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book review of

*Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life* by Alastair Brotchie

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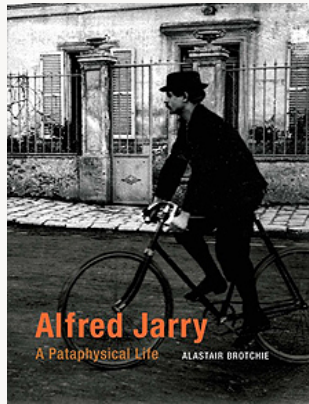
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Alastair Brotchie, *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The M.I.T. Press, 2011. 405 pp.; 135 b/w illustrations; bibliography; index. \$37.95 ISBN: 978-0-262-01619-3

When Alfred Jarry (1873–1907) died in 1907, among the many mourners who attended his funeral were leaders from the literary and artistic communities representing the most extreme Symbolism and avant-gardism. Jarry had touched many with his scathing wit, his refusal to give in, his ability to challenge authority and his hatred of sham and materialism. Some of his writings and visual creations were purchased by several artists; Pablo Picasso bought a series of manuscripts and one of his oil paintings, Paul Eluard a manuscript of *Ubu Cocu*, and Guillaume Apollinaire another manuscript. Jarry's position as a founding father of surrealism was emphasized even though he died without ever realizing the full impact he had during his lifetime or the influence that his works would maintain well after his death.

His legendary status as a major figure of Parisian bohemianism has recently been examined in a superbly researched book that looks more deeply into Jarry's total contribution than has ever before been attempted. While he was known as the author of the absurd and often grotesquely conceived play *Ubu Roi*, a play that shocked Parisians when first performed in 1896, his life has remained obscure since it has been extremely difficult to research his contributions, his friends, his family, and the locations where he lived. Drawing on an exhaustive amount of new material—including documents and photographs—Alastair Brotchie has provided depth to a figure who was either totally misconceived by others or who remained a figure locked in myth and legend. What emerges through the reconstruction of Jarry's personality and life presents a text that separates myth from reality. Brotchie sees Jarry as much more than a fool, someone who played games to entertain others. He emerges as a satiric wit whose life and writings presented an alternative view to reality—one that might have been deeply flawed but which was immensely original, thought-provoking, and challenging. It was as if Jarry's life was an experiment in existence, one that mirrored, and served as a beacon for artistic movements that challenged the entrenched establishment.

Through a series of contextual and thematic chapters, Brotchie effectively reexamines the ways in which Jarry has been understood and appreciated. By presenting a variety of opinions on Jarry, Brotchie probes the artist's influence on his contemporaries and beyond to our time. To many, Jarry squandered his talent; his life was one "of disappointment and unfulfilled promise" (305). His work after *Ubu Roi* was judged as worthless, his life filled with fundamental flaws. A revisionist approach, one partially espoused by Brotchie, sees Jarry differently. Those qualities that were once seen as negative are seen as strengths. Jarry's "unworldliness, far from being naïveté, was in fact a heroic refusal to compromise" (305). Instead of Jarry being destroyed by Père Ubu, he is seen as committed to something else. He created "a zone of total individual liberty" constructing an existence "... in which the distinctions between art and life were eliminated" (307). While not everyone subscribes to this position, the author carefully tempers this more positive interpretation providing even more documentation for seeing Jarry not as a martyr, but as a human figure, one overwhelmed by his beliefs; he sees him as someone who maintained his ideas until the very end. Brotchie humanizes Jarry by lifting him out of the darkness of mystery. An examination of the various sections of this book, each providing a carefully measured treatment of Jarry's life, presents the painstaking way in which Brotchie has constructed his arguments.

From the first sections, Brotchie focuses on the ways in which Jarry became what he eventually was to become—a prodigious performer unable to control his conduct or his imagination. His earliest studies provided him with visual images that he returned to later in life as he saw his teachers as the basis for humor and satire. Reproductions of early drawings establish his visual imagination; his earliest poems demonstrate an ability to express discontent. These drawings and poems fashioned Jarry's reputation. In examining his juvenilia, writings from as early as 1885, Brotchie makes the case that he often returned to some of these materials later in life, frequently with a heightened "ironic intention" (22).

Early in the text Brotchie defines the crucial term pataphysics, a philosophy closely linked to Jarry's work that became his personal credo, however, a system that has remained difficult to define. The author attempts to clarify its meaning, noting that it was developed out of Jarry's attending classes by Henri Bergson in Paris, who was then emerging as one of the most influential philosophers of the era (29). While Jarry freely appropriated ideas from Bergson, he did so in an expansive and creative way, allowing him to create something more extreme than originally intended. Without arriving at a totally satisfying definition, Jarry constructed a supplemental universe where "imaginary solutions," reigned providing the "superiority of virtuality" over anything that was concrete or actual (30). Pataphysics allowed for different meanings, qualities central to Jarry as he tried to map out his own poetic imagination. In centering on philosophic concerns at the core of Jarry's existence, Brotchie bravely provides a meaningful way of trying to understand his tormented complexity.

In Chapter 4, "Paris from 1891–93", Brotchie studies the individuals who became Jarry's friends, effectively presenting the artistic climate of the city. At the Lycée Henry IV, Jarry appeared provincial, his dress odd, his speech unrefined, although it was acknowledged that he was a person of a superior intelligence. Among his friends was the poet-to-be Léon-Paul Fargue (1876–1947), who accompanied Jarry to art exhibitions, including those held at the avant-garde gallery of Le Barc de Boutteville. At the gallery Jarry made the acquaintance of the younger

Nabis, such as Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard, among others. These associations provided Jarry with evidence that the visual arts were changing, that imaginative alternatives were being stressed and that naturalism, the art of the actual, was being severely challenged and undermined by radical expressiveness. These associations also impinged on Jarry's schoolwork, and Brotchie reveals that it was the artistic ferment of the era that impelled Jarry to move forward on his own by publishing a poem in March of 1893. He also became a devotee of the new theatre where Symbolism was challenging naturalism for supremacy. In examining the 'isms' of the 1890s, in chapter 5, Brotchie provides further evidence for the ways in which Jarry was amalgamating ideas and issues from many of the movements of the day without becoming totally immersed in any one of them. But Jarry found something else which became a personal credo: what was followed in art had to become fundamental to life itself. And these "concerns" merging "into one's mode of living might have more serious consequences" (62).

Jarry's openness to new associations and stimuli also led to his friendship, with the poet Rémy de Gourmont (1858–1915) who, recognizing his friend's growing independence, helped him publish in the *Mercure de France*, then one of the leading avant-garde publications. It is through his contacts with de Gourmont and the journal that Jarry met the novelist Marguerite Eymery, known as Rachilde (1862–1953), who at first supported Jarry but later in his life, and after his death, denounced his writings as the source for "all the buffoons" in modern art including Dadaism and Surrealism (69). Although correct in her assessment of Jarry's influence, Rachilde was wrong in the assessment of his work. Brotchie's commentary on this relationship is most insightful; it is one reason to admire the meticulous way in which he has assessed so many historical associations in Jarry's life at the moment when the latter was emerging as one of the most revitalizing figures for avant-garde bohemianism.

In Chapter 6, Brotchie establishes Jarry's ties with other visual artists such as Symbolist Charles Filiger (1863–1928), and how he became increasingly involved with two camps: those who were writers and those who were finding new ways to stimulate visual creativity. Jarry's reviews of exhibitions are noted as he used these essays as a means of strengthening his ties in finding artists whose contributions underscored the new creative spirit of the time. Jarry's ambivalent sexuality is also discussed while acknowledging that there is no way to accurately assess whether he was homosexual or not. In the final analysis, Brotchie's handling of these various aspects of Jarry's life reinforces the genuinely open ways in which he tries to grasp the complexities that were pushing Jarry in so many directions at once.

It was the theatre that ultimately became Jarry's consuming passion. Here, in December, 1896, Jarry saw his play *Ubu Roi* performed. This was the moment when Jarry and Ubu became conjoined in people's minds; it has remained this way in history. While the impact of Ubu on the audience and on the creative minds of artists everywhere has been widely discussed, what Brotchie presents are new ways to consider what Ubu actually meant, how the character came about, and Jarry's motivations for the play; Ubu became both a spokesman for bohemianism and a buffoon. Brotchie provides many new insights into this critical figure that also became a rich icon for numerous visual artists. He sees *Ubu Roi* as signifying a new type of theatre where what is absurd and grotesque helped artists to create something free and individualistic, thereby challenging traditional conventions of what could be presented on stage. Brotchie argues that Jarry's emergence as a significant creative force coincides with the moment that the character of Ubu begins to insult the audience. The sensation caused by *Ubu Roi* was aided by

Jarry's visual images of Père Ubu, which immortalized and "finally fixed. . . the physiognomy of Père Ubu" forever (132).

The performance and publication of *Ubu Roi* brought Jarry to an increasingly wider audience than the Symbolist coterie with which he had been originally linked in Paris. The "bizarreness" of the play, and the originality of the achievement, aroused considerable curiosity as to who Alfred Jarry actually was. Anecdotes were passed around between those who knew Jarry and others who wanted to know him; it was, as Brotchie correctly notes, the beginning of his legend (144). Jarry became the darling of bohemian society as artists tried to draw his portrait, demonstrating that he was finding a devoted group of acolytes including the printmaker Charles Léandre (1862–1934) (158). What also emerged were bitter denunciations of *Ubu Roi* by conservative critics, among others, who failed to recognize what Jarry had achieved. Careful to situate *Ubu Roi* within a larger context, Brotchie notes that the work is now seen "as the first modern play" a position "partly assured" by the incomprehension of many contemporary critics (169). Brilliantly analyzing the importance of *Ubu*, Brotchie notes that *Ubu* "upset almost everyone who saw it" (169). Going far beyond Symbolist states of mind, *Ubu* was pure Dada theatre, a work so far ahead of its time that it made incomprehension one of the fundamental traits of modernism and bohemianism.

Significantly, in Chapter 9, Brotchie moves his analysis in another direction. The success of *Ubu* was seen as an unsettling threat to many. There was a movement underway to attack what *Ubu* stood for, and to question whether Alfred Jarry had even written the text at all. Authors published books and articles noting that *Ubu Roi* was nothing more than a childish prank; they tried to dismiss it as a communal work done by school children that had been perpetuated on the public. While there is some truth in the fact that childhood images had inspired Alfred Jarry, and that he drew on some of his teachers whose pomposity annoyed him, writers such as Charles Chasse (1883–1965) never understood that the fundamental humor of *Ubu Roi* was that regardless of whether the play was a hoax, it was still a work of art. Defended by the Dadaists, Jarry and *Ubu* gained additional stature during the 1920s.

The next chapter continues the examination of Jarry by looking at his remarkable productivity during the late 1890s. In the minds of many people, Jarry *was* Ubu, a perception that, in itself, was absurd since Ubu stood for everything that Jarry hated and despised. Jarry's writings, often quite autobiographical in tone, constitute some of his best work, although his ability to continue working was often compromised by the fact that he had little income. As he became the darling of a number of avant-garde groups, and as he tried to exist by participating in popular culture performances of *Ubu* using puppets, Jarry continued to write even though his dedication to creativity was undermined by the poverty in which he found himself. Any monetary success that he enjoyed, and it was brief, came with the re-publication of new editions of *Ubu Roi*. Brotchie reiterates that Jarry's later writings, while quite excellent, never achieved the fame of *Ubu*. In the process, a melancholic view of Jarry's life emerges, as he becomes the pure artist haunted by the necessity to work and who often did not have the means to subsist. In the end, his health suffered.

In the latter sections of the book, Jarry's influence on Guillaume Apollinaire—one of the supporters of originality in the visual arts, and on Pablo Picasso who greatly admired him—is examined. As Jarry's fame grew, his ability to continue working was hindered by his health, his

extreme poverty, and the fact that he withdrew almost totally from human contact. Eventually his health deteriorated to such a state that it led to his early death from consumption. Throughout all phases of Jarry's career, Brotchie has done a remarkable amount of primary research to set the record of Jarry's contributions within the larger context of the era in which he lived. Jarry's documented associations with the literary and visual worlds provide evidence of his lasting contribution. In piecing together and interpreting previously unknown photographs, literary materials, private documents and letters, Brotchie has demonstrated that Jarry was a much more complex figure than previously thought. This carefully detailed book requires close attention from any reader; as the reader gets further and further involved in the book, Jarry emerges from the pages of this superb publication as a personality and creator who was uniquely gifted with the courage to follow his ideas in the face of opposition and bewilderment. Brotchie's book will undoubtedly become a lasting milestone for any historical and analytic appraisal of Jarry and the era he inspired. Jarry conveyed the joy of creative inspiration as a guide to the advancement of originality; these qualities are at the heart of this monumental publication.

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