Conclusion

Jarry’s work can be characterized as playful, elusive, paradoxical and provocative. In fact, these qualifications formed the essence of Jarry’s writing and thinking. Whether he was challenging literary and artistic conventions or dissecting social and political issues, Jarry’s non-conformist attitude was at the heart of his literary texts and determined his outlook on the world. Nowhere does this become clearer than in the two Almanacs. Although long overlooked, they are in many ways exemplary, if not the most radical expression of Jarry’s poetics.

In chapter one I showed how Symbolism provided an inspirational environment for Jarry in the 1890’s and helped shape his ideas on literature. The ironic manner in which Jarry outlined his (Symbolist) aesthetics in ‘Linteau’ (1894) already illustrated his scrutinizing attitude towards contemporary literary ideas. ‘Linteau’ is a seminal text; a starting point for understanding the Almanacs. In it, he introduced his vision of a polysemic and hybrid work, inclusive of genres and forms from all cultural spheres. In short, he was in search of models and modes of expression that defied contemporary notions of originality and artistic beauty. Around the time of the first Almanac (1898), Jarry’s career witnessed several changes in publishers and platforms that also signalled a transformation in his writing. His texts were now being published by the more progressive and more politicized La Revue Blanche, where the editors were more willing to accept Jarry’s uncompromising attitude when it came to his texts. Jarry’s work left Symbolism behind and embarked on a new direction set in motion since Ubu Roi (1896). From 1900 onwards and around the time of the second Almanac (1901), Jarry also became acquainted with a new generation of avant-garde writers and artists, including Apollinaire and Picasso, on whom he would have a considerable influence.

In fact, several phases of Jarry’s career and aspects of his work appear to come together in the Almanacs. They link Jarry’s early Symbolist influences, his love for images from L’Ymagier (1894/95), the cycle of Ubu plays, the erudite and innovative novel Gestes et Opinions du Docteur Faustroll (1911[1898]), his satirical journalism, the more accessible, titillating nature of novels such as Messaline (1901) or Le Surmâle (1902), the light-hearted playfulness of the libretto’s he wrote for Terrasse’s operetta’s, such as Le Moutardier du Pape (1903), and pataphysics. Jarry’s first published prose text ‘Guignol’(1893) introduced Ubu’s pataphysical knowledge to the world, but nowhere is this more clearly expressed than in the Almanacs. The absurd logic, crucial to pataphysics, characterizes the texts and the character of Ubu. It shows in Ubu’s ability to speak out on every subject, in the focus on ridiculously trivial details to comment on important events of the year, in short in a constant reevaluation of accepted values and ordering structures. Both Ubu and pataphysics function as provocative tools that challenge not only contemporary literary aesthetics, but contemporary cultural sensibilities in general.
The Almanacs were inspired by aspects of the artistic-counterculture found amongst fin de siècle humorist literary groups and in the cabarets of Montmartre, as well as by popular tradition. I argued in chapter two that the almanac genre had the advantage of falling outside of contemporary literary genres or models of writing. The artist cabaret must have appealed to Jarry for the same reason. Characteristics of Montmartre’s cabaret culture (use of popular culture, collaboration, mixing the arts, satire and provocation) and of the popular genre of the almanac (heterogeneity, ‘anonymity’ and collective authorship) suited Jarry’s vision of literature and can be found in both Almanacs. As a result Ubu’s Almanacs linger between journalism, literature, popular culture and artistic counterculture, but precisely that hybridity gave Jarry the tools to play with prevailing notions of art and literature.

The Almanacs were, as I showed in chapter three, the result of an artistic collaboration. The contributors, Nabi painter Pierre Bonnard, composer Claude Terrasse, poet Félicien Fagus and art dealer Ambroise Vollard, all from Jarry’s inner circle, brought with them various cultural spheres and artistic domains which influenced the content, form and structure of the two works. The historical details of this collective effort also illustrated how the Almanacs were known and appreciated among the literary and artist avant-garde of the day and how Ubu had already become a literary archetype. The pseudo-anonymous, collective genesis of the Almanacs challenged and reinvented contemporary concepts of the author and originality. Jarry of course remained in control of the creative process as the final editor; the other authors also still labelled him as the main author. However, the role of the author was re-interpreted. He was no longer a ‘solitary’ genius author, creator of unique material but a supervisor and editor of the text, ordering the words and images.

The genesis of the Almanacs as a collective work is reflected in their structure and composition, as I showed in chapter four. The collage form was also a logical extension of Jarry’s vision of literature. His ideal text was heterogeneous, polysemic, fragmentary, inclusive of other artistic media and non-literary texts, and not restricted by genre boundaries or narrative conventions. The collage in the Almanacs has several effects. First of all, the incorporation of pre-existing texts challenged contemporary ideas in which the uniqueness of the literary text was defined by the originality of the material and singularity of the author. Secondly, the collage practice also re-evaluates the role of the author. With the Almanacs in particular (but also visible in other works such as Faustroll) Jarry and his collaborators put into practice another vision of the literary text and the author: the texts or materials themselves did not need to be authentic; the author’s arrangement and their insertion in a new context ensured the originality of the work. The author retains a central role in the literary work, but not as a divinely inspired singular genius. Instead, he becomes a ‘bricoleur’, who consciously cuts and pastes his texts, combines the material, and invites the reader to make certain connections.

Jarry’s inventive use of collage in the Almanacs is closely related to his particular use of language, as I also demonstrated in chapter four. In his writing he constantly alternates for example between literal and figurative connotations, and he associates words through phonetic and visual puns.
His economical use of language results in a highly constructed, dense text; no word is redundant, no connotation neglected. Collage, or combining apparently random fragments to create new connections, helped achieve Jarry’s ideal of an associative, polysemic text. Apart from the obvious playfulness and humour of the texts, the puns are also employed to generate meaning and to create an intricate web of semantic threads. As I showed in the analysis of the ‘February’ text of the first Almanac, one word or sign (in this case ‘Poissons’) generated the narrative through an exploration of all its connotations. Thirdly, Jarry’s use of collage therefore challenged conventional modes of representation, as reality was documented through bits and pieces from that reality (fragments, quotations, visual signs) rather than telling and ordering it through conventional narrative. He pushed the boundaries of contemporary definitions of the literary text.

Jarry’s innovation of the literary form can be seen within a more general crisis of representation that was being felt around 1900 among artists and scholars. Scientists and philosophers challenged accepted knowledge about how man perceived the world. This influenced several artists and writers who sought new ways of representing the dynamic and complex nature of modern life. Ubu’s Almanacs reflect if not foreshadow paradigmatic changes in art and literature of this period. Jarry can be considered a frontrunner when it comes to his use of collage in the Almanacs. It is known that he influenced artists such as Picasso or Apollinaire, who used the technique respectively in painting and in poetry. As the artistic expression of broader cultural developments, collage was certainly ‘in the air’, but Jarry was one of the first to practice it, certainly in a literary work.

In chapter five I discussed the prominent interaction with newspapers in Ubu’s Almanacs. This is of course visible in the collage of newspaper fragments, but the content and discourse of the texts are equally inspired by news and journalism. I linked this to the major role of the press in society at the time. Writers were sceptical and ambivalent when it came to newspapers. They felt torn between the new financial and creative opportunities the press offered and the commercialism and perceived superficiality that went along with it. A similar attitude can also be discerned in Jarry’s work. Jarry was critical of the press, of its mass appeal, and of writers who used journalism as a commercial or political platform. However, he also turned to journalism as a new source of creativity. The Almanacs prefigure the tone and style of Jarry’s chronicles, in their fascination for news and their innovative juxtaposition of journalism and literature. In the Almanacs, forms and genres from the press (such as the interview or advertisements) are used in order to satirize them and to challenge journalistic representations of reality. Jarry appears to blur the boundaries between journalism and literature in the Almanacs. Still, the fact that journalist genres and aesthetics are turned into literature suggests that the two nevertheless remained distinct in Jarry’s eyes. This is reinforced by the satire, as well as by the fact that Ubu’s Almanac is presented as a ‘cure’ for newspapers and that Ubu’s ‘alternative reality’ is offered as the only real ‘truth’. Despite the obvious irony, there is a serious undertone in that statement, as it refers to the status of the literary work in society and literature’s relationship to everyday life. Faced with contemporary manifestations of mass culture, such as newspapers or
advertising, writers and artists felt they needed to redefine the position of art in society.

In chapter six I addressed this complex issue in more detail and showed how Jarry’s attitude was, as often, ironical and ambivalent. Like so many contemporaries, he expressed concerns about the pervasiveness of journalism or about writers bowing to commercial or popular standards. Through the character of Ubu a similar dismissal of the banality of mass culture was expressed, but at the same time fin de siècle anxieties about mass culture were also partially ridiculed. In Jarry’s work, mass culture seems to be considered as a challenge and not simply as a threat to art. This was, in itself, not radically new, since many of his contemporaries, writers and artists, looked to everyday life or popular forms for inspiration. However, with the Almanacs, Jarry radically defied contemporary literary standards of ‘beauty’, through the wordplay, the bawdy humour, the crude and disruptive collage aesthetic, and the reinvention of the literary form. Jarry did of course not aim at debunking art or levelling it with more popular forms of expression. However, he also refused to simply aestheticize popular culture in order to lift it to contemporary artistic standards. The perceived vulgarity or triviality of mass culture is hardly elevated to universal beauty and truth, at least not the kind of higher, symbolic truth and beauty most (Symbolist) contemporaries were aiming at. Instead, Jarry chose to create a more hybrid form. The Almanacs are exemplary of the new, yet ambiguous, bonds emerging between art and mass culture at the beginning of the twentieth century. Jarry challenged the formulas and conventions of both popular aesthetics as well as literary aesthetics. By allowing these new forms and materials to enter the literary work, Jarry created new structures, genres and modes of representation (such as collage). Furthermore, the use of ‘everyday’ materials made it possible for Jarry to bring literature closer to everyday life, but without bowing to the demands of mass culture.

Considering their pseudo-journalistic form, it is not so surprising that Jarry addresses several ‘hot’ issues in the Almanacs, including the Dreyfus Affair and colonial politics. Most of Jarry’s earlier texts hardly dealt with current events, but with these two works Jarry definitely broke with that trend, as I showed in chapter seven. When it comes to social and political issues in the Almanacs, Jarry is first and foremost interested in challenging the ‘logic’ behind ideologies and ideas which claim the truth. He would also continue that strategy in his chronicles. Jarry’s innovative use of language is employed to question society’s discourses and values. The collage and wordplay become tools for social commentary. As far as is documented, Jarry stayed clear from political movements and public commitment to any specific political ideology, as he guarded his independence as a writer. Yet precisely this independence seemed to have been a condition for his reflection on political issues. Jarry probably consciously situated the Almanacs in a tradition of literary satire. There are obvious hints to Rabelais, Molière and Swift in the texts. Ubu’s excessive cruelty and lack of conscience or moral centre has obvious comic effects, but precisely the combination of comedy with the very real and serious issues addressed in the texts, including anti-Semitism, racial prejudice, abuse of power and colonial exploitation, often make for an uncomfortable read. Without pointing
explicitly to one specific ethical position, the brutal reality behind these issues is made evident. For readers aware of the seriousness of the themes, the texts in the Almanacs invite critical reflection, or at least provoke a reaction. However, whereas the Almanacs seem to implicitly side with the pro-Dreyfus camp and with the anti-colonialist movement, what strikes the most is the overall challenge posed to the cultural and political establishment. The humour, playfulness and paradox of the texts (in form and content), as well as the absurd, ‘pataphysical’ logic, seemed necessary means for the subversive anti-establishment position Jarry embodied, whether in his public persona or in his work. This independent, detached, attitude prevented Jarry from becoming caught up in institutionalized politics and joining the ranks of contemporary ‘intellectuals’, while still confronting and exposing serious issues in his texts.

The Almanacs are key works for understanding Jarry’s poetics and they shed more light on Jarry’s cultural and historical position. Jarry was a child of his time and his work owed a lot to contemporary developments in art and literature. Through their dialogue with contemporary culture, the Almanacs provide an off-beat perspective on French society around 1900. Jarry’s work also took on a new direction, as he broke with the hermetic Symbolism of his earlier texts to become more engaged with his time and with contemporary culture. The Almanacs are an example of how literary works responded to their surroundings. They were to a degree shaped by contemporary cultural developments (the advent of mass culture, newspapers and advertising, the political turmoil of the fin de siècle) in their form, style and content. A number of formal innovations are visible in the Almanacs; the appropriation of new genres and discourses (from popular culture and journalism) within the literary work, collage, juxtaposition of text and image, and an economical, innovative use of language, made up of puns and endless connotations and references, that defied contemporary notions of genre and what a prose text should be.

Examining the Almanacs, it becomes clear that Jarry was at the forefront of many innovations that would occur in twentieth century art and literature. Furthermore he emerges as a key, transitional figure between the late nineteenth century Decadents and Symbolists, humorist groups (such as the Hydropathes), the artistic cabarets and the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century. As I said in the introduction, Jarry has influenced artists and writers throughout the twentieth century up until today, his work has inspired philosophers and Ubu and pataphysics even found their way into pop culture. But despite Jarry’s cult status, his texts have always remained largely unread and unknown, no doubt due to their experimental and often hermetic character. With my discussion of the Almanacs, I hope to have not only demonstrated their vital role in Jarry’s oeuvre and their importance for understanding his ideas and writing. I also hope this thesis contributes to a better understanding of Jarry and his oeuvre, which is valuable in its self, but not in the least because of Jarry’s lasting legacy in literature and art.