

Introduction

“Unrolled by the Saliva and Teeth of the Water”

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In 1960, the absinthe-colored cover of the *Evergreen Review* asked the question “What Is ‘Pataphysics?’” Now, more than sixty years later, a more appropriate question might be “*Why* has ‘pataphysics—a ‘science’ invented in the 1880s by Alfred Jarry (1873–1907) and his schoolmates to mock their incompetent physics teacher—persisted as a mode of jocoserious artistic production into the twenty-first century?” Pataphysics has maintained a near constant presence through modernism, postmodernism, and into contemporary experimental practices, capturing the imagination of writers, artists, thinkers, and musicians as diverse as Marcel Duchamp, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, John Cage, Asger Jorn, Man Ray, the Beatles, Joan Miró, Jean Genet, Jean Baudrillard, Thomas Chimes, Christian Bök, Amy Catanzano, and William Kentridge.¹ Despite only being acknowledged as a word by the *Oxford English Dictionary* in June 2005,² pataphysics has been a platform and medium for persistent intellectual, poetic, conceptual, and artistic experimentation for more than a century. Why? To answer these and other questions, we must first turn to its origins.

Alfred Jarry: Pataphysical Origins

Fin de siècle author, artist, and puppeteer Alfred Jarry lived “a pataphysical life.”³ It was short—he died of tuberculosis aggravated by alcoholism at the age of thirty-four—but explosively creative. Jarry cultivated a life of profound ridiculousness, a project he approached with the utmost seriousness. He kept a pet owl, lived on the second-and-a-half floor of a Paris apartment building,⁴ wore bicyclists’ clothing for almost all occasions, was known to “pronounce mute ‘e’s in everyday conversation,”⁵

and referred to his bicycle as “that which rolls” and the wind as “that which blows.” He was famously fond of absinthe, which he would often drink in massive quantities with the express purpose of inducing hallucinations. The oft-cited culmination of Jarry’s commitment to a life of absurdity was his deathbed request for a toothpick.⁶ These idiosyncrasies permeated Jarry’s existence. He cultivated a systematic resistance to normalcy, rendering the quotidian preposterous and the preposterous quotidian. Clichéd but true for Jarry: life was his art, and art was his life.

Jarry’s “science” had an inauspicious birth. During his time at the Lycée de Rennes from 1881 to 1891, he and his classmates coined the term “pataphysics” to distinguish physics *as such* from the physics nonsensically taught to them by their notoriously incompetent and buffoonish teacher, Félix-Frédéric Hébert. Hébert became the main character in a series of comical poems, stories, and plays written and performed by the boys, appearing alternatively as Père Heb, P.H., or Père Eb. That sophomoric invention eventually transformed into the literary work for which Jarry is best known: *Ubu Roi* (1896). A caricature more than a character, the play’s eponymous protagonist boasts three mismatched teeth, a retractable ear, an immense belly,⁷ and an insatiable, infantile ego. On December 6, 1896, the play famously caused a riot on its opening night with its very first word, when the corpulent title character bellowed “Merdre!” (the French word for “shit” with an extra *r*), a thinly veiled expletive that symbolically threw excrement at the audience, in equal measure eliciting outraged protests and uproarious laughter of approval. Though the play opened and closed the same night, the scandal of it catapulted the play and its author into notoriety. It has been cited as the birth of absurdist theatre and even, for some, of French modernism and the avant-garde in general. But while the Ubu plays⁸ made Jarry famous in France, it is his neo-scientific novel, *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician* (1911), that has had the most lasting and wide-ranging impact on artistic practices of the last century.

Although the Ubu plays and *Faustroll* can be seen as complements, they should more accurately be seen as rivals. After the enormous *succès de scandale* of *Ubu Roi*, Jarry often felt trapped by his own creation—typecast, as it were. He was famous for creating Ubu and, to some extent, for playing the part of Ubu in the cafés and salons of Paris. Yet in his lifetime he was able to publish only short excerpts of *Faustroll*—by far his most philosophical and formally ambitious literary work—and they were largely ignored. *Faustroll* was not published in full until four years after his death; Jarry never got to hear Guillaume Apollinaire call it “the most important publication of 1911.”⁹ If Jarry were alive today, he might be happily shocked to learn that many leading scholars now acknowledge that *Faustroll* was his real magnum opus. Alastair Brotchie, whose biography of Jarry is the most comprehensive portrait of the author in English, observes that “while the ‘public’ identified Jarry with Ubu, Jarry identified himself with Faustroll,” and he stresses that “*Faustroll* should

be seen as a representation of Jarry's present life *in its totality*.¹⁰ 'Pataphysics was Jarry's lifelong work, and *Faustroll* was its fullest expression.

The elevation of 'pataphysics from an adolescent joke to a term of comic-aesthetic and philosophical import worthy of a lifelong (and, indeed, century-long) commitment was due, at least in part, to Jarry's time studying with Henri Bergson from 1891 to 1893 at the Lycée Henri IV in Paris. Jarry deeply admired Bergson and was engrossed by his lectures, but disagreed with him about one key concept: epiphenomenalism, which posited that consciousness itself might be understood as an "accidental side effect of the state of the brain."¹¹ While Bergson rejected this notion, Jarry was fascinated by the idea that consciousness itself could be a mere accident. Emphasizing how important this philosophical break with Bergson was for Jarry, Brotchie even goes so far as to say that 'pataphysics itself might be understood as an epiphenomenon of Jarry's attendance at Bergson's lectures.¹² *Faustroll* further attests to the term's significance for Jarry. A reference to epiphenomenalism precedes the two most famous definitions of 'pataphysics in the novel, suggesting that the concept is crucial, perhaps even prerequisite, to an understanding of 'pataphysics: if consciousness itself is accidental, then 'pataphysics sets as its enterprise the cultivation of a ludic reality.

While Jarry had originally planned to publish a treatise on 'pataphysics in order to fully flesh out his jocoserious philosophy of art and life, his decision to ultimately write a "neo-scientific novel" on the topic is revealing—suggesting that the terms of the term itself must reside in fiction. Defining 'pataphysics through a novel allowed Jarry to blur the lines between fiction and nonfiction, literature and science, nonsense and philosophy. The novel situates the "science" in the realm of the imaginary and speculative while also making tantalizing use of actual scientific and mathematical theories. *Faustroll* adeptly integrates the real and the imaginary in ways that make us question each: "real science" starts to sound absurd, while Jarry's "imaginary solutions" start to sound plausible. The novel form allows Jarry to embody and enact the complex, paradoxical aspects of 'pataphysics rather than elucidate them.

In order to understand *Faustroll's* importance for Jarry's own conception of 'pataphysics and for the various pataphysicians after him, an overview of key plot points and main characters will be helpful. The primary narrative involves Faustroll's mock-Odyssean voyage "from Paris to Paris" by sieve, a twelve-meter-long copper-mesh skiff that floats on water by surface tension.¹³ His travel companions include his first mate, Bosse-de-Nage, a hydrocephalic baboon whose only words are "ha ha," and Panmuphle, a bailiff who had been sent to collect overdue rent from Faustroll and functions both as a frame-tale narrator and an ironic connection to the rational, "real" world. Faustroll's two comic foils—which represent, respectively, buffoonery and seriousness, lawlessness and the law, instinctual reactions and

intellectual responses—act together to personify what Faustroll (and Jarry) reject: the notion that mutually exclusive opposites cannot coexist. In the text, Faustroll is both; $1 + 1 = 3$. Along the three characters' journey, they visit fourteen "equivalent"¹⁴ islands, each corresponding to a different artistic figure, including, among others, Aubrey Beardsley, Paul Valéry, Paul Gauguin, Henri Rousseau, and Stéphane Mallarmé. In this series of deliriously hilarious vignettes, Jarry paints a composite portrait of avant-garde Paris and his own psychosocial cityscape. By naming these figures, Jarry simultaneously invites a variety of artists into his pataphysical universe and suggests that the practice of pataphysics should and *does* extend outside the world of the book and into the real.

The novel consists of eight books, each with multiple subchapters, the titles of which echo those found in philosophical treatises. Book 2, "Elements of Pataphysics," opens with a chapter titled "Definition," from which the most widely quoted definitions of 'pataphysics are taken: "DEFINITION. *Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments*" (22). Hardly a clear definition to begin with, the novel further complicates things by almost immediately offering even more definitions, including "the science of that which is superinduced upon metaphysics," "the science of the particular," and that which "will examine the laws governing exceptions, and will explain the universe supplementary to this one" (21). Furthermore, the chapter ends with a reference to "the irreverence of the common herd whose instinct sums up the adepts of the science of pataphysics in the following phrase:" (24). Like the famous colon at the end of Ezra Pound's "Canto I,"¹⁵ Jarry's colon acts as a frame for what follows, so that the rest of the novel becomes, comically, "the phrase" that sums up 'pataphysics. The novel thus explodes the single-sentence definition by offering multiple definitions, and formally expanding the definitional task both backward (by naming the entire chapter "Definition," itself being only one "element" of 'pataphysics) and forward (by ending the chapter with a colon that suggests the definitional exercise continues). 'Pataphysics is thus rendered not *indefinable* (as is often asserted) but rather *infinitely* definable. Pataphysics is not a science of lack, but of excess, not of foreclosure but of possibility, and, from its origins, includes an invitation to readers to continue its comically rigorous investigation of the absurd.

In book 7, Faustroll sinks his sieve and drowns himself, which is described as "mak[ing] the gesture of dying" (97). Following pataphysical logic, Faustroll is not dead as such, but rather translated to "eternity," a truly pataphysical realm that is completely outside of time and space. From eternity, Faustroll offers, in a final pataphysical flourish, a geometrical proof of God's existence that leads him to the solution " $\infty - 0 - a + a + 0 = \infty$ " (111–14).¹⁶ The novel concludes, without apology or equivocation, "Therefore, *definitively*: / GOD IS THE TANGENTIAL POINT BETWEEN

ZERO AND INFINITY. Pataphysics is *the* science.” (114). Jarry asserts, in his signature deadpan manner, that ‘pataphysics could prove what philosophers had tried but failed to prove for centuries: the existence of God. Of course, Jarry has proved nothing at all except, perhaps, that language can render visible in the imagination a mathematical impossibility (a tangential point) while also making a certain kind of poetic sense. As Roger Shattuck notes, “Beneath the double talk and ellipsis, [pataphysics] . . . seems to mean that the virtual or imaginary nature of things as glimpsed by the heightened vision of poetry or science or love can be seized and lived as real.”¹⁷ Reinforcing the gesture of the definitional colon, the text’s terminal ellipses, in effect, hands the pen to the reader, inviting them to practice pataphysical science into eternity. It should come as no surprise then, that while Jarry called this a “neo-scientific novel,” readers have taken it as a guidebook to pataphysics that includes permission to carry out experiments in its name.

It is to *how* pataphysics has “unrolled” from its origins in Jarry’s texts into the contemporary moment that this collection turns its critical attention. *Pataphysics Unrolled* provides evidence that the prophesy at the heart of what is arguably the most important sentence of Jarry’s most important work, and this volume’s epigraph, came true:

And behold, the wallpaper of Faustroll’s body was unrolled by the saliva and teeth of the water.

Like a musical score, all art and all science were written in the curves of the limbs of the ultrasexagenarian ephebe, and their progression to an infinite degree was prophesied therein. (99)

By describing “the wallpaper of Faustroll’s body”—which should be understood to be the text of *Faustroll* itself—as “unrolled by the *saliva* and *teeth* of the water” (my emphasis), Jarry alludes to textual rumination: a chewing on of the text that releases its full flavor and provides sustenance to the reader. With a hyperbolic, mock-religious tone, the lines both prophesize and invoke the continuation of pataphysical enterprises; they put the roll in *Faustroll*. Jarry’s provocation has been answered: artists and thinkers have digested the text, and it has fueled over a century of experimentation in an astounding range of fields and disciplines, in both avant-garde and popular art forms.¹⁸ The claim to “all art and all science” being contained in *Faustroll* should not imply that the novel was comprehensive, but rather that pataphysics—as a mode of aesthetic inquiry—has the capacity to reveal all art and all science (conscious and unconscious, real and imaginary, past and future) as it moves through time and space. By suggesting the text is “like a musical score,” Jarry further implies that the text is meant to be *played*: interpreted and performed. In practice, then, pataphysics is more of a verb than a noun—denoting an orientation and approach rather than any particular style or mode. Its insistence on situational

interventions that fuse rationality and irrationality, procedure and chance, humor and seriousness, has worked to keep it relevant as a technique that pushes against stagnation in ways of thinking through productive critique (creation). If part of pataphysics' enterprise is to use imagination to invent new realities, then it is perhaps no surprise that real life has imitated literature: pataphysics continued after Jarry's death as *Faustroll* continued after Faustroll's.

Faustroll was written seven years before Albert Einstein published his theory of special relativity in 1905, and Jarry showed a remarkable ability to artistically anticipate scientific discoveries, especially the concept of the space-time continuum and the perspective-dependent nature of space and time. Jarry's image of the "wallpaper of Faustroll's body" becoming a scroll as it "unrolls" through history provides an apt metaphor. When one reads a scroll, one can only see part of the text at any particular time; despite the fact that the text continues (both backward and forward), one can never experience the whole of it at once. When thought of as a scroll, the history of pataphysics represents a different understanding of time and literary history in which past, present, and future can be moved through, unrolled and rerolled—in effect, rendering the scroll its own kind of time machine.¹⁹ This book considers Jarry's legacy as such a scroll—showing the continuous (though not necessarily linear) flow of pataphysical ideas from today to Jarry and before. Faustroll's body is still being "written" as artists, writers, scientists, philosophers, and computer programmers conduct new pataphysical research, play new artistic-intellectual games, and design new pataphysical technologies. As such, Dr. Faustroll goes beyond a figure representing Alfred Jarry and his idiosyncratic pseudoscience to become the embodiment of an artistic-scientific energy, a continually unrolling force that creates and reveals alternative realities as it moves through time and space.

Pataphysics After Jarry

In 1948, a group of Paris intellectuals formed the *Collège de Pataphysique* as a paradoxically formal collective to further explore "the science." With Dr. Faustroll as the "Inamovable Curator," Marcel Duchamp as a "Grand Satrap," and such prominent members as Boris Vian, Max Ernst, Raymond Queneau, Man Ray, Jean Dubuffet, Groucho Marx, and Eugène Ionesco, the *Collège* was notoriously esoteric and insular, especially before its "disoccultation" in 2001. Over the years, it has produced a number of publications, but until 2001 these publications circulated clandestinely among its members and friends, a practice that cultivated the *Collège's* reputation as a secret society producing secret knowledge.²⁰ Adding to the sense of mystery is the *Collège's* use of idiosyncratic spellings (*phynance* for finance), dates (preferring the pataphysical calendar), and concepts with uniquely pataphysical connotations (clinamen, antinomy, syzygy). While the *Collège* has certainly been the most important

“pataphysical institution” (an intentional contradiction in terms) in maintaining the legacy of pataphysical inquiry, this volume focuses primarily on artists and scholars who have worked with pataphysical ideas but have not been members.²¹ The *Collège* has helped to create a lineage of pataphysical artists and thinkers by publishing works, preserving documents and ephemera, and keeping the comedic energy alive, but it does not dictate who or how one could play at pataphysics.²² While the *Collège* has maintained a largely French and European membership²³ the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle (known by the acronym Oulipo)—a subcommittee of the *Collège* that literally translates to “workshop of potential literature”—has proliferated internationally and spawned its own offshoots.

Founded in 1960 by François Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau, the Oulipo consists of mathematicians and writers whose primary concern has been to research (*anoulipism*) and create (*synthoulipism*) forms and constraints with which literature has been or could be written. The theoretical issues surrounding potential literature are complex, and many members of the Oulipo, both past and present, disagree on how precisely these works should be executed and for what purpose. For example, some argue that the creation of formulas for potential literature should be their main focus, while others insist that constraints must be illustrated, or even exhausted. Regardless of which side of the debate one falls on, the Oulipo’s efforts to create “recurrent literature” is linked to ‘pataphysics’ investment in systematic, procedural, and exhaustive experimentation grounded in jocoserious constraints: “We will thus classify under the heading of ‘recurrent literature’ any text that contains, explicitly or implicitly, generative rules that invite the reader (or the teller, or the singer) to pursue the production of the text to infinity (or until the exhaustion of interest or attention).”²⁴ While the Oulipo’s origins in the *Collège* is not always acknowledged, its desire to continue pataphysical research (re: creative writing) into infinity comes directly from *Faustroll’s* imperative to continue, to go on, to keep up the joke.²⁵

While these two groups, based largely in France, continued the pataphysical enterprise strategically, pataphysics’ influence began to take root in a more diffuse manner internationally. The publication of Roger Shattuck’s *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France, 1885 to World War I* (1955), the 1960 special issue of the *Evergreen Review*, and other translations of Jarry’s work into English gave Anglophone artists and thinkers an opportunity to explore pataphysics outside the context of coterie groups such as the *Collège* or Oulipo. These publications coincided with a general growing interest in countercultures in the United States, with which Jarry’s hallucinatory, raunchy, and antiestablishment ideas resonated. A black-humor aesthetic in literature and the visual arts also made American audiences receptive to Jarry. The Theatre of the Absurd—and particularly works by Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Edward Albee—popular in the United States

during the 1950s and 1960s, was deeply influenced by Jarry's work, although relatively few realized this at the time. Through all of these developments, American and European forms of pataphysics were continuing to cross-pollinate each other. Perhaps nothing represents the transatlantic presence of pataphysics more than the establishment of a comprehensive Marcel Duchamp collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1954, which grew into a pilgrimage site for many of the avant-garde in the 1950s and 1960s. Philadelphia continued to be a locus of pataphysical experimentation, most notably through the painter Thomas Chimes and "Graffiti Pataphysic" artist James E. Brewton, a largely forgotten but crucial artist for the ways that his work illustrated transatlantic pataphysical experimentation through his connections with CoBrA artists.²⁶ As a whole, pataphysics presented an opportunity for American artists of the 1950s and 1960s to further link their work to European lineages while also establishing their own voices.

In Canada, pataphysics was also percolating. The Toronto Research Group (TRG)²⁷—the name given to the collaborations between poets bpNichol and Steve McCaffery between 1973 and 1981—explored pataphysical creative-research methodologies that merged mysticism and mathematics, speech and writing, the conceptual and the material. As a result of their work, they coined the term Canadian "Pataphysics."²⁸ In 1981, *Open Letter* published a special issue on Canadian "Pataphysics," followed by an issue on Millennial Pataphysics in 1997, showcasing how pataphysical practice had continued to evolve in the Canadian literary avant-garde. The issues cemented the link between a pataphysical past and a conceptual future in Canadian literature. While *Open Letter* validated pataphysical literature from a more academic perspective, it was through small literary publications that pataphysical literature thrived, including such works as bpNichol's *Catalogue of the "Pataphysical Hardware Company"* (1985), which included "everything for your imaginary needs"; John Riddell's *How to Grow Your Own Lightbulbs* (1997); and Gary Barwin's *Anus Porcupine Eyebrow* (2009), which reads letters and punctuation as icons to produce a series of visual-verbal poems. Also of note were the activities of the Institute of Linguistic Onto-Genetics. Founded in 1981 by Michael Dean, the (imaginary) institute produced several publications and held three events—a 1981 symposium at which Dean offered the keynote as his alter-ego Aldo Breun, an "Un Fair" that never occurred but was documented as if it had in 1984, and *L'Affaire Pataphysique*, an event in 1985 at which attendees visited booths to pay for pataphysical performances by artists in persona.²⁹

Part of the allure of Jarry's "science" from midcentury, when his works were translated into English, to the present has been its resonance with modern and post-modern philosophers and theorists, including Henri Bergson, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Lacan, and Gilles Deleuze,³⁰ as well as its exploration of modern scientific concepts that, in retrospect, can be seen as precursors to string

theory, quantum mechanics, and—as Jim Hendler and Andrew Hugill explore in their chapter—quantum computing. Jarry’s reading of Nietzsche—discussed by both John Heon and Jean-Michel Rabaté in their respective chapters—was a watershed moment for him. Nietzsche’s central principles, especially that meaning is multiple and that philosophy should be a “gay science,” helped Jarry to formulate his own expansions of the concept of ’pataphysics as comic aesthetics.³¹ The realization that there is not a single source of truth, knowledge, or logic, but rather multiple perspective-dependent truths, competing types of knowledge, and alternative forms of logic began to coalesce with Jarry and his associates, and expanded on a massive scale during the coming decades. For Jarry and many modernists, new scientific discoveries and technologies were making visible the vital role of perspective. They revealed that the world was not a single, stable universe, but a relativistic multiverse in which common sense and direct sensory perception told us only a tiny fraction about what else was at work in the physical world. More general concepts of polysemy and polyphony marked many fields in the early twentieth century, and later burgeoned in the works of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze, whose rise to prominence helped to further broaden the exploration of pataphysical ideas in the second half of the twentieth century. Jarry, like Lacan and Derrida after him, illustrated the importance of play within language and the arts as a way of coming to understand and experience these less-apparent truths. Jarry put polysemic play into play, as it were, bringing it into what would come to be the most influential circles of avant-garde art and thought. While Jarry was not the only figure involved, he was certainly one of the most important and earliest—a truly seminal voice that shaped art and thought throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Unrolling ’Pataphysics

Building on the strengths of recent scholarly contributions,³² *’Pataphysics Unrolled* collects critical and creative essays that, together, present a previously untold account of how and why pataphysical experimentation has persisted from its origins in late nineteenth-century France into the contemporary moment. Touching on fields from literature to art, architecture to technology, and environmental science to education, the volume reveals how pataphysics has evolved *in practice* across decades and across disciplines. Given how influential pataphysics has become, this volume is necessarily incomplete; it is illustrative rather than comprehensive. While we want to acknowledge the rich histories of groups such as the *Collège de ’Pataphysique* and the Oulipo, this volume’s primary purpose is to elucidate an *unauthorized* history—one that includes experimental poets, popular musicians, environmental scientists, speculative architects, and computer programmers who have explored pataphysical

ideas and methodologies outside these groups. Are their exploits “true” to Jarry’s original texts? Are their opinions about pataphysics “right”? Pataphysicians would not ask these questions, for their answers exist on a metaphysical plane. But what the essays here do show is how—through application, experimentation, and interpretation—pataphysics has continued to offer a methodology for using imagination to systematically reconceive our realities.

But we must be careful not to call anything that is experimental, weird, or anti-rational pataphysical; while pataphysics resists rational and stable definitions, to call anything experimental pataphysical would dull the term’s critical bite. It is indeed true that a strict pataphysician might argue—in tone equally serious and tongue-in-cheek—everything is, of course, ultimately pataphysical; pataphysics is, after all, “*the science*.” But rather than posit one definition of what could or could not be considered pataphysical, this volume chooses to show a variety of ways in which the term has been applied and understood. For example, Ted Hiebert counts Marina Abramović as a pataphysician for the ways in which her work manipulates human perceptions of time, and Orchid Tierney finds pataphysical principles in UnderAcademy, an unaccredited anti-degree institution that mocks the rise of massive open online courses (MOOCs). Some of our authors might disagree as to what would “count” or “not count” as pataphysical, but none of our authors uses it as a catchall. Rather, they each, in their own way, develop rigorous and thoughtful uses of the term and its associated concepts.

Jarry’s work was radically interdisciplinary and anti-doctrinal, and this volume reflects that spirit. The essays in *Pataphysics Unrolled* differ widely in methodology, style, and even genre. Their organizational structure within this volume creates disciplinary and temporal dissonance, a tension we hope preserves a sense of discovery and surprise as one moves through the chapters. One of the productive paradoxes of pataphysics is that it is a concept that undermines concepts, a system of thought that undermines systems of thought and categories of knowledge. Pataphysics sprang from irreverence toward academic authority, and this volume ends with a speculation that pataphysics might help us find our way out of neoliberal educational models that have made some schools seem more like businesses. Following an academic gospel of pataphysics is anathema to the spirit of pataphysics, and restrictions on approaches to or uses of it are exactly what Jarry would have abhorred. We therefore emphasize playful exploration over strict adherence to academic norms, serendipitous connections over straight paths of influence, and genre-bending over genre-adhering. The authors gathered here represent how artists, writers, and critics have been animated by pataphysics, but not controlled by it. We see the bringing together of authors of diverse ages, disciplinary and academic training, and professional positions as a strength of the volume.

Like *Faustroll*, *'Pataphysics Unrolled* takes readers on a journey to several distinct but interconnected islands of creativity and thought. By doing so, it acts as a corrective to the relative critical neglect that pataphysics has suffered and lays the groundwork for establishing a theory of diverse pataphysical practices. Pataphysics has spread rhizomatically throughout twentieth- and twenty-first-century art and thought in both unexpected and more expected ways. Essays in this collection have a more-or-less gravitational pull toward each other and Jarry's work. Some return us to foundational Jarry texts, finding new avenues for exploration (Rabaté, Heon), while others question the multiple ways artists claim "influence" (McCaffery, O'Dair). Some examine pataphysics' avant-garde trajectories (Hansen, Décimo, Dworkin), while others expound on their own pataphysical practices (McDowell, Dickinson, Hugill and Hendler). The essays—like pataphysics itself—challenge seemingly fundamental distinctions between high and low culture, the serious and the comic, the arts and the sciences, and critical and creative writing.

The first section, "And Behold, the Wallpaper of Faustroll's Body': Jarry's Pataphysical Invitation" offers readings of Jarry's texts and shows how they influenced modernism and eventually sparked the formation of the *Collège de 'Pataphysique* and Oulipo. John Heon's essay begins the volume and serves to orient readers to 'pataphysics through a reading of *Faustroll* that highlights its complex interplay of humor and psychopathology. Positioning Jarry alongside Bergson, Nietzsche, and Freud as one of the great modern thinkers of comedy, philosophy, and psychology, Heon's essay offers close readings of some of *Faustroll's* most hilariously hallucinogenic passages and connects them to a broad range of figures, from Rabelais to Goethe to Foucault to Cixous. Jean-Michel Rabaté's essay on "pataphallics" analyzes the psychosexual aspects of Jarry's novels *Messaline: Roman de l'ancienne Rome* (1901) and *Le Surmâle: Roman moderne* (1902). While later instantiations of pataphysics tend not to be explicitly sexual, Rabaté's reading asks us to reconsider the relationship between pataphysics and sexuality and the significant impact Jarry had on French modernism. Critical accounts of pataphysics too often jump from the publication of *Faustroll* in 1911 to the founding of the *Collège* in 1948. Catherine Hansen's essay offers new insight into the years leading up to and surrounding the *Collège's* founding. Bringing to light the pataphysical activities and sympathies of Noël Arnaud, Boris Rybak, and the Main à Plume group, not to mention André Breton's surrealists, Hansen asserts the importance of acknowledging a "wartime pataphysics"—one situated in the wider sociocultural contexts of myth-making and myth-busting at the onset of the Cold War. Marc Décimo, as translated from the French by Anne M. Mulhall, offers insight into the antics of the *Collège de 'Pataphysique* by examining the publications and photographs that reveal Duchamp's material relationship with the institution. Craig Dworkin examines the technique of "definitional literature" pioneered by Stefan Themerson and developed by the

Oulipo, with special attention to the experiments of Georges Perec and Marcel Bénabou. Interrogating the metaphors of “machine” and “engine” as they relate to textual production, Dworkin queries the relationship between the two and the consequences of their divergent ideologies for conceptual writing.

“Like a Musical Score, All Art and All Science’: Pataphysics After Jarry and Beyond the *Collège*” brings together essays that showcase pataphysical experimentation across disciplines by artists who interpret Jarry’s ideas somewhat more liberally than those in the first section. Michael R. Taylor locates Jarry’s influence in Philadelphia and his profound impact on not only Duchamp but also James E. Brewton and Thomas Chimes. The essay is particularly remarkable for its treatment of Brewton, an artist whose works have been largely forgotten yet represent a significant connection between postwar American art and radical European avant-garde groups such as CoBrA and the Situationist Internationale, through which Brewton discovered pataphysics and brought the ideas back to the United States. Steve McCaffery offers an insider’s perspective on Canadian “Pataphysics”³³ and bpNichol’s most pataphysical work, *Probable Systems*. Pairing this with a reading of the pataphysical influences on American Ed Dorn’s *Gunslinger*—which manifests to markedly different effects—works to showcase the wide range of possibilities as they relate to pataphysical influence in North American literature. Expanding on a 2014 article written for online music publication Pitchfork,³⁴ Marcus O’Dair surveys cult bands and popular musicians who have drawn on pataphysics for inspiration, revealing an astonishing range of influence—from the Beatles and Frank Zappa to Captain Beefheart and the Residents—and provocatively wonders if pataphysics might be found more easily in music that doesn’t claim the moniker. Ted Hiebert also examines unconscious pataphysicians: contemporary artists whose art practices can productively be understood as pataphysical despite claiming no direct connection. Reading together Marina Abramović’s groundbreaking *The Artist Is Present*, Andrew Buckles’s *Why Wait?*, Rirkrit Tiravanija’s *Untitled 1992 (Free)*, Doug Jarvis’s *Minding the Belly Brain*, Sophie Calle’s *Take Care of Yourself*, and Tetsushi Higashino’s *Observation Diary of a Hydroponic Nose Hair*, Hiebert examines a contemporary interest in slowing time and stretching everyday activities in ways that render the artworks time machines.

“Written in the Curves of the Limbs’: Pataphysical Criticism” looks at the ways scholars have turned to pataphysics to rethink their critical practices. Jerome McGann, Johanna Drucker, and Brandon Walsh detail how pataphysics was fundamental to conceiving their work at the Speculative Computing Lab at the University of Virginia, when digital humanities was forming as a field of study. Jarry reacted against a reductive form of scientific positivism popularized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and here we see pataphysics reappear as a tool to critique technological positivism. McGann shares critical experiments from the

Lab and beyond that creatively explore the work of Swinburne, Lautréamont, and Poe. Drucker revisits her “patacritical demon,” an ultimately imaginary platform that would be able to find the anomalies, exceptions, and derivatives in literary texts, accounting for human interpretation. For Drucker, cultivating a pataphysical approach to digital humanities was crucial in preserving the “human” in humanities, and maintaining a form of critical play that kept literary objects from losing their subjectivity (i.e., capacity for interpretation). Walsh explores Prism, an application that builds on the work of Drucker and McGann to crowdsource individual interpretations and visualize imagined collaborative readings of literary texts. Poet-critic Charles Bernstein’s farce-essay-manifesto recasts the history of American experimental poetics as the “history of pataquerical struggles,” proclaiming the need for a “bent studies” of the truly inchoate, provisional, and ideologically impure. At the end, readers are invited to write in their feedback on the chapter and ponder the question: “Did this essay solve your problem?” Hint: it didn’t.

“Progression to an Infinite Degree Was Prophesied Therein’: Pataphysics’ Possible Futures” collects essays that examine truly contemporary pataphysical practices and, we hope, suggest avenues for future pataphysical exploration. Seth McDowell stretches pataphysical principles into the world of architectural design and engineering, envisioning cities that turn problems into solutions: a city solves its excessive trash problem by transforming it into “blubber” that becomes the city’s own landscape; a city comprised solely of highways is able to solve its economic crisis; and a city installs “privy pods” that act as public restrooms and fueling stations for hydro-scooters, thereby freeing it of its reliance on fossil fuels. Adam Dickinson also uses pataphysics to consider our current environmental crisis, though from a very different perspective. Dickinson develops a theory of “metabolic poetics” in order to understand the ways various poets, including himself,³⁵ have made legible the otherwise inscrutable biological writing being performed on our bodies, without our consent, by toxic chemicals in our environment. In doing so, Dickinson explores the potential of pataphysics as a form of ecopoetic inquiry to help us understand the Anthropocene. Andrew Hugill and Jim Hendler focus on pataphysics’ uncanny relationship with computing, including a discussion of the creation of a pataphysical search engine that provides users with unexpected (though not chance) results, and a sneak peek at what is to come: namely, quantum computers—a technology that might, they argue, be able to save technology from itself. The volume ends with a return to where pataphysics began: as a way to mock academic claims to authority. Orchid Tierney looks at how digital mock-academies use pataphysical methods as a way out of restrictive modes of being and knowledge production, and posits that, in the world of the neoliberal university, pataphysical colleges offer a vital supplement to formal institutions of higher learning.

One of the major premises of *Pataphysics Unrolled* is that it is time to take the comedic intervention of pataphysics seriously. The playful yet consequential impact of pataphysics—its contribution to modernism and its afterlives—can only be truly appreciated through sustained treatments of the writers, artists, philosophers, and critics who have been inspired and shaped by Jarry’s ideas. From the establishment of long-lasting institutions such as the *Collège de Pataphysique* to bpNichol’s short-lived “Pataphysical Hardware Company, to the Musée Patamécanique (which may or may not exist in Rhode Island),³⁶ to Tania O’Donnell’s recent faculty award-winning thesis show at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA),³⁷ the guiding principles of pataphysics—its fusion of science and art, humor and philosophy, play and inquiry—have fueled the imaginations of artists and writers for over a century. To return to the question that began this introduction, pataphysics has flourished for more than a century, in part, because of simple inertia. Jarry put ‘pataphysics into motion, and it has continued to unroll, not yet having met any force strong enough to stop it. In other words, pataphysics has staying power precisely because it doesn’t stay in one place for long. In its insistence that the act of *creation* is the most defiant tool we have to critique, reimagine, and reconfigure a world that “is the way it is,” perhaps by accident, pataphysics can be applied to almost any way of knowing as a way to explode its most basic, and probably unacknowledged, assumptions. Pataphysics, I would argue, can be studied in the past but can only be lived in the present. To be a pataphysician, one must constantly replace the accidental/prior consciousness in which they find themselves with a consciously creative/new one. As Hiebert writes, “The real challenge of setting sail in a sieve is that of keeping the water from seeping in; it requires a constant attention to the act of bailing out the boat in order to maintain a precarious balance at the intersection of imminent submersion and pataphysical buoyancy.”³⁸

As the wallpaper of Faustroll’s body unrolls into the future, what will pataphysics “be” in another two, twenty, or two hundred years? I don’t know, but I hope it will.

Notes

I would like to thank Craig Dworkin, John Heon, Emily Brewton Schilling, and Michael Taylor for reading versions of this introduction and providing helpful feedback. I would also like to thank the anonymous readers who provided insight and encouragement. More personally, I would like to thank Leah Benedict for companionship, Rachel Banner for friendship, and Joseph DeVitis for partnership; this would not exist without you.

1. These names could have easily been replaced by other “equivalent” names. For a

book-length study of the *many* individuals, groups, and movements that were influenced by ‘pataphysics, see Andrew Hugill, *Pataphysics: A Useless Guide* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

2. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Pataphysics, *n.*,” accessed December 15, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/>.

3. Alastair Brotchie, *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

4. His height (Jarry was about 5'2") allowed him to live in such an apartment, though his head would sometimes scrape the low ceiling, causing plaster dust to fall on him. Catalog item no. 61 of bpNichols's Pataphysical Hardware Company is "Plaster de Paris," a bag of talcum powder packaged to read "For those nights you can't remember / now people will believe that you, like Alfred Jarry, live in the low-ceilinged room of your choice when they see the dust of ceilings atop your duff." For an image and description, see Brian Dedora, "L'Affaire Pataphysique, Toronto, 1985," part 1, Dispatches from the Poetry Wars, October 6, 2017, <https://www.dispatchespoetrywars.com/documents/laf faire-pataphysique>.

5. Alfred Jarry, *Adventures in 'Pataphysics: Collected Works I*, ed. Paul Edwards, trans. Paul Edwards and Antony Melville (London: Atlas Press, 2001), 13.

6. Brotchie, *Alfred Jarry*, 358.

7. A belly so big and singular in appetite, in fact, that it required the invention of its own term: *gidouille*.

8. *Ubu Roi* is only one of three Ubu plays. The others are *Ubu Cocu* and *Ubu Enchaîné*. All three are published together in English as *The Ubu Plays*, trans. Cyril Connelly and Simon Watson Taylor (New York: Grove Press, 1969).

9. Cited in Roger Shattuck's introduction to *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician (A Neo-Scientific Novel)* (1911), by Alfred Jarry, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1996), x.

10. Brotchie, *Alfred Jarry*, 228–29 (Brotchie's emphasis).

11. *Ibid.*, 31.

12. *Ibid.*, 29.

13. Jarry, *Faustroll*, 15 (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text).

14. Jarry often played with notions of equivalence and difference, asserting simultaneously that books could be equivalent (*livres pairs*) and that, when examined closely, things that appear similar are not ($A \neq A$). For more on his *livres pairs*, see Ben Fisher's *The Pataphysician's Library: An Exploration of Alfred Jarry's livres pairs* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2001).

15. Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (1934; repr., New York: New Directions, 1996), 5.

16. John Heon's essay playfully suggests that the eighth and last book of *Faustroll* may, in fact, just be an ∞ writ vertically.

17. Roger Shattuck, introduction to Jarry, *Faustroll*, ix.

18. See, especially, Marcus O'Dair's essay, which shows Jarry's influence on popular music.

19. Jarry was fascinated by the concept of time machines, and the Oulipo's concept of "plagiarism by anticipation" supports this pataphysical approach to time and literary history.

20. Currently, its website allows for some publication downloads and accepts donations that come with subscriptions to publications, illustrating that the *Collège* is opening up its once-closed doors.

21. A notable exception to this is Marc Décimo's essay on Marcel Duchamp and his direct involvement with the *Collège*. Dworkin's essay, too, focuses on the *Collège*, though indirectly through the Oulipo. Décimo and Hugill are both *Collège* members.

22. While 'pataphysics was circulating in esoteric circles, Jarry's works, and in particular his Ubu legacy, had large followings, and the French cult of Jarry expanded far beyond the *Collège*.

23. While technically true, the *Collège* has itself inspired a number of international pataphysical colleges. Hugill, for example, is also a member of De Nederlandse Academie voor 'Patafysica, and the Académie québécoise de la 'pataphysique. A map of pataphysical institutes across the globe can be found at <https://www.patakosmos.com/>.

24. Warren F. Motte, Jr., *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1998), 109.

25. Craig Dworkin theorizes the practice of "definitional literature" and its origins in 'pataphysics in his contribution to this volume.

26. Michael Taylor's chapter in this volume takes a close look at this history with a focus on the work of James E. Brewton, which has only been recently rediscovered. His essay is the first work of criticism on the artist, and the first to publish Brewton images since the early 1970s. These images—Brewton's

Self-Portrait, Portrait of Asger Jorn, Ubu Becomes King, Ubu's Military Mind, Sunrise, Graffiti Pataphysic, Alfred Jarry, Patatarget, and Alfred Jarry in Paris—have never before been reproduced in color in print.

27. For more on the TRG, see Steve McCaffery and bpNichol, eds., *Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book Machine—The Collected Research Reports of the Toronto Research Group, 1973–1982* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992).

28. Canadian "Pataphysics adds an apostrophe to 'pataphysics, denoting "a shift from elision to quotation." The TRG continues, "If 'Pataphysics (according to Jarry) is 'the science of imaginary solutions' and thereby the source of answers to questions never posed, then "Pataphysics (diacriticized via the open quotation of a double elision) will be 'the literature of all imaginary sciences'" (ibid. 301–2).

29. Brian Dedora offers an overview of the many performances at this event in "L'Affaire Pataphysique, Toronto, 1985," parts 1 and 2, both published on the Dispatches from the Poetry Wars website on October 6, 2017, and January 19, 2018, respectively: <https://www.dispatchespoetrywars.com/documents/laffaire-pataphysique/> and <https://www.dispatchespoetrywars.com/documents/laffaire-pataphysique-toronto-1985-part-2-2>. McCaffery also discusses this event in his essay.

30. See, for example, Gilles Deleuze, "An Unrecognized Precursor to Heidegger: Alfred Jarry," in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 91–98; Todd Dufresne, "Derrida, Jarry, Nietzsche: Introducing a Deconstructive Pataphysics, Contra Heidegger," *re: post* 1 (1993): 26–33; or Stephen Barker, "Canon-Fodder: Nietzsche, Jarry, Derrida (The Play of Discourse and the Discourse of Play)," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1989): 69–83.

31. Conversely, Jarry himself helped to bring Nietzsche into greater prominence in

France through translations of his works and discussion of them in avant-garde circles.

32. This book would not have been possible without the groundwork laid by Christian Bök's *Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001); Brotchie's *Alfred Jarry*; and Hugill's *'Pataphysics*, which have all made overdue and vital contributions to the study of pataphysics for Anglophone readers.

33. For more on Canadian "Pataphysics, see *Open Letter: Canadian 'Pataphysics* 4, nos. 6–7 (Winter 1980–81), *Rampike: La 'Pataphysique* 5, no. 2 (1986), and *Open Letter: Millennial 'Pataphysics* 7 (Winter 1997).

34. Marcus O'Dair, "Pataphysics: Your Favorite Cult Artist's Favorite Pseudoscience," Pitchfork, October 21, 2014, <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/9527-pataphysics-your-favorite-cult-artists-favorite-pseudoscience>.

35. Most notable in his recent *Anatomic* (Toronto: Coach House, 2018), a book that involved chemical and microbial testing on his body.

36. See <https://www.museepata.org/>.

37. *Presence*, the first annual thesis exhibition for PAFAs Low-Residency MFA program, opened on August 9, 2017. Tania O'Donnell received the faculty award for her exhibition, which included the thirteen-panel installation piece *Machines & Machinations, 6 Crumbs* (featuring the video *Falling into Spiral Thinking—Hare Origin Stories*) and three sculptures: *Machine to Trigger Waves of Powerful Emotion (3 Wheeled with Spring Vacuum Attachment)*, *Ubu Appurtenance*, and *Petite Conscience Box*. Her more recent work, much of which is similarly informed by pataphysics, can be viewed at <https://www.taniaodonnell.art/>.

38. Quoted from his contribution to this volume.