It is hardly an original observation that the transition between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was marked by enormous political, scientific, and intellectual upheavals, and that their counterpart in the arts was the emergence of the various movements that would later come to be called “modernism.” This artistic revolution was centered in Paris; although the avant-gardes would spread rapidly across much of the globe, it was from there that their message was most often carried. So, for example, at the century’s turn both Marinetti and Rubén Darío, soon to be the principal figures of the modern movement in Italy and Argentina, were often among those to be found at the same Parisian salon. Every Tuesday afternoon, in the offices of the *Mercure de France*, then the most advanced literary journal in France, these gatherings were hosted by the novelist Rachilde, wife to the magazine’s editor, Alfred Vallette.

Rachilde and Vallette, at the center of Parisian literary circles, would play an important part in the life of Alfred Jarry and were among his most loyal friends. Yet when Jarry died, aged thirty-four, just over one hundred years ago, they undoubtedly shared the opinion common to his contemporaries: that he was an impossibly obscure and oddly inconsistent author whose works were unlikely to survive. This opinion was not entirely unreasonable; Jarry was “writing ahead of his time,” which means only that his work became easier to appreciate once read in the context of those he had influenced.

It would take several decades before Jarry began to be recognized as a pivotal figure during this transitional period. Nowadays any cultural history of the last century must assign Jarry a formative role. His impact on modern theater was notably profound, and most accounts of twentieth-century drama begin with a description of his most famous play, *Ubu Roi*. A preliminary list of his literary admirers would include Guillaume Apollinaire, Antonin Artaud, André Breton, Italo Calvino, Julio Cortázar, Guy Debord, Witold Gombrowicz, Eugène Ionesco, Stéphane Mallarmé, Alan Moore, Georges Perec, Jacques Prévert, Raymond Queneau, Tristan Tzara. Wole Soyinka is only one of many to have written versions of *Ubu Roi*, while the best website for the international avant-gardes is called: UbuWeb. An equally extensive roster of artists, commencing with Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp, could as easily be assembled; and philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard have cited his “philosophy” of Pataphysics as prescient. And yet … when one encounters one of those brief notices of Jarry that appear in biographies of his contemporaries, or in various contexts on the Internet, they are more likely to dwell upon his mode of living than on his works. It is Jarry’s life that has been declared exemplary, for personifying the idea of revolt in its purest sense. It is the attitude of Jarry that has become a rallying point. He has the reputation of someone whose refusal to accommodate to the norms of everyday existence resulted in a life of intransigent nonconformity.
This book is not much concerned with Jarry's influence. Even so, it is worth noting that this influence began to be felt only once the first flush of modernism was over. Its early manifestations, notably Cubism and Futurism, were effectively replays of realism, concerned with reinterpreting immediate experience. Only when more metaphysical—and, as we shall see, pataphysical—concerns came to the fore would Jarry's example be recalled. It was thus almost inevitable that the Dada movement should proclaim its admiration, and in this context it is easy to appreciate, for instance, why Jarry influenced Duchamp more than he did Picasso.

As for Jarry himself, he appears never to have doubted the value of his own works, nor their eventual reception. When asked his opinion, he typically replied “posterity will decide,” in a tone that left little doubt as to the expected verdict. Jarry’s self-assessment appears vindicated, and he has now found his place among the authors of unclassifiable classics, in the company of French authors such as Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Artaud, Roussel, Bousquet, Bataille. In the Anglophone world his role has been noted in works such as Cyril Connolly’s 100 Key Books of the Modern Movement (1965) and Harold Bloom’s The Western Canon (1994). Ubu Roi is now one of the most performed plays worldwide, after those of Shakespeare, and usually in youthful productions.¹

The reassessment of Jarry’s writing only really gathered pace after the founding of the Collège de ’Pataphysique in Paris in 1948, whose researches brought forth a mass of new material relating both to Jarry’s work and to his life. These early enthusiasts of Jarry the writer tended to downplay the more eccentric aspects of his life; they generally felt that Jarry’s works had been obscured by his “myth.” They also sought to minimize the importance of Ubu within his work, or stressed that it comprised only a small part (some 10 percent) of Jarry’s writings. Yet without Ubu, Jarry’s works would look very different—impossible even—and Ubu likewise became an essential part of his daily existence. Jarry’s life and character unfold as a succession of paradoxes or, less dramatically, as simple contrariness. Perfectly correlated, his works reflected these contradictions in the broad outlines of an œuvre that could encompass both the buffoonery of Ubu, and the subtleties of Jarry’s “science” of Pataphysics.

These conflicts in his life, represented by the extremes of Jarry’s writing, are open to various interpretations, which are explored briefly in chapter 13 below. The intervening narrative may allow the reader to decide to what extent Jarry fabricated both his life and his myth, or to what extent they were imposed upon him. Jarry’s life inevitably influenced how his works were written—one concern of any biography—but biography is a fiction too, just as a life as lived is a work in progress. How then was Jarry’s life written, and “read,” not least by himself?

This book turned out longer than I had anticipated, and I heartily thank my editor, Roger Conover, for permitting this Ubuesque distension. However, I do not feel that there is much here in the way of “padding,” and so it is perhaps surprising that it mainly covers a period of only fifteen years, from Jarry’s arrival in Paris in 1893 to his premature death in 1907. The mass of available source material is a measure of the fascination Jarry exerted on the literary circles of 1890s Paris, a social scene which did not exactly lack for vivid personalities. Impossible to ignore, he was written about by almost everyone who encountered him during his brief passage through this society; and although this documentation is extensive, it does rather concentrate on his personality, and upon tales of his outré behavior.
How should one deal with this wealth of anecdotes? “Serious” authors have tended to adopt a rather censorious policy of ignoring them, or have made casual mention of them with what often seems feigned displeasure. In this biography, however, such episodes are recounted simply because they actually occurred. Yet just as there are extremes in both Jarry’s works and his character, so too these anecdotes reflect similar oppositions. There were occasions when Jarry was essentially playing the fool—and such incidents may be as entertaining as their author intended—but he also adhered to other nonconformities, more deeply ingrained, which he practiced with an absolute and stubborn consistency, and the consequences of these convictions were undoubtedly more significant. The distinction is far from clear-cut, and because Jarry frequently overstepped the mark, the one tended to blend imperceptibly into the other, at which point the joke might assume a more disquieting cast. Absurdity and tragedy were as closely entwined in his life as in his work.

Noël Arnaud, certainly among the most sympathetic and knowledgeable of Jarry’s biographers, admitted with obvious reluctance: “We must resign ourselves: Jarry was not innocent of his myth.” Why this resignation, and in what sense was Jarry guilty? Answering this question—and disentangling Jarry’s life from his myth—initially appeared to be one of my principal tasks; but the acknowledgment that Jarry played a role in its creation presented rather more interesting problems. It seemed to me that Jarry the man and Jarry the writer were truly indivisible, that they were connected at a particularly deep and intrinsic level, and that exploring the connection between the one and the other must be an essential part of this biography, more so than is commonly the case. Jarry once wrote an article on “monsters” in which he discussed the definition of this word in the context of mythological beasts. “Usually,” he wrote, “the word ‘monster’ signifies some sort of unaccustomed harmonizing of dissonant elements […] I call ‘monster’ every original inexhaustible beauty.” In the terms of these definitions, Jarry’s works have many inexhaustible beauties, yet he personally retains a monstrous aspect exactly because his character resisted being reduced to anything except a combination of “dissonant elements.” Thus, without consideration of his works, or more importantly, of what they represent—their underlying concerns and assumptions—Jarry’s character and motivations must remain hidden.2

Jarry appeared intent on making his own universe; he formulated its interior logic and defined its external laws. Both his life and his works proceeded from a combination of the same interior impulses, and the same exterior influences; and while these were undoubtedly responsible for the difficulties he experienced in his life, they were also what animated his writing. It is this inseparable conjunction that imparts to his life a heroic aspect. He did not avoid the risks and difficulties it entailed; and the consequence was that his best work possesses an authenticity which even on first reading is palpable, but is also difficult to account for. Its source may be found where Jarry’s life and works mesh together, and he could never have been “innocent of his myth,” since his myth is no more than the play in this “machinery with more or less fixed gears.” Problems arise only when the attempt is made to sift one from the other, fictional from real. The pataphysician would see no virtue in such a distinction, but the biographer cannot avoid it.3
No surprise, then, that one of Jarry’s favorite images was the mirror, or the double, and the structure of this biography is intended to reflect this—not too laboriously, I trust. The main part, the evenly numbered chapters, consists of a conventional chronological biography. This is broken up by the intercalary, odd-numbered chapters which are intended to offer a glimpse of undercurrents which connect the most apparently disparate aspects of Jarry’s thought and personality. Of necessity, these shorter chapters must range outside the chronology of the remainder of the book, and it is for the reader to decide whether this combination adds up to the harmony of Jarry’s definition. I hoped to make of Jarry a believable person, despite the fact that he seemed to devote much of his life to making such a task as difficult as possible. The Jarry who emerges here appears to me more “human” than monstrous, but I do not think that this diminishes him. As befits the inventor of Pataphysics he remains an entirely exceptional being, equally original in both his existence and his writing.

This is the first full-length biography of Jarry in English. The only previous work of substance, the critical biography by Keith Beaumont, is now twenty-five years old. (Subsequent works in English have not improved upon it.) Beaumont considered Jarry’s life primarily in relation to his writing, which meant that the biographical portion of his study was somewhat abbreviated. It is also now unavoidably out of date, but as a critical reading in English of Jarry’s works, Beaumont’s book remains unsurpassed. The present work takes the opposite position so as to give a more detailed biographical account. It incorporates a great deal of material that will be new to English readers, and a more modest portion that will be new to French ones. Various new sources were unearthed during the writing of it, most notably more than thirty previously unknown letters, including his last, written on his deathbed.4

A FEW CONVENTIONS IN THE TEXT
The Mercure de France was both a publishing house and a literary magazine; it is italicized here when the magazine alone is referred to. The same applies to other periodicals that also had a book publishing arm. The titles of Jarry’s works are given in English when there is a generally accepted translation (and one with which I happen to agree), and self-evident abbreviations are used, thus Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician is usually referred to simply as Faustroll. Otherwise titles appear in the original French. The apostrophe to the word “Pataphysics” is not used (except in reference to the Collège de ’Pataphysique). Jarry signaled its desirability, but never employed it himself. The endnotes indicate the sources used and can be ignored by the general reader. My intention has been to write a readable narrative that conformed to academic standards by being fully sourced, while avoiding academic jargon and discursive footnoting.

PHYNANCE
This was something that played an important role in Jarry’s life. The exchange rate between the franc, sterling, and the dollar remained fairly constant between 1896 and 1910, when 5 francs was worth 4 shillings in sterling and one American dollar. There are various methods of calculating what this is worth in today’s money, but a rough guide would be that 1 franc in 1896 approximates
to around 4 pounds, 5 dollars, or 5 euros at 2009 prices. By the time of Jarry’s death in 1907 the franc had lost around 10 percent of its value over the previous decade.5

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Translations in the text are my own, with the help of Antony Melville, unless another is indicated in the notes.

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