

Forrest on Pollin (2013)

Pollin, Karl. *Alfred Jarry: l'expérimentation du singulier*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2013. Pp. 284. ISBN: 978-90-420-3769-4

Jennifer Forrest, Texas State University

Roger Shattuck described Alfred Jarry's literary aesthetic as composed of equal parts humor and seriousness. In *Alfred Jarry: l'expérimentation du singulier*, Karl Pollin examines the serious side, skirting the general tendency to focus on Jarry's *Ubu roi* and on his affinities with that farce's title character, and according particular attention to the philosophical grounding of his *œuvre*. Nevertheless, Pollin begins his study with the play's first performance and the historical marker it constitutes for Jarry, who addressed the audience in the manner of a marionette before the raising of the curtain. The author's "masked" introduction to the public (he wore greasepaint and adopted quasi-mechanical movement and speech) not only erased the separation between accepted reality and the illusion that occurs on the stage, but perhaps more importantly initiated his public demonstration and renunciation of the artificial conventions that determine the construction of social (and private) identity, and thereby question preconceptions about the body, language, and communication. His disturbing monotone speech pattern and marionette-like movements represented the linguistic and physical dispossession of himself *and* the creation of a uniquely inimitable persona that bridged the domains of real life and literature.

The paradox regarding the nature of identity and existence undoubtedly lends itself to philosophical analysis, and in *Alfred Jarry* it is of a principally Deleuzian kind. Correspondingly, Pollin takes Jarry's essay "Être et vivre" (*L'Art littéraire*, 1894) as his ostensible point of departure, followed by those texts that involve different facets of the exploration of the dynamics, contradictions, and difficulties of living originality. In chapter two, Pollin charts the progression from dispossession of self to its reconstruction in alternate spaces and times in *Les Jours et les nuits* (1897) and *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien* (1911). The former's Sengle, for example, creates for himself a parallel mental, and invariably temporal, space that permits him to desert while at the same time fulfilling his military service. Pataphysics, which Jarry defined as the "science of imaginary solutions," emerges in these novels as the means for realizing the seemingly impossible, for blurring the boundaries separating real and imaginary, present and past, and here and there. In chapter three, Pollin examines Jarry's protagonist's rejection of received ideas (including scientific ones) about the limits of the human body in *Le Surmâle* (1902). Marcueil matches the physical capabilities of his body against the potentially inexhaustible ones of machines, posing a corporeal experience that challenges notions about the distinction between the organic and the mechanical, and between life and death. In chapter four, Pollin turns to *L'Amour absolu* (1899) and *L'Amour en visites* (1898) and Jarry's reinvention of love through a relation of desire (carnal and/or spiritual) that aims to break through the seemingly insurmountable barrier between two bodies and involving another type of dispossession of the self, of which only the trace of a bite will remain.

Pollin's work makes liberal use of the dense style and often frustrating vocabulary of post-structuralism, which, in the absence of an equally weighted consideration of the richly humorous component of these novels, can make for very slow, dry, and difficult reading. In addition, the reader who seeks some grounding of Jarry and his aesthetic in the cultural-historical milieu of the fin de siècle will be disappointed. There is little to no mention of other figures from the period whose works defy, each in their own way, generic categorization, like those of Octave Mirbeau, Remy de Gourmont, and especially Marcel Schwob, Jarry's mentor and friend (he dedicated the 1896 publication of *Ubu roi* to Schwob). In particular, Schwob's *Vies imaginaires* (1896) performed a creative reconstruction through imagination of the often-unconventional biographical subjects (criminals, pirates, prostitutes, etc.) that he privileged precisely for their singularity. In light of Schwob's idiosyncratic interpretation of the art of biography, the breadth of Pollin's study would have benefitted from a detailed definition and discussion of Jarry's blurring of his own life and literary creation, as well as of the author's own biographical-fictional fusions of Jarry and his characters Faustroll, Marcueil (*Le Surmâle*), Lucien (*L'Amour en visites*), and Emmanuel (*L'Amour absolu*). In the last chapter of Pollin's *Alfred Jarry*, the personal tone of the preceding sections happily liberates itself from philosophical concerns to consider Jarry's legacy, making this work a welcome addition to the presently active discipline of Jarry studies, particularly in the attention that it pays to his lesser-known novels.

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