Papers of Legendary Author Jack Vance Now at The University of Texas at Tyler

Billy Cryer

In late April of 1967, Ursula K. Le Guin sent off a handwritten note to 6383 Valley View Road in Oakland, California. "Dear Mr. Vance," began Le Guin in her unmistakable compact, graceful pen strokes. "This is a fan letter—an unmitigated fan letter. I have read all your books & stories with the greatest pleasure, and then after a while re-read them with greater pleasure. There are some lovely imaginations at work in s.f. now, but the work itself is so often botched or sketched or compromised; yours never; you are competent, an artist. Write more books, write more books. Yours gratefully, Ursula K. Le Guin."

This letter—together with a substantial archive of author papers—now resides at The University of Texas at Tyler as the Jack Vance Collection. One of the most acclaimed and influential American science fiction and fantasy authors of the twentieth century, Jack Vance (1916-2013) remains one of the most obscure and least studied literary figures. Winner of multiple Hugo Awards, a Nebula Award, and two World Fantasy Awards—as well as the Edgar Award for mystery fiction and the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America Grand Master honor—Vance authored more than sixty novels and well over a hundred short stories over a period of seven decades. Since the appearance of "The World-Thinker" in 1945 in *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, Vance's richly imagined worlds, vivid prose style, and mesmerizing narratives have inspired generations of writers. Vance shaped contemporary genre fiction in ways that academic scholarship has yet to fully explore.

The Jack Vance Collection comprises more than 60 boxes of materials spanning the full breadth of Vance's life and career. The collection includes handwritten and typescript copies of dozens of manuscripts; juvenilia and other unpublished works; extensive correspondence with editors, publishers, fellow authors, and readers; notebooks, personal diaries, and travel journals; numerous photographs; and an array of realia—including Vance's musical instruments. Materials produced by the author date from approximately the 1940s through the early 2000s. Several of Vance's early manuscripts are in the hands of individual collectors, and a small collection of Vance papers are housed at Boston University's Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center. However, the majority of the author's manuscripts and nearly all the other personal papers are now located at UT Tyler's Robert R. Muntz Library.

The body of correspondence in the collection is considerable. This includes letters from many influential figures in speculative fiction—Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, Dean Koontz, Frank Herbert, Robert Silverberg, Poul Anderson, Lin Carter, and Harlan Ellison, among others. The earliest correspondence include several letters dated 1946 from Vance to Norma Ingold, the year the two were married. These "courtship" letters exemplify Vance's signature wry humor and fertile imagination, and they also offer a glimpse into a unique period of the author's life, when he was

first carving out a place for himself as a professional writer while preparing for a life as husband and primary breadwinner.

The manuscripts of Vance's published works are particularly comprehensive. They represent nearly all of Vance's major works, including those that comprise his most celebrated series, such as The Dying Earth, Lyonesse, and Demon Princes. Vance wrote initial drafts of novels and stories by hand, then made extensive revisions on typescript manuscripts prepared by his wife Norma Vance. "Norma was strongly supportive of my writing from the start, and we began working as a team," wrote Vance in his 2009 autobiography. "I cannot emphasize enough how hard Norma worked over the course of my career—certainly as hard as I have, if not more" (86). The manuscripts are a testament to the magnitude of Norma Vance's contributions to her husband's success.

Of note in the collection are many notebooks and travel journals documenting multiple around-the-world voyages taken by the Vances. These extensive travels provided rich anthropological, culinary, and architectural detail for the uniquely imaginative settings in Vance's fiction. Also included in the collection are an assortment of juvenilia, including a raft of unpublished poems. These early efforts reveal the developing author's remarkable gift with language—what Robert Silverberg has described as Vance's "sense of color and image, his power to evoke mood and texture and sensory detail" (119).

Also among these early materials are a handful of Vance's college English and journalism papers while at University of California, Berkeley during the late 1930s and early 1940s. These papers glimmer with Vance's trademark sardonic wit. For one English essay assignment, the student was tasked with an analysis of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. In a discussion on the chapter "Solitude," Vance argues that the author enjoyed a "compromising kind of solitude," that, in fact, Thoreau was at best a "parlor hermit": "He could have achieved a real solitude by moving to Wyoming or Montana," observes Vance. "But there would also have been Apaches eager to remove Thoreau's scalp. He may have thought of this and decided that Concord was far enough." Vance concludes his essay on a note of frustration about the restrictive nature of prescriptive writing topics, as a general practice:

> However, all of this theorizing to the side, what is there to say? I dislike the idea of writing with any seriousness in so admittedly mechanical a vehicle as a weekly theme, classically scribbled during the hour preceding class. I could very easily comment, with considerable feeling, upon Death Valley in the moonlight, and speculatively, speak of frangipani blossoms and white sails bellying to the trade winds, and even more speculatively tell of the unimaginable grandeur and empty black vastness of interplanetary space.

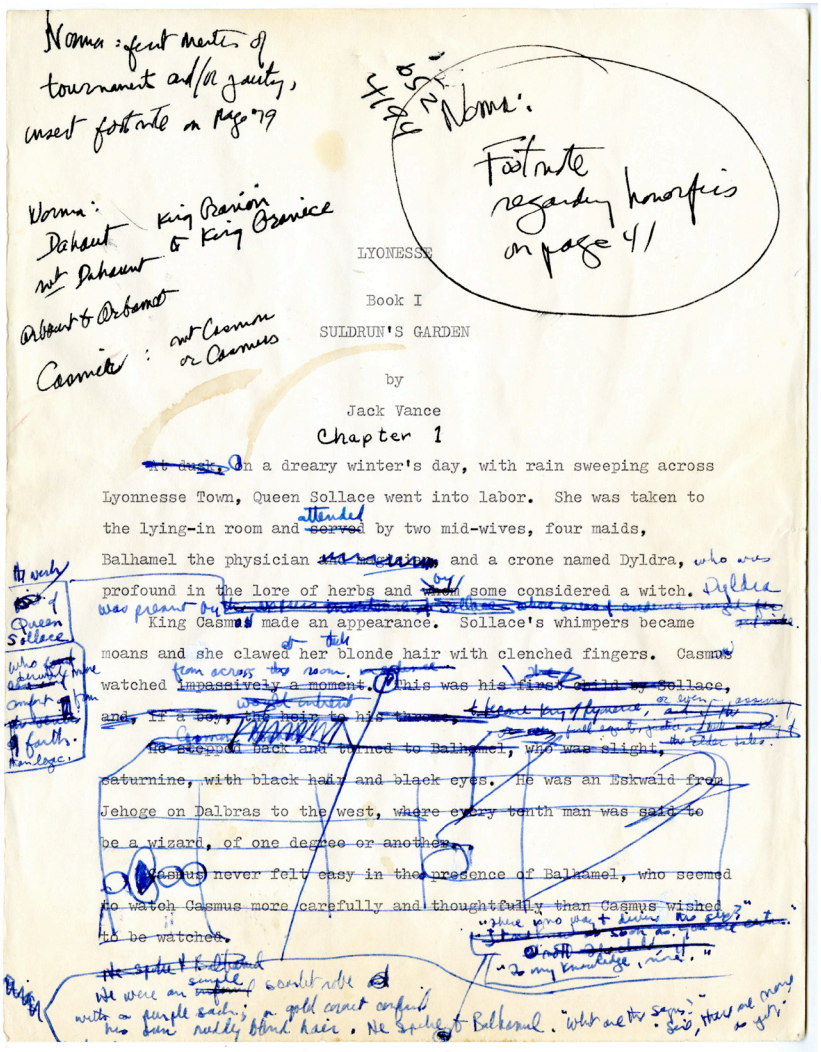
Vance's English professor marked the paper with a D—perhaps somewhat unhappy at such irreverent treatment of the great New England naturalist—though this fortunately did not take the wind from Vance's sail. The young writer was only just setting forth, his course set straight for the "unimaginable grandeur and empty black vastness" of the Gaean Reach, the far-future science fiction setting that would serve as the backdrop of so many celebrated planetary adventures.

The Jack Vance Collection was acquired through the efforts of Dr. Billy Cryer, who is curating the collection—and who for several years made regular trips to the Vance residence in Oakland to begin organizing the late author's papers. Special acknowledgement goes to the Vance estate, as well as UT Tyler archivist Rachel Motes, who has facilitated the transition of the collection to its new repository. A finding aid is currently in preparation and will be made available, along with the collection, once it has been fully organized. For inquiries about the Jack Vance Collection, please contact Billy Cryer at bcryer@uttyler.edu.

Works Cited

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LYONESSE

Book I

SULDRUN'S GARDEN

by

Jack Vance

Chapter 1

On a dreary winter's day, with rain sweeping across Lyonnesse Town, Queen Sollace went into labor. She was taken to the lying-in room and attended by two mid-wives, four maids, Balhamel the physician and a crone named Dyldra, who was profound in the lore of herbs and some considered a witch. Dyldra was present by King Casmus made an appearance. Sollace's whimpers became moans and she clawed her blonde hair with clenched fingers. Casmus watched impassively a moment. This was his first child by Sollace, and, if a boy, the heir to his throne. He stepped back and turned to Balhamel, who was slight, saturnine, with black hair and black eyes. He was an Eskwald from Jehoge on Dalbras to the west, where every tenth man was said to be a wizard, of one degree or another.

Casmus never felt easy in the presence of Balhamel, who seemed to watch Casmus more carefully and thoughtfully than Casmus wished to be watched.

Banality, Absurdity, and Liang Qingsan's Science-Fictional Counter-Narratives

Fontaine Lien

Although the genre has advanced far beyond its pulp days, much of science fiction and speculative fiction has retained elements of escapism and wish fulfillment—it is just that the precise desires have changed along with cultural norms and societal circumstances. To list just one example, whereas past adventures might have imagined heroic and handsome men conquering Mars and rescuing alien princesses (*A Princess of Mars*) as an obvious replacement for colonialist adventures, recent fiction is more likely to depict a marginalized outcast surviving the apocalypse using their unique gifts. Examples of more relatable protagonists abound in contemporary Chinese science fiction (SF) as well, perhaps because many Chinese SF writers also hold professional day jobs that do not allow them to commit wholesale to imagining fantastical worlds. Few, however, have incorporated the banal and the everyday as Liang Qingsan (né Liang Hua) has, and to great effect.

Liang Qingsan's two distinctive types of SF writing can be described on the one hand as fantastical steampunk techno-orientalism, and on the other as a genre that mobilizes banality and humorous absurdity, as opposed to novelty and graveness, that forcefully confront us with our quotidian realities. While other scholars have highlighted the serious sociological and environmental concerns of authors such as Liu Cixin, Xia Jia, and Chen Qiufan, I argue that their contemporary Liang's "minor" science fiction better reflects a particular subset of attitudes within his generational cohort, those who choose to "lie flat" over pursuing wealth or career accomplishments as with previous generations. On the surface writing about trivial situations, Liang's SF nonetheless utilizes scientific nova in a noteworthy and interesting way, and is an important voice that has heretofore been missing in the consideration of contemporary Chinese SF. Recognizing this voice forces a re-consideration of Chinese SF as world literature: it does not necessarily "speak for the subaltern" (Spivak) or represent any kind of national allegory (Jameson). It can, as Liang's work demonstrates, speak to the humor and exasperation that pervades everyday life in an era of absurd technological saturation, a problem shared across much of the world.

Liang Qingsan's Unique Brand of Millennial Science Fictio

Like many of his generational cohort, Liang is an SF writer but also somewhat of a hobbyist SF scholar. Though his primary field of study is in the STEM disciplines, he is an amateur researcher of Qing dynasty history and culture and has taken classes on late-Qing science fiction with the prominent Chinese SF scholar, Wu Yan (Liang, "Boredom" 3). Although he modestly claims to not be able to make a living from writing SF, he is a contracted author with a Shanghai publishing company. A recent book jacket blurb enumerates his hobbies as research, reading manhwa, playing video games, and daydreaming (Liang, *Mechanical Wonders*). This testimony is representative