The Consolation of Pataphysics

(**Andrew Hugill**
interviewed by
James Langdon)

(JL) I've invited you to discuss *The Unexplained: A Sourcebook of Strange Phenomena* (1976), a mainstream paperback sampler of William Corliss's immense self-published "sourcebook" project. Corliss engaged in a lifelong pursuit of the scientific anomaly — that which might contradict a dominant paradigm of scientific thought — until his death in 2011. I discovered him in your book *Pataphysics: A Useless Guide*, whose subject is closely linked to Corliss given his interest in anything out of the ordinary, contradictory, or anachronistic. **(1)** His sourcebooks compile articles from the scientific press on unresolved or mysterious findings in archaeology, astronomy, biology, geology, geophysics, mathematics, physics, and psychology. In *The Unexplained* we find cases of megaliths whose construction defies belief, volcanoes on the moon, and extraordinary pictorial mirages witnessed by hundreds. Is there any substance to Corliss's material, or is it just pseudo-science and conspiracy?

(1) Pataphysics is a slippery science that eludes definition. It is also a college, with an international membership, dedicated to elaborating and historicizing a set of related concepts. One of these, the anomaly, is the subject of this conversation. The College of Pataphysics is ridiculous yet sincere, a labyrinthine institution sustained by an anti-institutional spirit. Andrew Hugill, my correspondent, has attempted to negotiate the difficulties of documenting the cultural products of pataphysics in his book *Pataphysics: A Useless Guide* (2012). There he offers the following shortlist of definitions:

> Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions
> Pataphysics is to metaphysics as metaphysics is to physics
> Pataphysics is the science of the particular and the laws governing exceptions
> Pataphysics describes a universe supplementary to this one.

)AH(It's the kind of thing one used to read in doctors' waiting rooms. *Reader's Digest* would often have a "stranger than fiction" section. What's fascinating is the extent to which modern science has incorporated a lot of this stuff. Most of what Corliss describes as unexplained is now explained, in one way or another, by modern science. It becomes an archive of what people thought was anomalous at the time — Corliss began his publishing activity in the mid-1970s, which is in itself interesting; it doesn't invalidate it. Corliss's work has this rather detached quality. You could compare him to Charles Fort who explored similar terrain, but actively fostered a mythology around the unexplained becoming a Messianic figure with disciples who followed him and truly believed in this stuff. **(2)** Corliss is more scientific, dare I say more *objective*. He is a cataloguer.

(2) Charles Fort (1874–1932) was an American scholar of the anomalous and the paranormal whose name has become identified with the public fascination with such phenomena. When I was growing up *The Fortean Times* prompted much conspiratorial speculation among my school friends, and apparently continues to flourish — I see that it is still available as a colorful print magazine.

(JL) That detachment produces a strange tension in the book. He doesn't really comment on the articles, other than short introductions surveying each scientific discipline. But then the presentation of the book is not at all scientific. The paperback format, the surreal cover illustration, the blurb, they speak more of the "new age" than credible science. The painting on the cover is uncredited but seems to have been made for the book, or in relation to Corliss's work, showing in a style typical of fantasy illustration, an apparition of a human head looming over a landscape populated by stone circles and curious fossils. Overhead, frogs and fish fall from the sky and mysterious planets orbit the sun. Bantam was a mass-market publisher, but the book seems designed to appeal to counter-cultural sensibilities.

)AH(I think Corliss had his eye on sales. He was trying to be a successful author and appeal to general curiosity. I think that's the reason for the book's presentation. It's aimed at a mainstream readership with an appetite for mystery. The scale of Corliss's enterprise was extraordinary: there are around fifty volumes listed on his website. He had to sustain that production somehow. The conspiratorial undertone has many echoes in popular culture. Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods* was very big in the seventies and theorized that Earth had been visited by aliens, and the drawings on the plains in Peru were signs to be seen from space. We could also look at Rennes-le-Château, and the

whole "The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail" conspiracy, which of course is still going strong with Dan Brown and *The Da Vinci Code*. **(3)**

(JL) I hadn't thought about Corliss and his readership in this way. It would explain why the book is so funny. He talks about canals engineered on Mars, fireflies on the moon, there's even a whole chapter on toads embedded in rocks! We've asserted his credibility, yet some of these examples are plainly ridiculous. Mixed in with the laughable are more believable stories. The material on the planet Vulcan, at one time believed to be in orbit between Mercury and the Sun, for example.

)AH(That was quite a common belief for a long time. There are maps showing planet Vulcan. **(4)** Even recently there was something in the news about another planet being discovered beyond Pluto. Once again we have this speculation that there is more out there than we realize.

(3) *Chariots of the Gods* and *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* are used here to refer to a tendency in popular culture toward the suspension of disbelief and the temptation to give credence to fantastical narratives. We are a species of storytellers, after all.

(4) The story of Vulcan remains appealing — Thomas Levenson's book *The Hunt for Vulcan: How Albert Einstein Destroyed a Planet, Discovered Relativity, and Deciphered the Universe* was listed in *Symmetry* magazine's Physics Books of 2015.

(JL) Vulcan is a good example of a scientific paradigm according with physicist and philosopher Thomas Kuhn's theory that at certain points in history scientific communities conform to a single dominant narrative of the universe. This in turn has a normalizing effect on scientific activity, excluding anything that contradicts the dominant theory. As Corliss wrote, "Anyone who saw an intramercurial planet in this century was looked at askance."

)AH(Kuhn's narrative is an attractive explanation for what gets attention, and equally pertinent in considering the anomaly. Scientific orthodoxies create constraints, but also allow for counter-narratives, for critique and the potential for change. History shows that many significant discoveries have emerged from overthrowing dominant paradigms. Einstein's paper on general relativity was hardly read for ten years, and when it did emerge the establishment weren't particularly impressed! Gradually they realized there was more to it. Kuhn's theory presupposes that science proceeds in a series of logical steps, but it might be more meandering. Isaac Newton devoted half of his life to alchemy! Today people think this is absurd and a waste of time, but he apparently considered it as important as gravity.

(JL) We might say that Corliss was working in an unsympathetic era. But historically the anomaly wasn't always dismissed. I've been reading Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park's *Wonders and the Order of Nature: 1150–1750*. **(5)** It talks about an age in which the anomaly was a primary scientific object. The most extraordinary events in the world were considered the most deserving of scientific study. Corliss would have fit right in. But perhaps being on the margins actually sustained him.

)AH(The emergence of quantum theory means that now, unlike in Corliss's time, there is so much uncertainty. We are used to the idea that science doesn't have all the answers. After World War II there was a faith in science, that it could destroy the world and create it through knowledge. Today people are more relativistic, more willing to accept the idea that there are multiple viewpoints and solutions.

(5) Director of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, Lorraine Daston has written extensively on historical shifts in the credibility of different lines of scientific enquiry. Her essay "Preternatural Philosophy," published in the collection she edited *Biographies of Scientific Objects* (2000), can be read as an account of the pataphysical from within the canon of mainstream science. She writes: "Why don't we have a science of dust wreaths on windy days? Why do we have a science of the interior of animal bodies, or of the shapes of crystals, or of the genealogy of languages? What ontological, epistemological, methodological, functional, symbolical, and/or aesthetic features qualify or disqualify the motion of projectiles, dreams, the waxing and waning of the Gross National Product, monstrous births, or electron valences as scientific objects?"

(JL) Naturally there is a metaphysical element to Corliss.

Reading him I sense that his will to undermine, or at least question, the scientific mainstream with his great archive of the unexplained was motivated by faith of some description. It seems to come from a resistance to the idea that everything *can* be explained.

)AH(Corliss's anomalies often point to metaphysical things: things that are unexplained in physical terms and imply something beyond the physical. His devotion to his project is a bit like that of the famous Facteur Cheval, a French postman who did his rounds in the morning and spent the rest of the day building this enormous folly made of debris in his back garden. He called it *Le Palais Idéal*. It looks like a cross between a cave and a temple. People still visit it. He devoted his whole life to it, working on it until his death in 1924, with no real explanation as to why. Very strange and mysterious, and rather touching. It's similar to Corliss's project on the anomaly. For what exactly? It has a heroic futility.

(JL) How do we get to pataphysics in Corliss? Why did you include him in your survey?

)AH(It's the pursuit of the anomaly that connects Corliss to pataphysics. It certainly seems that we are not convinced that any of the phenomena he catalogued are truly beyond

explanation. But that's not the point. This is often true in pataphysics, that it's a question of administration. How you administer things rather than the things themselves.

(JL) His practice was in itself not particularly exemplary of his interests. He was a compiler, somebody spending time in libraries, reviewing journals, cataloguing things. It's a complete contrast to Alfred Jarry, the central figure in pataphysics. **(6)** Jarry was also a commentator on science — there's a wonderful quotation in your book:

Contemporary science is founded upon the principle of induction: most people have seen a certain phenomenon precede or follow some other phenomenon most often, and conclude that it will ever be thus. Apart from other considerations, this is true only in the majority of cases, depends on the point of view, and is codified only for convenience — if that!

He carried this philosophy into his behavior. There are lots of examples of his uncouth exploits in your book. The idea that one's behavior is also a representation of an outlook, or a literary construct is missing in Corliss. What do you make of the disparity between Corliss's scholarly method and his fascination with the anomaly? Is embodying one's work important to pataphysics?

(6) Alastair Brotchie's biography *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life* (2011) is the definitive resource.

)AH(I think in fact this scholarly remove is more characteristic of the College of Pataphysics than is Jarry's example. The quiet scholar devoted to the study of things that appear to be absurd or irrational in some way. Corliss fits that mold. A lot of the members of the college have been like that and still are. People like Paul Gayot, Thieri Foulc, even François Le Lionnais — brilliant minds, but working in a very unobtrusive way, just pursuing science as they saw it. It's a science defined by Jarry, and I suppose the question is: What has Jarry got to do with all of this? He is seen by a lot of pataphysicians as an icon for the idea of pataphysics. Strictly speaking, Jarry didn't invent the word or the concept. He was one of several schoolboys who invented it. His genius was to take it and apply it in a novel way. I think Jarry took the idea, put down what he could and left us in the college to continue the project. I've just written a text about pataphysics and computing. I quote this line from Franz Liszt, the composer, who said he wanted to "hurl [his] lance into the boundless realms of the future." I say Jarry fired his revolver into the future, not caring whether it hit the target or swerved into one of the neighbors' children!

But probably there is more pataphysical richness in the scholarly and studious approach. There's a paradox, because of course the college itself is organized in an incredibly hierarchical way. The college structure supports this idea that there are greater and lesser pataphysicians. But it then typically turns that on its head by making the head of the college a fictional character. Until recently the vice curator was a crocodile! It of course plays with the absurdity of that.
I think most pataphysicians would agree that you don't have to be a card-carrying member of the college to be a good pataphysician.

(JL) I'd like to go further into this administration idea.

You've reconciled that disparity in Corliss — between his practice and his subject — but I'm interested in how a subject and its administration might be more closely related. When I'm teaching I often give a workshop in which I ask student designers to organize a collection of random objects. The work is usually carried along by a number of systematic methods — sorting by size or color, function, or chronology. Very often a contradiction or an anomaly will emerge. Then the conversation turns to how to resolve it — whether to exclude it, reconcile it, append it. You're also a composer. How have you absorbed the anomaly into your music?

)AH(When I make decisions about things they are informed by a pataphysical state of mind. I'll give you a concrete example. Back in 1981, I wrote a little piano piece called *Bride, teeming with sweet to the Bridegroom*. It has two simple two-bar phrases. They are taken from the accompaniment of a song cycle by Granville Bantock, a Victorian composer who wrote music set to the poems of the ancient Greek Sappho. His setting is both delightful and ridiculous, in that Sappho's work survives only in fragments. But Bantock wove it into a narrative, or rather his wife Helen did. So I decided to chop it up into fragments again. The two phrases are quite inconsequential in themselves, but the piece works in a very disciplined way. You play the first phrase completely, then you have a silence that lasts the duration of the second phrase. Then you play the first phrase minus one of the notes. And then you play one note from the second phrase. This goes on and on and gradually there is a crossover. You arrive at a point where half the notes are missing from the first phrase and half the notes appear from the second phrase. The process continues and you end up with just the second phrase. That's the piece. I followed this through very rigorously and logically. But I realized some weeks later I'd made an error — one of the notes disappears and then reappears, but then disappears again! — in copying rather

than composition. I decided to leave the error in. The piece was then performed, and has continued to be performed. Of course no one noticed. Until about eight years ago I got an e-mail from a friend in France. He and his students had been analyzing the piece and they'd discovered the mistake. I had to write and admit that I did know it was there, and that I'd decided to incorporate the error in the piece. I could feel the disappointment at the other end!

(JL) I suppose what gives your decision its rightness is this story, that in the telling you reconcile *and* append the anomaly, your mistake. You create the mental image of the piece with and without the mistake — through storytelling they are both brought into existence.

)AH(Exceptions and contradictions are essential to pataphysics. If you have something with a clear logic to it, with no contradictory element in it at all, then you start to lose touch with the pataphysical. Including that mistake made me feel better about this as a pataphysical work, because there was a contradiction embedded in the work itself.

(JL) There are contrary forces in many artworks that derive from the idea that everything needs to be self-evident. The designer Norman Potter had a nice way to put it; he said a designed object should not have a "back." There should be no perspective on the object

not considered by the designer, no possibility to hide some inelegant or unresolved detail. The rhetoric is clear: God will see it! **(7)** But there's also the fact that the story you told about your work is not strictly present in the work itself, unless you scrutinize it to the degree that those students did. This brings me back to one of Jarry's definitions of pataphysics included in your book: "Pataphysics is the science of the particular and the laws governing exceptions." Every phenomena is a particular and unrepeatable event, and shouldn't be understood in relation to a norm. Extrapolating from that it seems he is talking about an elemental storytelling. The whole universe, every human being, interaction, phenomenon, is actually one event, and Jarry's definition is a commandment, not to try to reduce it through abstraction or simplification, but to tell the story of it exactly as it happened, bit by bit, each fractionally different version of events. Without shortcuts.

(7) Norman Potter (1923–1995) was an English designer, writer, and teacher. In the spring 2006 issue of *Eye Magazine*, Richard Hollis, a teaching colleague of Potter, tells the following story: "Potter once directed the installation of an exhibition at the college [The West of England College of Art and Design] from the top of a ladder. One tutor, Ken Campbell, shouted: 'Nobody's going to see this exhibition from up there.' Norman looked down: 'God will.' He had this idea about the essence of something being more important than how it was actually seen."

)AH(This is how we get to another important term: equivalence. If everything in the universe is one particular occurrence, then how do you distinguish one thing from another? They are all equivalent. The hundredth coin toss is as valuable as the first. And one day the coin will land on its edge. What Jarry points out is that utility shouldn't be a judge of the value of things. He talks about not looking at a watch as a round thing, but as an ellipse, because you view it from the side. He says if you ask people what the shape of a watch is they will say it is round. The reason is that they only ever look at it to see what the time is. He wanted to divorce the utility from the thing to give another perspective. Pataphysicians call this "inutiliousness." If you can get to something inutilious you are seeing something pataphysically.

8) Here I'm rather casually invoking complex ideas from the work of neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga. In the 1950s, Gazzaniga led research on the cognitive functions of individuals who had had the two hemispheres of their brains disconnected in order to control severe epilepsy. In the course of studying these patients, Gazzaniga identified what he calls the "interpreter," the unconscious function of the brain to "narrate" experience that I am referring to. Gazzaniga's work has been widely published in academic and popular science. His autobiography *Tales from Both Sides of the Brain: A Life in Neuroscience* was published in 2015.

(JL) You are also then resisting the programming of your brain. Your brain automates this narrative shortcutting by substituting archetypes for particulars. It unconsciously assumes that the watch is round without ever calling on your conscious self to confirm it and determine the precise angle from which you happen to be seeing it on any particular occasion. **(8)** To experience the world more fully in that way would lose the narrative flow that we regard as continuity in our conscious life, and that we project onto our reading of the universe.

)AH(I don't think Jarry was concerned with getting people to see the world more fully, just to see the world in a different way, bringing another aspect or dimension to things outside daily reality. He had a horror of the real world, the banal. Which is why I find it so interesting that there's this infra-thin division now between pataphysics and quantum mechanics so that you can't tell the difference a lot of the time. If you read physicist Richard Feynman on quantum mechanics he says that nobody understands quantum mechanics and if they tell you they do they are lying! Pataphysics is a permanently unknowable thing that resists definition. We are dealing with two things that have very similar properties. It's a strong

relation ultimately between the mindset created by quantum mechanics and the mindset created by pataphysics. They both use mathematics to make you think about things in ways that you couldn't possibly imagine based on any visible evidence around you. They are not religious and yet religious people can impose their own beliefs on them. Science and pataphysical science are converging. And the notion of anomaly is central. In quantum mechanics everything is an anomaly. Everything has its unique position at any one moment, but could be somewhere else at the same time.

(JL) This does bring us back to Corliss and the concept of the knowable. His amateurism, his independence comprise a view of the world that is in a way anti-institutional, resistant to certainty. The convergence you describe also speaks to that, the idea that at some level the world is unknowable undermines something of the scientific institution, or at least elevates the amateur. The conscious experience of one individual is a construct of the brain, a unique particularity in the sense that Jarry described, and that can't be undermined.

)AH(It's the consolation of pataphysics.

Graphic designer James Langdon is one of six directors of the artist-run gallery Eastside Projects in Birmingham and founder of the itinerant School for Design Fiction.

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