

Julios in Action

Throughout the nineteenth century, refuge in metaphysics was the best antidote for *timor mortis*, the miseries of the *hic et nunc*, and the sense of the absurd by which we define ourselves and the world. Then came Jules Laforgue who, like a cosmonaut, preceded another Jules and showed us a simpler solution: what is the use of ethereal metaphysics when we have a palpable physics within our reach? In an epoch when all sentiment acted like a boomerang, Laforgue flung his like a javelin into the sun, against the despairing cosmic mystery. That he was right, time has proved: in the twentieth century nothing can better cure the an-

Encore à cet astre

*Espèce de soleil! tu songes: —voyez-les
Ces pantins morphinés, buveurs de lait d'ânesse
Et de café; sans trêve, en vain, je leur caresse
L'échine de mes feux; ils vont étiolés!—*

*—Eh! c'est toi qui n'as plus que des rayons gelés!
Nous, mais nous crevons de santé, de jeunesse!
C'est vrai, la terre n'est qu'une vaste kermesse,
Nos hourrahs de gaieté courbent au loin les blés.*

*Toi seul claques des dents, car tes taches accrues
Te mangent, ô soleil, ainsi que des verrues
Un vaste citron d'or, et bientôt, blond moqueur,
Après tant de couchants dans la pourpre et la gloire,*

*Tu seras en risée aux étoiles sans cœur,
Astre jaune et grêlé, flamboyante écumoire!*

It is said in passing (but a very special passage) that in 1911 Marcel Duchamp did a drawing for this poem that became the basis for his *Nude Descending a Staircase*: a typical pataphysical progression.

thropocentrism that is the author of all our ills than to cast ourselves into the physics of the infinitely large (or the infinitely small). By reading any text of popular science we quickly regain the sense of the absurd, but this time it is a sentiment that can be held in our hands, born of tangible, demonstrable, almost consoling things. We no longer believe because it is absurd: it is absurd because we must believe.

My readings of the Science pages of *Le Monde* (appearing Thursdays) have a further benefit: rather than turning me away from the absurd, they encourage me to accept it as the natural mode by which we are shown an inconceivable reality. This is not the same as accepting reality though believing it absurd; it is discovering in the absurd a challenge raised by physics without being able to know how or where the mad race through the double

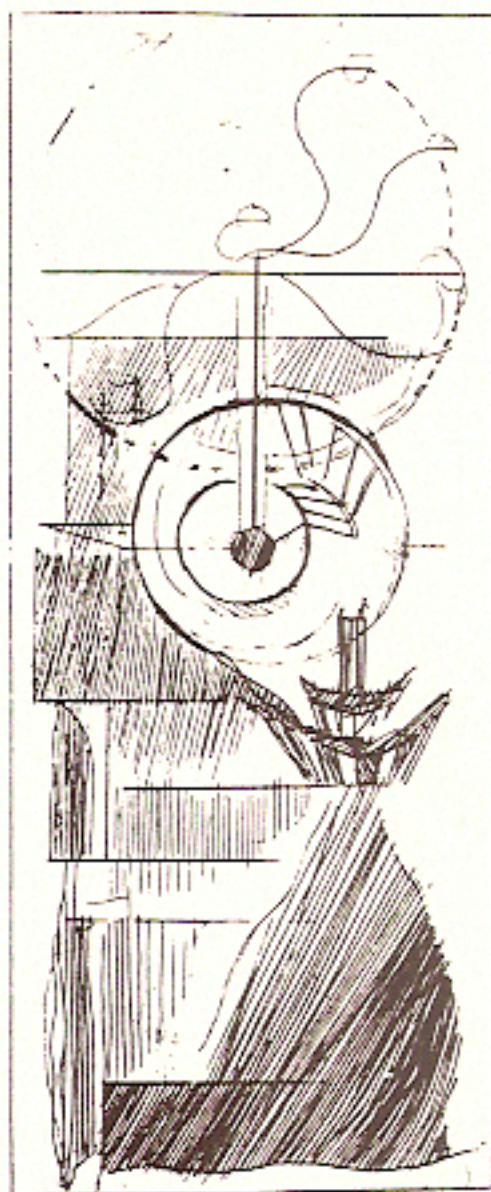


tunnel of tele- and microscopes will end (but is that tunnel really double?).

What I mean is that a clear sense of the absurd *situates* us better or more lucidly than the post-Kantian assurance that phenomena are mediators of an inaccessible reality that will somehow assure them at least a year of stability. From childhood, Cronopios have an eminently constructive notion of the absurd, so it startles them to see that Famas can take in stride reports like this: "The new elementary particle 'N asterisk 3245' has a relatively longer lifespan than other known particles, even though it does not exceed a millionth of a millionth of a millionth of a millionth of a second" (*Le Monde*, Thursday, July 7, 1966).

"Say, Coco," says the Fama after reading that, "bring me my suede shoes. I have an important meeting at the Society of Authors. We're going to discuss the floral games of Curuzu Cuatia and I'm already twenty minutes late."

Certain Cronopios have been quite excited to learn that the universe itself may be asymmetrical, a fact that runs counter to one of the most illustrious of received ideas. A researcher named Paolo Franzini and his wife Juliet Lee Franzini (have you noticed how a writing Julio, working with an illustrating Julio, has already considered two more Julios and now a Juliet, in reference to an article that appeared on 7 July?) know a great deal about the neutral meson *eta*, which only recently emerged from anonymity and which has the curious quality of being its own antiparticle. The moment it decomposes, it produces three pi-mesons, one of which, poor thing, is neuter, while the other two are positive and negative, which is a great relief to everyone. And then we discover (this is what the Franzinis have shown) that the conduct of the two charged pi-mesons is not symmetrical; the harmonious proposition that antimatter is the mirror image of matter is deflated like a balloon. What does this mean to us? The Franzinis are not concerned: it's fine that the two pi-mesons should be warring brothers because that helps us to recognize and identify them. Even physics has its Talleyrands.



Cronopios will feel a dizzying rush in their ears when they read the conclusion of this report: "Thus, thanks to this asymmetry, we will be able to identify celestial bodies composed of antimatter, if such bodies exist, as some have claimed based on the rays they emit." This, always on Thursday, always in *Le Monde*, always with a Julio somewhere in view.

As for the Famas, Jules Laforgue, on one of his interplanetary voyages, wrote:

La plupart vit et meurt sans soupçonner l'histoire
Du globe, sa misère en l'éternelle gloire.
Sa future agonie au soleil moribund.

Vertige d'univers, cicux à jamais en fête!
Rien, ils n'auront rien su. Combien même s'en vont
Sans avoir seulement visité leur planète.

ps. When I wrote, above, "a perfectly typical pataphysical progression," about the Laforgue–Duchamp connection, in which I am forever somehow entwined, I did not imagine that I would once more take passage into the realm of transparent vastness. This very afternoon (11/12/66), having completed this text, I went to see an exhibition of Dada. The first painting that I saw on entering was *Nude Descending a Staircase*, especially sent to Paris from its museum in Philadelphia.