The Pataphysics of Inoperativity in the Works of Giorgio Agamben

Tyson E. Lewis

Abstract

This paper argues that the origin of Giorgio Agamben's abiding interest in inoperativity comes out of his largely overlooked engagement with pataphysics, and with the works of Alfred Jarry in particular. More than a mere reference point, pataphysics emerges as the fundamental signature underlying many of Agamben's philosophical practices and interests. In particular, we can see the imprint of pataphysics in terms of Agmaben's science of the real, the cultivation of a taste for the aesthetics of impossible things and non-knowledge, the politics of exceptionality, analogical empiricism (of paradigms), and the notion of form-of-life. At the same time, the article utilizes Agamben's pataphysics to reveal new meanings and uses for pataphysics, especially with regards to Jarry. In conclusion, the article offers up a theory of study that renders inoperative the signatures of pataphysics in Agamben's writings so that such signatures can make themselves intelligible and, in turn, open to new use.

Keywords: Giorgio Agamben; pataphysics; Alfred Jarry; state of exception; Ubu Roi; Faustroll; study

●

The recently published edited volume *Agamben's Philosophical Lineage* (Kotsko and Salzani, 2017) traces the multiple philosophical influences on the expansive œuvre of Giorgio Agamben. The book is organised into three parts that highlight his primary interlocutors, important yet secondary points of reference, and more subtle and submerged dialogues. Given the breadth and depth of the book, one might find it surprising that no space is given to the enigmatic French poet, playwright, critic, and proponent of pataphysics, Alfred Jarry.

Of course, this might be due to the fact that Jarry is not traditionally considered a philosopher, and has received much more attention for his affiliation with Symbolism, Dada, and Surrealism than for his influence on philosophers such as Deleuze or Derrida (to name only a few). His lineage places him somewhere between hermeticism, esoteric occultism, Lord Kelvin, C. V. Boys,

Corresponding author: Tyson.Lewis@unt.edu

and H.G. Wells (Shattuck, 1960). Yet, this explanation for the oversight seems rather superficial.

Agamben, who translated Jarry's novel *The Supermale* into Italian, highlights Jarry's philosophical importance in several books, including *What is Philosophy?* and *Autoritratto nello Studio*. In the latter text, Agamben (2017a: 85) recalls how Jarry's posthumous novel, entitled the *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician,* 'enchanted' him by the rigorously poetic way in which it attempts to deal with genuinely philosophical problems. Indeed, if pataphysics is a joke, argues Agamben (*ibid.*: 86), then it is truly a 'brother of seriousness' in the sense that pataphysics discovers a 'supplementary universe' beyond the limitations of Western metaphysical traditions. Instead of highlighting specific philosophical claims or insights offered by Jarry, it is instead Jarry's methodological approach to philosophical problems through poetic means that enchants Agamben. Agamben argues that Jarry was one of his first inspirations for approaching philosophy through poetic experimentation. This poetic form extended not simply throughout Jarry's writings, but also throughout his eccentric form-of-life. As is well known, Jarry attempted fully to embody a pataphysical reality through his dress, behaviour, and personal character. There was, in other words, no separation for Jarry between life and philosophy. His transformation was so complete that, according to Agamben, the 'mask […] had devoured its creator — of him, nothing remained' (2017a: 88). Total indifference to social norms and conventions or the proper conditions of existence (as Jarry lived in abject poverty during the latter part of his short life) made him into a kind of living marionette 'without any human residue' (*ibid.*). In other words, pataphysics formed Jarry's form-of-life as a kind of inoperative existence that preferred not to accommodate itself to any definition of the human.

In this article, I first want to explore the marks left on Agamben by Jarry's philosophic-poetic experiments. To do so is to unpack the pataphysical dimensions of Agamben's work that have yet to be appreciated, or rather, it is to take up familiar concepts and methodologies in order to reveal their pataphysical (rather than metaphysical) origins. This project is not merely an addition to the laundry list of figures that have influenced Agamben. Instead, I want to make a stronger claim: that Jarry's pataphysics is a signature running throughout Agamben's many attempts to render inoperative various political, ethical, and aesthetic discourses and practices defining Western metaphysics. If pataphysics is indeed a signature, this would account for its absence from *Agamben's Philosophical Lineage*. Signatures, according to Agamben are not merely signs; rather, they enable signs to signify anything at all by granting a certain usability to sign

systems. This usability enables signs to be linked together to form complex signifying networks. Agamben summarises, 'the clue represents the exemplary case of a signature that puts an insignificant or nondescript object in effective relation to an event […] or to subjects' (2009: 70). Signatures — like clues — produce a chain of similarities between dissimilar concepts, ideas, objects, or actions. Instead of erasing the signature in the pure play of references (as books such as *Agamben's Philosophical Lineage* are apt to do), here I want to do the opposite and reveal the pataphysical signature animating Agamben's work, or that which grants his project a certain intelligibility but only insofar as its trace remains largely undetected.

At the same time, I wish to utilise Agamben to read Jarry's texts anew. While it is often the case that Jarry is interpreted as a prescient prophet having forecast of some of the most important theoretical and scientific insights of the 20th century — including deconstruction, postmodernism, and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle (Hugill, 2012) — it is my contention that Agamben's pataphysical project enables us to approach Jarry with fresh eyes, liberating him from an infinite deferral of floating signifiers, a spectacle of ludic images, and a full-blown embrace of an ontology of contingency. In this sense, the paper offers three overlapping projects: (a) a reading of Agamben through the lens of pataphysical signatures; (b) a retrospective, Agambenian interpretation of Jarry and pataphysics; and (c) a description of Agamben's own development of pataphysics, or how Agamben builds on and pushes further Jarry's legacy.

While it might appear that these projects ought to be analytically distinct (each meriting its own distinct essay), I want to push them to a point of indistinction. Indeed, such a manoeuvre follows Agamben's own approach to doing (pataphysical) philosophy. Discussing his core methodological principle — to develop that which remains unspoken in the thought of his interlocutors —, Agamben argues that 'if we follow [this development] all the way, we inevitably end up at a point where it is not possible to distinguish between what is ours and what belongs to the author we are reading […]. In this way, I will endeavour to continue and carry on — obviously, with full responsibility — the thought of an author I love' (2019: 34–35). To speak of (a) without (b) or (c) would institute divisions that no longer exist if the signature of Jarry's pataphysics truly animates Agamben's work. Indeed, there is a moment of study in which *influence on* and *development of* cross paths and cross temporalities to the point at which the past enters the present and the present enters into the past, causing a pataphysical breakdown of linear concepts of causality. In the nexus of (a), (b), and (c) we can

locate a point of inoperativity between subject and object, author and reader, influence and development, and self and other that, in the end, is a true sign of love.

To trace the movement of pataphysical signatures through Agamben's work and to determine how these lines loop back and offer a new development of Jarry's ideas, this essay will not be structured as a linear argument. Instead, it will offer a series of lateral movements from one particular to another, forming a loose constellation. These particulars include the scientific, aesthetic, political, ethical, and educational relay points that lead from Jarry to Agamben and back again. The sections are as follows: the science of the real, a taste for the aesthetics of impossible things and non-knowledge, the politics of exceptionality, analogical empiricism (of paradigms), and a pataphysical form-of-life. In conclusion, the sinuous paths that unfold throughout the essay will be interpreted as a kind of labyrinthine library, which, I propose, renders inoperative the very inoperativity of pataphysics itself by enabling the reader truly to study (rather than learn from) the Jarry-Agamben assemblage.

The Real of Pataphysics

For Agamben, Jarry's pataphysics gestures toward a supplementary universe. This notion has been interpreted by pataphysicians as an early account of the possibility of a multiverse, or of quantum mechanics, and even a precursor to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. There are good reasons for supporting all of these interpretations. For instance, Jarry (1996: 88) embraces the strange force of the 'clinamen' or the random swerve or deviation of atoms crashing into one another. Whereas science for figures such as Aristotle and Francis Bacon concerns the knowledge of *regularities* and *continuities*, Jarry's pataphysical empiricism is concerned with the production of *irregularities* and *discontinuities* that arise through the unanticipated, tiny variations in atomic composition that are highly localised, and as such, introject chance into the universe. Pataphysical experiments set these chain reactions in motion through various procedures and protocols that act as catalysts. For instance, Jarry equally used mathematics and wordplay to induce swerves of poetic meaning.

Jarry's syzygy words are a case in point. Syzygy was originally an astrological term indicating the alignment of different celestial bodies. Jarry appropriated the concept and applied it to language. The resulting syzygetic words were born from the collision of seemingly unrelated grammatical or phonic

elements which when combined formed humorous puns or strange meanings. Syzygy words render common sense inoperative by disrupting any sense of a fixed, stable identity or meaning that would assign things, words, or ideas to specific categories. They also neutralise good sense by generating words that seem to tend toward chaos rather than order. In short, the clinamen is a methodological principle for rendering inoperative the functionality of language by interjecting contingent elements when and where they ought not to occur.

Interpreting the clinamen in Jarry's work as a precursor to certain scientific insights into the quantum world is provocative, but also misses something important about the inoperativity of Jarry's poetics that distances it from quantum mechanics and the laws of probability. Here, Agamben's own spin on Jarry's pataphysics is perhaps more generative than strictly "canonical" interpretations of Jarry as a mere handmaiden to Heisenberg.

The key to understanding Agamben's pataphysics is found in his short book *What is Real?* Here Agamben engages directly with quantum science, and in particular the strange disappearance of noted physicist Ettore Majorana who vanished without clear cause or motive whilst on a boat to Naples. According to Agamben's interpretation, quantum mechanics has renounced necessity for contingency and chance. In so doing, it has ceased to seek knowledge about the real. Instead, it merely seeks to control the real through statistical calculation. With the rise of quantum mechanics, Agamben warns, 'Science no longer tried to know reality, but […] only [to] intervene in it in order to govern it' (2018c: 24). Probability becomes a tool to manage and control a universe that is now contingent all the way down.

In an interesting twist, Agamben sees this shift towards the question of governance as a foreclosure of the questions traditionally posed by science. Potentiality, released from any relationship to actuality, gains predominance, overtaking the actual to the point at which only probability remains. Here Agamben's worries concerning the current emphasis of quantum mechanics and probabilistic thinking in the sciences coincides with his criticism of biopolitics as the management of life. Indeed, we can read biopolitics as the social science equivalent of quantum physics now applied to populations on the macro-level. In both cases, governance is justified in relation to the need to maximise operativity

for a predictable (and controllable) future.[1] Stated differently, pataphysics attempts to reclaim a science of the impossible in order to safeguard the question of the real whereas quantum physics reduces the possible and the impossible to the *probable* and the *improbable*. Thus (un)reality becomes manageable and subjected to biopolitical control.

Given this critique of modern statistics and quantum physics, it is no wonder that Majorana's only recourse was to abandon science completely and disappear. Agamben's thesis concerning this disappearance thus takes on philosophical rather than purely psychological dimensions. He writes, 'if quantum mechanics relies on the convention that reality must be eclipsed by probability, then disappearance is the only way in which the real can peremptorily be affirmed as such and avoid the grasp of calculation' (2018c: 43). Majorana becomes the scientific version of Bartleby the Scrivener's famous ethical stance "I would prefer not to [be governed by probabilistic sciences]" (Melville, 2016). Disappearance renders inoperative the mechanism that makes governance possible. Majorana, in eluding scientific capture, keeps open the scientific question (what is real?) against the contamination of science by a biopolitical question (how to manage contingency?).

Returning to Jarry, we can now understand Agamben's fascination with Majorana as a trace of a pataphysical signature of the real. Majorana embodies the clinamen, introjecting a swerve into a system of statistical probability that cannot be calculated and thus cannot be governed. In other words, the clinamen is a particular kind of swerve that disrupts the operativity of statistical analysis, always returning us to the question of what is real. Just as Majorana disappeared from science, so too we can remember how Agamben describes Jarry as essentially disappearing into his performance. The mask annulled its creator leaving no trace of Jarry as a psychological individual. In both cases, those who seem to have abandoned science — Majorana through his ambiguous escape and Jarry through exaggerated performance — are actually those who are *protecting* science. It is therefore wrong to assume that Jarry's pataphysics is a mere precursor to quantum mechanics and probability theory. Agamben ensures that Jarry's clinamen is not fully absorbed into the scientific apparatus, and instead holds

---

[1] Here, it is interesting to compare Agamben's critical appraisal of quantum theory as the new metaphysics of biopolitical control with Karen Barad's embrace of quantum physics to problematise metaphysics. While beyond the scope of this essay, this is an interesting debate that, at its centre, concerns the question of how to interpret the place of contingency within contemporary pataphysical inheritances (conscious or unconscious).

open a space and time for disappearance, or for science to remain in defiance of its own probabilistic tendencies.

Pataphysical Tastes

As indicated above, Agamben's interest in Jarry lies in the latter's poetic resolution of philosophical problems. Even the earliest of Agamben's texts show an interest in developing this methodological approach, healing the fracture between poetry and philosophy. Thus, in *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, Agamben writes, 'poetry possesses its object without knowing it while philosophy knows its object without possessing it' (1993: xvii). Poetic words enjoy the object of knowledge by presenting it in a beautiful form while philosophy does not enjoy its object although it pursues knowledge of it. Once split, the two drift further and further apart, with philosophy becoming increasingly bound to formal constraints (think here of analytic formalisation according to the laws of logic) and poetry becoming increasingly freed from formal constraints. At the height of this separation, Agamben discovers criticism as a form of writing which 'neither represents nor knows, but knows the representation' (*ibid.*) and thus a thinking that combines critical and creative disciplines. Criticism is a 'putting together of impossible things' (*ibid.*: 155) or a 'relation with unreality' (*ibid.*: xix) that is invisible to either philosophy or poetry when they are separated.

Agamben returns to this question in his book *Taste*, written around the same time as *Stanzas*. In this text, he desires to overcome the dichotomy between science and pleasure, which always places taste in an inferior position within the hierarchical ordering of the senses. *Homo Sapiens*, meaning "wise man," he recalls, is etymologically linked to "*sapor*" or taste. And yet, in Western metaphysics, any relation between science and pleasure is disavowed. Recasting earlier claims, Agamben observes how science can know its object yet not take pleasure in it, and the artist can take pleasure in his/her creation without knowing it. The only trace of the original contact point between the two is found in the question of taste. Taste, and its various historical discourses, provides what Agamben refers to as an 'intermediate dimension' that is capable of a conciliation without negating difference between the two (2017c: 21). Precisely because taste *simultaneously* presents the problem of knowledge *and* pleasure without excluding one or the other, it sets forth an 'enigmatic' (*ibid.*: 20) relation between the two. Science — as knowledge which can be explained and thus known — and pleasure — which cannot found any knowledge — suddenly traverse the great divide opened up by

metaphysical distinctions. For this reason, taste is, from Agamben's perspective, "anti-metaphysical" in that it permits of the impossible: 'the knowledge of sensible appearances (of the beautiful as 'that which is most apparent') as true and the perception of truth as appearance and pleasure' (*ibid.*: 31). Paradoxically, this would be an impossible science that holds open the (un)reality of a supplementary universe that lies below distinctions between science, philosophy, and poetry.

Another set of dichotomies is also rendered inoperative through the discourse and practice of taste: political economy. Agamben writes, '[w]here aesthetics takes as its object a knowledge that is not known, political economy takes as its object a pleasure that is not enjoyed' (2017b: 66). Calling upon Marx's analysis of the commodity, Agamben argues that modern political economy is less about use-value (which can be enjoyed) than it is about exchange-value or a value that one cannot have/enjoy. In sum, '*Homo aestheticus* and *Homo economicus*, are in a certain sense the two halves (a knowledge that is not known and a pleasure that is not enjoyed) that taste struggled to hold together for the last time in the experience of a knowledge that enjoys and a pleasure that knows' (*ibid.*: 68). In this sense, taste struggles to define an indeterminate zone of contact that is not reducible to either knowledge or pleasure. It is a way of knowing that is equally non-knowing.

While Agamben chooses to define taste in the negative as anti-metaphysical, I would prefer to characterise it positively as pataphysical. Once again, pataphysics emerges as a signature that influences Agamben's critique of both modern science and aesthetics. Jarry's radical experimentations with resolving certain philosophical problems through poetic form is here raised to a new level through Agamben's own pataphysical (anti-metaphysical) methodology. Jarry's work poses the problem of the real not through scientific probability or through aesthetic judgment but rather through the cultivation of *taste* for non-knowledge, or a knowledge that we have only in so far as it (dis)appears.

Jarry's work cultivates a taste for non-knowledge, and it does so through the peculiar *manner* of its creation.[2] For instance, Jarry often takes up scientific formulae or mathematical equations and discovers within them a strange, uncanny aesthetic potentiality. Likewise, he combines scientific rigour, absurdist

---

[2] Indeed, Agamben's repeated interest in mannerism as a topic as well as the distinctive mannerism of his writing can both be traced back to Jarry, whose particular brand of Symbolism can be described as a mix of outrageous imagery, medievalism, profanations, and obscure references and vocabulary.

jokes, adolescent scatological phrases, and obscure, scholastic references all within a single passage. While one is often left speechless when forced to articulate the underlying pataphysical "reasons" at work in such constructions, it is equally true that one can gain a certain *sense* or *taste* for Jarry's manner (as it explodes onto the page).

For Agamben, each work of art is traversed by a certain tension between style and manner. Style, on this reading, is the 'perfect possession of one's means' in the form of a habit (Agamben, 2017b: 8). Manner, on the other hand, is a 'trembling' or 'vacillation' in which 'style suddenly overflows, colours fade, words stutter, and matter clots and spills over' (*ibid.*: 8–9). It is, in other words, the 'deposition of habit' (*ibid.*: 9). Extrapolating further, style is a potentiality to create that makes creation possible whereas manner is the potentiality not to create that passes into the act of creation precisely by rendering style inoperative.

Jarry's various performative acts of suspension were, as Agamben (2017a: 88) rightly points out, completely 'astounding'. These acts were often imitated but never equalled by fellow playwrights and poets. The reason they could never be duplicated was precisely the singularity of the manner in which they were performed. Such a manner is a kind of naked exposure of one's potentiality-not-to do something passing into an act. While it is common to praise an artwork for its style, *real taste* is a taste for the manner in which something has been done, or rather the manner in which something is done only in so far as it is undone. Stated differently, a manner — a slight, uncontrollable trembling of the master's hand that is beyond the capture of habit — is another way of embodying Jarry's notion of the clinamen or swerve. The swerve makes style (dis)appear, meaning that it indicates an inoperative moment within the convention of style that throws style into relief, or exposes it, in a moment of neutralisation. Manner (as swerve in habit) makes art astonishing, filling style with a sense of perpetual decompletion in the precise moment of completion. It is the actualisation of an ability not to do something in the doing of something and therefore a way of cultivating taste for the paradoxes of pataphysical science.

Interestingly, in an autobiographical statement, Agamben observes that he has been 'incapable of denying' himself the happiness toward which his tastes have inclined him 'just as an atom in its ceaseless fall cannot escape the *clinamen* that makes it suddenly curve' (2018a: 3). While quantum physics might emphasise the contingency that the clinamen produces, Agamben shifts focus toward the *necessary* and somewhat *inescapable* lure of the clinamen to interrupt and render inoperative a certain normative trajectory (of atoms). What connects the clinamen with taste is precisely an ability to not *not* swerve (an impotentiality to resist that is

also and equally a potentiality to allow). Taste is therefore an *in*ability to keep separate the faculties of knowing and sensing — a falling passively into the tractor beam of the clinamen as it swerves. It is a weak (yet necessary) force of contact that attracts poetry to philosophy, knowledge to pleasure, or life to its form (despite their being pulled apart through management). Hence the disruptive and anarchic politics of taste.

The Politics of Pataphysics

Famously, Agamben's *Homo Sacer* series posits that modern totalitarianism reveals the 'biopolitical significance of the state of exception as the original structure in which law encompasses living beings by means of its own suspension' (2005: 3). There are two key points here. First, the state of exception reveals the force of the law without the law. The state of exception thus presents a paradox of a law that is in power only in its subtraction, or a law that operates through its inoperativity. The suspension of the law is not outside the legal order, but rather is the limit of this order (neither fully inside nor radically outside). In its suspended state, the force of the law exposes the sovereign's power of decision that is always already a potentiality within any juridical order. Importantly, the continued operativity of the extra-legal force of the sovereign is the 'original structure' of politics in the West (*ibid.*). As an original structure, Agamben is not suggesting that it merely existed in the past and has been historically overcome through constitutional reforms that ensure citizens have rights against abuses of sovereign power. Instead, as origin, it belongs to the juridical order even if it stands outside this order. Indeed, the juridical structure *needs* this original structure. As Agamben summarises, 'This space devoid of law seems, for some reason, to be so essential to the juridical order that it must seek in every way to assure itself a relation with it, as if in order to ground itself the juridical order necessarily had to maintain itself in relation with an anomie' (*ibid.*: 51). To preserve itself, the juridical order must, at times, render inoperative its own legal apparatus and turn to the anomie of the sovereign decision. Anomie and law thus have a secret solidarity that is revealed through the state of exception.

This notion of the exception has been exhaustively described in the secondary literature in relation to two main figures: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt. Certainly Agamben's overt references to both theorists in *State of Exception* justify this interpretive strategy. In this book, Agamben anchors his theory of exceptionality in a debate between Benjamin and Schmitt, with Schmitt

attempting to harness the power of Benjamin's notion of divine violence to the operation of the law. In other words, Schmitt, on Agamben's reading, yolks the inoperativity of divine violence to the operativity of a juridical apparatus. Yet what is missed when the debates between Schmitt and Benjamin are placed in the foreground as two signifiers of exceptionality is the latent pataphysical signature that enables the debate to take place in the first place. Long before Benjamin or Schmitt took up the question of the exception, Jarry had already speculated that pataphysics 'will examine the laws governing exceptions' (1996: 21). Such a formulation is paradoxical as laws have no exception, and exceptions do not abide by laws, hence the irreducible pataphysical nature of the formulation. It is Agamben's work that clarifies this paradox through a detailed analysis of Benjamin and Schmitt. Thus, I want to read Agamben as picking up a problem first formulated by Jarry and revealing that the contemporary world operates no longer according to metaphysical laws but rather in accordance with pataphysical laws of exceptions.

The quintessential figure in Jarry's writings that fully embodies the paradox of exceptionality is Père Ubu. This character's obscenity, violence, and absurdity are a profound meditation on the nature of sovereign power through theatrical parody. The following description offered up by the character Bougrelas, summarises the essence of Père Ubu: 'A vulgar Père Ubu, an adventurer who comes no one know from where, a vile scoundrel, a disreputable vagabond' (Jarry, 1961: 47). He does not exist in the *polis*. He is somehow outside the juridical sphere, included only through his exclusion as an obscene excess that does not seem to have a home or a history. It is not insignificant that the play ends with Père Ubu in a cave, battling a bear and then escaping on the high seas. Both of these are zones beyond the reach of the *polis*, points where the law is rendered inoperative, where human and animal meet, where life and death merge, and where pirates dwell (or stow their treasure/spoils/contraband).

When Père Ubu takes power, he immediately suspends the law and throws his magistrates through a trap door. His wife cries, 'Here! What are you doing, Père Ubu? Who will administer justice now?' To which Père Ubu replies, 'Huh! I shall. You'll see how well it'll work' (Jarry, 1961: 70). He subsequently makes himself master of finances with unlimited power to squeeze taxes out of his subjects — subjects who are no longer citizens with rights so much as raw material or a standing reserve army for Père Ubu's whims, gluttony, and frivolity. With enemies on all fronts, Père Ubu must wage an all-out war against his enemy, Bougrelas and his allies in Russia. Civil war turns into a global war. Throughout the chaotic romp of the play, the exception to the law becomes the law. In sum,

Jarry's Ubu character highlights how legal, scientific, and moral systems retain the claim of consistency only insofar as they exclude any admission of their obscene yet constitutive relationship to moments of exception in which they are suspended. In other words, Jarry puts us on a threshold of understanding the original structure of Western sovereignty that is later inherited by Benjamin, Schmitt, and then Agamben.

In Jarry's life, we find an enactment of Père Ubu. As stated above, Jarry, the person, disappeared into the mask of Père Ubu. Yet, Jarry did not simply reproduce or live out the absolute tyranny and violence of Père Ubu. Instead, Jarry's life became what Agamben would refer to as a 'recapitulation' or the absolute profanation of a profanity (2018a: 11). For Agamben, a recapitulation is the only way in which anything can reach completion. Perhaps we could even argue that Jarry's Ubu-esque existence sides with Benjamin against Schmitt, releasing divine violence from the law and its internally excluded relation with sovereignty in order to produce a creative, experimental form-of-life. On this formulation, Jarry does not destroy Père Ubu. Rather he becomes the living embodiment of a parody of a parody, or a recapitulation of the parody in order to bring it to its end.

By recapitulating the profanity of Père Ubu, the sovereign power of the violent ban becomes the playful irreverence of Pulcinella.[3] The Ubu-esque becomes the Pulcinella-esque. For Agamben, Pulcinella is the ultimate figure of recapitulation, in which life is released from the guilt and action which determine its place within history and politics. Pulcinella is guiltless because he does not act and does not produce deeds. 'Pulcinella does not act in a play', writes Agamben, 'he has always already interrupted it, has always already left it, by means of a shortcut or a byway' (2018a: 43). Unlike the sovereign whose action is the decision, Pulcinella *does not decide* and is thus indifferent to judgment. Indeed, all decisions are interrupted by Pulcinella, who bursts onto the scene at precisely the moment when a decision would be announced and implemented. The instrumental violence of the sovereign to preserve the law through its suspension is neutralised through the opening of an escape route. Thus, if Père Ubu ushers in a catastrophe, Pulcinella offers an escape. He is, to put it differently, a clinamen, introducing a swerve into the sovereign act of deciding. And for this reason, his violence is an anti-violence, or a violence against the sovereign act. The sovereign and the clown thus pass through one another via Jarry's own life. Strangely,

---

[3] Undoubtably, this connection to Pulcinella is alluded to by Charles Terrasse's description of Jarry as 'one who spoke to children with the heart of a child' (cited in Brotchie, 2015: 201).

Jarry's mask somehow contracts these two figures into one dramatic persona that expresses his manner of being in the gap that separates and joins the two.

As Agamben argues, Jarry's mask subsumed its creator. Like both the sovereign and the clown, Jarry was beyond the human (and thus, not unlike Majorana, beyond the probabilistic ability of science to predict or explain). As Agamben reminds us, the "actor" who "plays" Pulcinella 'cannot take off his mask, because there is no face behind it', calling into question the 'false dialectic between face and mask' (2018a: 55). If Jarry is indeed a living and breathing embodiment of Père Ubu now transformed in a moment of recapitulation into Pulcinella, then Jarry's life and untimely death cannot be read as symptoms of personal problems but rather as escape strategies, enabling him to disappear from calculation and governance through comedic play. His existence suggests that there is still a politics beyond action. It comes from exposed, comical gestures rather than great deeds or decisions. It comes from disappearing rather than appearing on the public scene.

Jarry's life brings together these two figures that lie at the extreme edges of Agamben's work. Indeed, true comedy is only possible during periods of catastrophe, as with the comedies of Aristophanes. Comedy is that which survives to recapitulate catastrophe — to redeem it through a laugh. Jarry's seriousness and commitment to the mask of Père Ubu is thus a strategy bearing political significance: the state of exception from above is transposed into a state of exception from below, and in the process even the parodic survival of sovereign violence comes to an end, offering up a new experience of life that is pataphysical (an imaginary solution, as we shall see, below). In Jarry's work we find a shift in logic from critique (political parody) to creation (a new science). Pataphysics is what can be built out of the ruins of Père Ubu's violence. We can now turn to the defining elements of this science which are latent in Jarry's work as a potential to be developed by Agamben.

Pataphysical Paradigms

In a shocking formulation, Jarry once wrote that pataphysics is 'the science of the particular, despite the common opinion that the only science is that of the general' (1996: 21). In pataphysical fashion one might go so far as to argue that in Jarry's writings, the parts are greater than the whole, as his books often dematerialise into short flashes of brilliance or insight without any sense of logical, organic, or aesthetic coherence. Instead, one can find in Jarry a rather surreal interest in

pataphysical equivalences between otherwise incompatible particulars set in relation by violent swerves that break off attempts to define 'coherence' in any conventional way. The result is a literary state of exception (from below) in which expectations are suspended, styles become idiosyncratic mannerisms, and genres are left idle.

A science of the particular, as Jarry rightly points out, stands in stark contrast with the modern conception of empirical science described by Francis Bacon in his book titled *Novum Organum*. In this text, Bacon champions inductive reasoning as a method for constructing a pyramid of knowledge or system of sciences that would rest on firm foundations in observing the natural world. At the summit of his pyramid would reside the laws of nature as the set of maximally generalisable principles. These would be derived from observations of invariant relations in the physical sciences, which would slowly erase accidental qualities and individual experiences.

If science is always a quest for the general — as Bacon describes — then what is a science of the particular? Jarry points out that pataphysics rejects induction (general inferences based on particular observations). At the same time, Jarry's notion of pataphysical knowledge seems to trouble deductive reasoning, which moves from the general to the particular. In both cases, the problem is that science concerns itself with a dialectical, vertical oscillation between concrete observations and more general principles (culminating in universal and necessary laws). Jarry wants a science that can somehow escape this dialectical pull, and insists that pataphysics is concerned with *particulars* as such. This might seem like another turn toward quantum indeterminacy, yet there is a key difference. Whereas physics continues to concern itself with the hunt of the god particle or a theory of everything (thus maximising the ability to predict and govern), Jarry's turn toward the particular rejects any such grand theorising. Indeed, the underlying onto-theological search for a single theoretical model for all quantum phenomena is not beyond the metaphysical threshold of modern science opened up by Beacon, but rather its absolute limit — a limit beyond which it contracts with the supplementary universe of pataphysical particulars crashing and swerving into one another.

There are many ways to further develop this science of particulars, not the least of which would be Deleuze's (1997) fascination with combinatorials. But we can also turn to Agamben and his theory of paradigms as yet another pataphysical offshoot of Jarry's scientific formulation. Indeed, it is my argument that we can only fully understand the origins of Agamben's unique reading of paradigms through the signature of pataphysics, and in turn, Agamben enables us to

precisely develop Jarry's science beyond some version of quantum physics. For Agamben, a science of paradigms, or paradigmology, does not proceed by way of induction or deduction but rather by a lateral, analogical movement from one particular to another. Summarising much of his work in relation to a (pataphysical) science of paradigms, Agamben (2009: 31) writes, '*Homo Sacer* and the concentration camp, the *Muselmann* and the state of exception, and, more recently, the Trinitarian *oikonomia* and acclamations are not hypotheses through which I intended to explain modernity by tracing it back to something like a cause or historical origin. On the contrary, as their very multiplicity might have signalled, each time it was a matter of paradigms whose aim was to make intelligible series of phenomena whose kinship had eluded or could elude the historian's gaze.' Such a science moves according to analogies, enabling the researcher to discover previously unseen affinities between singularities without transforming these singularities into cases of yet more general phenomena or original cause of later phenomena. Not unlike Benjamin's notion of the constellation, paradigmology generates a sense of intelligibility that is immanent to the paradigmatic group, rather than external or transcendental. These analogies render inoperative typical classification systems, suspending their tendencies to either negate singularities or somehow force them to conform to certain, preexisting taxonomies. When classification is rendered inoperative, new and sometimes unexpected or disturbing patterns and connections can emerge through pataphysical analogy. This is a science of horizontal rather than vertical movement, opening up singularities to a host of new uses that spill over their "proper" places or functions erected by taxonomic systems of measure, control, and prediction. In short, pataphysics is a science of equivalencies which make intelligible relations amongst particulars through analogies. Perhaps we can say that pataphysics is an *analogous empiricism* that does not simply produce clinamens so much as it draws constellational connecting lines between their various, wayward escape routes. The resulting knowledge is not scientific knowledge but precisely (non)knowledge of the supplementary, pataphysical world that underlies yet exists in excess of domains of knowledge found in the probabilistic sciences.

Paradigms are paradigmatic in so far as they neutralise a law that would make them a particular case of a higher-order or transcendent species or genus. This is not a negation of such laws but rather a suspension of their operativity in order to unleash unexpected analogies. The result is paradoxical, as Agamben (2009: 31) points out: 'The rule (if it is still possible to speak of rules here) is not a generality preexisting the singular cases and applicable to them, nor is it something resulting from the exhaustive enumeration of specific cases. Instead, it

is the exhibition alone of the paradigmatic case that constitutes a rule, which as such cannot be applied or stated.' Like a judgment of taste, paradigmatic thinking renders inoperative the dialectic between the particular and the general rule or law. It is an impossible science of the particular, or a combinatorial of particulars. Thus, it is my wager that paradigmology is, at its heart, pataphysical rather than metaphysical. Paradigmology is, stated differently, a methodological signature of pataphysics in Agamben's work.

A Pataphysical Form-of-Life

Jarry's life embraced the aesthetic potentials of 'trollism' (Brotchie, 2015: 192). Drawing inspiration from Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt*, Jarry distinguished trolls from humans by their sufficiency and singularity. Trolls, on this interpretation, are beings that cannot be judged according to laws or criteria outside of their particular way of life. Instead, they neutralise all attempts at classification into generic types by pushing the possibilities of life to a point of grotesquery. Taking this up as a practice of the self, Jarry disappeared into his Ubu- and Pulcinella-esque masks, enabling him to become troll-like in his radical and disruptive singularity.[4] He was a kind of living clinamen, swerving into situations in order to introduce pataphysical excesses into what it was possible to do or say. Whether challenging norms of politeness through outlandish speech, or physical limits of intoxication through drink, or athletic records of endurance through racing against trains on a bicycle, Jarry seemed radically indifferent to any imposed, external limit placed on thought or life against which he could be measured (governed/managed). Instead, he embraced a troll-esque existence of overabundant surplus that was astounding precisely because it preferred not to abide by any general type or norm.

      We find such trollism underlying Agamben's later formulation of "form-of-life" which is a life that is 'generated in living' and therefore 'does not have any priority, either substantial or transcendental, with respect to living' (2015: 224). In this definition, Agamben emphasises how a form-of-life gives itself its own rule,

---

[4] There are questions as to the accuracy of such an extreme (pataphysical?) description of Jarry. For instance in Brotchie's book, the Ubu-esque nature of Jarry's mannerisms (such as his way of precisely pronouncing every syllable of a word, his use of the royal "we" to refer to himself, his quick-fire elocution, and his mock-Homeric imitation of the ancient Greek way of turning nouns into verbs) were a kind of public performance that hid a much more generous and sensitive, private individual. Yet even if there is such a difference, it is still noticeable how Jarry's nonconformity to social norms and lack of politeness remained a test for his intimate friends.

or exhibits its own rule through the singular manner of its gestures. As Agamben states, a form-of-life is a 'manner or rising forth' in such a way that it is 'continually generated by its "manner" of being' (*ibid.*). For us, what is important here is how both Jarry and then Agamben take up the question of a life that is ungovernable, and thus can only measure itself against its own mask/manner.

Quantum mechanics produces forms of life that can be subjected to laws of probability. These laws are predicated on the *necessity of contingency*. Contingency, in other words, guarantees the need to intervene, analyse, and ultimately govern. On the macro-level of populations, the necessity of contingency dictates biopolitical creation and subsequent capture of forms of life. Indeed, the pluralisation of forms of life ensures the functioning of a biopolitical law and of certain bioeconomic institutional regulations. Opposed to the notion of forms of life, Agamben posits the notion of a form-of-life that is not subjected to laws of probability or scientific calculation (and thus to capture, management, and regulation). Instead of being a subject of the law, a form-of-life has an internal relationship to its own rule. The rule is 'radically heterogeneous to institutions and law' and is an attempt to 'realise a human life and practice absolutely outside the determinations of the law' (Agamben, 2014: 121, 110).

To be precise, the distinction between law and rule can be broken down as follows. Rules are born from within the practices of life, whereas laws separate and divide life. Rules, as exemplified in the Franciscan monastic tradition, are a formalisation of the implicit practices internal to an active community. As Agamben states, '[t]he rule is not applied to life, but produces it and at the same time is produced in it' (*ibid.*: 69). Rules are neither norms to be applied to life from the outside nor pure authority to be imposed on life from above. In other words, 'there is no place for anything like an application of the law to life' (*ibid.*: 102) when one is operating within the terrain of rules. The rules of a form-of-life therefore render inoperative the necessity of contingency and instead propose the *contingency of necessity* insofar as the rule is necessary in order to constitute a form-of-life that is itself anarchic or without law, ground, or foundation beyond itself.

Agamben's analysis of self-constituting rules of life helps us to tease out new possibilities for understanding pataphysics as the 'science of imaginary solutions' (Jarry, 1996: 22). Solutions abide by the logic of probabilities and operate within the various apparatuses of regulation, management, and control of forms of life. Solutions manage *styles* of forms of life, enabling habits to form in such a way that their patterns can be recognised and adequately predicted or adjusted to maximise health, prosperity, and efficacy. Solutions, in other words, concern pragmatic economies according to specific laws with their internal success

conditions. *Imaginary* solutions, on the other hand, concern the rules constituting and constituted by the mannerisms of a form-of-life. The rules of such a life are impossible to abstract, and thus articulate into a generalisable style, outside the form-of-life that lives its own rule. There is no metric against which to measure such mannerisms beyond their invention and originality (independent of efficacy). Mannerisms intensify life to the point where forms of life no longer operate according to laws of probabilities. Perhaps we can summarise as follows: mannerisms *rule* a form-of-life (from the inside) whereas style *governs* forms of life (from the outside). If the latter lends itself to concrete, effective controls and regulations, then the former remains resolutely imaginary, and thus beyond capture by the processes, procedures, and logics of the probabilistic sciences. Taken to an extreme point, manners turn the human being into a troll.

Another way of thinking about the imaginary dimension of pataphysical solutions is to highlight how the mannerism of a form-of-life is a *living criticism*. Remember that for Agamben, criticism is a putting together of impossible things that results in an unreality which neutralises the attempts of probabilistic science to govern life. The supplementary world of imaginary solutions is not, in the end, an endorsement of alternative realities but rather immanent to this reality yet in excess of the laws that govern it. Through the contingent necessity of the rules of a form-of-life, life appears at the precise moment it disappears, preferring not to be calculated and managed. The mannerisms of Jarry's form-of-life cannot produce knowledge of life in the sense of a global theory or set of universal laws or pragmatic solutions. Mannerisms cannot produce knowledge of life as such so much as a *taste* for an intensified mode of life that exists betwixt and between opposites (such as Père Ubu and Pulcinella).

But how does this strange taste that emerges from within an inoperative life act as a *critique* rather than merely play or fancy? Criticisms of Agamben, for instance, are full of complaints about his lack of tangible, real-world solutions to pressing problems. It seems difficult to propose viable reform proposals based on Agamben's often enigmatic, messianic clarion calls for a radical new understanding of life. Yet, these criticisms fail to recognise that both Jarry and Agamben do indeed offer solutions, but they are *imaginary*, preferring not to abide by the parameters of good sense and common sense dictating what counts as a viable solution in the first place. This does not dull the critical dimension of their writing, but rather helps to locate the limit conditions of our political, social, and economic imaginations. Jarry, and then Agamben, help cultivate a taste for intensified mannerisms that push forms of life to the point of dissolution into a virtual/imaginary excess that lives its criticism in so far as it gestures beyond any

notion of critique as a tool for reforming the very systems of management and governance that produced denuded forms of life in the first place.

To live a pataphysical life is to become troll-like by constantly inventing rules that intensify what is impossible (rather than merely probable!) in one's existence.

Studying as a Pataphysics of Education

To summarise, Agamben's project as a whole can be thought of as a pataphysical clinamen that swerves Western metaphysics toward impossible solutions. Impossible solutions are paradoxical, as they cannot be easily placed within pre-existing categories or taxonomies (and thus resist governance). In the concluding passages of the central chapter of his book, *What is Philosophy?* Agamben turns to pataphysics as a science that 'radically neutralises the sterile oppositions mental/real, existent/nonexistent, signifier/signified' and redeems the 'object of philosophy and thought' (2018b: 89). What is unleashed through pataphysics is the potentiality of the world made manifest — a potentiality that is not exhausted in what is actual. Indeed, pataphysics offers a supplementary world within this world that is waiting to be recapitulated through the mannerisms of a form-of-life that prefers not to abide by the logic of division inherent in the cut that exists between science, art, and philosophy. Volumes such as *Agamben's Philosophical Lineage* map out the influences of various philosophers on Agamben's thought, yet have failed to bring to light this fundamental pataphysical signature that animates his work and lends it its use (even if such use is *without functionality*). Indeed, this is no surprise given that such a signature cannot be a strictly "philosophical influence". Instead, the signature is what makes the lineage as such possible. In leaving this signature hidden, pataphysics remains *operative* within Agamben's work (as an undetected, subterranean vortex). That which renders *inoperative* other laws, apparatuses, and machines throughout the lineage continues to operate, and an operative signature *can only facilitate learning and never study* (Lewis, 2013).

Drawing inspiration from Kafka's various characters (including Dr. Bucephalus), Agamben argues that study is a strategy that 'deactivate[s]' and 'play[s]' with the contours of reality in order to reveal the signatures that animate it (2005: 64). Such a move, I argue, releases the signatures themselves, it allows them to show themselves. On this reading, study is a particular kind of educational activity that is not equivalent to simply learning. While learning involves predictions and evaluations, studying involves contact with a potentiality

that prefers not to abide by predictive sciences or educational assessment measures. It is, in this sense, an educational activity that de-activates the performative laws defining what education ought to be (including the future-oriented calculation of performance based on the probability of learning aptitudes).

When books such as *Agamben's Philosophical Lineage* attempt to 'guide the reader through the maze of Agamben's sources, rendering explicit what remains implicit and providing a reliable guide to his reading of the many figures he draws from' (Kotsko and Salzani, 2017: 1), it functions under the sign of learning. Indeed, the word "maze" is important in this context as mazes have ends that orient actions. Each individual turn in a maze can be evaluated or assessed with regard to this end — either a given turn gets an individual closer or farther away from an explicit goal. As moves are tested out, one can learn how to navigate the maze with increasing levels of efficacy. There are solutions to be found through probabilistic calculation. Yet, when Agamben refers to study practices, he never refers to a maze (1995: 64). Instead, he refers to 'labyrinthine allusiveness' that has no end in mind and 'does not even desire one'. In other words, the turns the studier takes cannot be judged in relation to an end (as it does not have one). In fact, the labyrinth renders inoperative the very notion of progress or regress, as there is no longer a goal against which such measurements can be assessed. The logic of learning to master a problem gives way to *imaginary solutions* that do not have an end in mind. Perhaps what is at stake here is a distinction between the metaphysics of learning and the pataphysics of studying. The former has a ground and a destination whereas the latter is ungrounded and without destiny. One concerns the probabilistic management of moves to maximise the likely chances for escape where the other simply disappears into the labyrinth and is thus beyond calculation (itself a form of disappearance). One acquires knowledge while the other leaves only the taste for non-knowledge.

Although Agamben's direct reference points for his theory of study are his personal experience of wandering through Aby Warburg's library as well as Talmudic reading practices, with little effort we can posit a pataphysical signature animating and making possible his reflections on the labyrinthine circumnavigations of study. Close to the beginning of Jarry's *Faustroll*, the character Panmuphle lists the books contained in the pataphysician's library. As Ben Fisher has argued, this catalogue is a rather 'perverse selection' characterised by a 'deliberately idiosyncratic quality' (2000: 26–27). While Fisher argues that the catalogue can be interpreted as evidence of the eclecticism of the Symbolist style in general, he is also careful to emphasise the irreducible singularity of Jarry's

manner of organising the library (thus interrupting any attempt to form generalisations out of particulars). Although there are important differences, I argue that Jarry's heterogeneous list follows the 'law of good neighbours'[5] proposed by Warburg as a unifying principle of his library. Of course, Jarry's list is presented in alphabetical order, but this convention only manages to throw into relief how such order is artificial if not absurdist. Breaking through the surface are labyrinthine entanglements that provoke the reader into a state of perpetual (esoteric) study without end. Indeed, the actual narrative of *Faustroll* could be conceived of as a kind of imaginary study, traveling through the list, with books, themes, and styles becoming inspiration for the islands (analogically linked singularities in a virtual sea) and the authors becoming strange characters, objects, and creatures (exaggerated trolls). The list-as-labyrinth for study becomes a special kind of studious literature or literature-as-library. Unlike a maze of influences from which we can extract lessons from Jarry's life concerning his influences (or the style of Symbolism more broadly), the tale of Faustroll's travels is offering an opportunity to study the library *from inside its own pataphysical rules*, and in this way, acquire new tastes for laws of exceptions, singularities, the conjunction of opposites, and imaginary solutions. It is my contention that Agamben, as a paradigmatic studier, takes up this method of study in his own work, and in this sense, is the true pataphysician of our time.

The challenge thus becomes: How to study the study of a studier?

To *study* Agamben means that we must read his work in search of pataphysical signatures, bringing these signatures out of the dense network of signifying relationships which conceal them, and thus render these signatures inoperative. This, in turn, opens the signatures themselves (not simply the signifiers in the maze) for new uses, new tastes, and new mannerisms. The work of study, in this sense, is not merely about pataphysics (thus arguing that Jarry is yet another name in the lineage) but itself becomes a pataphysical form-of-educational-life: a studious life that, like Jarry, always seems to disappear before we can learn anything from it.

●

---

[5] It is interesting to note that this is the only positive reference to law in all of Agamben's work. On my reading, the law of good neighbours is perhaps better thought of as the *rule* of good neighbours insofar as the texts generate their own rules concerning how they ought to be read based on their proximity to one another. This rule is not transcendent so much as a by-product of their contingent placement. In this sense, the rule of good neighbours highlights the contingency of necessity in the pataphysician's library.

References

Agamben, Giorgio (2019 [2017]), *Creation and Anarchy: The work of art and the religion of capitalism*. Trans. Adam Kotsko. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Agamben, Giorgio (2018a [2015]), *Pulcinella or, Entertainment for Kids in Four Scenes*. Trans. Kevin Attell. London: Seagull Books.

Agamben, Giorgio (2018b [2016]), *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Lorenzo Chiesa. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Agamben, Giorgio (2018c [2016]), *What is Real?* Trans. Lorenzo Chiesa. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Agamben, Giorgio (2017a), *Autoritratto nello Studio.* Milano: nottetempo.

Agamben, Giorgio (2017b), *The Fire and the Tale*. Trans. Lorenzo Chiesa. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Agamben, Giorgio (2017c [2015]), *Taste*. Trans. Cooper Francis. London: Seagull Books.

Agamben, Giorgio (2015 [2014]), *The Use of Bodies*. Trans. Adam Kotsko. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Agamben, Giorgio (2013 [2011]), *The Highest Poverty: Monastic rules and form-of-life*. Trans. Adam Kotsko. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Agamben, Giorgio (2009 [2008]), *The Signature of All Things*. Trans. Luca D'Isanto and Kevin Attell. London: Zone Books.

Agamben, Giorgio (2005 [2003]), *State of Exception*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Agamben, Giorgio (1995 [1985]), *Idea of Prose*. Trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt. New York: SUNY.

Agamben, Giorgio (1993 [1977]), *Stanzas: Word and phantasm in Western culture*. Trans. Ronald L. Martinez. New York: SUNY Press.

Brotchie, Alastair (2015), *Alfred Jarry: A pataphysical life*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Deleuze, Gilles (1997 [1993]), 'The Exhausted'. In *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 152-174.

Fisher, Ben (2000), *The Pataphysician's Library*. Cambridge: Liverpool University Press.

Hugill, Andrew (2012), *Pataphysics: A useless guide*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Jarry, Alfred (1996 [1911]), *Exploits & Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*. Trans. Simon Watson Taylor. Boston: Exact Change.

Jarry, Alfred (1961 [1896]), *Ubu Roi*. Trans. Barbara Wright. New York: New Direction Books.

Kotsko, Adam and Carlo Salzani, eds. (2017), *Agamben's Philosophical Lineage*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press.

Lewis, Tyson E. (2013), *On Study: Giorgio Agamben and educational potentiality*. New York: Routledge.

Melville, Herman (2016 [1853]), *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*. London: Penguin Classics.

Shattuck, Roger (1960), 'Superliminal Note'. *Evergreen Review*, 4(13), 24–33.