

William Anastasi's Pataphysical Society: Opening Remarks

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Transcript of talk Dr. Christa-Maria Lerm

William Anastasi's Pataphysical Society: Jarry, Joyce, Duchamp and Cage is a remarkable publication, giving testimony to William Anastasi's four-decade-long occupation with Alfred Jarry and what one could call a core group feeding off Jarry: Joyce, Duchamp and Cage. William Anastasi's Pataphysical Society is also, as this evening's proceedings amply illustrate a "society" that enjoys increasing popularity.

In the introduction, the editors, Jean-Michel Rabaté and Aaron Levy, call the aim of the microscopic research that Anastasi has undertaken (and continues to pursue) an elucidation of "exponentially multiplying networks of correspondences, echoes, allusions, quotations, borrowings". These correspondences are between motifs, procedures and characters' lives. In Anastasi's case, this dense web has Alfred Jarry at its centre and has widened over the decades to include not just Joyce and Duchamp, but John Cage and others, thus Anastasi's contemporaries and friends. This ever widening circle has now encompassed what I would call the society to which the book's title alludes. In the readers' and protagonists' minds (those of affiliates of the society), the correspondences become a *perpetuum mobile*.

The result is necessarily (and already has been in Anastasi's research on the core group) an "over-reading" of the evidence, carried out with (I continue to quote the introduction) "the inflexible patience of a demented archivist", combined with a more than flexible roaming of the mind to establish new (one could say rhizomatic) connections. Research is the tool, and it foregrounds what all research is: an exercise that involves personal preferences, one's own history, identities and background knowledge, guiding the investigation and thus often self-fulfilling the hypotheses. In the words of the introduction, "interpretation becomes art [...] and it] provides a new way of reading all avant-grade literature". This does not just sound like a major achievement – it is paradigmatic.

In order to show how far-reaching the impact of such a reading is – and how central Jarry has indeed become, i.e. in order to support Anastasi's hunch in the realm of art, art curation and history, I need to follow for a few minutes, precisely the procedure to which Anastasi has inspired his (the exegete's) interpreters and add some minor remarks to pataphysics, understood as among many other things the science of the particular. The nature of these investigations is such that both Anastasi and several of his interpreters of the highest calibre, the co-authors of this publication, have been prompted towards speculation and the anecdotal in order to capture the nature of that uncannily dense net of references, coincidences and borrowings.

And in following on from this and in laying open some of the "docking stations" between that Anastasi/Jarry-universe and my own projects and scholarly interests, I become implicated and cannot avoid (even if I wanted to) to spin that dense web further. This enables me in the first instance to express gratitude for having been admitted (it seems) to the outskirts of this

illustrious society, by virtue of the kind invitation to speak here this evening, as well as Joseph Masheck's kind mentioning of my inclusion of Anastasi's *me innerman monophone* in the exhibition *Joyce in Art: Visual Art Inspired by James Joyce*, for last Summer's Bloomsday centenary in Dublin. In it I presented (and interpreted in the accompanying book) visual interpretations of Joyce from the last 90 years.

Anastasi's stunning *me innerman monophone* installation was one of the key pieces in that exhibition, whose loan Aaron Levy and the Slought Foundation kindly facilitated. It was central not only because it illustrates brilliantly the research-based procedures of Joyce and the aesthetics of accumulated textual research (the long lists in both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, as well as the way in which Joyce addresses and echoes the "deep incrustations of time" in the stacked materiality of his printed pages, as well as the lines on them). Anastasi also needed to be present to give company to yet another artist-cum-Duchamp scholar, Ecke Bonk, who designed my *Joyce in Art* book. Research and writing and their materiality became a focus. Most importantly, however, *me innerman monophone* was indispensable because it is the closest precedent for - or an eminent tradition in which I could place - my own enterprise and its procedures.

While Anastasi's universe has circled around Jarry for almost half a century and my own modest investigations into Modernist and contemporary art have departed from Joyce almost 20 years ago, giving me that "demented archivist's" perspective on art, until I discovered that my thinking had become somewhat "artistic", but more crucially that this kind of "dementia" had been at the core of some artists' own explorations. Raymond Pettibon (who created some new drawings for *Joyce in Art*) called it the disease of reading *Finnegans Wake*, making it impossible for him to read any text thereafter in any other than a microscopic way. The text becomes ever more enmeshed in one's own course of learning and living, encouraging an idiosyncratic general as well as personalised knowledge.

This observation is (quite unoriginally) not too far from Derrida's assertion that "Everything that happened to me, including the narrative that I would attempt to make of it was already pre-dicted and pre-narrated [...] in *Ulysses* to say nothing of *Finnegans Wake*." This experience furthermore conjures what Jean-Michel Rabaté recounts in his recent publication, the "Palgrave Advances in James Joyce Studies". It is an incident that I had not heard described before and that I love: a reader, one could also say a fan (even a stalker) pestered Joyce, since he believed that the writer had cast a spell on himself and his family. He felt trapped in the work and implored Joyce to lift the spell - or else he would free himself by harming the writer.

It is tempting to view Anastasi's as a similar but positively cast and posthumous "radical interpretive endeavour", as the introduction to the present book calls Anastasi's Jarry/Joyce/Duchamp-work. My attempt at seeing much of the history of contemporary art as a legacy of Joyce's writings may also carry a certain obsessive radicality.

Obsession may not be the first word that comes to mind when considering the Joyce in Art exhibition that featured me innerman monophone. It was, however, one that I would like to see in the tradition of thematic investigations in the medium of the contemporary visual art exhibition, a genre that was pioneered by Harald Szeemann, the eminent Swiss curator. Szeemann, who passed away a few months ago, called the sum total of his now prematurely concluded curatorial practice

his “museum of obsessions” and himself a cultural Gastarbeiter (a word that Steve McCaffery uses in the Pataphysical Society). For Szeemann, the adage “artist-curator” was coined and his work is largely responsible for the strength of the curator’s role in recent decades. One of his legendary exhibitions was entitled *Bachelor Machines*, testifying to his Duchampian credentials – and he wrote his PhD about none other than Alfred Jarry. In extension of what William Anastasi has presented here, one cannot help but surmise that exhibition history and the history of curating are thoroughly and in their foundation, their very core, inspired by the French writer.

As far as the history of art is concerned, the science of the particular and the obsessive approach of that “demented archivist” who moves between science and art immediately strike me as related to Aby Warburg. When Jean-Michel Rabaté proposed *Joyce the egoist* at the Zurich Joyce Conference in 1996, I attempted a Joycean iconography in paralleling the near-contemporaries Joyce and Warburg. But the art historian with much closer contact to the writer who needs to be admitted to our society is no doubt Carola Giedion-Welcker. The friend of the Joyces from 1928 had particularly seen in the writer’s work the kinds of overarching and diachronic connections that are here the topic. She encouraged him to visit the stone alignments at Carnac and compared his procedures in an interdisciplinary way with visual artists like Constantin Brancusi, Max Ernst and Kurt Schwitters.

She moreover felt personally “spellbound” (if that is the right word) at first reading *Ulysses* and said it had changed her life. A similar experience then underlies the book that she wrote about Alfred Jarry in German in 1960. As I said, she is well known to have traced interdisciplinary connections, but Joyce only appears rarely in the Jarry book, leaving the work to William Anastasi. As an aside – and further perpetuating the web of connections that is the topic of this publication and my topic here tonight – can I mention that I am organising a conference on Giedion-Welcker for the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds for next June. I already invited William Anastasi and would welcome any member of the “Pataphysical Society”.

I would like to conclude with an observation parallel to the one with which I closed my argument in *Joyce in Art*. It seems that we have reached a point where Joyce’s legacy – and Jarry’s as well as Anastasi’s – have produced clusters of connections and more and more indirect manifestations. Thomas McEvelley has shown this elsewhere in tracing the many “borrowings” from Anastasi’s work that have become canonical in Minimalism and beyond.

This “society” has penetrated visual culture in the broadest sense, making it virtually impossible to tell apart a direct use of Joyce or Jarry or a subsequent interpretation of interpretations. Apart from the obvious statement that simulacra are central to postmodernism, there are further implications of this state of affairs for the work of artists, curators and, generally, for practice- and theory-based researchers. Anastasi is to me the prototypical practice-based researcher, a concept that is at the heart of third level art education in the UK and that is gaining currency across the globe.

We will have to follow Anastasi ever further into the intricacies and peculiarities of his pataphysical science. *Finnegans Wake* reading groups and similar collaborative interpretive exercises are our home from home – and we are compelled to continue our work within the Pataphysical Society as obsessive readers, viewers, exhibition curators and researchers.