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Pataphysics

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PUBLISHER

Times Newspapers Ltd

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Fletcher, Stephen. 2019. "Pataphysics". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/5984>.

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Stephen Fletcher, "Pataphysics", in *Letters to the Editor*, The Times Literary Supplement, No. 5562, 06 Nov (2009), page 6.

Pataphysics

Sir, — the origin of *pataphysics* (see Thomas Postlewait's letter, October 30) lies, bizarrely enough, in a lecture delivered by William Thomson (Lord Kelvin) to the Institution of Civil Engineers, London on 3 May 1883. In that lecture, Thomson stated that, "In physical science the first essential step in the direction of learning any subject is to find principles of numerical reckoning and practicable methods for measuring some quality connected with it. I often say that when you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it; but when you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind; it may be the beginning of knowledge, but you have scarcely in your thoughts advanced to the state of Science, whatever the matter may be." This pompous comment might have sunk into oblivion, were it not for the fact that Thomson's fame led to the publication of his "popular lectures" during the period 1889-94, and his remarks to the civil engineers found their way into volume 1 [Popular Lectures and Addresses Volume I. Lecture on "Electrical Units of Measurement" (delivered 1883). London: Macmillan and Co., 1889, pp. 73-74.] Shortly afterwards, a copy fell into the hands of Alfred Jarry. Appalled by what he read, Jarry countered with "pataphysics", which is surely the branch of knowledge which deals with anything that cannot be measured or reproduced. An etymology (of sorts) was provided in his posthumously published *Gestes et Opinions du Docteur Faustroll, Pataphysicien*, where we find that "Pataphysics... is the science of that which is beyond metaphysics".

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