RENE DAUMAL AND THE PATAPHYSICS OF LIBERATION

1 Introduction

René Daumal was co-founder, with Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, of what has usually been seen as a para-surrealist group, Le Grand Jeu, which flourished briefly 1928-1932. The members of Le Grand Jeu were close to the surrealists by their collective collaborative nature, by their experimental practices such as automatic writing and an interest in the dream-world, and also by their intellectual and political practices: a brief commitment to Marxism, an interest in non-western thought patterns (the 'primitive' mind, Oriental philisophy, occultism), and last but not least, humour.

The chronological approximations of literary history have tended to obscure the fact that Le Grand Jeu was quicker off the mark and more theoretically rigorous than Surrealism. The preoccupations I have just mentioned belong to a long tradition to which both the surrealists and Le Grand Jeu were heir. The valorisation of the primitive mind, for example, has its roots in the eighteenth century; it happened to be in the air during the 1920's with the publications of Lévy-Bruhl. Similarly, interest in the Orient and ancient religions dates back to earlier centuries, although it had been given a new urgency by Artaud in the Révolution surréaliste during 1925. It is hardly surprising to find both the surrealists and Le Grand Jeu showing interest in these areas, since they could be used as ammunition in the aim common to both groups: the critique of 'bourgeois' mentality. What is surprising, though, is to find that Breton, as 'arbiter' of surrealism, was only to develop these interests on a theoretical level as part of surrealism's cultural syncretism later, in some cases much later than the active period of Le Grand Jeu. In the case which interests us here, Breton's Anthologie de l'humour noir appeared in 1940, with a brief theoretical introduction outlining humour as 'une révolte supérieure de l'esprit', and explaining its function in Freudian terms:

Le secret de l'attitude humoristique repose sur l'extrême possibilité pour certains êtres de rester, en cas d'alerte grave, à leur moi l'accent psychique pour le reporter à leur surmoi, ce dernier étant à concevoir génétiquement comme l'héritier de l'instance parentale.

But as early as 1928 Daumal had already integrated his preoccupation with the destructive role of humour as revolt within a coherent system which he paradoxically called an experimental metaphysics. It is this metaphysical system and the place of humour within it which will form the focus of this paper.
Daumal’s ‘métaphysique expérimentale’

In his late teens, Daumal, fascinated by death, undertook a ‘série de tentatives pour faire l’expérience de l’au-delà’. These included experiments with astral projection, and a variety of drugs, the most important of which was carbon tetrachloride, similar in effect to chloroform. The experiments with carbon tetrachloride gave Daumal the intuition of the absurdity, as he puts it, of individual consciousness. During these experiments he abruptly transcended the normal categories of human experience; consciousness and language were the most fundamental of these. He experienced the annihilation of his individual consciousness, as well as the impossibility of articulating that experience. Not surprisingly, this gave rise to intense anguish, which forced Daumal, perhaps more surprisingly, to hypothesize an absolute consciousness, and moreover to hypothesize that this absolute consciousness was attainable by a ‘travail volontaire de l’esprit’ (EA 54).

The intuitive experience of the duality of individual consciousness, and the hypothesis of absolute consciousness as the resolution of that duality is the cornerstone of Daumal’s soteriology. He calls this soteriology a ‘science descriptive des formes a priori du progrès spirituel’. The words a priori are important; in its theoretical form this philosophy is a reflection upon ‘cet éveil perpétuel vers la plus haute conscience possible’ (T23). To reflect upon this progress, however, is not the progress itself, and Daumal is concerned to maintain the disruptive and immediate force of the intuition in spite of its articulation as the cornerstone of a metaphysical philosophy. He will, for example, insist on the paradoxically experimental nature of his metaphysical philosophy. By analogy with the experimental sciences, Daumal infers that a metaphysical system is totally arbitrary unless it is based on ‘vérifications expérimentales’ (T28), otherwise it is no more than a logically co-ordinated system based on empirically unverifiable abstractions. The ideal pattern of such a metaphysical system is, Daumal says, the vicious circle (T29-30). The elaboration of theory is the activity of the rational mind alone, and by definition, therefore, cannot encompass the whole person. Metaphysical reflection is necessary, Daumal points out, ‘mais non voulue pour elle-même. Elle est un signe immédiat de moi-même, ou plutôt un système de signes’ (EA 132). Metaphysical reflection is a mental construct subsequent to or prior to an act of consciousness, which experiences the phenomenal world without mediation: ‘La connaissance d’une réalité comme telle ne peut être qu’une connaissance en acte, et un acte immédiat; et le seul acte immédiatement donné est celui de prendre conscience’ (T26-27). Using a Socratic image, he repeatedly stresses that a metaphysical philosophy is only a map, ‘l’itinéraire d’un voyage possible’ (T20), for ‘aucune pensée réelle ne peut s’exprimer en mots si elle n’a pas été vécue’ (PP 13).
The act of consciousness required is a cartesian aporia; it is crucial for Daumal that doubt should be maintained as the motive force of any kind of spiritual progress:

Plus un penseur a mis de réalité dans ses paroles, plus ses paroles auront d’autorité, plus elle risqueront de devenir des dogmes étouffeurs de doute; et le doute est le moteur de la recherche intellectuelle (PP 14-15).

The metaphor which returns constantly in Daumal’s work is the opposition between sleep, as the passive acceptance of the normal categories of human experience, and awakening, as the awareness of ontological alienation. For Daumal, we are asleep, our consciousness submerged beneath a marasmus of automatisms, unquestioned opinions and prejudices: ‘Si tu acceptes passivement les conditions qui sont faites à ta conscience, tu dors’ (T 21). He will call on his reader to awaken from the inertia of consciousness, from what he can call, playing on the two meanings of esprit, death of the mind, but also spiritual death, by an act of consciousness:

L’éveil n’est pas un état, mais un acte [...] Et comme la réalité de l’esprit est acte, l’idée même de ‘substance pensante’ n’étant rien si elle n’est actuellement pensée, en ce sommeil, absence d’acte, privation de pensée, il n’y a rien, il est véritablement la mort spirite (T 21, 23; Daumal’s emphasis).

To think, however, that is to become conscious by an act of consciousness, is immediately reified as soon as it is registered as such, as thought, an object of consciousness lying passively in the mind. Thus consciousness is a perpetual effort, an act which must be ceaselessly renewed lest each awakening should become a state of mind, an inert mass, a condition of consciousness passively accepted.

In this perspective the act by which the original intuition of the absurdity of limited individual consciousness is renewed is not so much aporetic doubt, but more fundamentally the Hegelian act of negation, in which doubt clearly has a part to play, but is if anything merely a metaphor for negation. The empirical cornerstone of Daumal’s doctrine is the experience of the absurdity of self as a limited consciousness, separated from what he assumes to be the possibility of an unlimited consciousness. Upon this empirical foundation Daumal constructs a methodology which is a systematization of what he considers to be the only possible attitude in the face of such a revelation: a radical revolt, a refusal to accept the absurdity. He argues that ‘I’ always transcend all possible attributes: ‘Qui suis-je? Enumérez tous les prédicats positifs possibles, je répondrai toujours: “ce n’est pas cela”’ (T 40). For the initial act of consciousness, the experience of the absurd, is itself the first in a series of negations, the refusal to be limited by individual consciousness, to be determined by any form. To become conscious of something is to separate it from myself, to objectify it: ‘Toute forme est en effet connaissable en quelque façon, donc objet. Or,
un objet, c'est ce qui n'est pas moi. Le monde objectif, c'est donc ce qui est rejeté au cours de la marche vers soi-même’ (T 41). Consciousness thus cannot be a form, since it is essentially an act; and as such it must be identical to itself: ‘L’acte de nier, privé, par définition, de toute détermination positive, est identique à soi dans son mouvement perpétuel’. If consciousness is nothing more than an undetermined act, the only thing differing for each act of consciousness being what is objectified, then it follows that to speak of a multiplicity of consciousnesses is absurd. Absolute consciousness is thus legitimized, and rationalized as the hypothetical limit of a process of negation whereby all determinations are sloughed: ‘L’esprit individuel atteint l’absolu de soi-même par négations successives [...]. Le sujet pur ne se conçoit que comme limite d’une négation perpétuelle’ (CC 26).

3 Pataphysics

What role does pataphysics play in this apocalyptic Hegelian metaphysics? It was certainly a constant preoccupation for Daumal, who insisted in 1929 that it was much more than ‘une plaisanterie’. His interest in pataphysics goes back to his schooldays and the group of friends who were later to form Le Grand Jeu; they prepared a magazine called ‘Bubu magazine’ (modelled on Jarry’s Ubu), which was published by the Collège de Pataphysique. The Collège has also published a number of other texts by Daumal. During the 1930s he contributed a regular feature for the Nouvelle Revue Française called ‘La Pataphysique du mois’, poking fun at modern science and its methods.

On the theoretical level, humour is intimately associated with the sense of the absurd; it is axiomatic for Daumal that laughter is an expression of despair at the scandal of individual consciousness after the revelatory intuition of the possibility of absolute consciousness, as he explains in his essay ‘La Pataphysique et la révélation du rire’: ‘Le rire pataphysique, c’est la conscience vive d’une dualité absurde et qui creve les yeux; en ce sens il est la seule expression humaine de l’identité des contraires [...] la seule expression humaine du désespoir’ (EA 20).

How can laughter be an expression of the identity of opposites at the same time as a reaction, as it were, to duality? Because laughter is an expression of revolt against the particularisation of consciousness, and is thus an aspect of the most crucial operation of Daumal’s soteriology: negation. As he explains, ‘la pataphysique [...] sera [...] une façon de rire, c’est-à-dire de nier et de rejeter de soi (comme le Rire premier renia une partie de soi, qui fut le Monde)’ (EA 26). Laughter thus becomes synonymous with the refusal to accept the limitations and determinations imposed upon conscious-
ness by contingency, or at least an ironic distanciation from contingency.

Despair at duality, revolt against duality; the third point to be made about the function of humour for Daumal is that revolt should be continuous. Laughter as revolt destroys the tendency of thought to become inert, as Daumal explains in a curious conjunction of Descartes and Jarry: ‘Fais alterner le doute méthodique avec le sarcasme méthodique: ainsi tu éviteras peut-être la momification intellectuelle’ (CC 26-27). Pataphysics acts as a provocation to the rational mind, forcing a perpetual revaluation of position:

[Le] raisonnement pataphysique [...] dès l’abord semble grotesque, puis à y regarder de plus près contenant un sens caché, puis à un nouvel examen décidément grotesque, puis de nouveau vrai plus profondément, et ainsi de suite, l’évidence et le ridicule de la proposition croissant et se renforçant sans fin (EA 23).

The mind in this description of the pataphysical event, however, is oscillating between two perceptions without any meliorative notion; the mind is circling viciously rather than spiralling upwards, to (ab)use Daumal’s idealist metaphor. Only the hypothesis of absolute consciousness allows the mind to break out of its viciously revolving pataphysical mirror. It could be argued that this vicious circle is nevertheless more productive than the vicious circle of purely rational or dogmatic acquiescence which Daumal considered to be the function of any metaphysical system. In Daumal’s pataphysical event the mind is at least constantly provoked out of dormant self-satisfaction into a ceaseless questioning, even if this questioning is somewhat glibly rationalized as a quest. Daumal certainly makes the implication in terms of lived attitudes perfectly clear:

L’homme ou la société doit être à tout moment sur le point d’éclater, à tout moment y renoncer, et refuser de s’arrêter à une forme définie (EA 13).

4 Patametaphysics? Metapataphysics? Does the patter matter?

Laughter then is a manifestation of despair, doubt, revolt, negation. To what extent is this aspect of Daumal’s soteriology a valid application of Jarry’s anti-theory of the comic? We can certainly see theoretical similarities between the two. Jarry’s definition of pataphysics was ‘la science des solutions imaginaires’,17 and it is worth citing Keith Beaumont’s gloss at length:

All creations of the human mind are purely ‘imaginary solutions’, all are equally ‘pataphysical’. But at the same time pataphysics, by placing all such manifestations of human creativity on the same level is able to accept them all with the same dispassionate detachment.18

Let us consider the two fundamental points made here and contrast them with Daumal’s position. All human creations are imaginary solutions: as we
have seen, Daumal considers a metaphysical system to be a necessary system of signs, but no more than signs, images of spiritual progress; indeed the passage cited earlier continues: ‘toute la connaissance humaine, prise comme valant pour et par elle-même, est un gigantesque cercle vicieux’ (T 30). Another, more concrete example of this point is Daumal’s argument that ethical categories such as ‘God’, ‘Good’, ‘The Family’, ‘The Fatherland’, i.e. concepts with involve self-sacrifice or devotion, are merely substitutes, ‘substituts dégradés’ (T 87), ‘dérivés illusoires’ (T 89) of the ‘principe négateur suprême’ (T 81), the absolute, which is the ultimate self-sacrifice, the negation of self (see T 85-90). Dispassionate detachment: Daumal talks of renunciation, abnegation, resignation in ‘l’abandon volontaire d’une révolte possible’ (EA 13), explaining that ‘l’effort de volonté n’est pas de vouloir accomplir une action, mais de la laisser se faire dans un continu détachement’ (EA 13).

There would certainly seem to be congruence of views. Jarry’s position goes further, however, than mere detachment. As the epigraph to Ubu enchainé of 1899 puts it in an anarchically ironic flourish: ‘nous n’aurons point tout démolis si nous ne démolissons même les ruines! Or je n’y vois d’autre moyen que d’en équilibrer de beaux édifices bien ordonnés.’

Similarly, we find Daumal and Gilbert-Lecomte writing in 1929:

Si […] nous sommes dogmatiques, notre seul dogme est

LE CASSE-DOGME […]

Notez donc: DEFINITION: “…Le Grand Jeu est entièrement et systématiquement destructeur…”

Maintenant nous faisons rapidement remarquer que le sens commun se fait du verbe détruire un obscur concept dont la seule exposition démontre le caractère absurde (fabriquer du néant en pilonnant quelque chose). Destruction, bien sûr, ne peut être qu’un aspect de transformation, dont un autre aspect est création (EA 150; the author’s emphasis).

But Jarry’s anarchic vision is total; there is no room for transformation, for creation, in Daumal and Gilbert- Lecomte’s words. As Beaumont says of the Ubu epigraph cited earlier, ‘Ubu’s ultimate objective remains to “demolish everything”‘; and the “fine new edifice” which is to be constructed is to be an instrument for completely sweeping away even the remaining ruins; it is a “construction” designed to complete the task of destruction’, and Beaumont will argue that Jarry’s work is existential avant la lettre, resting upon an awareness of ‘the ultimate illogicality — or “gratuitousness” — of existence itself’. And that sentiment of absurdity is in no way resolved by a Hegelian synthesis, or absolute; the materials Jarry uses in his patchwork of illogicalities collide together as a sign of absurdity unresolved, fragmented figments of the collective imagination.
We can see then how Daumal has adapted pataphysics to throw light on the ‘evidence absurde’ which resulted from his carbon tetrachloride experiences, and to back up a self-questioning experimental metaphysics, an auto-critical ontology which is in permanent crisis. This is a far cry from Jarry’s other definition of pataphysics which stresses its non-, even anti-metaphysical transcending of metaphysics: ‘la pataphysique [...] est la science de ce qui se surajoute à la métaphysique, soit en elle-même, soit hors d’elle-même, s’étendant aussi loin au-delà de celle-ci que celle-ci au-delà de la physique’. Daumal’s use of pataphysics is therefore questionable in the pataphysical frame of reference, as Julien Torma pointed out in a letter to Daumal after Daumal had sent him his essay on pataphysics: ‘Mettre une métaphysique derrière la pataphysique, c’est en faire la façade d’une croyance. Or le propre de la pat.[sic] est d’être une façade sans rien derrière’. In a letter to J. Montmort he expresses his reservations about Daumal even more pointedly: ‘Je crains que la Pat.[sic] ne soit un gentil trompe-l’œil, pour éviter à la mystique de faire vieux-jeu’.

5 Conclusion

Daumal’s use of pataphysics is not, I would contend, quite as cosmetic as Torma suggests. Certainly it fulfils the same function as negation, and therefore might appear to be redundant. But the following passage stresses just how important the concept of humour is in Daumal’s soteriology:

En usant toujours de tels mots que négation, plus exacte peut-être en leurs sens originels, je craindrais de laisser entendre cette opération comme un vain simulacre abstrait du discours, un vain schéme vocal. Et, pour tâcher que tu ne retombes dans le sommeil de ton ‘savoir’ philosophique, je dirai donc plutôt, quand je parle bien du doute méthodique, sarcasme ou déraison méthodique (T 41: Daumal’s emphasis).

Despite its heavily idealist overtones, therefore, Daumal’s method relies far more on the provocation of the rational mind, than it does on the Hegelian Geist, the hypothesis of absolute consciousness.

Humour is not just a Bergsonian social corrective for Daumal, a convenient critical tool with which to excoriate the absurdities of science, as it had been for Jarry in Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien. Nor is it just a protection against a hostile world, as Breton claims, following Freud. For Daumal, it is certainly the former, and could well be the latter; but it is more. It is a soteriological tool of self-criticism and humility, which, like acid, gnaws away at self-importance and self-satisfaction in the search for an authentic self untrammelled by the absurdity of bourgeois individualism. I shall leave the final word to Daumal, whose apparently gnomic Clavicule 3 from Le Contre-Ciel aptly summarizes in its playfulness the joyous rejection of the absurdity of the individual self:
Recule encore derrière toi-même ris:
Le Non est prononcé sur ton rire.
Le Rire est prononcé sur ton NON.
Renie ton Nom, ris de ton NON (CC 26).

Notes


4. I borrow the term from C. Browder, André Breton: Arbiter of Surrealism (Droz, Genève, 1967).


7. Ibid., p. 12; Breton’s emphasis.

8. Ibid., p. 15.


11. ‘Clavicaules d’un grand jeu poétique’, in Le Contre-Ciel (Gallimard, coll. ‘Poésie’, no. 63, Paris, 1970), p. 27. The first section of the ‘Clavicaules’, in which the first version of this statement appears, was first published in Anthologie des philosophes contemporains (eds A. Dandieu & R. Aron, Sagittaire, Paris, 1931): the complete ‘Clavicaules’ were published as the introductory section of the first edition of Le Contre Ciel [sic] by the Editions de l’Université de Paris in 1936. Further references in the text are to the 1970 edition, and are abbreviated as CC.


14. In more or less chronological order of writing: poetry, Le Lyon rouge, suivi de Tempête
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des Cygnes ou La Conquête des Signes (Editions du Collège de Pataphysique, coll.'Ha-Ha', 16 [1965]) and plays, Petit Théâtre (Editions du Collège de Pataphysique, coll.'Ha-Ha', 11 [1957]) both dating from 1922-1924 and both in collaboration with Gilbert-Lecomte; correspondance with Julien Torma, dated 1925-1929 (Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique, 8, pp. 45-52. Some have seen these letters as an elaborate mystification; see P. Minet, "Correspondance: A propos du "Grand Jeu"", in Le Monde [des Livres], 7476, 25 jan. 1969, p. III); the Traité des Patagrammes, written in the form of letters to A. Harfaux in 1932 (Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique, 16 [1955], pp. 3-26; reprinted in EA 209-240); a short story, Le Catéchisme, written in 1935 (Editions du Collège de Pataphysique, coll.'Ha-Ha', 4 [1953]; reprinted in PP 137-141).


19. A. Jarry, Œuvres, p. 427; Beaumont's translation, op.cit., p. 188.

20. K. Beaumont, op.cit., p. 188.


22. See ibid., p. 81.


24. The essay referred to in Note 16.


26. Ibid., p. 53.


28. See p. 532.