Introduction

Elements of ’Pataphilology

Sean Gurd

I began to think with the word ’pataphilology around 2001, as a way of grouping a dossier of very strange texts that ranged in date of origin from the 1860s through the 1990s and in genre from avant-garde literature through the work of outsiders, hallucinators, schizophrenics, and principled refuseniks to normal (and normative) language practices. Sometimes these texts (many of which are gathered in the epoch-marking 1998 anthology Imagining Langugae, edited by Jed Rasula and Steve McCaffery) deploy perfectly respectable philological methodologies, but in a manner which leads to bizarre and even otherworldly results; at other times new philologies are invented, then deployed to produce remarkable and moving documents. Reading these works, I felt as though I had entered an alternate world in which everything I knew had somehow been subtly changed, where everything was itself and yet unsettlingly different at the same time.

My interest in this ’pataphilological file, as I came to think of it, was surely sustained by my fascination with, and even my love for, the philology practiced in the classics departments where
I worked and studied. I didn’t know what ‘pataphilology said about philology, or even if it said anything at all about it; I had not done much beyond recognizing that ‘pataphilology seemed to share a set of gestures with its more well-known counterpart. But I am certain that that little file (to which, from time to time, I added a new work, a new name, a new idea) contributed to my engagement with classical philology. So I was delighted when the neologism, which I had never even said out loud, appeared in print in 2013, in an article by James Zetzel called “The Bride of Mercury: Confessions of a ‘Pataphilologist.” Surveying Roman textual scholarship in later antiquity, Zetzel imagined that it was practically impossible to tell philology and ‘pataphilology apart. I wouldn’t say that about my ‘pataphilologists — what they do is very different from philology as I know it — but Zetzel’s argument is entirely concerned with scholarly practices that belong to the “mainstream,” even to the Grand Tradition of European literary learning. Although our ‘pataphilological dossiers were different, it intrigued me that the work done by my artists and outsiders might resonate with what happens in professional (or at least professorial) philology. Perhaps the line separating the two was less rigid than I thought. Here was an invitation, finally, to get to work on ‘pataphilology, to figure out what problem, fictional or not, it sought to solve.

Why ‘pataphilology? — I mean, why the word? Because of ‘pataphysics, of course, that well-known discovery of Alfred Jarry. In Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician, Jarry offered the following discussion, which has now become canonical.

An epiphenomenon is that which is superinduced upon a phenomenon.

Pataphysics, whose etymological spelling should be ἔπι (μετὰ τὰ φυσικά) and actual orthography ‘pataphysics, pre-
ceded by an apostrophe so as to avoid a simple pun, is the science of that which is superinduced upon metaphysics, whether within or beyond the latter’s limitations, extending as far beyond metaphysics as the latter extends beyond physics. Ex: an epiphenomenon being often accidental, pataphysics will be, above all, the science of the particular, despite the common opinion that the only science is that of the general. Pataphysics will examine the laws governing exceptions, and will explain the universe supplementary to this one; or, less ambitiously, will describe a universe which can be—and perhaps should be—envisioned in the place of the traditional one, since the laws that are supposed to have been discovered in the traditional universe are also correlations of exceptions, albeit more frequent ones, but in any case accidental data which, reduced to the status of unexceptional exceptions, possess no longer even the virtue of originality.

**DEFINITION.** Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments.²

²Pataphysics is the extension of an intellectual series that begins in physics and proceeds through metaphysics (thus it is ἔπι [μετὰ τὰ φυσικά], [supervenient] upon [what comes after physics]). Metaphysics and physics are not, says Jarry, a science of generalities; rather, they are concerned with exceptions that have become commonplace, even banal (they “possess no longer even the virtue of originality”). Whatever brings us beyond metaphysics, then, must be able to discover something vivid and compelling within the field of common exceptions: it would be a capacity to focus on the luminous detail, but also a refusal to treat that detail as just an example of some broader set or general category. In the simplest terms, it’s clear that what accomplishes

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the transition from meta- to ’pata-physics is just Jarry’s text: ’pata-physics is, above all, the result of a certain way of writing. But Faustroll (as I will try to show shortly) is pervasively and palpably philological; so much so that one could claim, simply, that the operation that achieves ’pata-physics is a kind of philology. Call it ’pataphilology, and give it credit for the emergence, as Jarry puts it, of “a universe which can be — and perhaps should be — envisaged in the place of the traditional one.”

Jarry was born in 1873 to a bourgeois family, once prosperous but undergoing a gradual economic decline. His talents with French, Latin, and Greek promised a significant academic career, but his love for literature and art was not matched by his enthusiasm for schoolwork, and he failed to gain entrance to the École normale supérieure. Instead, he turned to the theatre and the press. Poverty was a constant companion, because he lacked the financial patrimony that, then as now, was so often the needed complement to a literary career. Nonetheless there was a breakthrough in 1897, when the Théâtre de l’œuvre produced a five-act play, Ubu Roi. The play was a success — de scandale, anyway; in the short term it may have been most famous for introducing the nonce word or modified obscenity merdre. Ubu Roi did not lift Jarry out of poverty, but it did secure his position as a significant figure on the literary scene. It was to Ubu that Jarry first attributed the possession of a new science, la pataphysique. In Ubu Cocu, Ubu is a docteur en pataphysique, which is explained as “a science which we have invented and whose need is broadly felt.” Linda Klieger Stillman describes Ubu as “the supreme scientist, capable of pataphysically resolving all oppositions, much as a mirror contains simultaneously two inverted worlds. Equal but, and because, opposite.” The instrument of Ubu’s pataphysics was a scepter or wand with which the physical world could be bent and transformed at will. Jarry

5 Ibid.
calls it a *baton à physique*, an appellation behind which one does not need a great deal of energy to hear *pataphysique*.\(^6\)

Jarry’s first drafts of *pataphysical* theory may have been written in 1894, under the title *Éléments de pataphysique*.\(^7\) Perhaps by 1895 he had sketched out some more analytical components. These early attempts show every sign of being heavily theoretical, technical descriptions.\(^8\) But at some point it became clear that the indicative mood was not appropriate to the subject and that the whole project needed to be wrapped or encapsulated in narrative form. That led to the manuscript of what we know today as the *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll pataphysicien*. The bulk of the text was written rapidly in 1897–98; it was in sufficiently good condition for an excerpt to be published in the *Mercure de France* in the spring of 1898.\(^9\)

Learned consensus is that “‘Faustroll’ is an amalgamation of ‘Faust’ and ‘troll,’ familiar to Jarry, who had played the role of the king of trolls in *Peer Gynt.*”\(^10\) That etymology requires the removal of a *t* to make the compound: Faust-troll becomes Faust’roll. Another explanation for the name arises from the end of the *Gestes et opinions*, when this Faust, this über-scientist, dies and unfurls himself into the ocean: “[A]nd behold, the wallpaper of Faustroll’s body was unrolled by the saliva and teeth of the water.”\(^11\) Written on the unscrolled sheet is a telepathic letter from Faustroll to the British physicist Lord Kelvin containing a detailed overview of the founding principles of pataphysics. Thus, in the end, the novel’s hero turns out to be a book-roll. FaustROLL or Faust[sc]ROLL or — better — Faust”roll.

We could take that as the first sign of how important philology is to the operations of *pataphysics*. There are others. The

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6 But see below.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 10.
10 Ibid., 45.
basic premise of the novel is this: Faustroll travels through the streets of Paris, which has become a vast archipelago of islands; each island is a tribute or response to one of Jarry’s contemporaries on the Paris literary and artistic scene. Jarry’s habitual procedure in the description of islands in the Paris archipelago is to compile a topography out of details drawn from the hono-rand’s oeuvre, much in the matter of post-impressionist painting, where the canvas is filled with fragments of color and form and the “picture” is best described as an epiphenomenon emerging from their collocation.12 In this way the book is a summa of reading, a sort of précis of the work of his colleagues in literature and art. But transforming Paris into an archipelago also makes the novel a periplous, a fictional voyage around the known world. Here Jarry invokes the Odyssey (we will see momentarily just how deeply his knowledge of Greek extends), but also Rabelais, whose fourth and fifth books narrated an equally fantastic naval adventure. For Patricia Murphy, ’pataphysics is ultimately a Rabelaisian enterprise:

The explanation that pataphysique “étudiera les lois qui régissent les exceptions” calls to mind Rabelais’ elaborate pseudo-scientific constructions at the beginning of Pantagruel. Faustroll experiments with changing his size, making himself extra small. The results are similar to some of the experiences of “Alcofribas Nasier” in the mouth of Pantagruel. Pantagruel is accompanied by Panurge, Faustroll by Panmufle. Even dissimilarities may point to a connection. The content of Jarry’s description of the île sonnante is far removed from the content of Rabelais’ île sonnante. But Jarry is imitating Rabelais by using a favorite device of his model, taking literally and rendering concrete an expression intended as metaphor or metonymy.13

12 See, for example, Jarry, Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll pataphysicien, 192–95.
Nor is it merely a matter of shared detail or spiritual inspiration: Jarry’s language is replete with Rabelaisian borrowings, as deeply rooted in the history of French as, say, *Finnegan’s Wake* is rooted in the history of English.

Philology thus practically constitutes the project of *Faus- troll*. When Jarry claims that pataphysics’ “etymological spelling should be ἔπι (μετὰ τὰ φυσικά) and actual orthography *pata- physics*, preceded by an apostrophe so as to avoid a simple pun,” he provides a treasure chest of philological exploits, introducing important concepts such as “etymological spelling,” “actual” orthographies, and puns. Just what pun Jarry was trying to avoid remains unarticulated. But Christian Bök runs through some possibilities:

Ubu, for example, is a slapstick comedian (*pataud physique*) of unhealthy obesity (*pateux physique*), whose bodily language (*patois physique*) foments an astounded physics (*épa- tée physique*) that is not your physics (*pas ta physique*). Pataphysics embodies a polysemic fusion of both poetry and science, insofar as the French idiom for the English word “flair,” *la patte* (the hand of the artist, the “paw” of the style) appears in the homophonic phrase *patte physique* — the flair of physics.

Any way you cut it, pataphysics is a physics that demands — or, better, that relies on — the utmost sensitivity to language and textuality. Indeed, the work is inseparable from a text-critical tradition which has restored and explained it. Jarry died in 1907 without seeing the complete work in print; the first edition was published in 1911 by the Bibliothèque Charpentier. Five editions later, Jarry’s collected works were published as part of the

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Bibliothèque de la Pléiade in 1972, as much of an acknowledge-
ment as any that he had achieved canonical status. By that time,
the Collège de ’Pataphysique had become one of Paris’s most
prestigious literary societies. Founded in 1948 and occulted be-
tween 1975 and 2000, the Collège produced a commentary on
Faustroll in five issues of the Organographe of the Cymbalum Pataphysicum between 1982 and 1985. This commentary was col-
lected as a single volume in 1986, then republished in expanded
form with a new edition of the text in 2010. I quote the preface to the commentary:

THE MASTER BOOK
“Everything is in Faustroll,” claims Satrap Boris Vian. And
many Optimates of the College of ’Pataphysics draw a literal
conclusion from this fact, finding answers to all questions by
the method of opening the Master Book at random: thus for
the ’pataphysician the sortes faustrollianae replace the sortes
biblicae, homericae or vergilianae. Election of a small number
and embarking in an ark like in the Bible, navigation like in the
Odyssey, descent to the kingdom of the unknown dimen-
sion as in the vi\textsuperscript{th} book of the Aeneid; Faustroll transcends
these illustrious models, which it expropriates (like a repo-
man) following the example of the Rabelaisian Pentateuch
and without even trying to compete with them. It places it-
self, to the degree that doing so has any meaning, beyond all
literature. [...] Everything is in Faustroll, clearly, because Jarry took care
to put it all in there.  

Readers will surely notice that Faustroll, in this reverent descrip-
tion, obeys some of the signal laws of ’pataphysics: it effortlessly
exceeds literature (as ’pataphysics exceeds metaphysics, as meta-

16 Alfred Jarry, Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien: Roman
17 Jarry, Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll pataphysicien.
18 Ibid., 7–8. All translations from this edition are my own.
physics exceeds physics), and yet it does so by being nothing but literature. The totality of Faustroll, we might say, is epiphenomenal on the totality of literature.

The Collège’s commentary proceeds, carefully and with extreme sobriety (out of which emerges, quite naturally, an incredible delirium), to “place, date, draw back disguises, articulate allusions and people, clarify contexts, unravel interferences and sources.” But it also takes upon itself the task of “speculation,” which here means something like what its etymology implies; stepping through the looking glass and “treating places, characters, itineraries, acts, and options like real beings, acts, and places, seeing this world itself (the common place where mediocrity is comfortable) in the place of another world, treating Faustroll as though it were reducible to glosses like a common Bible.”

Clearly, the commentary on Faustroll is not a joke. If it is true that ‘pataphysics is “the revelation of laughter” (la révélation du rire), that means that ‘pataphysics attends to the truth disclosed therein. Only thus can the commentary write of Faustroll that it is “not hermetic, but so concise, so dense with allusions and borrowings, inviting the imagination and speculation so vividly, without ever letting itself be worn out in ‘meaning,’ that it seems, if you will, to make exegesis an exigency [exiger l’exégese].” Faustroll makes an infinite demand on the reader. The commentary’s overriding imperative is to respond to this demand by following up every citation and allusion it contains. All of this bespeaks real philological labor. So, too, does the attempt, in evidence throughout the commentary, to establish the geography of Faustroll’s travels. When Faustroll reports, for example, that they rowed for six hours between L’île de Bran and the Pays du Dentelles, the commentary remarks that, without knowing the speed of the rowing, it is impossible to determine

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19 Ibid., 21–22.
20 Ibid., 23.
21 See Ruy Launoir, Clés pour la ‘pataphysique (Paris: Seghers, 1969). This has grounding in textual authority. See below.
22 Jarry, Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll pataphysicien, 19.
the exact distance between the two regions. Nonetheless, and despite sometimes strenuous efforts to establish the geographical coordinates (efforts which recall the ancient and ongoing attempts to connect Odysseus’ travels to real-world places, still very much in evidence during the centuries of the Grand Tour), the commentary also recognizes that these coordinates are only “anchors in the real” of verbal derivations—puns producing geography (L’île de Bran = Hildebrand)—or, to put this differently, fictional topography functioning as “the revelation of laughter.”

One of the things revealed by the Collège’s commentary is that Jarry brought to his writing a virtuosic sense of language and an extensive knowledge of the classical heritage. Again and again, the Gestes et opinions rests on a Rabelasian base that itself, in turn, emerges from a Greek substrate. For example: when Faustroll takes essential supplies from each of his cherished books, he takes from the Odyssey “the joyful walk of the irreproachable son of Peleus in the meadow of asphodels.” The reference passes through Rabelais, who made an offhand reference to the asphodels in the Elysian fields in Gargantua. The commentary assumes a reference here, too, to Odyssey xi.538–540, remarking that

[Ulysses] summons (in the strong sense, as Faustroll “summons” the twenty-seven beings from their paginary space) the shadow of the dead and speaks with the famous ones, including Achilles who says, as Jean Giono would do later, that he would rather be a farm-hand than a dead hero in the Elysian fields.

23 Ibid., 122.
24 Ibid., 20–21.
25 Jarry, Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician, 19 (Jarry, Œuvres, 490).
26 Jarry, Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll pataphysicien, ad loc.
27 Ibid., 125.
References to the *Odyssey* are hardly surprising, given the fact that the *Gestes et opinions* is the tale of a naval adventure in which the hero travels from marvelous place to marvelous place. Nor is the invocation of a happy afterworld entirely incongruous in a novel which culminates with its main character passing on to the next dimension — and then writing a theoretical treatise about it.

But Jarry’s investment in Greek provides more than what we must admit is, after all, an easy set of references to the *Odyssey*. Some sophisticated details emerge from this side of his education. Thus, for example, in chapter XII Faustroll opens and reads from his copy of *élémens de pataphysique*, “Livre N, chapitre 5.” It does not require extraordinarily deep knowledge to know that Greek systems of numeration use alphabetic symbols. But the editors of the commentary report that this reading is found only in the later MS version of the *Gestes et opinions* (MS F):

In revising the MS F, he reminded himself that, in fact, the Greeks added in this place the *wau* or the numerical digamma (the digamma is the old sixth letter of the alphabet, long vanished from writing) and he corrected it.\(^{28}\)

Of course, the non-numerical form of the digamma was F, and so it is fitting that the MS in which Jarry made this correction has come to be known as the F MS (this is not, in fact why, it has this name, however; the association between the digamma and the bibliographical record is as ’pataphilological as anything you could imagine). We remark as well that the sound *w*, which the digamma originally notated, disappeared from most dialects of Greek before the historical period, and though it was pronounced in early Homeric epic, it is not notated in Homeric texts, nor was it likely pronounced in most performances. The Homeric text is shot through, we might say, by hidden apostrophes which conceal a lost letter. How appropriate that it should

\(^{28}\) Ibid., ad loc.
be used for the chapter of a non-extant work on the elements of pataphysics.

I offer this abbreviated discussion of Jarry’s novel — it could be extended *ad infinitum*— to make it clear that ’pataphysics depends rather profoundly on ’pataphilology. To characterize it briefly, this ’pataphilology is a singular way of working with language that revivifies singularities or exceptions. As such, there is no one ’pataphilology; like vice, ’pataphilology has an infinite variety of forms. Each ’pataphilological undertaking is radically and uniquely itself. Nor can there be a generalized ’pataphilology *as such* or *per se*; each is always, and necessarily, bound to the object whose singularity it resuscitates and celebrates.

Before offering a brief overview of some of the work that has gathered in my little ’pataphilological file, let me insist again that ’pataphilology (like ’pataphysics) is not a joke. We are talking here about language practices that are deadly serious. ’Pataphilologists work hard, perhaps harder than traditional philologists, and their personal sacrifice is far greater. So is their ambition: ’pataphilologists reach back to the dawn of language and conjure with the most vital elements of human existence. This work is most definitely not orthodox, but it may be indispensable.

It is the surface of language, say some ’pataphilologists, that matters: if there is meaning, it can only be got at through a form of extreme rigor that begins not from the illusion that words have meanings, but from their sensual appearance. Echoes, rhymes, sonic similarities frequently play an outsized role. In the realm of language, another word for this is “Cratylism.” In Plato’s *Cratylus*, Socrates glides along the sensual contours of Greek in order to hear what the language seems to whisper.

It seems to me that Poseidon was so named by the first who called him this because the nature of the sea held him as he walked, and prevented him from making progress, but was
like a bond (δεσμός) for his feet (ποδῶν). So he called the god who governed this capacity Poseidon, because he “bound the feet” (ποσί-δεσμον). But he added the ε for the sake of making the word more attractive. Or maybe he didn’t say this, but instead of the first σ he said λλ (πολλείδων), to indicate that the god knew (εἰδότος) much (πολλά). Or maybe he was called “the shaker” (ὁ σεῖων) because of the earthquakes, and the π and the σ were added later.29

This might be called a “rhyming method.” “Rhyme” channels the ancient Greek word ῥύσμος or ῥύθμος. The word eventually came to mean “rhythm,” but in fifth-century physical theory it had a more technical meaning; it meant something like “form.”30 In Democritus, rhythm designated the specific configuration of elementary particles or elements, στοιχεία, which gave a thing its appearance and being.31 To put this a different way, “rhythm” named the object’s singular material configuration—a historical conglomeration of concrete elements reducible to no abstract paradigm. To demonstrate how atomic elements (στοιχεία) combined to create rhythms or forms, Democritus used the example of words, which are changed when their letters are changed or moved about.32 In the Cratylus too, στοιχεῖον designates both “element” and “letter.” And yet ρύθμος also rhymes, obscurely, with ρέω, “flow,” so that what names form is also closely connected to flux.33 Adding to the complication is the fact that the Greek word for “flow,” ρέω, sounds very much like one of the Greek words for “speech,” ρήσις, which could punningly be described as a stream from the mouth.34 The Cratylus thus appears

29 Plato, Cratylus 402e–403a.
32 Aristotle, Metaphysics 985b4.
34 See Plato, Theaetetus 206d and 263e.
to be doing some extremely sophisticated conceptual work, establishing a philosophical liaison between Democritean physical theory and the Heraclitean thesis that what is is in a state of perceptual change, and using this liaison to interpret language as a stream of letters/elements (στοιχεῖον) in a constant process of change. Remarking on the surface interaction of letters in Jarry and Joyce, Sean Braune has called this *etymism*, joining atom and etym in a single rhyme, and we might compare the comments of Joshua Katz and Michael Gordin in Chapter One of this collection on the relation between Adam and the atom in *Ridley Walker*. David Melnick’s extraordinary homophonic translation of *Iliad* 1–3 shows that this sort of thing is a great deal more than just a parlor game: it belongs to the same poetic tradition that would include the Sanskrit śleṣa, a genre of epic poem which tells two stories (for example, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*) in the same text, at the same time.

Ω’ δ’ ἀρα Περκώτην καὶ Πράκτιον ἀμφενέμοντο καὶ Σηστόν καὶ Ἄβυδον ἔχον καὶ διαν Ἀρίσβην, τῶν αὐθ’ Ὑρτακίδης ἦρξ’ Ἄσιος ὄρχαμος ἀνδρῶν, Ἄσιος ὑποθόος ήγε φύλα Πελασγῶν ἐγχεσιμώρων τῶν οἳ Λάρισαν ἐριβώλακα ναιετάασκον·

Ὑπόθοος δ’ ἄρα Πελασγῶν ἐγχεσιμώρων τῶν οἳ Λάρισαν ἐριβώλακα ναιετάασκον·

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Like the śleṣa, Melnick has attempted to create a text in which the same sequence of sounds can be taken either as telling the Iliad, or as telling the story of what nearly all of Men in Aïda’s commentators have called an ebullient homoerotic orgy. Men in Aïda rhymes with the Iliad, sharing, if I may put it this way, the same etymic rhythm.

Such projects make meaning epiphenomenal to the acoustic substrate. It’s hard not to think here of the work of those shadowy figures in Hellenistic literary theory who defined poetry more or less exclusively in terms of its sonic construction and then insisted, in a manner other philosophers found infuriating, that the essence of the poem was epiphenomenal, thus in effect claiming that the defining nature of poetry was to be found in its accidental features.
In practice, the Critic scans an aesthetic artifact for its (phonic) display of material micro-differences [...] as these are arranged by thesis and taxis, i.e. by synthesis. In their ensemble, these differences of quantity and quality — they are in fact positional attributes, and endowed with relational values — constitute aesthetic qualities at a higher level (the “macro-level” of sensation in contact with a synthesis), where sound can be seen to be “caused” (the “elements,” viz. their positionalities, are literally the “causes,” aitia), as a surface effect, a surplus phenomenon, or to take their own striking terminology, an “epiphenomenon.”

That tends to transform linguistic signs into glyphs. Let us make an anachronistic distinction: if in the early modern period hieroglyphs were thought to be pregnant with higher or mystical meanings, a ‘pataphilological glyph is the representation of what you would perceive if you could somehow suspend the idea that a sign meant anything determinate: it is, to put this another way, a purely sensual presence.

The Codex Seraphinianus, created by Luigi Serafini, a 400-page ersatz encyclopedia in an incomprehensible writing system, appears to be the compendious description of an alien world, covering everything from microbiology to technology and culture. But its hundreds of pages of text mean nothing, and never will, and though some words appear to be made out of the things they describe, there is no way to decipher it. Even its Rosetta Stone is disconcertingly different from ours. The Codex Seraphinianus revels in the sheer materialism of the written trace: just as, in one entry, we are shown methods for floating words off the page, as though they had three dimensions and measurable mass, so does the experience of “reading” the codex

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become a purely sensual one, a kind of delight in graphic surfaces alone.\textsuperscript{40}

In the graphic novel \textit{Dicamus et Labyrinthos: A Philologist’s Notebook}, the Toronto-area composer, artist, and soundscape theorist R. Murray Schafer tells the story of an unnamed philologist who has set out to decipher some mysterious Cretan tablets. We read the journals of the philologist as he works towards his solution, which turns out to involve the myth of Ariadne and the legend of the labyrinth. This writing system is eminently decipherable, in fact it’s only an encipherment of English, with a relatively simple code. But \textit{that} makes the whole thing more bizarre—a philologist deciphers an ancient script that is just a cipher of his own tongue. As though to confound the ouroboric mystery, the philologist disappears into the labyrinth at the end of the book.\textsuperscript{41}

The made-up tablets in \textit{Dicamus et Labyrinthos} point towards a second common element in these undertakings: while ’\textit{pataphysics is the science of “imaginary solutions,”’} \textsuperscript{42} ‘\textit{pataphilology} often seems to reverse the polarity of this definition, offering very real solutions to imaginary problems. Most notable here are projects like Schafer’s that offer translations, or dramas depicting the translation of made-up documents, often in equally made-up languages. Armand Schwerner’s \textit{Tablets}, for example, which he began publishing in 1968 and continued to work on through 1991, are a collection of “translations,” essays, and typographic fantasies purporting to be based on the project of deciphering some of the oldest writing in human history.\textsuperscript{43} Even in the earliest lines of the work, it’s easy to appreciate Schwerner’s

\textsuperscript{40} Luigi Serafini, \textit{Codex Seraphinianus} (Milan: Franco Mario Ricci), 1993.  
\textsuperscript{42} Jarry, \textit{Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician}, 22.  
\textsuperscript{43} Armand Schwerner, \textit{The Tablets} (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1999).
virtuosity with scholarly gestures. I cite the first four verses of the first table, each of which has a line of commentary added by an unnamed “scholar-translator”:

All that’s left is pattern* (shoes?)

*doubtful reconstruction

I rooted about . . . like α . . . . . . . sow* for her pleasure

*atavism: a hieroglyph: perhaps ‘a fetal pig,’ ‘a small pig,’ ‘goddess’

the (power)* for all of [us]!

*perhaps ‘damage,’ if a borrowing; cf. cognate in N. Akkadian: ‘skin-burn’

I made a mistake. The small path was barely muddy. Little squush; And wet socks.* it is (scholarship?)(meditation?)

*modernism. Specificity of attire a problem. Possibly ‘underwear’ (dryness?)

Let me start at the end of this passage and work backwards. The translator’s indecision between scholarship or meditation in trying to decide what “it is” is, on the face of it, a ludic invocation of something many of us know all too well: the original words are poorly attested, or inherently ambiguous, and that leads to a bivalent translation. But by the end of his life Schwerner was writing tablets which set up a conflict between meditative translation methods and scholarly ones, and so the two possible meanings turn out to be a commentary on the commentators’ methods (see below). The same verse evokes an issue common to many ’pataphilological tablets: there is a radical anachronism in which present and deep past seem to coalesce and combine uncomfortably, in which subject (translator) and object weirdly

Ibid., 13.
coincide. “Little squish; and wet socks” receives the comment “modernism. Specificity of attire a problem.” Indeed — because the word might be underwear, not socks. Both are jarring, however, not merely because ancients didn’t wear underwear or socks, but also because something about these items of clothing is too intimate to appear in a text so purportedly other and archaic. The clothes we wear against our skin are, in a way, symbols for how private, tactile, and personal our contemporary predicament can be.

The second line invokes a similar anachronism with the note on “sow,” the original of which is a “hieroglyph,” and therefore an “atavism,” reaching back into older strata of written language. The lacunae Schwerner put in this line seem to have been one of the primary attractions for using the tablet form in his original conception of the project: his early working notes evince a repeated concern with the limitations of the English tense system and an interest in developing poetic means to express what the tense system forecloses as expressive possibility. “Attention must be paid,” he writes, “to the necessary, unavailable, tenses between the few tenses that we have in English, those that tempt us into believing that grammatical orders of reality have anything to do with our experience.” The tablet form with its gaps and discontinuities allows him to impose a fragmentary status that breaks and can even refuse the false continuity of syntax and tense. Eventually, Schwerner would supplement the rhetoric of lacunary translation with a fictive invocation of languages that existed “before” there was inflection, “when” the time-sense itself was linguistically dispensable. The “atavism” of the hieroglyph for “sow” figures the temporal impurity, or maybe it is the omni-temporality, of the Tablets’ imagined ur-language.

Last, let’s look at the first verse. On the one hand, it seems like a joke. “All that’s left is pattern” might be a quite important expression of poetics, a translation (as it were) of Eliot’s “these fragments I have shored against my ruin,” a verse that is certainly relevant to the Tablets. But then the translator’s “doubtful

45 Ibid., 133.
reconstruction” suggests that the word isn’t pattern but “shoes.” That would appear to seriously undermine the profundity of the first line. No pattern: just shoes. There are few more ’pataphilological first lines in modern poetry, except perhaps for B.P. Nichol’s “purpose is a porpoise.”46 The grin you might be grinning at this point will turn to horror and regret, however, when you recognize that “all that’s left are shoes” is also a grim recollection of the shoes that remained when the Nazi gas chambers had done their terrible work. Schwerner’s “scholar-translator” has what can best be described as a fraught relationship with philology’s anti-Semitic heritage; the scholarly voice fantasizes about an originary speech that is not Semitic,47 and chillingly reflects on the difficulty of his undertaking with the ill-omened comment “but work makes freedom.”48

Schwerner’s last Tablets move into questions about the origins of language and its difficult relationship with experience. In these late works, he imagines a script that includes determinatives that, for example, establish the posture a body takes when a word or a phrase is said, or prescribe the state of mind of the speaker (Schwerner calls them “Mind/Texture/Determinatives” [M/T/Ds]).49 Different M/T/Ds connected to the same phrase lead to radically different meanings (and therefore translations).

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48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 149.
The same sequence of symbols, differently sized and accompanied by different M/T/Ds, leads to a radically different translation:

\[\text{He will surely never die. The world is made of his voice.}\]

Where is he, mouth of the ear
Great artificer, perturbed basket of claims
Shoot of roots & shrinker of [retinues]
Making the mazy watery blue one oozing red
Entreatings the stutterer in the meaning cave . . . . . . . . . . .+ + + + + + +

By this point in his work, Schwerner is treading a very fine line between fictionalized translation and sincere, concerted poie-

\[50\] Ibid., 94.
sis. He was in fact inventing a way of being-in-the-world that came with its own writing system, language, and methodology of translation, complete with polemics between different interpretations of the same experiences. “Mind/Texture/Determinatives” come, says Schwerner, in two types or flavors: “pure” M/T/Ds are existential or cognitive states, the products of intense, inner searching by a blind, archaic artificer. But there is a second group of M/T/Ds, which Schwerner calls “Utterance/Texture/Indicators,” or U/T/Is, which isolate particular vectors largely related to the external world stage and graft them onto a written expression.” Schwerner discusses at length the “U/T/I of solitary reading” (which places the utterance it modifies into the mouth of a person who is reading alone), as well as a set of U/T/Is which designate “body-declensions,” that is, the specific postures a body might take while uttering an expression (lying down dying, lying down sick, crouched giving birth, etc). U/T/Is attempt to “publicize or make socially visible” the experiences of the M/T/Ds, but such a project is bound, in at least some degree, to fail, and so Schwerner describes these tablets as “sacred forgeries, or rather forgeries prompted by a dazzled and mournful reconsideration, retrospective as well as perhaps economically profitable, of the sacred.” That pretty clearly describes the Tablets, too — and so, like R. Murray Schafer’s philologist, Schwerner reaches deep into the archaic past only to find himself.

In a move mirroring the difference between the inward-looking M/T/Ds and the socially-visible U/T/Is, Schwerner describes translation as a conflict between “Sympathy-Meditation” and “Insertion/Ingestion.”

[Sympathy-Meditation] refers to a specific translation-process in the light of which the doer composes his doings, the objects; the Reception-Attribute signals a major constituent in the very shape-worker, intent on doing his do.

51 Ibid., 81–85.
52 Ibid., 97–98.
53 Ibid., 98.
What is the habitus of the world which is borne over to the translator’s diagnosis by the liminal ghosts of Utterance — world whose propensities he may perceive as neural, anatomical, style, or sly? He is not quite aware of such intermittent analogical audacities; at some penultimate way-station of speculation, surrender to the delights and perils of Fascination yields to action.

Surprises inhere in the cryptic ground of the translator’s thaumaturgical operations. This ground — in the context of the Path of Sympathy-Meditation — exists along with the translator’s assumptions that the composition of the world is an ingathering of individual entities characterized by their particulars; these are conceived of as idiosyncratically bounded, each a kind of Platonic idea of its Thingness as it were, all picked, packed and ready, set aside for perceptual collecting and labelling. Residing for the most part far below the shuttling and prehensile elaborations of consciousness, the translator’s assumptions do not quite attain to the mettle-some certitudes of a vision of the world. The limits and anxieties of his experiences will lead him to ignore or to suppress his intuitions about the nature of the ground, which he might at best experience as agonist — constrictively or oracularly pythonic, at worst as super-market. The Receiver is actually a Collector.54

I don’t want to put too fine a point on it, but that is almost a word-for-word importation of Jarry’s definition of ’pataphysics. Things are taken to be singular configurations of singularities, “platonic ideas of their own thingness”; compare Jarry’s claim that ’pataphysics “attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments.”55 We might ask how such a method of translation could ever adhere to the “letter of a text,” but these tablets have no letters to adhere to. Sympathy-meditation leads to an utterance in the vicinity of a text,

54 Ibid., 110–11.
55 Jarry, Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician, 22.
grounded in an awareness of the singularity of things. “Insertion/Injection,” on the other hand, directs itself to a world experienced as essentially unitary one which gives rise to “stuffs whose boundaries are established through acts effected by the PI worker’s language, or his practice.”56 This is, in other words, a translation method that recasts the original utterance in terms of a “target” language or culture.

The Tablets progressively reveals itself to be rooted in the profound problem of transforming intense experience into language.57 In addition to the “Mind/Texture/Determinatives,” Schwerner also introduces what he calls the “Entrance-Exodus Vibration” (E.-E.V.), which he uses to address the problem of the relationship between words and things. Simply put, the degree of vibration of a glyph is a measure of the dissonance between its semiotic “transparency” and its sensual “presence.” One might imagine the vibrating indeterminacy of the relation between word and object as the staging-point for a choice between two philological paths: one in which you trust what words give you, accept an intimacy between what is the case and what one can say, and another in which the discomfort carried by the dehiscence between what is said and what is lived provokes radically unorthodox methodologies: strange etymologies, glyphic surface-rhymes, fictional languages, and imaginary fragments.

Schwerner’s Tablets points toward a third characteristic of some ’pataphilologies: though they start from the surfaces of language (sound, glyph), they seek to convert that into a search for the most profound origins of human experience. One can compare this impulse with the Epicurean doctrine of the clina- men, that atomic swerve thanks to which there is anything at all. For the most part, the twentieth-century reception of the swerve has emphasized its role in the elimination or reduction of fatefulness and the consequent donation of freedom to hu-

56 Schwerner, The Tablets, 113.
57 “Ominacunei segments are sometimes subject to Entrance-Exodus Vibration (E.-E.V.): the word is never quite the thing nor is it ever quite not-the-thing. The degree and type of Vibration affecting a particular segment are codified within my diacritical pointers…”; Ibid., 113.
man existence. It functions (in Christian Bök’s words) as “the atomic glitch of a microcosmic incertitude — the symbol for a vital poetics, gone awry.” The value of such a perspective is, perhaps, rather painfully obvious. The clinamen, a world-generating deviation from physically determinate behavior, is the grounding exception, the non-paradigm or elementary heuristic that serves to organize the entire science.

But within the Collège de ’Pataphysique, the doctrine of the clinamen — necessary because “Clinamen” is the title of a chapter in Faustroll — has other resonances. The commentary on Jarry’s novel recalls Lucretius’s insistence that the swerve must be as slight as possible: just enough to set atoms off on their trajectories, but not enough to violate the natural laws of their movement. One might be tempted to say: the swerve must take place, but not at all. Or: the clinamen doesn’t happen, and in doing so it creates the world. The clinamen, the Collège insists, is an imaginary solution to the problem of origins: given the world, whence? Given a word, what led to it? If the vulgar avant-garde emphasizes the swerve as an originary seeding of choice in the universe, hieratic ’pataphysics understands that the clinamen is only a construction, and one so close to being nothing at all that it is guaranteed to have no power over us.

A ’pataphilological drive to uncover impossible origins is more than amply present in Faustroll and its commentarial tradition. Consider one of Jarry’s greatest literary coups: the portrait of Faustroll’s (ba)boon-companion Bosse-de-Nage. Bosse-de-Nage is parodically modelled on Jarry’s some-time friend, the Belgian author Christian Beck. Prefacing their remarks with the caveat that “Ubu is not a satire of the bourgeoisie and Bosse-de-Nage is not about a Belgian,” the authors of the commentary nonetheless observe that Beck’s nom-de-plume was Joseph Bossi. As if comparing Beck to a baboon wasn’t enough, the commentary suspects fecality: “Bosse-de-Nage is face-of-the-moon [face-de-lune]” where Nage → Nache → fesse, in “ancien

58 Bök, ’Pataphysics, 43.
59 Jarry, Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll pataphysicien, 160.
Français”: thus Bosse-de-Nage is “ass-face.” The commentary cites another opinion according to which Bosse is a verb, and Bosse-de-Nage = travaile de la fesse.60

Again, let me insist that ’pataphilology is not a joke. In a discussion of the logic of metaphor which is cited at length by the scholar-translator of Schwerner’s Tablets, Octavio Paz remarks on the very serious work that the ass-face metaphor does:

There is not much purpose in repeating here everything that psychoanalysis has taught us about the conflict between the face and the ass, the (repressive) reality principle and the (explosive) pleasure principle. I will merely note here that the metaphor that I mentioned, both as it works upward and as it works downward—the ass as a face and the face as an ass—serves each of these principles alternately. At first, the metaphor uncovers a similarity; then, immediately afterward, it covers it up again, either because the first term absorbs the second, or vice versa. In any case, the similarity disappears and the opposition between ass and face reappears, in a form that is now even stronger than before. Here, too, the similarity at first seems unbearable to us—and therefore we either laugh or cry; in the second step, the opposition also becomes unbearable—and therefore we either laugh or cry. When we say that the ass is like another face, we deny the soul-body dualism; we laugh because we have resolved the discord that we are. But the victory of the pleasure principle does not last long; at the same time that our laughter celebrates the reconciliation of the soul and the body, it dissolves it and makes it laughable once again.61

“Ass-face” Bosse-de-Nage has only one expression in his vocabulary: HA HA. Jarry remarks that the correct spelling should be AA, “because the aspiration was not written in the world’s

60 Ibid., 162.
ancient language.” This looks at first like a throwaway riff on the role played in French orthography and pronunciation by the history of the language; could it be more than accidental that from the Hellenistic period on the Greek aspiration \((h)\) was notated in written texts by a diacritic, ‘? Jarry elevates his reflection on Bosse-de-Nage’s HA HA into a tour-de-force of almost neo-Platonic sophistication.

A juxtaposed to A, with the former obviously equal to the latter, is the formula of the principle of identity: a thing is itself. It is at the same time the most excellent refutation of this very proposition, since two A’s differ in space, when we write them, if not indeed in time, just as two twins are never born together — even when issuing from the obscene hiatus of the mouth of Bosse-de-Nage.

The first A was perhaps congruent to the second, and we will therefore willingly write thus: \(A \cong A\).

Pronounced quickly enough, until the letters become confounded, it is the idea of unity.

Pronounced slowly, it is the idea of duality, of echo, of distance, of symmetry, of greatness and duration, of the two principles of good and evil.

From mathematical equation, through geometry, through a reconstruction of the basic components of space and time: this is, in effect, a mini-Timaeus, a mathematical cosmology drawn in the sound of the baboon’s voice.

Not so crypto-Platonic, either. Chapter ten offers a series of translations of Bosse-de-Nage’s little vocal object \((h)\)a:

— Ἀληθῆ λέγεις, ἔφη
— Ἀληθῆ
— Ἀληθέστατα.
— Δῆλα γάρ, ἔφη, καὶ τυφλῶ

62 Jarry, Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll pataphysicien, 345.
63 Jarry, Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician, 74–75.
— Δῆλα δή.
— Δῆλον δή.
— Δίκαιον γοῦν.
— Εἰκός.
— "Εμοιγε κτλ.
— You speak truth, he said.
— True.
— Most True.
— Clear things, he said, even to a blind man.
— Clear things.
— Clear.
— Indeed, it is just.
— Seems right.
— Seems that way to me.
Etc. 64

These are, for those of you who haven’t checked your Plato recently, the affirmative replies to Socratic questions in the Platonic corpus. “Systematically compiled (or re-copied from a compilation by Jarry), following the alphabetical order, the Platonic ha has are 42 in number, but in the MS L Jarry scratched out the last, reducing their number to coincide with the number of chapters in the Life and Opinions.” So says the commentary. 65 Which, for its part, would like to know what language is the “ancient” one Jarry seems to imply is spoken by Bosse-de-Nage when he says (h)a (h)a (or ’a’a). Hebrew and Egyptian are possibilities, but the commentary ultimately decides that the most plausible answer is the language before Babel. Alluding to the robust tradition of pataphilologists described by Queneau (among others) as les fous littéraires, the commentary comments:

64 Ibid., 28–29.
65 Jarry, Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll pataphysicien, 164.
Jarry was interested in the “primitive” language which so excites linguists—or “crazy linguists,” some would say. In Chapter XVI, he mentions the “language of paradise” intelligible even to the animals which is, certainly, the oldest there is.\(^{66}\)

Compellingly, the commentary refers to Jarry’s essay in *La Chandelle Vert*, “*Ceux pour qui il n’y eut point de Babel*,” in which Jarry seems to espouse the idea, proposed by Victor Fournié in *Introduction à l’histoire ancienne*, that “the same sound or the same syllable has the same meaning in all languages.”\(^{67}\) The “stone-age professor” called his students to attention by saying

\[
\textit{Hein}
\]

(cf. ha ha): this can then be found in *in-cipere*, etc. Even more to the point, the echoes of the original sonic language can be found in laughter (ha! ha!):

We believe that laughter is not only what M. Bergson, our excellent professor of philosophy at the *lycée Henri-IV* called it—the sentiment of surprise. We think we should add: it is the impression of truth revealed [*l’impression de la vérité révélée*].\(^{68}\)

Ha Ha: the revelation of the truth (unity, duality, dimensionality, space and time…). Following widely accepted contemporary geological thought, Fournier called this primal (and yet still with us) language, the language spoken by the primate Bosse-de-Nage, *Lemurien*.\(^{69}\)

The resolute philological pursuit of a necessary and impossible origin—also animal, as it happens—is most extraordinarily

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\(^{66}\) Ibid.


\(^{68}\) Ibid., 1016.

\(^{69}\) Jarry, *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll pataphysicien*, 350.
present in the work of Jean Brisset (1837–1919), whose lifetime project was to deduce the origins of humankind from extensive etymological investigations into French vocabulary. His method was the pun. Puns, insisted Brisset, are not jokes. When we laugh at them, he says, that is a god-given defense designed to prevent us from realizing what they reveal.

The iron sword which guards the way to the tree of life is called “pun” or “word-play.” The idea that there could be something hidden beneath the pun could never occur to anyone, because such an idea was forbidden the human spirit. It was imposed on us only to laugh stupidly. […]

It was by [divine] revelation and on the appointed day that we were led to formulate the following law:

The study of the relationship which exists between different ideas, expressed by a sound or a series of identical sounds, naturally leads the spirit to discover the nature of the creation of speech, which co-occurs with the creation of man, who is himself the Word. 70

He himself has realized the truth of language “at the appointed time” and “by revelation.” He will teach us to read the book that lies open on our lips. Literally: writing of etymology as “the key which opens the book of speech,” Brisset comments, “you can see perfectly well that the books are open, because the first books [livres] are lips [lèvres].” 71 Typically, Brisset guides us simply by presenting his etymologies with minimal commentary: “the words speak for themselves,” and meditating on them will lead to illumination. 72

There is no more radical application of the ‘pataphilological principle of sensualism than what we find in Brisset: to understand an expression you have not only to listen to it but also feel

71 Ibid., 147.
72 Ibid.
it in your mouth and on your lips, massage it until it reveals its truth to you.

If I say; teeth, mouth [les dents, la bouche], that evokes only ideas that are very familiar: the teeth are in the mouth.

[...]

The teeth seal [bouchent] the entrance of the mouth [la bouche] and the mouth helps [aide] and contributes to that closure: the teeth close it [les dents la bouchent], helping the mouth [l’aidant la bouche].

The teeth are the help [l’aide], the assistance in the mouth [en la bouche] and they are also too often ugly in the mouth [laides en la bouche] [...] At other times, it’s milk [lait]: they are white like milk in the mouth [lait dans la bouche].

Here Brisset invites us to chew on our speech, to cut it up and roll it around on our tongues until our persistent mastication reveals a whole series of hitherto unexpected truths.

And what we discover, if we listen closely enough, is that humankind’s earliest ancestors were frogs. As the upright, land-going form gradually emerged from its watery progenitor, his language evolved at the same time.

Like man, the frog lives in all climates, on earth and in the water. Frogs are diurnal and nocturnal, they love musical evenings, but in the morning they stay in bed, which is the earth. Frogs are quite friendly and like to live close to men, to the point of coming and sitting far from water, close to someone who watches them — so long as he remains reassuringly still.

Our frogs speak our language. I have made a note of their cries: coaque, coéque, quéquête, que re r’ai haut, cara, cara, cate, cate, and also couique. People say they say ololo and brekekex as well, but I haven’t heard those.

Qu’ai haut, co = come [viens]. What matters is the co, which is the origin of “again” [encore]. I’ve co, have you co? etc. Nothing could be more familiar. A que = au cul, to [my] behind. Co ac also means “have access”: it’s a call to “act together,” and the male obeys it. […] The cries of the frog are the origins of human language. When they sing together, from afar it sounds like the brouhaha of the human crowd. Their actual language cannot do otherwise than give an imperfect idea of what it was like when the spirit which animates all of humanity moved on the surface of the waters and was concentrated in these animals who transformed themselves slowly into men by a chain whose links were united for a long time, before the all-powerful destroyed the intermediaries.74

Brisset’s etymologies eventually reveal a complicated history. The evolution of humankind from its froggy ancestry left traces not only in language but also in myth and religion. More or less (Brisset is hard to understand, and the story is long), frogs emerged from spawn produced autonomously by the waters. They then developed genitals and thumbs (in which form they are recognizable as Uranus (“Urahn [fore-father] and Uranus are certainly the same word […] in Urahn and Uranus we also find the word rane, frog”75). When the species achieved human form, that was Saturn, or the devil (Saturnus = Satan). Brisset provides an extensive account of the evolution of anatomically modern humans on the basis of etymologies of our parts. He also vividly imagines the emotional and behavioral consequences of these anatomical changes.

The ancestors, we are told, had a very hard life. They ate each other alive, and even felt them still living within themselves.

Le mot beu ou boeuf désigne la bouche. Le beu haut =lève le bec = le beau. […] Par consequent, beau = bouche ou bec.

74 Ibid., 203.
75 Ibid.
Dans le ton beau = dans le tombeau. […] La première tombe et le premier tombeau sont donc dans la bouche et c’est là que les mots ont été mis dans la tombe, au tombeau, au ton beau.76

From this ancestral practice of living cannibalism Brisset derives the practice of etymology.

The true life is in the word. It is the spirit which gives life, says Jesus: the flesh has no purpose. The words which I say to you are spirit and truth. As creatures, we no longer eat our dead, but spiritually we always eat them, because we speak of them in the same terms used by those who did eat them and invented speech. […] The spirits which speak in us and through which it is given us to think and control ourselves, these spirits are connected to the words which they made: it is, therefore, really the spirits of the ancestors who speak and live, immortal, in our mortal bodies.77

Behind the Christian veneer, here, we discern a deeper, darker vision: speech is the remnant of an originary cannibalism thanks to which the past continues to live in us. But the opposite is also true: we are the host for the past, which lives in us like a parasite. Etymology, in Brisset, is the becoming-conscious of this eternal form of ancestor worship.

• • •

Let me face an objection. Schwerner, Schafer, and Melnick are all self-conscious artists, working with the forms and gestures of traditional philology, while Brisset is seriously attempting, in however misguided a fashion, to produce orthodox philology. If Schwerner (et al.) can be taken as pursuing a moment of authenticity — for example, the experience of the sacred — that somehow goes beyond what “normal” philology does, and thus

76 Ibid., 193.
77 Ibid., 195.
at least implies a critique of the latter, Brisset seems to do every-
thing he can to be just as dry-as-dust as his philological coun-
terparts. There is surely something to this objection: Brisset
and the poets are different from each other. But the difference,
I think, doesn’t lie in the goal. Brisset’s ambition is, in fact, far
greater than any orthodox philologist working today. He wants
nothing other than a reconstruction of the evolutionary ori-
gins of humanity on the basis of the etymology of French; and
in that, he is much more like Schwerner than like (say) Émile
Benveniste. The true difference between poets like Schwerner
and figures like Brisset, I think, lies in the fact that the poets are
self-conscious about the singularities of their procedures, while
Brisset is not; in fact, Brisset insists quite vehemently that any-
one who proceeds honestly and vigorously would produce the
same results as him.

The difference, to put it otherwise, lies in the ’. Jarry almost
never wrote ‘pataphysics; his usual spelling was simply pataphys-
ics. The Collège, elaborating on Jarry’s argument that the gen-
erality of science is in fact only a collection of exceptions that
have become unoriginal, made a doctrinal claim: everything is
pataphysical, and everyone is a pataphysician. Those who know
this and embrace it are ‘pataphysicians (“the College of ‘Pata-
physics uses the apostrophe to distinguish between voluntary
‘pataphysics and involuntary pataphysics”).78 Exactly that seems
to be what distinguishes Brisset from Schwerner (et al.): he is a
pataphilologist, while the poets are ‘pataphilologists.

III

E
ach of the essays that follow addresses ‘pataphilology in a
different way: it is in the nature of the topic that we will
find resonances and points of contact but no over-arching
hypothesis or argument. What we do find, however, is a recur-
rent inter-plaiting of the methods of Jarry during the composi-

cion of Faustroll with the high seriousness of “classical” philol-

78 Jarry, Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll pataphysicien, 146.
ology. There is also a recurrent concern with sound — the audible glyph of language, one might say — as the basic material of the linguistic attractions perpetrated in puns, etymologies, and new-language formation, or as the noise of the singular or the subject. Indeed, there is also a recurrent preoccupation with the subject: what is it? How can it be freed? Is it, perhaps, a 'pata-physical object, secured through strange new forms of language practice? And there is a consistent engagement with forms of time that, like the strange loops of Schwerner and Schafer and the odd origins of Brisset, seem to defy orthodox chronology, to tie the line of history into a knot or a Möbius strip.

Examining a series of “non-intrinsic philological isolates” — languages, more or less, forged for a single use (often literary) and not generally spoken beyond that one application — Joshua T. Katz and Michael D. Gordin make the case that what we call “philology” is better treated as an assemblage of language practices that can occur in different combinations in different contexts and that can be variously analyzed apart, and partly legitimated or delegitimated, by different scholars working in different disciplines at different times. One corollary of this viewpoint is that it becomes harder to tell what is “good” or “real” philology and what is pseudo- or pata-philology. Given a broad and neutral enough perspective, they suggest, it may not be possible to tell the difference. Faustroll’s games with language are as philological as anything produced by the Académie Française. While Katz and Gordin study the extraordinary languages to be found in a number of modern novels — Ridley Walker, The Wake, Clockwork Orange attract most of their attention — their argument asks whether far more conventional works of literature shouldn’t also be treated in a similar way. How close to their non-intrinsic philological isolates is the Latin of the grammarians, or that of Vergil for that matter? These are questions that will be taken up in detail by Erik Gunderson at the very end of the collection (see below).

James Porter’s contribution attends to one of the modern age’s strongest readers of Homer: Theodor Adorno, whose essay on “epic naïveté” exposes a philological anachrony of the
profoundest nature. Adorno and Jarry have more in common than a sober reading of either might initially suggest. Both were virtuosos at creating compelling texts by collocating fragments. In his greatest works, Adorno created “constellations” of textual fragments meant to explode the present and its ideologies; these constellations could also be read as allegories (this was a strategy he adapted from Walter Benjamin). Porter shows that Adorno’s reading of Homer projects the “method of fragments” back onto the epic itself, whose language “disintegrates” into fragments held together by little more than convention, and which as a result becomes an allegory of history. Jarry, too — at least in Faustroll — proceeded in a similar way: images, glimpses, gestures drawn from the work of each chapter’s honorandum are brought together to produce something wholly new. And Adorno’s emphasis on the sound of epic, its perpetually frustrated ambition to become noise, comes close to the essentially ‘pataphysical ambition to “symbolically attribute the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments.” Porter’s reading of Adorno’s reading of Homer’s curiously multivalent particle ἦ shows Adorno contemplating a sound that rhymes uncannily with Bosse-de-Nage’s Platonic HA. But Porter juxtaposes Adorno and Jarry: if there is an “ethics of ludic disobedience” in Jarry, Adorno “mimics the object of his critique in order to subvert it from within.”

Beginning from a reconstruction of some of Jacques Lacan’s connections with surrealism, Dadaism, and the French avant-garde, Sean Braune argues that Lacan’s discourse on the subject is, in the final analysis, a kind of ’pataphysics, and that his notorious way of communicating represented a rigorous form of ’pataphilology. Indeed, not just his writings and his seminars, but also his clinical practices emerge, in Braune’s analysis, as “a ’pataphilological laboratory of lalangue and mathemes.” Braune’s ’pataphilological ontology of the subject suggests that subjectivity may be the solution to an imaginary problem, one that emerges in the fictive space of the psychoanalytical encounter.

Existing in ethernity, Braune’s Lacanian subject seems to resonate with the walled-off (barred) subject analyzed by Paul
Allen Miller in his contribution. Reading a series of Horace’s *Epodes*, Miller proposes that the distinguishing feature of philology is its disciplined attention to what is said and what is meant. Philology struggles, however, with forms of discourse like irony which, he claims, rely on the mysterious presence of an unspoken and sometimes even unmeant component of the communication, an element that somehow manages to suggest the existence of a distinction between the said and the meant. For Miller, ’pataphilology emerges at the moment when one begins to attend to this moment of unmeaning. Now, someone might object (and indeed, this someone might be a philologist) that the mysterious thing that brings us to understand that an utterance does not mean what it says is, in fact, a communication, and therefore a meaning — that, to put this another way, an ironic communication *intends* its irony, and says so. Knowing that a sentence is ironic (this philological perspective might imply) either entails that you have been told so or that you haven’t, and in the latter case you can’t really say that you know the sentence is ironic. To which a ’pataphilological reader would reply: if a sentence says it’s ironic, if it directly signals its irony to you using signs you understand, it’s not really all that ironic. “Knowing” irony isn’t exactly knowing, if we’re being honest about it. It’s more like something that just happens, as it were; when it happens, or why it happens, and to whom, would be quite unpredictable, ultimately dependent on a one-off interaction between a reader and a text.

’Pataphysics’ trajectory from Ubu to Faustroll isn’t without political implications (or quite a bit of irony): what began as the instrumental science of an overweening king figure ends as a mode of language play connected to the dispossessed, nomadic man of learning, in whose hands it becomes capable of deflating the pretentions of power. (There is an unwritten *Faustroll contra Ubu* written beneath the lines of Jarry’s novellistic work.) Erik Gunderson’s closing contribution to the volume, “The Paraphilologist as ’Pataphysician,” begins to articulate the polemical and political implications of ’pataphilology. The first part of his essay is a profound reading of Priscian’s account of the anatomy of
language, reaching from the voice to the word, and showing in
detail that this discourse has been exquisitely crafted to estab-
lish a full and fully signifying presence. There is, in Priscian’s
account, no room for the arbitrary or the radically meaningless.
But, as Gunderson demonstrates, the rule-governed linguistic
purity theorized and celebrated by late-antique grammarians is
in fact beset and surrounded by exceptions and variations: poets
violate the rules all the time, and so too do the grammarians
themselves. The fact that they seem to enforce linguistic lawful-
ness while palpitating with anomalous singularities reminds me
of Jarry’s insistence that science is not the study of laws but the
study of exceptions that have become banal, that have lost the
distinction of being original. Gunderson describes the gram-
marian as “a paraphilologist who attaches himself to language
as its guardian.” This paraphilologist, who could also be called
a pataphilologe (note the absence of an ’), was countered in
antiquity by writers like Lucian, Petronius, and Apuleius, whose
playful inversions of grammatical authority Gunderson finds to
be ‘pataphilological in the most orthodox sense. They embrace
willingly what the paraphilologists do in ellipses or in the con-
text of a disavowal.

Perhaps it might be appropriate to close this lengthy intro-
duction with a return to the question with which I began: what
is the difference, or is there a difference, between philology and
‘pataphilology? The answers to this question vary across the
book, but it does seem to me that in important ways each contri-
bution tends towards eliding the difference more than towards
emphasizing or defining it. In this sense, Katz and Gordin, with
their assertion that pataphilology is philology, line up well with
Gunderson’s observation that grammatical enforcements of lan-
guage’s lawfulness tend to coincide with an ever-shifting and
anomic field of linguistic singularities. There is nothing but the
clinamen and its consequences. This is, in a sense, just what was
implied by the Collège de ’Pataphysique when it defined the dif-
ference between pataphysics and ’pataphysics as the difference
between voluntary and involuntary: philology and pataphilol-
ogy would, on this model, be more or less synonyms, while
'pataphilology would be little more than the self-conscious, willing embrace of the practice and all its implications.

One question we are left with concerns tactics. How should we proceed? Via the ludic abandonment of sense, as Porter observes relative to Jarry? Or should one adopt the gestures and style of philology in order to explode it from within? Perhaps the answer to that question lies in the first contribution to this volume, which I have not yet mentioned: Steve McCaffery’s ecphrastic translation of the Papyrus of Ani. Here we have, I would suggest, as classical a presentation of ’pataphilological procedure as one could imagine. Evoking a return to the most archaic of origins, McCaffery “reads” the hieroglyphic script as a series of images to be named ecphrastically. He quite literally (not literally at all, actually; there are no letters here) transforms them into glyphs, in a move analogous to Melnick’s homophonic translations of Iliad 1–3. One could interpret this undertaking as a parodic refusal of sense, a finger in the eye of philology and its grandest pretentions. Look again, though, and I think you will find something else. McCaffery’s is a movingly honest and close reading of the papyrus — the voice of this poem takes seriously the difficulties of scrutinizing such a text, and the translation’s fabric has a compelling unity and pathos that do not derive from any kind of facile flippancy. In a way, what McCaffery does is evoke the (non)sense of the hieroglyph in the moment before it is deciphered. And that, we would do well to recall, is not a joke: it evokes the verge or the cusp of comprehension, a site I would propose to be analogous with the ’pataphysical subject in Lacan as it is discussed by Braune, the free subject concealed behind irony pointed to by Miller, or even the truth hidden behind the gates of the earthly paradise imagined by Brisset. What we find in McCaffery’s translation, I propose, is an approach that combines “parodic philology” with the ludic refusal of sense. And that (as Cavafy said somewhere) may be some kind of a solution.