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Jill Fell, *Alfred Jarry*. London: Reaktion Books (distributed by the University of Chicago Press), 2010. 219 pp. 40 halftones, notes and bibliography. \$16.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-86189-755-8.

Review by Sally Debra Charnow, Hofstra University.

Jill Fell begins her critical biography of the iconoclastic Alfred Jarry with an anecdote about a dinner party that was held in 1897. Three versions of the story all detail Jarry pulling a “foul rusty little Bulldog revolver” out of his pocket and firing two shots at the Spanish sculptor, Manolo. After that, the details of the story become murky in the various re-tellings. Was Picasso present? Was everyone too drunk to notice the two shots or did two pregnant women faint afterward? By offering this Prologue in which the exact details of the story remain unverifiable, Fell suggests that drawing the contours of Jarry’s life, friendships, and intimate relationships is a difficult task filled with conflicting stories, legends, myths, and a published correspondence that reveals very little about Jarry’s emotional life (p. 166). Fell looks to Jarry’s complex, often enigmatic prose, poetry, and puppetry to explain the man instead.

Jill Fell’s volume was published as part of the *Critical Lives* series that is designed to present the work of leading cultural figures of the modern period. Each book explores the life of an artist, writer, philosopher or architect and relates it to their major works. Fell has done exactly that. Divided into ten chapters, Fell’s biography follows Jarry’s life through a close reading of his texts and performances. Ultimately she argues that, even though he died a young man at the age of thirty three, “Jarry suffered from being a prophet before his time” (p. 101).

Alfred-Henri Jarry was born in 1873 to a middle class family in Laval close to the Breton border. Fell traces Jarry’s early life by using fragments of notes written after his death by his older sister, Charlotte. His mother, Caroline, believed she was related to Breton aristocracy and had great aspirations for her son. In 1879, when he was six, the family business failed and Caroline moved with her two children back to her childhood home on the Brittany coast. His father was “left to the grim routine of commercial traveling” (p. 17). Fell claims that the nine-year period that Jarry lived there—with the loving attention of his mother, sister and grandfather—was the most stable in his life. During that time Jarry was considered a model student at the nearby Lycée de Saint-Brieuc, earning top marks and writing small poems and plays. Almost all of his early poems were based on an existing poem, a picture, or a famous quotation. His writing already showed the contempt for tyranny, cruelty, and hypocrisy for which he would later be known. This form and thematic content continued throughout his literary life. As an adult he recopied these early writings into an anthology entitled *Ontogénie* (a term referring to the origin of an individual being); it was found after his death. Jarry clearly had a sense of the future importance of his work.

Believing Saint-Brieuc was too small to serve Jarry’s academic and intellectual needs, the ever-ambitious Caroline moved her son to the lycée in Rennes. She thought the larger school in the capital of Brittany would “stretch her son’s capabilities” (p. 19). It was at Rennes that Jarry had a “formative encounter” with his physics teacher, Félix Hébert, who became the model for Jarry’s infamous King Ubu. The myth of Jarry began here, Fell explains (p. 21). Described as a

mixture of intellect and pugnacity, with a passion for bathroom humor, Jarry was known to deliver verbal assaults in a strange raspy voice. He was unkempt and regularly stayed up all night. His room was decorated with skeletons that bobbed in the moonlight. In collaboration with the Morin brothers (Charles and Henri), Jarry began creating the fictitious adventures of Père Hébert (later Ubu Roi), first as a play with live actors and then with puppets.

By 1891, Jarry was making his way in the Parisian literary world. Fell devotes particular attention to two key relationships in this period: his deep friendship with the author Rachilde (Marguerite Eymery) and the impact of the loss of his mother in 1893. Rachilde saw herself as the protector of avant-garde authors, especially those who challenged social and sexual norms and expectations. She was Jarry's most ardent supporter and confidante, privy to knowledge about his private life, including his clandestine affair with Léon-Paul Fargue. Although the circumstances of his mother's death are not clear, Fell points to the powerful closing poem of his first book, which contains by far the majority of his whole poetic output, *Les Minutes de Sable Mémorial*, to extract a sense of his grief. In this poem, *Le Sablier*, "a draining hour glass stands in for a bleeding heart." It is a lament "even though the subject of the lament is not overtly named" (p. 33). Despite illness, loss, and a falling out with his father, Jarry was "fiercely in control of his galloping intellect" (p. 27). In the same year, his poems and prose won five literary prizes and under the title *Guignol* (featuring the exploits of Ubu), Jarry won a triple contribution from the prestigious monthly *Écho de Paris*.

In the summer of 1894, Jarry spent time on the Brittany coast with the Groupe de Pont-Aven painters of which Paul Gauguin was the most well known. Seen as embodying the most radical developments in French art at the time, Synthetism, this group was influenced by the two-dimensional flat surfaces and bright colors of Japanese prints. For subject matter they were drawn to the "unsophisticated traditions and costume of the local people and the manifestations of their faith" (p. 45). Some artists in this group exalted the local peasant, seeing poverty itself as an almost sacred state, while others denigrated them as hardly distinguishable from their livestock (p. 47). In this context, Jarry's Breton background was an asset and he was inspired to try his hand at woodcuts.[1] Jarry decided to join the principles of his 'Pataphysics' philosophy, part of the "Hébertique baggage" that he brought to Paris from Rennes, with those of the new artistic movements of Synthetism.[2] The link for him was in the notion of simplicity: "Simplicity does not have to be simple but complexity, compressed and synthesized" (pp. 132-133). In collaboration with Remy de Gourmont, Jarry created *L'Ymagier*, a new magazine that featured "religion and folklore." They commissioned art from the Pont-Aven group. *L'Ymagier*, according to Fell, "represents an important landmark in the revival of the archaic woodcut in France." Gourmont and Jarry were perceived as two of the "key innovators of this movement and the forerunners of German Expressionism," especially the Munich-based *Blaue Reiter* (pp. 53-54). By commissioning Henri Rousseau's *La Guerre* for the magazine, Jarry's "intention to shock is unmistakable" (p. 54). The calculated aim to shock pervades his oeuvre.

Jarry's work on *L'Ymagier* coincided with his compulsory military service. Through family connections Jarry was based in Laval, his hometown, "where the boredom and rigours of the barracks could be offset by invitations from friends of the family" (p. 61). The harshness of military life Jarry depicts in his novel *Les Jours et les Nuits* was mitigated by the material advantages that were available to him in Laval. The plot of his novel, Fell explains, "swings between the real experiences of the conscript and the idealized world of his [Jarry's] childhood in the same [Breton] landscape, filtered through memory" (p. 61). The idealized world is given voice through the character of Sengle, depicted as the 'desertion' of Jarry's alter-ego, desertion into a dream-state at night. *Les Jours* is the most accurate of Jarry's semi-autobiographical novels, according to Fell. He even offers clues that have allowed researchers to discern the identity of the love of his life, François-Benoît Claudius-Jacquet (p. 67). A frustration for his

biographers, Jarry's published correspondence is silent about his intimate relationships.

The first part of Fell's critical biography is chock full of fresh insight into this complex man and his writings, while the second half treads over more familiar terrain, especially the performance of *Ubu Roi* at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in December 1896. The performances of *Ubu Roi* catapulted Jarry to national prominence and brought the ridiculous puppet character, Ubu, "to the status of one of the great comic prototypes" (p. 75). But in contrast to the well-known image of Jarry as an eccentric bohemian, his campaign to promote *Ubu Roi* at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre was well-organized, methodical, and pragmatic. It was also a self-conscious "vehicle of provocation and a framework for his theatrical innovations" (p. 94). Historians agree that it would take twenty years before similar concepts including the mixing of inanimate mannequins with live actors would be put into practice again with Jean Cocteau's *Parade* in 1917. Thus, as has been well documented, "the performance innovations created by Jarry for the play *Ubu Roi* were far more important for theatre history than its plot" (p. 89).

Jarry was committed to artistic integrity. In the dense and complicated *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien*, "Jarry takes the reader to the worlds of the other writers and artists that shaped his own literature" (p. 129). Jarry thought Aubrey Beardsley had allowed "bourgeois standards and commercial arguments to direct which of his drawings should be published, repeatedly agreeing to more anodyne alternatives" (p. 111). In *Faustroll*, he portrays Beardsley (alias Ali Baba) "as immersed in the 'pitiless' boiling oil, like the corrupt clergy of Dante's *Inferno*. It would be on the repression of his artistic integrity and the denial of his genius that Jarry judged him." For Jarry, Oscar Wilde was a true artist, while Beardsley subscribed to the "very hypocrisy he had attacked." That is, he was an artist who betrayed his calling (pp. 111-112). Jarry had scorned hypocrisy ever since his teen years in Rennes. Although always toying with conceptions of the real and the unreal in his writing and performances, Jarry never wavered when it came to what he deemed to be artistic truth. He found fault with any kind of compromise—a difficult stance to take and survive.

Beginning in the summer of 1900 and continuing through to the spring of 1903, Jarry wrote book reviews for *La Revue Blanche* and then *La Plume* giving him a period of relative financial security. Given the position of *chroniqueur* or commentator on social mores and current events, Jarry's writing responsibilities expanded. His journalism continued to be popular, Fell explains, because "his curiosity fastened on recently invented items of modern life ... postage stamps; national flag; the camera; buses and bicycles. He envisaged things that had not yet been invented such as moving walkways and cordless phones (pp. 155-156). Fell points to Jarry's article, "Paris colonie nègre," in which he "put himself in the position of an inhabitant of the African jungles encountering northern European customs for the first time." In the story, the African native didn't pay for his drinks and then he head-butted the waiter. Jarry suggests that the native's behavior was like that of European explorers and "no doubt [he would] have gone on to plant a few flags, burn some monuments and take various people into slavery." Fell explains: "Through his technique of transposing what might be considered 'normal' behaviour in a familiar context Jarry was better able to question its absolute morality. It was the closest that he came to making a political statement" (pp. 157-158).

A fascination with modern machinery also inspired Jarry's novel, *Le Surmâle* (Supermale). Jarry termed this work a *roman moderne*. Fell explains that it "focuses on the way that humans were beginning to take on the characteristics of machines, narrowing the gap between them" (p. 162). In this surreal story, the Supermale appears first as a cyclist riding in front of a train, dressed in a topcoat and grey top hat, "riding a heavy antiquated machine with solid rubber tyres and iron mudguards, but this illusion passes to reveal a cyclist with wild flowing locks, whose bulging muscles have split his shorts and whose racing bicycle has microscopic, super-efficient tyres" (p.

163). Then Jarry narrates a sexual marathon. “At midnight, shut away on their own, the couple begin their attempt to attain and surpass the target of 80 acts of copulation in 24 hours in the spirit of a sporting match.... After the figure 82 has been reached, Ellen loses consciousness, apparently killed by the ordeal” (p. 164). Fell offers a nuanced reading of the poem written by the male character Marcueil after the sex marathon. Her analysis turns on the ambiguous gender of the subject of this highly erotic poem. (A naked form that reaches out/ Desiring what could never be, it seemed./ Eyes alight with joy unbounded,/ How are a diamond’s carats to be counted?) The subject “form,” although carrying a female possessive (sa), deliberately leaves the gender of the beloved open (p. 166). Jarry gave the supermale protagonists some of his own characteristics. According to Fell, they were his fantasy alter-egos: “emotionally cold and destroyed through the agency of a predatory woman.” Although close to a number of women in his life, Jarry was “convinced of the destructive power of a woman in love” (p. 167).

Of the women in Jarry’s life, Rachilde was at the center. In many ways she was the mastermind of his career. Her husband Alfred Vallette, editor of the *Mercure de France*, published his work; together they helped him make connections and shared their villa in Corbeil, on the Seine south of Paris, with him. After the collapse of *La Revue blanche* Jarry sank into poverty, alcoholism, and illness. In these final years he wrote continually to Rachilde; she remained his confidante until the end.

Jill Fell, known for her ongoing work on Jarry, brings a wealth of knowledge and interpretive skill to his oeuvre.[3] In many ways, this book is geared to the specialist. Full of critical details and astute literary analysis, it also demands a fair amount of knowledge of the period and its avant-garde literary world to be meaningful. The rubric of relating the artist’s life to his work offers a valuable opportunity for deep textual analysis and a certain kind of psycho-historical narrative. But a fuller contextualization would allow greater critical distance. In many ways, one is left with taking the artist’s representation of self at face value. But as we see with Jarry, it is difficult to sort out the strands of autobiography from his fanciful artistic expression. His innovative performance of self and his constant toying with authenticity purposefully resists knowability. Fell intimates that we are better off teasing out his questions rather than searching for resolutions, and this is precisely the great value of her work.

## NOTES

[1] Not just in Brittany but throughout France, regionalism or the “reawakening” of regional sentiment was popular during this period. Regionalism signaled a new artistic attachment to regional forms of literature, dialect, folklore, and art. For a discussion of regionalism and theatre see Sally Charnow, *Theatre, Politics, and Markets in fin-de-siecle Paris; Staging Modernity* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 183-203.

[2] Jarry defined ‘Pataphysics’ in Book II of *Faustroll* as “the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes to the lineaments of objects the properties described by their virtuality.” For an in-depth analysis of Jarry’s concept, see Fell, pp. 116-136.

[3] Jill Fell, *Alfred Jarry: An Imagination in Revolt* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press: Madison, Teaneck, NJ, 2005).

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