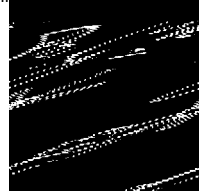


# 2



## 1873–1891

Hertz's account of Hébert's demolition is the first of several descriptions of Jarry's often uncontrollable nature. He would appear to many of his contemporaries as a prodigious performer, but someone verging on possession and barely able to restrain either his conduct or his imagination. At fifteen, when Jarry entered the *lycée* at Rennes and Hébert's classes, his defiance and his determination to exceed the bounds of normal behavior were already so marked that one suspects they masked something else ... but what precisely? Shyness, insecurity, or some deeper resolve? Even as a schoolboy Jarry tended toward a sort of creative self-immolation; he soon acquired something of a "reputation."

2.1

Alfred Jarry, portrait of P. H., 3½ × 2 inches,  
Rennes period.



2.2

Alfred Jarry, drawing of P. H. torn from a school  
exercise book, Rennes period.



The *lycée* was huge, its buildings arranged around four courtyards, with interminable corridors, enormous cellars and attics, even its own church. In Jarry's day it was also somewhat decrepit, particularly the old part in which Hébert's classes took place. The physics laboratory in which he taught now houses the school museum, which has been named in Hébert's honor, or rather, in honor of what he inspired. The first-floor classroom resembles a medieval operating theater: near the center is a large square work table for experiments, and before it rise tiers of long fixed desks and bench seats. This was the arena in which Jarry encountered Hébert.

...

In 1888, Caroline Jarry had returned to Rennes, where she had been born, with her two children, Alfred and his elder sister Charlotte, having separated from her husband nine years previously. Alfred had left his primary school laden with prizes, and his mother decided he needed the best secondary education to be had, at the *lycée* in the regional capital. He registered as a non-boarding pupil on October 1, a few weeks after his fifteenth birthday, and the family settled into the first of the three different addresses they would occupy over the next two years.



2.3  
Rennes. The *lycée*.

Here Alfred practiced a cult of rebellious unconventionality that was conventional enough in a youth of his age. In later life Charlotte left a brief “poetic” record of her brother, and the lack of any family papers means that these *Notes on Alfred Jarry* are the only firsthand account of his early home life. She recalls his bedroom, with its black walls decorated with skeletons, where he would read till the small hours surrounded by dictionaries, bicycle, guitar, and air rifle; his bombarding of passersby with a peashooter from the windows of the house, or in the street disguised in monk’s robes, peashooter concealed beneath the hood; and his chemical experiments, which burnt the house’s gutters with acid.<sup>1</sup>

It was at school that Jarry really felt the need to make a mark. The French employ the word *potache* to evoke the adolescent schoolboy and his universe, a turmoil of scatology, insubordination, sexual and other confusion, and frequently of creativity. Jarry played the role with particular verve and conviction, and was loath to renounce it, even in adulthood. Early adolescence proved especially formative for Jarry, who discovered literary and artistic enthusiasms to which he returned throughout his life. He had also found a mode of living, a manner of uncompromising behavior that somehow conformed with his inner drives, and which he rarely dropped, at least in public.

Various of Jarry’s ex-school friends were interviewed by his early biographers. They remembered him as pugnacious, precocious, and intelligent. Many recalled his disquieting gaze, his quick wit, his need always to go a little too far: he gave the impression of being both fearless of authority and indifferent to the opinion of his peers. They nicknamed him Quasimodo, because of his short stature, thick-set physique, and arching gait, and remained wary of his sardonic humor and cutting tongue: it seems Jarry was already acquiring his distinctive mode of speaking, precisely accentuating every syllable. His intimates found him a loyal and entertaining friend; mocking, but never spiteful, nor envious. He was also advanced for his age, not only as regards his already vast and obscure reading, but in his “morals” and his fascination with sexual matters. When he arrived at school, breathless, pale with insomnia, shoes filthy and collar askew, he explained that he had been “to the bro-thels” (the school was indeed surrounded by these establishments, due to the proximity of the local barracks). The roots of such swagger may, of course, be associated with his shortness of stature, and with hidden uncertainties concerning his sexuality and its orientation. It all proved too much for some of his classmates:<sup>2</sup>

I’m no prude, I was always a good Rabelaisian. Among ourselves we *potaches* used a language that was a cross between that of Rabelais and the barracks; but it was the superficial and purely verbal bravado of young schoolboys with no practical experience. Jarry distinguished himself by a vivid and realistic obscenity. He described his visits to brothels (at 15, what’s more!), or shocked us with stories of the black masses he read about, where, I don’t know, perhaps in some book by Haraucourt. [...] I still recall quite distinctly one of these alarming tales, of a mass presided over by the Devil, which finished with him sprinkling the assembly with sp...k from his own personal and gigantic censer. [...] His father’s death, his mother’s indulgence, the total lack of parental supervision, all of this contributed toward Jarry becoming a depraved *potache*.<sup>3</sup>

This recollection some forty years after the event should not be taken entirely at face value. For one thing, Jarry's father was not dead at the time, merely estranged from the family. Another ex-pupil recalled: "He had little to learn so far as sexual matters were concerned. [...] He tackled these topics with great relish and discussed them with medical precision and extreme coarseness. Respect for women was a sentiment with which he was entirely unfamiliar from the age of 16 onward. I have even asked myself how, given his habitually crude language, he was able to maintain decency before his mother and sister." Jarry made even adults uneasy. Fellow pupils later recalled that in the town as well as the school he occasioned hushed tones among parents and teachers. He was clever, but not malleable, they said. And precocious, quite capable of carrying off all the school prizes, if only he made the effort. A brilliant pupil in fact, but also the worst kind of troublemaker.<sup>4</sup>

...

The ritualistic nature of the humiliations inflicted on Hébert already exceeded the usual formalities of teacher/pupil warfare. The entire *lycée*, including the staff, was well aware of this, and younger pupils keenly anticipated the entertainment. They awaited with impatience their promotion to "the legendary classes of Monsieur Hébert."<sup>5</sup>

Soon after Hébert's return to teaching in 1881, dramatic accounts of the various exploits attributed to him, under the names P. H. (for Père Hébert), Heb, Éb, Ébé, etc., began circulating in the school. Each new generation of his pupils contributed to this epic literature in which Hébert's torments were extended beyond the classroom. At first this was a purely oral tradition. Presently, however, written texts were produced and were passed down from year to year until the Hébert cycle approached Homeric dimensions.

We know about this lost literature from a book published originally in 1921, fourteen years after Jarry's death, by Charles Chassé. Although it was written for rather disreputable reasons (which will be discussed later, in chapter 9), Chassé's book is valuable because it collected a number of personal descriptions of Jarry by his contemporaries. The Hébertian literature comprised dozens of poems, some more than 150 verses long, as well as plays and, for a brief period, weekly newspapers and bulletins. Initially, they were a fairly realistic depiction of Hébert's classroom martyrdom, but the competitive imaginations of dozens of schoolboys soon freed P. H. from everyday reality. Episodes inspired by the works of Rabelais, Lesage, Byron, Shakespeare, *The Lives of the Saints*, *The Count of Monte Cristo* and from schoolbooks, not excluding even Euclid, gradually transformed P. H. into something entirely original. Chassé's book includes a few fragments of the lost poems, along with a summary of the "oral tradition," a text worth citing in full:<sup>6</sup>

Still visible today in the deserts of Turkestan are the ruins of an immense city which, several thousands of years before the Christian era, was the capital of a great empire whose last sovereigns were Dromberg I, Dromberg II, and Dromberg III. The population of this empire were known as Ginormants. During the reign of Dromberg III, on the banks of the Oxus, P. H. was born,

the offspring of a Ginormant and a Tartar or Mongolian witch who lived in the rushes and reeds bordering the Aral Sea.

Appearance of P. H.—He was born complete with bowler hat, woolen cloak, and check trousers. On top of his head is a single, extendible ear, usually covered by his hat; both his arms are on the same side (likewise his eyes) and, unlike humans, whose feet are situated next to each other, he has one behind the other, so that when he falls over he is unable to pick himself up without assistance and remains prostrated, shouting until someone helps him up. He has only three teeth—of stone, iron, and wood. When the teeth of the upper jaw attempt to break through, he forces them back with blows from his front foot.

N.B. An umbilical point is one of the points on a surface at which that surface is cut by a plane tangential to a circle.

It is possible to demonstrate that:

1. All points on the surface of P. H. are umbilical points.
2. Any body whose surface is entirely composed of umbilical points is a P. H.

P. H. was baptized with essence of pataphysics by an old Ginormant who dwelt in a hovel at the foot of the mountains bordering China. He hired P. H. to watch over his polochons (polochons are animals resembling large pigs; they have no head, but compensate for this lack by having two backsides, one at each end).

For several years, when the snows melted, P. H. led his flock of 3,333 million 333 thousand and 333 polochons down to graze on the steppes between the Caspian and Aral Seas and on the shores of Lake Balkhash. He carried his food in an enormous pocket which he dragged behind him by means of a shoulder strap. On his return, as the first snows fell, his master carefully counted his polochons, a task which took the whole winter to complete.

But his master is exceedingly miserly when it comes to food and one year, toward summer's end, P. H. found himself short of nourishment and devoured a polochon. He had intended telling his boss that it had been carried off by a panther, but he was unfortunately betrayed by one of the polochon's tails which remained caught between his teeth. P. H.'s master immediately dispatched his extra-fast messenger-polochon to Dromberg III with the request that he send the Ginormants to arrest P. H. The latter had slunk off into the night and crossed the mountains into China, where he hoped to find refuge.

But the very next day he saw the pursuing Ginormants silhouetted against the skyline. At once he took to his heels with such haste that he passed through a too-narrow gorge in the Alatau mountains and there left behind two pieces of his woolen cloak. What is more, his *gidouille* [approximately: his gutbag] became so compressed by the sides of the gorge as to gouge out two flat ledges that were still visible at the end of the nineteenth century. However, he got through!

The great mass of Ginormants arrived at the same narrow defile, and in horrendous confusion trampled one another underfoot, those at the back pushing forward without realizing their progress was blocked. If we are to believe the testimony of Herodotus (Bk. III, Ch. xii), the din was heard as far away as Ceylon.

P. H. made good his escape and continued across Mongolia, Manchuria, and Siberia, but the surviving Ginormants took a short cut and were easily able to pick up his tracks, which were unique owing to his feet being situated on the same axis. Reaching the source of the Anadir, he met the Devil to whom he agreed to sell his soul if he would save him. The bargain was struck and at the moment the Ginormants were about to pounce, he dived into the frightful abyss at the bottom of which lies the source of the Anadir, and was immediately transformed into a little copper-colored fish. He descended the river, passed into the sea, and swam through the Bering Strait into the Arctic Ocean. An ice floe swept him to the north of Siberia. Here he remained for a thousand years, preserved in the ice. Following an exceptionally mild winter, he managed to free himself and continued traveling westward and, near the North Cape, he felt the first warm currents of the Gulf Stream. Attracted by the warmth, he passed down the coast of Norway, then into the English Channel and hence to the mouth of the Seine.

There, unfortunately for humanity, he decided to swim upriver and was finally snared by a fisherman near the Pont du Louvre. As soon as he was extracted from the water, P. H. assumed his previous form and the fisherman—seeing the ignoble hat, the porcine snout, and the enormous gutbag looming into view—fled in terror. P. H. removed the entangled fishhook, a painful exercise, and set forth immediately on his criminal exploits. He occupied himself in this manner throughout the fourteenth century during the reign of King Charles V.

A little later, P. H. received his baccalaureate, with poor marks, by dint of terrorizing his examiners. His only scientific apparatus consisted of two or three cuneiform characters which he attempted to reproduce more or less badly.

Soon after, at the head of a gang of bandits commanded by Captain Rolando, he seized the castle of Mondragon, which became his lair.

Then there was the journey to Spain, the usurpation of the throne of Aragon, the departure for Poland as captain of dragoons, etc., etc.

...

Between 1885 and 1886, according to Chassé, two brothers, Charles and Henri Morin, committed the more recent exploits of P. H. to paper. Presumably with the help of other pupils, they wrote and illustrated a series of short plays that detailed the misfortunes of P. H. as summarized by Chassé in the last two paragraphs of his account above. These plays bore the titles *Les Héritiers*, *Le Bastringue*, *La Prise de Ismaïl* (inspired by Byron's *Don Juan*), *Le Voyage en Espagne*, *Don Fernand d'Aragon* (inspired by *Gil Blas*), and all are lost. Finally, the Morins wrote *Les Polonais*

(*The Poles*). The adventures of Heb were most often scribbled out on scraps of paper in Hébert's class, or in those of his fellow teachers. On these occasions, Charles Morin tells us, pupils would sometimes contrive to have them confiscated on purpose, in the expectation that they would amuse Hébert's colleagues as much as their young authors.<sup>7</sup>

Charles Morin, the elder brother, left the *lycée* at the end of the school year of 1888 to pursue his studies in Paris. He put childish things behind him because, as he later told Charles Chassé, he had "better things to do than concern myself with such stupidities." He gave the manuscript of *Les Polonais* to his brother. Nevertheless, in Paris he continued to entertain his new friends at the Polytechnique with the exploits of Heb, so he cannot have been quite as dismissive as he later made out.<sup>8</sup>

Henri Morin was only a month older than Jarry, and for the first year they were in the same class. They were soon close friends, and it was not long before Jarry read the manuscript of *Les Polonais*. His enthusiasm was immediate—in part because *Les Polonais* bears striking resemblances to some of the plays Jarry himself had written at primary school, not least in the schoolboy fascination with the bowels and their products.

Although many of the descriptions of Hébert's misadventures had been written as plays, it seems not to have occurred to any of their authors actually to stage them. It was Jarry who first suggested they should, and in December 1888, or perhaps in early January of the following year, the "Théâtre des Phynances" came into being. It was named in honor of Heb's abiding lust for "phynance," money, extracted with maximum violence from persons weaker than himself, with the aid of his henchmen, the "salopins." Henri and Alfred commandeered the extensive attics of the Morin household and mounted the first of several productions of *Les Polonais*, "to the detriment of our Latin and Greek studies," as Morin later ruefully remarked.<sup>9</sup>

Information about these productions is sparse. Henri assumed the starring role, costumed in a greatcoat stuffed with pillows, and Jarry painted the scenery. Their classmates played the remaining parts, and also made up the audience. All the surviving texts of these plays revel in scatological humor, and later on, in sexual innuendo. It is a fair assumption, then, that these gatherings in the Morin attic were secretive affairs, ceremonials of the Hébert cult to which adults were not invited.<sup>10</sup>

In the summer of 1889, the Morins moved house and the Théâtre des Phynances transferred to Jarry's. Here they lacked a room large enough, or private enough, for live performances, and subsequent productions were adapted for the puppet theater, and later still performed as shadow plays. Most of the puppets were made by Jarry's sister, a competent sculptor. Charles Morin recalled her making "a magnificent bust" of P. H., adding that since Hébert was a neighbor of the Jarrys, he passed their window every day on his way to school, and Charlotte was able to perfect her representation of him.<sup>11</sup>

The Théâtre des Phynances had perhaps two further seasons, but it is uncertain which plays were presented in the school years 1889–1890 and 1890–1891. *Les Polonais*, no doubt, but also new plays written by Jarry and by Henri Morin. Two of these have survived in fragmentary form: *Onésime, ou les tribulations de Priou*, by Jarry, and *La Chasse aux polyèdres* by Morin.



*Onésime* introduces for the first time more “adult” themes into the Hébert cycle, including alcohol and sex: the play describes the cuckolding of Hébert by Barbapoux, a character based upon one of Jarry’s class supervisors. Jarry would endlessly rewrite this piece over the next fifteen years, as the various versions of *Ubu cocu*, and it was eventually published in 1944.<sup>12</sup>

*Onésime* is very different from Morin’s effort. Jarry’s play has moments of genuine wit and wordplay amid its schoolboy humor, as well as a structure of sorts. Morin’s, on the other hand, is much more amateurish—the plot is a mishmash of repetitions and blind alleys, and smothers its audience in Hébertian oaths and ejaculations which would quickly prove wearisome to any but partisan schoolfellows in on the joke. These plays were probably both written with puppets in mind (one stage direction in *Onésime*, for example, calls for the character’s head to be set alight).<sup>13</sup>

We can assume that *Les Polonais* was still in the repertoire around the winter of 1890, because Henri Morin recalled giving Jarry the manuscript so he could adapt it for a shadow-theater production, and these were among the last performances of the Théâtre des Phynances. Jarry, he tells us, resorted to the shadow play only after finding the puppets too difficult to manipulate.<sup>14</sup>

This description of the Théâtre des Phynances is, however, no more than a best guess. Henri Morin’s is the only direct account, and he contradicts himself on a number of occasions. In a letter from 1934 published in the introduction to *Ubu intime*, Morin wrote that a shadow-play version preceded the live performances. He says too that he gave Jarry the manuscript of *Les Polonais* both in 1888 and in 1889, also that he sent it to his brother in Paris, or even that he entrusted it to a certain “Boris”: the mystery of the original manuscript of *Les Polonais* is indeed labyrinthine. Finally, it remains unclear whether Jarry and Morin used the name “Théâtre des Phynances” for all the various productions at Rennes, or only for the puppet plays. If the live-actor version was indeed preceded by a shadow-play version, it would explain why the published version of *Ubu Roi* bears the subtitle “as performed by the marionettes of the Théâtre des Phynances in 1888,” since shadow plays also use marionettes.<sup>15</sup>

More to the point, after all these performances, was *Les Polonais* still the same play as the one written by Charles Morin with his brother? Given the nature of the play, and its origins in the commonality of the Hébert myth, it appears unlikely that Jarry and Henri Morin would have stuck rigidly to the original text as committed to paper, as though it were an established script. Moreover, given that Alfred and Henri had been mounting these productions without the elder brother’s collaboration, surely the play would have evolved in performance? These matters would assume importance only after the first performance of *Ubu Roi*.<sup>16</sup>

Jarry wrote a couple of other pieces while at Rennes, including *Le Futur malgré lui*, a play which could pass as a conventional satire on the marital customs of the bourgeoisie. Quantitatively his output was considerably reduced compared to his last years at primary school; the productions of the Théâtre des Phynances must have been taking up his time, or he may even have applied himself to his schoolwork.

At the end of the school year 1891, Jarry and his mother left Rennes for Paris. Once again she uprooted herself in order to benefit his education, and the uncomplaining Charlotte tagged