

I HAD DINNER WITH JACK VANCE... AND I DIDN'T EAT ANYTHING.

Extracts (75%) – translated from French

First release on the French site :

<http://vance.jack.free.fr/pmonot.html>

Disclaimer: Vance's questions and answers have been translated into French on the original document by author (P. Monot) and then translated back into English in this document. Even if the meaning is correct, the style and words may differ from the original (unrecorded).

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photo : Fabienne Rose 1998

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Please note that the following is a report of an encounter, not an interview. The questions asked, the answers given are transcribed with more or less accuracy, but they very faithfully translate the ideas that have been developed during the various conversations. In fact, I had thought of bringing my pocket recorder, which would have allowed me to work more rigorously.

But I forgot to put batteries in it.

10:00 am, Meteor hotel - right in the middle of the Futuroscope site. I crash at the bar. At the reception they just told me that Jack and Norma Vance must arrive during the day with Paul Rhoads, their contact in France.

(...)

All alone in my corner, I decide to wait. Waiting for what, I don't know exactly, but I'm using the time to write some questions in Middle English for Jack Vance, in case I don't see him. At worst, maybe he can send me the answers later?

I also have two manuscripts, one of which is the manuscript of my novel which I am dedicating to Baron Bodissey.

I leave it at the reception desk for Jack Vance or Paul Rhoads.

(...)

In a corner at the far end, Doug Headline (director of the Rivages-Fantasy editor) is with a small, petite, white-haired lady: this is Arlette Rosenblum, Jack Vance's translator at Rivages.

(...)

Then a man comes in: about 30, high forehead, jeans and dark sweater. He searches the room with his eyes. He stops on top of me, half a smile on his lips.

- Are you Philippe?

I answer in the affirmative, although I have doubts about the moment.

- Paul Rhoads. I'm Jack's friend.

Thank you. (Chuckles) Pleased to meet you.

Let's sit down.

- Norma read him your message and the questions you wanted to ask him and he found them relevant.

Of course, I thought, I wasn't going to ask him things like, "Mr. Vance, what's your secret to writing so well and so much?" I grumble, but I'm over the moon.

- When Norma told him that you had dedicated your novel to Baron Bodissey, Jack laughed out loud. I think that's what made him decide to meet you. I mean, let's just say Norma asked him to make an effort.

Wonderful Norma!

Goimard's coming back, shoulders hunched over. He stops to shake Paul's hand. Not a glance for me. Siudmak waits patiently.

Then begins a discussion lasting more than an hour. Paul's father, it seems, was a close friend of Jack Vance... Paul became an early and devoted fan of Vance and was able to begin a correspondence with him. Since then, he has become his mediator in France, so to speak. Throughout the evening, I will have ample opportunity to see that Paul cares for Jack and Norma as a devoted and caring son. It is as if he has adopted them for good; perhaps he even wishes to preserve this special relationship through a certain possessiveness.

- Jack, he tells me, has been blind for several years. Nevertheless, he still manages to type on his keyboard; during this phase of his work, he is assisted by software that dictates aloud what he writes. He then composes the body of the text; then Norma works on correcting the hundreds of typos, gives her opinion here and there and then rewrites the whole thing.

Without her, Vance would not have been read for a long time.

(...)

- What I'm saying is a very personal reflection," he insists.

In fact, he speaks of the Vancian finesse, the judicious choice of words and the even more judicious way of arranging them in order to create, in very few sentences, an infinity of sensations and diverse images.

Paul is preaching to the converted but the discussion is interesting and, above all, very convivial.

Then Arlette Rosenblum passes by. She says hello to Paul, who introduces her to me. She looks even more confused than I was when I arrived, so she seizes the opportunity to mingle in a conversation and takes a seat with us.

I take this opportunity to congratulate her on the accuracy and quality of her work. Paul confirms.

- You have to have read Vance in English to fully understand everything he wants to convey. Arlette was the only one able to perceive Jack and make his world almost intact.

I say that in the 80s, Monique Lebailly had translated Cugel with, it seemed to me, a certain quality.

- I, place Arlette, did not translate Cugel. At least I think so, she adds, prey to doubt.

- The most striking aspect of her work, Paul continues, is, in my opinion, its timelessness.

I raise an interrogating eyebrow.

- Her descriptions are fluid, summary; they leave a great deal of room for the reader's imagination. When Jack describes a spacecraft, the reader can imagine it as he wishes. Let's imagine a reader from the 1970s; he reads, say, "Space Opera" where the characters visit several worlds. This involves frequent changes of scenery. The descriptions of each place will be imprecise enough for the reader to develop his or her own vision. He will imagine that the Phebus (the theater company's spaceship) has, say, an oblong shape like a rocket. If the same reader re-reads "Space Opera" in the 1990s, his vision of the ship will have changed: it may look like the Space Shuttle Columbia. But the words describing the Phebus in the novel have remained the same!

Paul gets up after an hour; he has to go back upstairs to see if Jack and Norma are ready. He tells me, almost in confidence, that I'd better come and wait for him in the hall in half an hour. That way I could accompany them to the reception hall when he comes down with them.

That, man, you don't have to tell me twice.

I sit back down; Arlette is still there, smiling at me. Ah, Arlette... I knew it before, but now I'm beginning to be sure that the cruel world of publishing has found a name for its neglected people: they call themselves translators.

Paid with a slingshot for a heavy and delicate job, mostly unknown to the general public, they sometimes find themselves at parties like this one and wonder if they really belong to this world.

(...)

Behind the reception is a landing which is accessed by a flight of stairs and leads to the elevators. My gaze is riveted on this area when I see it appear.

He is in a wheelchair operated by Paul; an old lady, probably Norma, is following them closely. Paul will tell me later that at that moment Jack heard the crowd and expressed the wish to move standing up.

That is why he beckons to Paul and starts to get up with difficulty. He is an imposing old man, with a pale ruby face and rare hair. In every way consistent with the few pictures I've seen of him, but much older.

He puts a hand on Paul's shoulder and Paul begins to guide him down the stairs. Then Paul sees me, and waves to me. I approach.

- Jack, here is Philippe, who dedicated his novel to the Baron Bodissey.

Jack Vance reaches out his hand in front of him with a smile on his face. I'm squeezing it.

- Hi, Philippe. It's very kind of you.

The crowd is gathering. Norma, a small, smiling woman with a perfect white mane that runs down to her waist, is gradually being swallowed up by the crowd. On closer inspection, so am I.

Only one solution left: I join Norma and reach out my arm to her. I'm Philippe, the one whose message you read to Jack!

She seems reassured, and it's arm in arm that we follow, with more ease in breaking up the crowd, Jack and Paul heading towards the reception hall.

As soon as we arrive, Paul sets Jack at a table while I present Norma with a seat. Then he asks me to stay with them for a moment and walks away.

- Philip, call Jack in the air.

I sit down in front of him and make myself known.

- Did you already drink something ?

Not at once, I must confess.

- What do you think about a Martini with me ? Please, I want it iceless, vermouth and a little bit dry.

Okay. I'll head over to the bar, order martinis from the overworked bartender. I come back with a tray full of four glasses. Paul has returned; I serve him, serve Norma and slip a glass into Jack's hand.

I take mine. I forgot that I heartily hate Martini and the taste of this infamous beverage reminds me of that.

I'm not the only one making a face; Jack puts down his glass and says to me:

- You know Philip, I don't think I'll be able to drink that, in fact. It's too dreadful. Could you please give me a Coke ?

(...)

Gradually, the participants of the convention sit around the tables. The waiters bring the first bottles of "rosé". In a very natural way, I find myself sitting to the left of Jack Vance. Opposite him is Christophe Arleston (famous French author and scriptwriter of *Lanfeust de Troy*), apparently just as disoriented as I am to be in the company of the Master. During the meal, I learn that he read Tschäi at the age of fifteen, and that from that moment on he had known that he would devote himself to a creative activity. He chose to express himself quite early on in the comic

book. Garci and Boris are also at our table, but at the other end, with Arlette and Norma.

(...)

- Jack, ask Christophe, how would you like to see one of your comic books?

- Comics ? answers Jack. I don't like Comics; it's poor literature for the teenagers.

Christophe doesn't really know how to react, but he keeps smiling. I intervene by telling Jack that there's a clear difference between comic book production in the United States and in Europe. Here, comics have been considered for some years as a means of expression in their own right. It's not about Pulp. There are very talented authors and their "language" is truly recognized. Christophe goes on to quote a few names, Bilal, Manara, Rosinsky...

Jack shrugs his shoulders; he doesn't know them.

- I had in mind to write a screenplay based on the Gesture of the Demon Princes. Would you approve of such a project?

- I don't think so. I'm not interested.

Paul, who followed the conversation, nodded his head. We understand it's no now, but that it can be discussed later.

I'm talking to Jack about his particular way of making his descriptions. When I do this work, I often have the impression that the result is heavy, or that it doesn't correspond to what I want to express.

- Words are full of meaning in themselves," he says. When you choose the right words, and put them together wisely, you can very quickly express a precise idea. What is important is the Force (He said: "The Force") of the words. And their combination opens the mind to the desired feeling as well as to the visual.

Later in the evening, Paul will return to the subject by quoting two passages, which he has commented on extensively in his review.

The first passage is taken from Cugel's Saga: it is the passage in which Cugel and the caravan leader try to get a passenger out of the car. The passenger opposes and casts a spell. For the second one, taken from Madouc, this is the passage where Shimrod orders a band of goblins to build Trilda, his mansion.

I want to know how Jack proceeds in the construction of his plot. When he has an idea, how does he develop it? How does he manage to structure a complex narrative, or at least one in which thousands of ideas intertwine and manage to form a coherent whole?

- I take notes all the time. Every single idea must be written down, no matter how small. I may or may not use it, but it will not have escaped me. Sometimes one of these ideas leads me to think more deeply, and then other ideas are added to it. That's what, most of the time, forms a narrative. You also have to know what you want to tell; it's not easy, but when you know it, the story flows. Whether it's a man's particular experience, you know where he's coming from and where you want him to come from. The trick is to put the story in order, to determine what is really important and what is incidental. Above all, the reader always has something to discover. The character has to live through a lot of things so that the reader is perpetually hooked to the text.

- I sometimes have the impression, I say, that my characters gradually come to live a life of their own, and...

Jack starts laughing.

- Then stop writing! Do something else. Your character, you're responsible for it. He has to go where you want him to go. Are you holding the pen or aren't you?

Maybe it's a view of the mind, I confess. What I mean is that you give a character psychology, behaviour, ideals, a whole bunch of things that make up his personality. But in the course of the story, the events he experiences can contribute to making him act differently.

- No, they don't. No, they don't. If you have chosen, for example, a character who hates space travel, you have to take that into account when he is forced to leave a planet. It's too easy, at that point, to make him change his mind for one reason or another.

He's right. I'm not digging any deeper into this idea, it's not necessary. I realize that I have a plate of hors d'oeuvres in front of my nose, and I haven't touched it.

I tell Jack that some of his stories, I'm thinking in particular of the Lyonesse trilogy, are veritable labyrinths. There are lots of events that happen at the same time, or one after the other, which are so many little

stories that interweave, each one, it seems, with its main character. I ask him how he finds his way through them.

- When I was twenty, I was trying to write very complex stories, with lots of characters and events. I used to tear my hair out," he laughs. I never managed to do that, and I gave up very often. So I got into the habit of writing simple stories; a single plot, no more than two or three central characters. And these stories, I managed to finish them. Gradually, my stories became more and more complex; I allowed myself to attach to the main plot small things that grew in size and fleshed out the story. It's a question of patience. Above all, I never hesitated to throw away texts that didn't satisfy me.

- The theme of vengeance comes up very often in your stories," Christophe notes, "It's a question of patience. Are you in favour of vengeance?"

- Well, not necessarily. But I said earlier that you have to keep the reader on the edge of his seat. Revenge is a widespread human feeling, which also implies the theme of the quest. From that point of view, it's interesting. The whole cycle of the Demon Princes' Gesture revolves around revenge; Kirth Gersen wants revenge for the death of his parents. The Gesture has been one of the most exciting stories for me to write.

- Why write footnotes?

It's Christopher again.

- Oh. Just for fun.

What about Baron Bodissey, then? I asked. Jack laughs.

- Well, what about Baron Bodissey?

- There's never more than a few scattered references about him in the footnotes. Sometimes he's quoted by a character. But we don't know anything more about him. Did he ever want to make him a character in his own right?

- Well, he didn't. I think he's all right the way he is. Sometimes I imagine what he likes, what he eats, where he's lived, what he's done... Above all, he's written a life story in twelve volumes called Life; that's all I need to know about him.

I claim that he has something of the spiritual guide. Vance's characters quote Baron Bodissey as if we were quoting Confucius or Descartes.

- Perhaps... he replies evasively, half a smile stretching a

corner of his lips.

I shall know no more; and I see around me that I am not the only one who is frustrated.

Now I have in front of me a plate of rice pilaf with a piece of salmon in sauce. I want to know what the decisive readings were for him (for Jack Vance, not for the salmon in sauce). Was there a particular author who gave him a particular taste for writing?

- I don't know... I read Verne's "Mysterious Island" more than ten times. I really like Burrough, C.A. Smith, Lord Dunsany and P.G. Wodehouse. But I don't have a favorite author. Back home, when I was young, there were no books. When I entered the College, I discovered with fascination a huge library. And from then on, I began to read everything I could get my hands on.

In Cugel's universe... I was just beginning.

And Jack from banging noisily on the table.

- Philip! he shouts.

Uh, yes? What?

- Cugel Cugel!" he articulates, imitating the way I pronounce the name, namely with a « G » as in « January ». As it should be in French, since the G is not followed by a U.

- Not CuJel! KIOU-GUEL !

All right, Jack. Pardon me. Kiouguel. I forgot my question, anyway.

Once he's finished laughing, Christophe asks:

- About Kiouguel, is the Dying Planet part of the Gaiana Area?

- The Gaian civilization has been extinct for millions of years when the sun of this planet started to go out. I have placed this epoch at the edge of the end of time. That's why the sun is dying, and the day is like an eternal twilight.

I ask him if he doesn't want to write new detective novels in the style of Bad Ronald or Lily Street. He says no.

- Too much work for not enough money.

General burst of laughter. The next day, at the conference he will give at the Palais des Congrès (which I will not attend), someone will ask him the same question. He will answer it with a long evasive speech, will beat around the bush and finally evade the question.

Dessert is coming ; I now have a piece of pie in front of me. Apple

pie, probably. Paul gets up, helps Jack to do the same: the Master goes back to his quarters. Everyone thanks him warmly, then he retires in the greatest discretion.

An hour later, I find myself at the bar with Christophe, Paul and the two Swiss, Boris and Garci. We begin a passionate conversation that will last until two in the morning. Boris is convinced that Baron Bodissey is a messenger of God; Bodissey is, according to him, a distortion of "God Said", or the Word of God. But it is true that Armagnac warms our neurons a little in this late hour. The next day, he and his companion will sign with Jack Vance's agent the final agreement for the publication of their role-playing game on Lyonesse. Christophe's dream has come true. And what about me? Well, I think a few long-awaited triggers went off in my mind. If I think back, I more or less knew the answers to the questions I asked Jack Vance; but maybe I needed someone of his caliber to remind me?

The next morning at the station, I wait for my train in front of a café and a copy of the local newspaper, Centre-Pressé. On the third page, there is an article about Jack Vance illustrated by a photo where he poses with Siudmak and a convention organizer.

Jack and Norma will be extremely touched by the welcome they received from the French, and he will show his pride in sponsoring the convention.

I know that I will keep this man's image simple and uncluttered. There was nothing formal about this meeting. And against all expectations, I feel I have been talking not with the writer, but rather with the old man full of dreams. There he is, the creator of worlds. He's modest, frank, bon vivant, a bit of an anti-conformist. Age and experience may have brought him, too, a certain inflexibility. The example of comic books illustrates this in a certain way, but the title of the Centre-Pressé article is even more explicit: « I don't write for the vulgar scoundrel » .

« 95% of S.F. production," he says, "is intended for teenagers. It's vulgar and badly done [...]. I bundle together Star Trek, Godzilla and Jurassic Park. »

In fact, Jack Vance doesn't seem to be an SF writer. As Paul Rhoads likes to say, he has all the makings of a humanist. His characters, their psychology, their emotions, their relationships, that's what comes first in his stories. The genre is almost a pretext; the fact is that he feels better in

the Universe whose infinity reminds us of the ideal of freedom that everyone is coveting.

Web sources :

First release on the French site : <http://vance.jack.free.fr/pmonot.html>

<https://www.nestiveqnen.com/jack-vance-interview/>

<https://www.askell.com/Arleston/>



Philippe Monot Jack Vance

Christophe Arleston

Photo : Paul Rhoads 1998