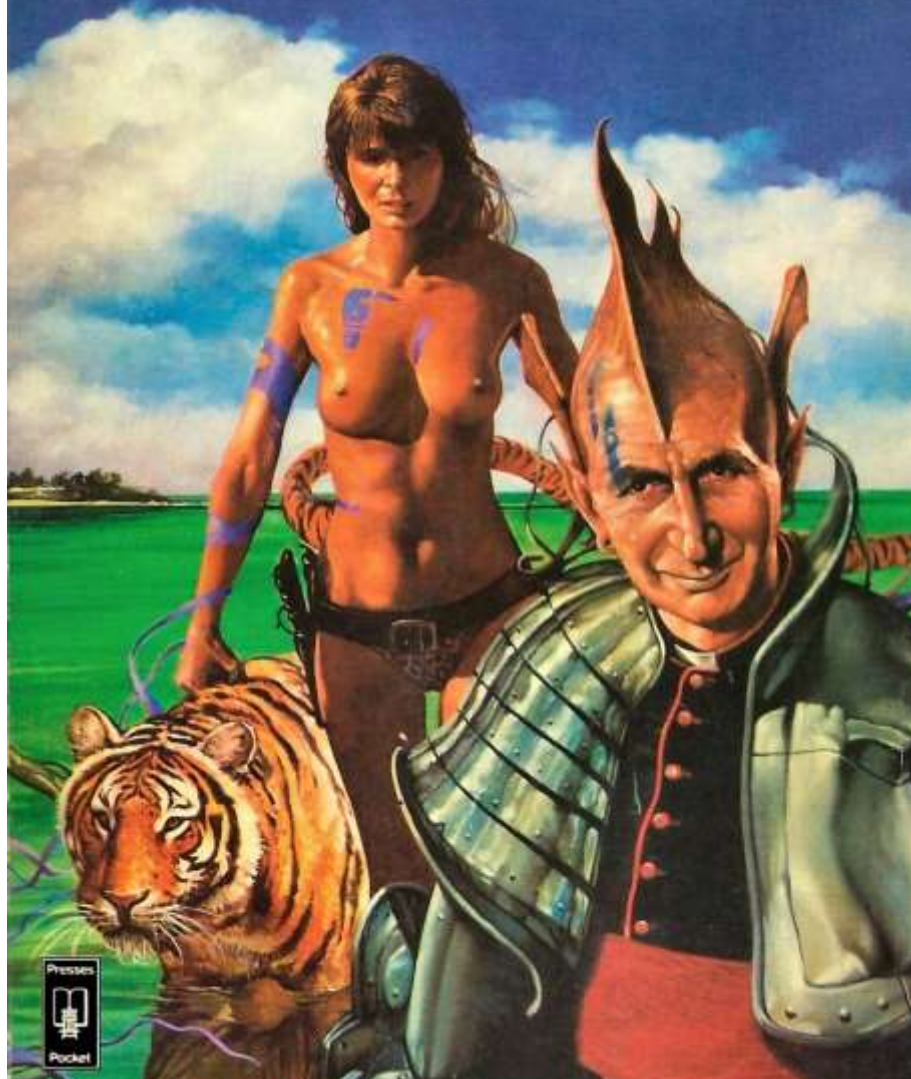


Le livre d'or de la science-fiction

# Vance<sup>Jack</sup>



*Art by Laverdet 1981*

## FOREWORD about JACK VANCE

### In anthology : "Le livre d'or de la science fiction"

#### INFORMATIONS

##### About the author

**Jacques Chambon**, (1942-2003), was a French teacher, literary critic, anthologist, editor, literary director and translator specializing in science fiction literature. He maintained a correspondence with Jack Vance (unpublished).

##### About The anthology

"The Golden Book of SF: Jack Vance" : publishing date 1981 , France

- Brain of the galaxy 1951
- DP! 1953
- When the five moons rise 1954
- The moonmoth 1961
- The last castle 1966
- Assault on a city 1974
- Freitzke' turn 1977

NB: This excellent preface, a (somewhat literary) overview of Vance's work, was written in 1981, and therefore makes no mention of his later works.

Disclaimer: This text has been translated using AI *DeepI* and then corrected manually. As I'm not a professional translator, some errors may remain (especially for the Jack Vance letter).

If so, please let me know at: [janluc13@gmail.com](mailto:janluc13@gmail.com)

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PREFACE for "THE GOLDEN BOOK OF SF: JACK VANCE"

(Anthology in French -1981)

by Jacques CHAMBON

*"The law, in general, is human reason, insofar as it governs all the peoples of the earth; and the political and civil laws of each nation must be no more than the particular cases in which this human reason is applied.*

*They must be so specific to the people for whom they are made, that it is a very great accident if the laws of one nation are suitable for another.*

*They must relate to the nature and principle of the government established, or to be established, either by forming it, as political laws do, or by maintaining it, as civil laws do.*

*They must relate to the physical characteristics of the country; to the climate, whether icy, hot or temperate; to the quality of the land, its situation, its size; to the way of life of the people, whether farmers, hunters or shepherds; they must relate to the degree of freedom that the constitution can tolerate; to the religion of the inhabitants, their inclinations, their wealth, their numbers, their trade, their morals, their manners. Lastly, they are related to each other; they are related to their origin, to the legislator's purpose, to the order of things on which they are established. It is from all these points of view that they must be considered."*

*Montesquieu, "De l'esprit des lois", book I, chap. III.  
(France, 1748)*

In his introduction to a collection of short stories by Jack Vance, Barry N. Malzberg theorizes that the title of an author's first published work has a symbolic character: it heralds the direction of an entire career. And indeed, it's no coincidence that the indestructible Jack Williamson's first published text was entitled *The Metal Man*, that the uneven Ray Bradbury entered the science fiction scene with *Pendulum*, the ever-vigorous Robert Heinlein with *Life-Line*, the sublime Sturgeon with *Ether Breather...* and the prolific Malzberg with *We're coming through the windows*. We'd be hard-pressed to get anything out of the

first published short story by a Silverberg (*Gorgon Planet*), a Spinrad (*The Last of the Romany*) or a Dick (*Beyond lies the wub*) - to take just a few examples from among the authors who have already provided material for a "Golden Book" - but while it's easy to find fault with it, and therefore difficult to acknowledge its scientific value, Malzberg's theory works wonders in the case of Vance.

Whether his career as an SF writer began with *The World-Thinker* (published in 1945 in *Thrilling Wonder Stories*) or, as Malzberg mistakenly believes, with *I'll build your dream castle* (published two years later in *Astounding*), both titles have the same prophetic value: today Vance appears to us as a thinker of worlds, a creator of wonders who has made a specialty of giving substance to the castles of our dreams.

From Proust's luminous pages on the subject, we know that every novelist is a creator of universes. Seized through the prism of subjectivity, the reality of a given time and place is inflected in directions that are those of the author's preoccupations, invested with meanings that belong uniquely to a personality; so that this reality, while remaining recognizable, plausible if not familiar, is transformed into another world, a reflection in the distorting mirror of a gaze.

*"Thanks to art, instead of seeing a single world, our own, we see it multiplied, and as many original artists as there are, so many worlds are at our disposal, each more different from the others than those rolling into infinity,"* wrote the author of *Remembrance of Things Past*.

However, we expect more from the science-fiction writer than an interpretation of reality to recognize him as a creator of universes - even if, in the final analysis, his writing is governed by a certain point of view on reality, which is precisely that of SF. What we ask of him is something exorbitant: a brand-new, unheard-of reality, extrapolated from our own or created from scratch, it doesn't matter - the essential thing is that it only speaks to us insofar as it transports us elsewhere. In science fiction, the creation of a universe involves not only a vision of the world, but also an imagination capable of conceiving spaces, creatures, cultures and even radically alien physical laws, and organizing them into a coherent whole that will win over the reader. James Schmitz, Frank Herbert, Ursula Le Guin, Philip José Farmer: these are just a few of the names to which Jack Vance belongs.

The prestige he enjoys in the U.S., not only among S-F fans but also among his peers, Vance didn't acquire in one fell swoop. It was with a gentle sotto voce, so to speak, that he tackled the daunting path of entirely invented worlds, with a series of short stories that appeared in *Startling Stories* from 1948 onwards, some of which were later reprinted in volume form as *The Many Worlds of Magnus Ridolph*. Philippe Curval's review of the book when it was first published in France sets the tone: "*Jack Vance's six chapter-narratives transport us at twenty thousand light-years per second into six absurd and beautifully nightmarish worlds. Invention galore, with an uncharacteristic Scheckley-esque tone, this is a well-crafted work, excellent for those long winter evenings spent basking in the fires of dreams.*" Nothing ambitious, then. Vance has fun. In particular, by portraying a hero who breaks completely with the tradition of the hard-boiled baroudeur then in vogue in space opera. An interstellar troubleshooter by trade, *Magnus Ridolph* is closer to *Hercule Poirot* than *Northwest Smith*, with his clean-cut old man looks, his impeccably trimmed white goatee, his very British phlegm... and his cunning - which accentuates, by a contrasting effect, the rather delirious character of the situations and worlds he finds himself confronted with at the same time.

However, underneath the light-hearted exterior, Vance's style is already there, well confirmed, mixing space opera (for the setting), heroic fantasy (for the tone) and police intrigue (for the narrative framework). It's all wrapped up in a certain sense of humor, essentially due to the slightly mocking distance the author seems to keep from his characters, his inventions and the vicissitudes of life as a cosmic traveler - as if he didn't take it all so seriously. Right from the outset, a formula is found that Vance will never abandon. There are no sudden changes in Vance's style, no spectacular crises leading to a radical renewal of inspiration; we are faced with a work developed serenely, regularly, on the basis of an invariable method, and if it bears witness to an evolution, it is in the direction of a refinement of this method and, sometimes, of a play with it, of the search for a perfect balance between the various components of the story, of a broadening of the subject. For this reason, it may be worth clearing up the misconception that Vance is primarily a heroic fantasy writer.

In fact, Vance's only two works are clearly in the realm of heroic fantasy, *The Dying Earth* (1950) and *The Eyes of the Overworld* (1966), which is not very many in a body of work that to date includes over forty novels - twelve of them detective stories! - and more than eighty short stories. (With a good thousand pages in the *Grey Mouse* cycle, Fritz Leiber, whom no one would dream of pigeonholing exclusively as a heroic fantasy author, beats Vance hands down!) But it was the first of these two books that brought his name to the attention of the American public, and the short stories making up the second that established his reputation in France in 1966 - a reputation then barely a year old, based on the almost simultaneous publication in our country of three short novels animated by the epic breath and creative freedom typical of this SF sub-genre: *The Star King*, *The Languages of Pao*, and above all *The Dragons Masters*. On the other hand, Vance's frequent references to witchcraft, his feudal settings where new St. Georges confront new dragons, his futures that seem to join barbaric pasts, all contributed to muddying the waters. Finally, the fact that this work, already written according to the whims of a wandering inspiration, based on atmospheric research rather than ideas, came to us, as is often the case in French publishing, in a certain disarray, did little to foster a clear grasp of what makes its profound coherence: not heroic fantasy, but a certain conception of the future and, by the same token, of science fiction.

The future, as envisaged by Vance - especially the distant future, which appeals more to his imagination than the immediate future - cannot be a simple extension, however aberrant, of the present. On the contrary, it has every chance of presenting that character of fundamental strangeness that Anglo-Saxons refer to as "alienness". So, if mankind spreads out across the galaxy, not only will it encounter radically different worlds, creatures and civilizations, but it will also be transformed by contact with them. From this point of view, Vance is one of the first to have exploited the idea of "modified man", but he does not proceed in the same way as James Blish who, in *The Seedling Stars*, a collection of short stories written between 1942 and 1955, imagines a humanity capable of surviving in any physical environment thanks to a program of genetic manipulation. For Vance, humanity's transformation is in some sense the order of things, part of a certain historical logic in which the colonized worlds, initially grouped into confederations under the authority of Earth, become increasingly autonomous. The enormous distances

separating inhabited planets, the very fact that they can accommodate very different categories of individuals (the giant planet in the novel of the same name is the refuge of marginal Earthlings ; the floating islands of *The Blue World* are occupied by the descendants of a group of convicts stranded there following damage to the spaceship that was transporting them to some penal colony), diplomatic incidents, even wars, the influence of native cultures where they exist - all this leads to a loosening of interstellar relations. Each society becomes a kind of closed system, tending to lose the memory of its origins and evolve according to its own dynamic. Forgetting Earth, forgetting people, regressive or progressive mutations: this is how Vance's hypothesis of human space expansion can be summed up.

From then on, the heroic fantasy aspect of his work has a dual status. As writing that generates a certain atmosphere, it stems from an approach to space opera that has gone beyond the stage of reduction to devote itself to evoking the most disconcerting possibilities: worlds where feudal lords are served by robots, worlds where spaceships stand side by side with oxcarts, worlds where science has become so sophisticated as to merge with magic, refined worlds devoted to the pleasure of the senses, epic worlds devoted to the pleasure of war, worlds of baroque grandeur and decadence... As a fully assumed genre, it stems from a vision of a distant future in which the Earth has become unrecognizable: Man, plants and animals have diversified into a multitude of strange species, and all this life at the end of inventions "festers, rich as rotten fruit"; traditional science is no more than a vague memory, a tinker's amusement in the face of the return in force of the magic of the first ages; the moon has disappeared; everything is bathed in the pale glow of a reddish sun "like an old man dragging himself to his deathbed". So much so, in fact, that we might wonder whether *The Dying Earth* (which stands out above all for its autumnal setting and languid mood) and its sequel, *Cugel l'astucieux*, (featuring a picaresque hero in the throes of epico-burlesque adventures) don't represent the tales of new human civilizations for whom the Earth has become a legend - in other words, the fictions that enchant the populations of a fictional universe.

To suggest cultures, mentalities and a state of history through the fictions that result from them would be a Borges-esque find if the intention were deliberate. In reality, Vance's intention in composing *The Dying Earth* was no more

than a work of first-degree heroic fantasy - even if the style and structure are particularly well thought-out. But the hypothesis formulated above, by the very fact that it can be formulated at all, regardless of its value, shows that Vance's work benefits from being considered as a whole, like a vast fresco, each panel of which brings new resonances to the others. Thus, because the art of Mazirian the Magician, who attempts to create a new humanity in biological vats, is quite close to that of the lords of the planet Aerlith, who specialize in the creation of fighting dragons, we can imagine a historical relationship between the worlds of one and the other - just as we can imagine, for the same reasons, that Mazirian's adventures are part of the repertoire of *Phadée* the minstrel, companion of one of these lords... As you can see, to link Vance's texts together is to give yourself the opportunity to make them produce a surplus of dreams, to read a science fiction that is both SF and a machine for generating SF, or if you like, to make reading-fiction.

Vance may never have had the idea of creating a Robert Heinlein style *Future History*, but it's as if, after taking us on a tour of the Earth as it dies of old age, the author had set out to evoke a few milestones in its long history. And indeed, from *The Five Gold Bands* (1950), the tale of a treasure hunt that leads us to discover five different worlds in the wake of a space adventurer, to *Wyst: Alastor 1716* (1978), we find ourselves embarked on a kind of diorama of cosmic proportions. Whatever the pretext for the journey. Whether we're following a hero on a quest (Adam Reith's quest for a spaceship in the *Tschaï* series, Ghyl Tarvok's quest for the truth in *Emphyrio*), an investigation (there's a mystery to be solved in almost every Vance novel) or a quest-investigation (Kirth Gersen's thirst for vengeance leads him on a number of searches and wanderings), it's all about tourism in powerfully exotic times and places. The paroxysmal form of these journeys into the extraordinary can be called heroic fantasy, if you like; for the rest, let's give Vance his due, namely, with all barriers between SF and HF abolished, a formidable ability to make Elsewhere and the Other exist.

Although this aptitude is already apparent in *Big Planet* (1950), it will only blossom gradually. The colossal world in which the author leads us to follow Claude Glystra, his hero, this patchwork of cultures jealous of their specificity, this melting pot of all possible adventures, is worthy of those from which Vance would later draw tetralogies. And yet, undoubtedly due to the constraints of magazine publication, it gives rise only to a relatively traditional and, it must be said,



somewhat narrow novel. We're left with the flamboyant names that are the secret of Vance's onomastic imagination (*Montmarchy, Lake Pellitante, Parambo, Tsalombar Forest, Kirstendale*), an idyllic city where the master only enjoys his aristocratic prerogatives as long as he accepts to be a slave from time to time, superb landscapes discovered from sail-powered gondolas euphorically spinning along a monoline suspended from peak to peak, but the whole doesn't seem fully realized and leaves the reader wanting more. Vance himself felt that Claude Glystra's ballad was far from exhausting the subject, since he recently felt the need to complete the evocation of his extravagant giant planet with a second installment: *Showboat World* (1975).

The study of the depths of Vance's worlds would seem to call for a chronological point of view. But what's the point of crawling from book to book? Although not immediately perfected, Vance's technique is characteristic enough to be described globally, as a set of parameters in relation to which the works play the role of variables, from the most minor to the most successful.

First and foremost, Vance's treatment of plot is very particular. The plot, reduced to itself, is often banal, and some critics have been quick to criticize him for this. Thus, when reviewing *Big Planet* and *the Houses of Iszm*, Serge André Bertrand, Alain Dorémieux's alter ego, was astonished: "*What's strange, with the wealth of invention he displays in the profusion of details, is that alongside this he has no imagination for building action, and his plots always stretch out in the flattest way in the world.*" In fact, even if he's nothing like Van Vogt, Vance is highly capable of crafting complex plots, as demonstrated by *The Languages of Pao, Emphyrio* and all his detective work - which we're just beginning to discover in France and which holds many surprises, since three novels by *Ellery Queen* were written by Vance! All we need to realize is that, with him, the action is loose and its interest secondary, the better to allow the multiplication of episodes, the accumulation of descriptions, the setting up of all the details likely to give consistency to the landscapes and societies where it takes place. An astronaut stranded on an alien planet (Tschaï); a society in crisis threatened by aliens (*the Dragon Masters*), a sea monster (*The Blue World*) or robot slaves (*the Last Castle*); an investigator charged with unmasking a criminal (*the Moon Moth*): all these situations are familiar enough to the reader that he or she cares less about their development than about their setting. So there's nothing wrong with following

the path of the schoolchildren, or lingering in an inn (the Vance sequence par excellence!) in the company of the hero, just long enough to get acquainted with what he's eating and drinking, the décor, the clientele, the waitress's costume and so on. On the contrary, it's when the action is too fast, when only the features that move it forward are retained, when the journey stops too quickly (as in *Big Planet*) that we're disappointed. What, with other authors, would pass for a weakness is here a strength - the very strength that allows Vance to leave us in no doubt about the worlds he introduces us to.

Here we come to another of Vance's hallmarks: his encyclopedic approach. I don't know if he's read Montesquieu, but he shares with the author of *Spirit of the Laws* (minus certain naïveties) the idea that everything in a society is interrelated - geographical environment, temperament and psychology of the community, mores, laws, language, religion, economy, etc. - and that it's the interplay between one level and another that gives it its homogeneity and part of its physiognomy. - and that it's the interplay between these levels that gives it its homogeneity and part of its physiognomy. As a result, we'll regularly be treated to complete tableaux in which each component has its place and function. In this sense, the pinnacle of the spectacular is reached with Tschaï's tetralogy, which Robert Louit hailed as follows when it was published in France: "*Each society, even when it only plays an episodic role, is described in all its aspects: political, economic, but also linguistic, sexual, sartorial and gastronomic. Tschaï is like an immense odyssey for which Homer would have enlisted the collaboration of Montesquieu, Saussure, Carlyle, Kinsey and Brillat-Savarin.*" However, even in the slimmer volumes, where such comprehensiveness is impossible, Vance still places great emphasis on the sociologically relevant picturesque. To achieve this, he uses a variety of techniques. Or, as in scholarly works, he festoons his text with preliminary notes, footnotes, extracts from documents or fictitious articles (scientific, anthropological, historical, journalistic, philosophical, linguistic) that flesh out the story without weighing it down - a practice he had already demonstrated in *The Demon Princes*, which, from volume to volume, gives a fairly precise idea of *Oecumene*, the gigantic galactic mosaic in which Kirth Gersen evolves, and of the infinite variety of the cosmos in general. Or he may focus on a particular dimension of the world in which he has decided to take us, leaving the reader to imagine the others from a few occasional notes. Thus, *The Houses of Iszm* focuses on habitat; *To Live*

*Forever*, on the stratification of a society that is able to offer immortality to its members; *The Blue World*, a sort of hymn to the genius of DIY, on the exploitation of the natural environment; *Emphyrio*, on artistic creation; *Trullion* (in the Alastor cycle) on the game of "hussade", particularly popular on this planet; *The Faceless Man* (first part of the *Durdane Chronicles*) on the police system; etc. Sometimes, the point of view is even more subtle. In *Space Opera*, one of the first SF novels, if not the first, to meet both definitions of the expression (space adventure story or opera, in the musical sense of the term, "cosmic"), various extraterrestrial civilizations are presented to us in a delightful way through the welcome they give to the performances of a traveling opera company. For Vance knows how to be as funny as he is evocative. Humor, fantasy and even Sheckley-esque quirks (such as the bread-and-butter tree found in *Domains of Koryphon*) often lighten his most complex creations, preventing them from falling into the trap of those admirable but sometimes rather laborious monuments in the style of Frank Herbert's masterpiece *Dune*.

That Vance is first and foremost a writer, and not simply a brewer of scientific knowledge and hypotheses, is particularly evident in his fascination with all language-related issues. The best example is, of course, *The Languages of Pao*, "one of the few works in SF", as Stan Barets puts it in his *Catalogue des âmes et cycles de la SF*, "that had the goodness to imagine that all the alien races in the universe didn't speak English! Not so unusual, since this is the case in almost all of Vance's work, which suggests that some of his dialogues are merely a translation, sometimes a rough one, of this or that fictional foreign language. But the linguistic theme is particularly striking here, as it constitutes the very subject of the book. Pao is a planet about to be colonized by a language that keeps it passive and individualistic. To free itself, it needs a complete change of mentality, and consequently of language; this is what Palafox, the super-savant of the planet Breakness, explains to Bustamonte, the distraught Panarch of Pao who has come to ask him for help: the society of Shraimand, a region of Pao flooded with sunlight and conducive to physical exercise, will be endowed with a language whose grammar is "simple and straightforward", whose vocabulary is "rich in gutturals whose pronunciation requires a certain effort, and in hard vowels", whose semantics will make "a successful man" synonymous with "victorious in violent combat", and will thus provide robust warriors; another region will be assigned to

the inculcation of a language favoring industrial development; another will produce devious merchants thanks to a hyper-grammatical language, including "complicated titles to teach hypocrisy, a vocabulary rich in homophones to favor ambiguity"; and so on. And so, for the duration of a generation, we witness the creation of social groups equipped for resistance: the Vaillants, the Technicians, the Cogitants, and so on. Language, the privileged weapon of the colonizer who, by imposing his language, imposes his culture - that of the conquered people no longer having, in some cases, even the right to exist - becomes, in an ironic twist, the weapon of the colonized.

I'm grossly oversimplifying the story, which includes the ambitions of Palafox, who gives the Paonese the means to liberate themselves only to enslave them to his own will; the story of Beran Panasper, the legitimate Panarch of Pao, raised by Palafox but eager to see his people preserve their specificity and unity; the revolt of the Valiant, also power-hungry; and, generally speaking, a whole complex web of political intrigue. But whatever the direction, the book is really a reflection on the relationship between language and thought. A true forerunner of the recent encounter between linguistics and SF, exemplified by novels such as Samuel Delany's *Babel 17*, or Ian Watson's *The Embedding*, Vance seems to be putting to the test the so-called "Sapir-Whorf thesis", undoubtedly the most elaborate regarding the role of language in conditioning thought, behavior and worldview - unless he's rediscovering it. However, his aim is not so much to illustrate this thesis as to build an original epic around it, a kind of intellectual space opera where words replace the energy of disintegrators, where the psychological and the social pass through linguistics. In other words, the thesis is only there in the background, behind the poetic images it inspires and justifies, and Vance only draws a "discourse of method" from it to create harmonious wholes. Such is the Institute of Breakness, the lair of the super-savants who imagine and organize Pao's linguistic re-education: it clings to the slopes of a high mountain, that is, in places as ethereal, austere and inaccessible as the secrets its inhabitants carry, and a special language is spoken there, where the emphasis is on abstraction, the repression of the emotional and affective, and logic. This is why Pao can ultimately be read as a metaphor for Vance's writing, a staging of his gesture as a writer: like Palafox, isn't his aim to create viable societies where

language, mentality, behavior and setting, mirroring each other, combine in an almost alliterative game?

All of Vance's communities have their own language(s): the language of the entire costume in *Coup de grâce*, a Magnus Ridolph adventure published the same year as Pao; the language of masks and musical accompaniments in *Moon Moth*; the language of luminous configurations used by the islanders of *The Blue World*; the language of the Emblema-Men and the inhabitants of the land of Cath (who have different names depending on the type of relationship, from the most stilted to the most intimate, that they have with their interlocutor) in the first volume of the *Tschai* cycle; and so on. Ultimately, everything becomes a sign for Vance's heroes to interpret: gestures, clothing, architecture, art, colors, smells, rituals... Magnus Ridolph and, above all, Kirth Gersen in *The Demon Princes*, struggle in a universe of signs; it is only insofar as he knows how to read them that the former regularly solves the riddles or problems proposed to his sagacity, and it is only insofar as he knows how to analyze events, to see what lies beyond appearances that the latter identifies one by one, sometimes in the midst of several suspects, the monsters he has sworn to avenge: our two adventurers are semiologists. And it's because this theme of a message to be deciphered, of a chain of events to be traced, ends up being so obsessively present that we come to wonder whether Vance's work might not itself be a text to be deciphered, beyond its shimmering colors, its bouncing, bouncing adventures and its general disorientation.

\*

The task is not an easy one, as the only available clues are buried in the work itself. Vance is a secretive man. Stingy with confidences, reluctant to talk about his books, he goes so far as to keep a careful distance from the small world of science fiction - he is rarely seen at conventions - and has never entrusted anyone but his works with establishing his reputation. As a result, we know very little about him.

*I believe that an intimate knowledge of a writer's personality diminishes the effect of his works on the reader, which is why I never hand out photographs, grant interviews or provide a minimum of biographical information to anyone who asks. Just things like: I was born in San Francisco in 1916; I spent my childhood on a ranch in*

*central California; I attended the University of California, where I studied physics, then turned to journalism; I served in the Merchant Marine until I got married, and now live in Oakland with my wife and son, although we travel a lot (...).*

*As for my books, I'm not sure what I can say about them. Let's say that what interests me at the outset are human reactions - whether of an individual or a society - to new or unusual situations. I write on the basis of an atmosphere rather than an idea; in other words, I have a feeling for the kind of story I want to write, and then I try to find a vehicle (plot, characters, setting) to express that feeling. It's a bit, I think, like composing music. In fact, I'm passionate about classic American jazz, and I play the cornet à pistons myself. There are also some French musicians I really admire, like the late Django Reinhart, Stéphane Grapelly and others like that. My favorite work of my entire output? *Cugel l'astucieux*, probably because I had so much fun writing it. I'm not very proud of my first stories in *Startling*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Astounding* - I suppose no writer is ever satisfied with his first texts - but there are a few, it seems to me, that still hold up. I have a particular fondness for *The Five Gold Bands*.*

This is what Jack Vance wrote to me in 1971, in response to my plea for help while I was working with Jean-Pierre Fontana on the preface to the C.L.A. edition of *Tschaï*. Since then, I've had the pleasure of meeting the man in San Francisco (in the summer of 1978), but my documentation has not been enriched. I only learned that Jack Vance's real name was *John Holbrook Vance*, the name he usually uses to sign his detective novels, that he also played the banjo, and I was able to observe - Michel Demuth, who was my accomplice for the occasion, can testify to this - that he had a serious fork stroke, an impressive descent (the former sailor!) and that he preferred to discuss the comparative merits of Californian and French wine rather than those of his own work... at least as long as I remained capable of learning and observing something...

It's not all bad news, you might say. And it's true that this data sheds a little extra light on a work that its author would like to see live his own life. The fact that Vance is an avid traveler (in the above-mentioned letter, he announced a forthcoming cruise in the South Pacific aboard a trimaran he was building himself,

and the inhabitants of a small village in Touraine recently wondered about this jovial American who, in the evenings, played the banjo on the terrace of the hotel-restaurant where he had taken up residence), goes a long way towards explaining the allure his stories take on: every time he sits down in front of his typewriter, Vance embarks on a great journey, as if to compensate for his love of fidgeting. Likewise, it's easy to see why Vance's knowledge, his highly respectable anthropological and linguistic skills, far from being arid and coldly bookish, have the flavour of the land: it's because he drew them from his peregrinations, from looking around him, from the dust of the roads rather than the dust of libraries. Finally, his love of music could allow a musicological reading of some of his works: *Tschai* as a symphony, *The Demon Princes* as a fugue, *Moon Moth* as a concerto...

But you can't go very far with such a background. It allows us to appreciate some of the work's artistic qualities, but it retains the appearance of a somewhat gratuitous object, exhausted only by the pleasure it provides. Doesn't Vance have anything to say? Would the universes he constructs have no other purpose than themselves? Are they merely places of escape? A few clues suggest otherwise. First of all, some short stories, apparently so un-Vance-like in their inspiration that they have long gone unnoticed; short stories like "*DP!*" (1953), which can be found in the present collection, and *Dodkin's Jobs*, a half-scary, half-hilarious satire of the great administrative machine gone mad, in which Vance delivers a critical discourse heralding the most modern trends in SF. Texts like these are rare, as our author generally prefers to express himself more obliquely (note that they date from the beginning of his career), but they suggest that the construction of exotic universes is not incompatible with the affirmation of a self. Vance's worlds speak, and they speak of him - which is no doubt why he finds it pointless to spill over into confidences and commentaries. This is confirmed by another, slightly more subtle clue: Palafox - whose activity, as we've seen, can be interpreted as a figure of the writer. Indeed, what is Palafox's ultimate ambition? To gradually substitute his countless sons for the Paonese, to turn Pao into a planet populated solely by Palafox, to transform it into a multiplied image of himself. This sounds like a veritable code of reading that could be explained as follows: "*All my writings are an image of myself, but a diffracted image; it reveals me but, at the same time, it hides me by this very diffraction and by the fact that it is only an image ("imago" in*

*Latin means "ghost, deceptive apparition"); Jack Vance is neither quite another nor quite the same as John Holbrook Vance."*

Seen in this light, as a mask that both veils and reveals, the work is ambiguous. Better still, ambiguity is a fundamental theme.

In this respect, the monsters that populate it are rich in meaning. They come in a wide variety of forms - animals, people, societies and even entire planets, such as the famous giant planet - but they all have one thing in common: their monstrosity lies in the fact that they are double, that they do not deviate completely from the normal, but rather constitute a distortion of it, most of the time artificial. Pao's "neutraloids" are both men and fighting animals; the dragons in *The Dragon Masters* are both animals and war machines; the *Demon Princes*, Vance's most complex monsters, are simulacra of men with multiple identities, perverts who take a malicious pleasure in warping reality, shaping it to their whim; *The Chasch-Men*, *the Dirdir-Men*, *the Wankh-Men*, *the Pnumekin* of the *Tschaï* series are all preoccupied with resembling their non-human masters as closely as possible; the hero of *Bad Ronald*, the remarkable "thriller" published at the end of 1979 in the Red Label collection, is a psychopathic killer in the innocent guise of an awkward teenager sheltered by his mother - he bears a striking resemblance to the *Demon Princes*: Like them, he lives hidden away in a small room where his mother has confined him to keep him away from the police; like them, he haunts the scenery unnoticed; like them, he has created an artificial paradise for himself in the form of a heroic fantasy novel he is working on in hiding; and like them, he can't stand it when reality doesn't bend to his whims.

Vance's monstrosity doesn't always take these extreme forms, but it's the same theme of naturalness smothered in artificiality that runs through his notes on costumes (so many incredible falbalas in Vance's worlds! ), the architecture (often composite and tarabiscotote), the environment (revised and corrected), the cuisine (complicated)... When the characters aren't monsters, they're dandies who stand out for their outrageous make-up, their sophistication, their baroquism.

The author's attitude to this parade of monsters and eccentrics is itself ambiguous. On the one hand, he feels a certain fascination with them, insofar as they represent the triumph of art over nature. *The Demon Princes*, for example, rather like Farmer's *Maker of Universes*, are artists in their own right - so that they



can be seen as symbols of the writer shaping worlds to his will and, beyond them, in the kind of general teratology that constitutes Vance's work, an example of writing taking itself as subject, producing fictions inspired by its own workings. But on the other hand, there's a palpable sense of unease. Vance's monsters are so far removed from nature that most of them are no longer viable. The planet Pao, as transformed by Palafox, is becoming ungovernable; the Demon Princes are getting caught in their own traps; some characters are growing weary of the overly sumptuous settings that surround them, such as the beautiful Alusz Iphigenia from *The Killing Machine*, who, after being bewitched by the prestiges of the planet Thamber, sees it as "nothing more than an animated myth, a diorama in archaic colors". And indeed, the creations of art, the dream worlds, only reflect the fantasies of their author, placing him in a tête-à-tête with himself that ends up cutting him off from reality. Kokor Hekkus, the Prince-Demon we meet in *The Killing Machine*, has mastered the art of terror and killing only because he himself has always been afraid of death; the young psychopath in *Bad Ronald* can't understand that young girls don't react like the sensual princesses in his little heroic fantasy novel: Vance's doubts about the free proliferation of imaginary universes dedicated solely to expressing the power of the imagination can be read in all these facts.

From this point on, a problem gradually emerged in Vance's work. It was barely perceptible until the mid-sixties, and could only be discerned in certain short stories ("*Ullward's Retreat*", for example) and in the author's back-and-forth between SF and the realism of crime fiction. But with *The Demon Princes* and the first short story in the adventures of *Cugel the Clever* - published a year after *The Star King* - the question of the legitimacy of dream worlds is raised. Not directly, as Vance is averse to ratiocination and theoretical discourse, but symbolically. Take, for example, Kirth Gersen's eulogy for Kokor Hekkus: "His imagination was both a gift and a curse. One life was not enough. He had to drink from every source, experience everything, live at the extremes. In Thamber, he had found a world to suit him. In his various incarnations, he had created his own epic. When he tired of Thamber, he returned to the world of men, less malleable perhaps, but just as exciting. In the end, he perished." And above all, let's read (or reread) "*The Overworld*", where Cugel, in search of one of those magic lenses that allow the inhabitants of the village of Smolod to give themselves the illusion of living like

lords in luxurious palaces, discovers a whole tribe of drug addicts living blissfully in poverty and filth. A transposed portrait of some hippie community where people are permanently high? Perhaps. But also a denunciation of the demobilizing power of escape for escape's sake.

How do you lull yourself into the shimmer of the imaginary without getting lost in it? How do you return to the human world without getting bogged down in it? Vance, no longer content to be an enchanter, but wary of the combat S-F in which he saw a whole new generation of writers engaged (we're in the mid-60s), was to answer these questions with works in which ambiguity was no longer equivocation or hesitation, but a skilful balance between the rights of fiction and the demands of reality. *The Blue World* (1966) and *Emphyrio* (1969), which bear particularly remarkable witness to this evolution, are indeed tales, according to Michel Tournier's fine definition: "*Halfway between the brutal opacity of the short story and the crystalline transparency of the fable, the tale (...) presents itself as a translucent but not transparent medium, as a glaucous thickness in which the reader sees figures taking shape that he never quite manages to grasp. It's no coincidence that nineteenth-century fantasy tales have a predilection for ghosts. The ghost personifies the philosophy of the tale, drowned in the mass of affabulation and therefore indecipherable. The tale is a haunted short story. Haunted by a ghostly meaning that touches us, enriches us, but does not enlighten us. (...) Archetypes drowned in the thickness of a puerile affabulation, great myths disguised and broken, which nonetheless lend their powerful magic to a popular story: such is undoubtedly the secret of the tale, be it oriental, fairy tale or fantastic; and it would no doubt be easy to identify the same springs in its contemporary avatar, science fiction.*"

*Blue World* is a "glaucous thickness" to the letter, as this tale transports us to the surface of a planetary ocean, on floating islets where a society in its infancy comes into conflict with a sea monster, King Kragen, who holds it to ransom in exchange for its protection. But this fairly simple affabulation (enhanced, as always with Vance, by epic scenes and an extraordinary wealth of descriptive detail) is "haunted by a ghostly significance" that relies, precisely, on King Kragen. Indeed, far from being just a big, bad alien beast, King Kragen gradually becomes the site of an investment, imperceptibly transformed into a plural symbol: a symbol of the racketeers that the city of Chicago once (?) specialized in; a symbol

of that hypocritical form of colonialism known as protectorate; a symbol of the god of the Bible, so benevolent to Adam and Eve as long as they blissfully walk hand in hand without threatening his prerogatives; a symbol of all minotaurs... And as a result, the whole scope of the book changes. Underlying the incredible confrontations that pit man against monster and man against man (for if Sklar Hast, the leader of the rebellion, has his followers, King Kragen has his own), we witness the unfolding of a moral, political, religious and technical liberation in which the entire history of mankind could ideally be summed up. The adventure novel has slipped into myth.

*Emphyrio* is also a tale of liberation. The population of Ambroy (still a picturesque foreign city) replaces the people of the islets of The Blue World; the arrogant lords who pressurize it and keep it in the Middle Ages, while they themselves indulge in excursions in superb interstellar yachts, replace King Kragen; and Ghyl Tarvoke, the ferment of the revolt of one against the others, replaces Sklar Hast. However, the political dimension of the story takes a back seat, and the "ghostly significance" of Ghyl Tarvoke's actions lies elsewhere. For he does not enter the age of suspicion of his own accord. It's only when the mysterious legend of Emphyrio comes to him in the form of a living puppet show that he's led to question the validity of the socio-political reality in which he lives, to dream of radical change, and to access the truths that will make it possible. In this way, thanks to the superb mirror effect produced by the book's structure (made up of 24 chapters that sing of the childhoods, exploits and apotheosis of an exemplary hero), *Emphyrio* can be read in the same way as the myth of Emphyrio can be read in Ghyl Tarvoke, i.e. as a myth: the myth of the passage, both individual and collective, from childhood to adulthood; the myth of access to lucidity (the living puppets who mime Emphyrio's destiny before the fascinated eyes of young Ghyl Tarvoke, offering him an obscure reflection of the truth, subtly refer to the myth of the cave); the myth of the imposture on which all power rests; and above all, the myth of the power of myth as a factor of progress.

It would be possible to show in the same way that *The Domain of Koryphon* (1974) is "haunted" by the memory of the situation that gave rise to the Algerian War (which Vance, for once, admits to having inspired). But I preferred to focus on books generally considered to be masterpieces - Vance's masterpieces, according to some - rather than on a rather hasty novel that ends up falling flat on its face.

This book does, however, have the merit of indicating, by giving him the opportunity of a new appearance, where Vance's great ghost lies. Reviewed in the light of these latest "tales", his entire oeuvre appears to be inhabited to varying degrees by the problem of colonization. Claude Glystra's mission to the *Big Planet* is designed to thwart the imperialist aims of Beaujolais's Barjanum; The Languages of Pao is the story of a double war of independence, and "The Miracle Makers", "*The The Dragons Masters*", "*The Houses of Iszm*" and "*The Last Castle*" could all be placed in the same category; Kirth Gersen's fight against the Demon Princes is not only driven by personal motives, but also by the need to stop an evil alien race infiltrating the human world; Adam Reith's great journey to the planet Tschai is to a large extent that of a decolonizer; Gastel Etwane, in the *Durdane Chronicles*, stands up against various forms of power and imperialism, etc. Initially, Vance's main interest is in the picturesque aspect of the blending of cultures and their transformations; he takes us on a tour of curious societies whose legitimacy he does not question. But gradually, no doubt because he had seen on his travels how difficult it was for certain nations to retain their independence and originality (that originality which is such a pleasure for tourists and anthropologists alike), he came to denounce the very principle of colonization and, more generally, all forms of tutelage. From this point of view, his evolution describes a curve that is almost the reverse of Farmer's. From the very start of his work, Farmer used SF as a war machine against racism, sexual taboos, religious mystifications, the metaphysics of death and the gods themselves. Then, increasingly asserting his right to write and invent in complete freedom, he launched into the creation of personal universes in a demiurgic gesture that competed with that of the gods. Vance, on the other hand, devotes himself from the outset to the creation of fantasy universes. Contesting only the separation of genres, which he blithely mixes, he is content to make his dreams plausible by dint of rigorous physical, psychological and sociological detail. Little by little, however, a latent reflection on his writing gave rise to the need to take part in the fight against alienating ideologies - including Puritanism! The purely novelistic gave way to the mythical. It's no longer a question of detaching oneself from reality, but of signifying it through this very detachment; it's no longer a question of fuelling a vague reverie, but of inspiring and guiding action.

That Vance should have been considered a reactionary author by some French critics seems to me to be the result of strange short-sightedness or downright bad faith. Admittedly, his name is among the seventy-two signatures on the motion in favor of the continuation of the Vietnam War that appeared in various American science-fiction magazines in 1968. But it may be that Vance, like many of his compatriots at the time, sincerely believed that the United States was fighting a war of independence. Admittedly, many of his characters are "big on purple", but we often witness their downfall, and their numbers are more than offset by those of the proletarian heroes. Admittedly, he values the role of individuals in political crises, and thus seems to adhere to the myth of the providential man, but this is the law of the adventure novel. Admittedly, his tone is not that of a militant, but it's his right to think that great poetic fiction is more likely to awaken revolutionary consciousness and action than first-degree preaching. In short, it's as hard to say whether Vance is right-wing or left-wing as it is to pigeonhole him as a writer of heroic fantasy, space opera or detective stories.

Ultimately, as is often the case with "popular" authors, we are in the presence of a writer and a character who are more complex than they appear. Beneath a classical inspiration that extends and perfects that of Edgar R. Burroughs, there are very modern preoccupations; beneath an apparently unpretentious style, there are the concerns of an artist; beneath a seemingly naïve practice of writing, there is a discourse that takes it as its subject. And who would have thought that this author of flamboyant adventure novels was capable of writing something as dark, as unhealthy, as disturbing as *Bad Ronald*? That's why Vance's work is one that should perhaps be completely reassessed, at least in France. In the U.S., it's already been done, as evidenced by the bibliophile editions it's been the subject of, as well as this comment by Barry Malzberg: "*Jack Vance's achievement as a science fiction writer strikes a little harder every year. So much so, in fact, that he is emerging as one of the pillars of the genre (...) He has built for us the whole castle of his dreams. Elegantly adorned with twists, turrets and rooms we've yet to discover, it's not about to fall (unlike the one at the very beginning of one of his most famous short stories).*"

\*

Finally, a few words about this Golden Book, whose *raison d'être* may not be self-evident, given that Vance is mainly considered (in both senses of the word) as a novelist.

A little background is in order here. How long has Vance been known in France? Since 1965-1966, when he practically stopped writing short stories (the Cugel l'astucieux cycle is in fact a novel, with a new chapter added from time to time at the request of publishers or anthologists) to devote himself to major novel series: *Demon Princes* (5 volumes planned, 4 published to date), *Tschaï* (4 volumes), *Durdane* (3 volumes), *Alastor* (3 volumes published to date). As a result, when it came to making older works available to the public, French publishers spontaneously turned to novels, overlooking the dozens of short stories that made up the bulk of Vance's output from 1945 to 1965.

Another fact that may have contributed to distorting perspectives is that Vance's short stories are generally quite long. Most of them are what Americans call "novelettes" (around 15,000 words), or "novellas" (short novels of 20-30,000 words), rarely "short stories" (less than 10,000 words) - which is quite understandable in an author where the descriptive element, a necessary condition for the credibility of his fictional worlds, is very important. Yet the novella, a distance in which Vance particularly excels (great marathon runners generally do very well over 10,000 meters), has virtually no niche in our country. If you want to include one in the contents of a magazine, you're often obliged to spread its publication over two issues, which is hardly to the reader's taste. If you want to include one in an anthology, you run the risk of unbalancing it. As a result, novellas are often left on the sidelines.

A Jack Vance golden book was therefore the ideal opportunity not only to do justice to the author of short stories - which can be read as an introduction to the novel's work, or as lateral and complementary insights into a monument to be revisited - but also to rescue some remarkable novellas from the limbo in which they usually lie. Hence the uniqueness of this collection: seven texts, instead of the dozen or so found on average in the other volumes of the collection.

A magic number that, after all, doesn't suit Jack Vance all that badly.