

Jack Vance

TALES of the
DYING EARTH
Book III

Cugel:
The Skybreak
Spatterlight

Jack Vance

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FOREWORD

I GREW UP IN CHICAGO during the reign of mayor-for-life Richard J. Daley, whose rule seemed absolute and eternal. When he died, in 1976, the papers treated his passing like that of a world-class strongman, in much the same way that they had covered the death of Chairman Mao a couple of months earlier. Like Mao, Daley was a stocky, pie-faced leg-breaker, tough and shrewd, with the bluff manner of a man who puts his confidence in the eternal principle of thinly masked force. Daley resembled, then, a character from a Jack Vance story: a cousin to Vance's formidable village elders, and also to his castle-dwelling ogres who have usurped by main force the perquisites of the spineless aristocracy. Daley spoke like one of Vance's characters, too, dressing up low blows in high-flown language. He would declare that "it would be a good thing for the great people of the great city of Chicago" if a certain public works project was finished before the next election, and underlings could hear the implied "or else." Having grown up in a world dominated by Daley, it seemed to me that no big-city boss could ever rival him.

But then, in good time, along came his son, Richard M. Daley. He ruled with similarly imperial purpose and reach, and he was no glib cutie pie, but he did things with a deceptively smooth efficacy that suggested a style more advanced than his father's. The son didn't get red in the face and make a display of crushing his enemies so much as he quietly ushered them into oblivion. Daley the First, angrily denouncing subversives and ordering his police to shoot to kill, became a household name in America in the late 1960s; Daley the Second's Chicago was rarely in the national news at all, which was how he liked it. The son steadily revised, undid, and added to his father's accomplishments for 22 years, a mayoral reign one year longer than his father's, and then

chose to leave office on his own terms — timing his departure, in the style of Cugel, to get out just before the city's shaky finances and social divisions produced a full-blown crisis that might have brought him down. Watching the son's virtuosity as a boss, I found myself conceding that there was a good case for seeing the sequel as greater than the very great original.

So it is with *Cugel the Clever* and *Cugel: the Skybreak Spatterlight* — originally published as *The Eyes of the Overworld* (1966) and *Cugel's Saga* (1983), respectively. I read *Eyes of the Overworld* first, at the impressionable age of 14, and it became a before-and-after moment in my life as a reader and, eventually, a writer. I'm not alone in this. Many a Jack Vance diehard dates his or her passion to an early encounter with *Eyes of the Overworld*. The verminous but delusively refined denizens of Smolod, the tricky business of arranging for curses to cancel each other out, the Busiacos, the encounter with Totality, the mordant and haunting journey with the pilgrims. . . there is so much in it to love and return to over and over again. And there are two sentences of barbed dialogue, ripe with veiled intent and malign word-music, that probably did more to turn me into a professional writer than anything else I have ever read: "But I thought to notice you examining the manner in which the timbers of my booth are joined. You will obtain a better view from within, but first I must shorten the chain of the captive erb which roams the premises during the night." How could any book top that?

Cugel's Saga was published 17 years after *Eyes of the Overworld*, when I was already in college and had left Chicago — for good, it turned out. I first read it a few years after that, having picked up a used copy of the Baen paperback with a painting by Kevin Johnson on the cover that renders an insectoid sime-bazil hybrid with inaccurate but effective gusto but commits a serious offense against literary fidelity by figuring Cugel as an earnest, button-nosed young swashbuckler. Where is the saturnine air of unsavory worldliness, the aversion to sentimental heroism, the eye out for the main chance? Where's the long nose and loping, bent-kneed posture? By then I was already embarked on adult life in New York City: working at an office job at what I suspected was a CIA front organization, cohabiting with my wife-to-be, beginning to make out the shape of a calling on the horizon. I was still young but well past

the adolescent stage of maximum hot-wax impressionability at which a book you love can strike to the formative foundation of your sensibility. But, having considered the matter over the course of many rereadings of both books over the years, including a couple of listens to the audio-book versions read by Arthur Morey, I find myself accepting a truth that the 14-year-old me would have found difficult to imagine: *Cugel's Saga* is the greater book, and the best of all the Dying Earth books.

My case in support of that claim rests in particular on three qualities of *Cugel's Saga* aka *Cugel: the Skybreak Spatterlight*: Vance's mastery of the episodic picaresque form, the sure balance he strikes between action and everything else, and the sophisticated treatment he gives to his own recurring quirks and obsessions.

First, for creativity and sureness of handling, episode for episode *Skybreak Spatterlight* compares favorably to anything else in Vance's oeuvre. The competition with Bunderwal at the Inn of Blue Lamps, the visit to Lausicaa, and the shipboard social microcosms on the *Galante* and *Avventura* are all first-rate Vance creations, elegantly balancing original world-thinking and astute story-engineering with thematic wit and lacerating insight into human nature. And there are two major setpieces — Cugel's visit to the manse Flutic and the story of the Bagful of Dreams — that rise even higher, to the level of perfection.

The episode is the heart of the picaresque, a genre defined above all by an episodic, open-ended story of a vagabond moving “horizontally through space and vertically through society,” as the critic Claudio Guillén put it. The picaro encounters a range of jobs, masters, adversaries, and social strata, a sampling that allows for a critical assessment of human nature and society as a whole. There's not much in the way of learning-and-growing and hugging it out. When Guillén described the picaresque novel as “formally open, so to speak, and ideologically closed,” he was describing *Skybreak Spatterlight* to a tee. Its various episodes recombine a dizzying number of different popular forms — the journey on the *Avventura*, for instance, has discernible elements of murder mystery, horror, fantasy, science fiction, sea tale, and Orientalist caravan yarn — but display a rigorous consistency of theme as they explore how social niceties and elevated talk of duty and ethics incompletely mask naked self-interest. Tanith Lee, a fine

fantasy writer who credited an encounter with Vance's Dying Earth with yanking her from morose youthful aimlessness onto the path of purpose that led to her calling, once lovingly recited to me a line from the Bagful of Dreams episode that cogently sums up Vance's world view: "I would offer congratulations were it not for this tentacle gripping my leg."

Second, in *Skybreak Spatterlight* Vance strikes an especially sure-footed balance between action and everything else. In all his work he generally tends to reduce the conventional genre action of battles and chases and such to brusque summary, leaving room for the stuff that really matters, like word-fencing, the play of base appetites, and painting a portrait of the human beast crouching behind the facade of manners and mores. In *Skybreak Spatterlight* he plays this instrument, so to speak, with particular brio.

Here, for instance, a man is stung by a poisonous creature: "Shilko uttered a shrill cry, rolled clear, turned several frantic somersaults, fell to the ground, bounded blindly to the lake and thrashed here and there in the water, and at last became still. Almost at once the corpse began to bloat." Concision is the key to the passage's tone, which is a lot more important than the action being described. When the flailing body grows still, a flash of darker feeling momentarily suffuses the scene with a hint of tragedy, seemingly interrupting its slapstick rhythm. But the pause that follows, implied by setting off the second sentence with a period, makes that sentence function more efficiently as a punch line once the bloating begins, returning to slapstick without having missed a beat. Compare this kind of subtle tone-shifting to what you get elsewhere in the fantasy literature: smoking gore and galvanic sinew-cracking feats of desperate prowess in the manner of Robert E. Howard, for instance, or the damp heroic sweep of Tolkien and his imitators.

Even though Vance is an expert imaginer of social and narrative situations, the real engine of his prose can be found in the inherent drama of the language itself. One telling habit in this regard is his love of dropping chunks of legalese into the middle of the diction of fantasy, a habit the Dying Earth books share with his Lyonesse trilogy. There's a doozy of an example in *Skybreak Spatterlight*, when Cugel finds himself obliged to enter a notoriously exacting enemy's carriage: "I will ride

with you to Taun Tassel,” says Cugel, “but you must accept these three terces in full, exact, final, comprehensive and complete compensation for the ride and every other aspect, adjunct, by-product and consequence, either direct or indirect, of the said ride, renouncing every other claim, now, and forever, including all times of the past and future, without exception, and absolving me, in part and in whole, from any and all further obligations.”

The comic shock of contractual language breaking into the diction of fantasy is a cold bath for escapists, a reminder that, though we may be a million or more years in the future in a land where magic works and euphonius place names abound, we’re also still in a recognizable version of our own world, surrounded by recognizable avatars of our own grasping selves who angle for advantage in the usual ways. And, of course, the juxtaposition also has the complementary reverse effect, inflecting with a tincture of the fantastic even the most mundane legalese — or a conversation with an innkeeper about the evening’s bill of fare, a puzzling encounter with a testy clerk, or any of a hundred other regular features of Vance’s pulp storytelling that bear the familiar mark of the everyday. I reread Vance for that drama of dueling dictions, much more than for the action.

Third and finally, Vance revisits some of his regular interests and quirks in *Skybreak Spatterlight*, but he handles them with uncommon self-awareness, somehow managing to exaggerate them to baroque extremes while also subsuming them to his larger purposes. Among the favored hobbyhorses he returns to again and again in his work are menus, itemized bills, and inexplicable hostility, but Exhibit A in this regard has to be his attitude toward female sexuality. His oeuvre fairly pulsates with lust for virginal young women with boyish figures who look back at us over their shoulder, and with a complementary horror of mature, sexually confident women who know what they want. His worst nightmare would be one of the robust dowagers played by Margaret Dumont, the Marx Brothers’ middle-aged straight woman, on quaaludes. In *Skybreak Spatterlight* he both wallows in and pokes fun at these proclivities: in the episode of the Paphniscean Baths he imagines an entire social order organized around female sexual aggression; and he mocks Cugel for lusting after Doctor Lalanke’s mimes, who are

virginal to the point of sexlessness. Even when Cugel actually succeeds in bedding lissome young women, they abuse his manhood without mercy: “Your fumbling and groping with cold hands has bored us all.”

That’s actually a startling moment in the fantasy literature, which in its ardor for heroic manliness tends to either pass blushing over such matters or assume that all couplings are mutually satisfactory. Picture a woman saying something similar to Conan, or Frodo. The humiliation would destroy the entire Planet-of-the-Guys fantasy world constructed around each of them, but in Cugel’s case it’s just another reminder of how things work, of how people go about the business of living. Even when giving free play to his recurring lustful obsessions, Vance manages to rigorously subsume them to one of his great themes: human intercourse of all sorts is about gain and advantage, using and being used, getting without giving.

If I’ve made the present volume seem like a novel of ideas, it isn’t. It’s an adventure tale, episodic in the best sense of the word, funny and dark and just mean enough; a craft triumph of world-thinking, story-engineering, and, above all else, writing for the sheer pleasure of making the language of fantasy do things nobody else can make it do.

— Carlo Rotella is director of American Studies at Boston College.

His profile of Jack Vance, “The Genre Artist,” appeared in the
New York Times Magazine in 2009.