

A lovely Curiosity

Raymond Roussel (1877–1933)

William Clark



"A formidable poetic apparatus"

Marcel Proust

"Raymond Roussel belongs to the most important French literature of the beginning of the century"

Alain Robbe-Grillet

"Genius in its pure state"

Jean Cocteau

"Creator of authentic myths"

Michel Leiris

"A great poet"

Marcel Duchamp

"The President of the Republic of Dreams"

Louis Aragon

"The greatest mesmerist of modern times"

André Breton

"The plays are among the strangest and most enchanting in modern literature"

John Ashbery

"My fame will outshine that of Victor Hugo or Napoleon"

Raymond Roussel

Victor who? Go into any book shop and they'll probably not have anything on or by Raymond Roussel. In 1957 the young Michel Foucault noticed some faded yellow books in José Corti's famous Parisian book store and tentatively asked the grand old man "who was Raymond Roussel?" Wearing by Foucault's ignorance, Corti looked at him with a "generous sort of pity" and feeling a sense of loss sighed: "But after all, Roussel..." What Corti told him and what he found in the pages he raced through mesmerised Foucault into paying for an expensive copy of 'La Vue' and (in two months) he wrote the darkly romantic 'Death and the Labyrinth' on Roussel's world. ¹

When it was translated into English an anonymous reviewer in The Times Literary Supplement remarked that the book 'seems addressed to an audience of cognoscenti, which must be exceedingly small in France and can hardly number more than two or three here.' However, Foucault's book was noticed by the new novelists in France,

and Alain Robbe-Grillet saw the 'fascinating essay' as one of the signs of a growing interest in Roussel, albeit not widely spread beyond certain circles. Roussel's life and work are so unusual that for a long time some people believed him to be a fictional character. ²

A new biography 'Raymond Roussel' by Francois Caradec and translated by Ian Monk has recently been published by Atlas Press—who in a series of Anthologies have enthusiastically preserved Roussel. This comes fairly soon after Mark Ford's 'Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams', (Cornell University Press) embalmed him a bit earlier, and there is some difference of opinion and emphasis in the two works.

His objective of complete artificiality caused Roussel to state he drew none of his creations from real life. Caradec just wonders 'who he was trying to kid' and similarly does not take Roussel's final work, *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres*, on face value—few serious commentators do. Colin Raff's review of Ford's book states Roussel "derived none of his striking creations from experience, wrote unimpeded by introspection or sentiment, unhampered by moral reflection or facile realism." For Raff there is nothing 'transcendental' in Roussel: "The author's creative procedures are the final revelation." ³

The generalisation inherent in that is challenged by Caradec who I think is closer to events. One might as well say that the artists creative intentions were the 'final revelation'. The writing can only be regarded as an experiment in this direction.

"I call them famous because they are appreciated by me and some of my friends" Baudelaire

Roussel is on the sharp point of a whole anti-tradition in French writing which influenced modern art and modernism at a very fundamental level. Socially he was not part of the leftist avant-garde tradition which grew out of the suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871, when the French state turned on its internal opposition in a besieged city. Fabulously wealthy, Roussel is more associated with the Aristocratic and the 'Dandy'.

For Baudelaire in "The Painter of Modern Life" (1859) the dandy was an integral aspect to the character of the modern artist:

"Contrary to what a lot of thoughtless people seem to believe, dandyism is not even an excessive delight in clothes and material elegance. For the perfect dandy, these things are not more than the symbol of the aristocratic superiority of his mind....It is, above all the burning desire to create a personal form of originality, within the external limits of social conventions... dandyism in certain respects comes close to spirituality and to stoicism, but a dandy can never be a vulgar man... Dandyism appears especially in those periods of transition when democracy has not yet become all-powerful, and when aristocracy is only partially weakened and discredited... Dandyism is the last flicker of heroism in decadent ages... Dandyism is a setting sun; like the declining star, it is magnificent, without heat and full of melancholy."

Which is a perfect description of Roussel: the language is also mirrored by Foucault:

"Things, words, vision and death, the sun and language make a unique form...Roussel in some

way has defined its geometry."

Dandyism is also seen as a conscious and elaborate rejection of bourgeois life, accentuating difference in a society that was moving toward uniformization. ⁴ In some respects the Dandy had to conjure up a world of artistic credibility, integrity and high standards from which to react and upon which to perform. Knowing he would be forgotten Roussel planned his own mythology, part of which was to posthumously reveal a great secret behind his books.

Like the declining star

This was Roussel's unique compositional technique which generated a structure for the plots and images of his writing, in much the same way that meter and rhyme control the arrangement of words in a sonnet. This synesthesia between music and poetry and prose developed gradually. "The quotidian is notable by its absence from his work: this is not a literature with much appeal for anyone in search of a social conscience. But if one is magnetised by works of the imagination derived almost solely from linguistics, Roussel represents some kind of summation. How I Wrote Certain of My Books, the posthumously published testament in which Roussel delineates many—but by no means all—of his writing techniques, is, as they say, essential reading. As a vade mecum it doesn't necessarily make the books easier to penetrate, but it does provide some clue as to what lies beneath them (though no matter how knowledgeable these clues make us, as readers, feel, no amount of shouting "Open Sesame!" at the threshold of the books entices them to reveal all their secrets). The most obvious examples...can be found early in his career, before he learnt to cover his tracks...One finds this mixture of the "simple as ABC with the quintessential" (to quote Michel Leiris' memorable definition) as either childish or brilliantly inventive. A Rousselian finds both attitudes acceptable." ⁵

The process is one of unforeseen creation due to phonic combinations and is based more on puns than rhymes:

"I chose two similar words. For example billiards and pilliards (looter). Then I added to it words similar but taken in two different directions, and I obtained two almost identical sentences thus. The two found sentences, it was a question of writing a tale which can start with the first and finish by the second. Amplifying the process then, I sought new words reporting itself to the word billiards, always to take them in a different direction than that which was presented first of all, and that provided me each time a creation moreover. The process evolved/moved and I was led to take an unspecified sentence, of which I drew from the images by dislocating it, a little as if it had been a question of extracting some from the drawings of rebus." ⁶

In lavishly published volumes Roussel's technique develops strongly from *La Vue* (1903), *Impressions d'Afrique* (1909) and then *Locus Solus* (1914), here summed up by John Ashbery: ⁷

"A prominent scientist and inventor, Martial Canterel, has invited a group of colleagues to visit the park of his country estate, Locus Solus ("Solitary Place"). As the group tours the estate, Canterel shows them inventions of ever-increasing complexity and strangeness. Again, exposition is invariably followed by explanation, the cold hysteria of the former giving way to the innumerable ramifications of the latter. After an aerial pile driver which is constructing a mosaic of teeth and a huge glass diamond filled with water in which float a dancing girl, a hairless cat, and the preserved head of



Danton, we come to the central and longest passage: a description of eight curious tableaux vivants taking place inside an enormous glass cage. We learn that the actors are actually dead people whom Canterel has revived with “resurrectine,” a fluid of his invention which if injected into a fresh corpse causes it continually to act out the most important incident of its life.”

Caradec’s biography (revised in 97 from that published in 72 because of the new finds of Roussel’s papers) establishes that in real life, Roussel on several occasions visited the astronomer and scientist Camille Flammarion and witnessed his peculiar experiments and observations of the outer planets, then still in the process of discovery. It would seem that Roussel’s admiration for the Jules Verne-like scientist Flammarion, was combined in the character, ‘Martial Canterel’ with Roussel’s own aspirations to be a scientist and explorer. Flammarion even proposed him (like a scene from a Jules Verne novel) to the French Astronomical Society. Bringing out the person more than the process, Caradec tempts us to read Roussel as a blending of Jules Verne’s, Flammarion’s and Pierre Loti’s influence.⁸

Ford too, had access to many of Roussel’s manuscripts, including his early unfinished epic poems:

“In these he found literally thousands of pages of obsessive description and endless digressions from the main plots. Ford calls this prolixity “compulsive,” and that’s not overstating it: Act II of the 7000-line *La Seine* contains nearly 400 named characters, all spewing banal small talk. Ford’s book demonstrates that Roussel developed his techniques as an attempt to somehow control his manic verbosity.”⁹

There’s none of that in Caradec’s book, which presents a much more studious and controlled Roussel. Opinions also seem to differ in Ford’s assertion that:

“...none of this could persuade the bourgeois multitude (whose tastes he shared, and whose adulation he coveted) of Roussel’s gloire. Only the contemporary avant-garde—the surrealists, whose work he professed not to understand—were enthusiastic...”¹⁰

Nothing interesting ever persuades the Bourgeois multitude, but he confuses us here with that ‘only’ and the suggestion that Roussel had bourgeois taste. Caradec (and Andrew Thompson in the *Atlas Anthology*) establish that Roussel was appreciated by a range of critics and several other influential writers and reviewers of his day: some of the earliest were Edmond Rostand (author of *Cyrano de Bergerac*), Andre Gide and his fellow Dandy, Robert de Montesquiou who said of *Impressions d’Afrique* in 1921:

“The second half of the work explains everything, not merely with satisfying logic, better than that, with a mathematical precision. The author says somewhere of one of his characters, “the sum of his orations presented a great unity.” This judgement could be applied to his narratives. The maddest incoherencies of the preceding chapters are explained with a geometric exactitude and with such an equilibrium of corroborating evidence that it almost becomes monotonous. It seems they must represent the hoc erat in votis of this particular genre. It ends up giving these combinations, which are above all else eccentric and bizarre, a bourgeois appearance.”¹¹

Roussel wrote more to vainly immortalise himself than to please the ‘Bourgeois multitude’: wealth freed him from that nightmare. Caradec constantly questions the pure abstraction others claim for Roussel. With *Locus Solus* Roussel’s ‘evolved procedure’ (as Robert de Montesquiou termed it) develops the word *demoiselle* (meaning



‘young girl’) to pun into ‘pile driver’ and ‘dragon-fly’ and then grow into the ridiculous flying machine mentioned earlier. But *demoiselle* was also the name of an early balloon-assisted aeroplane owned by the aviator Santos-Dumont. These were the days when humans learned to fly and as obsessed with science as Roussel was, he couldn’t help noticing such an event. John Ashberry suggests that just as the mechanical task of finding a rhyme sometimes inspires a poet to write a great line, Roussel’s “rimes de faits” (rhymes for events) helped him to utilise his unconscious mind.

As Roussel developed as a writer his procedure grew to an incredibly complex method:

“We find here, transposed onto the level of poetry, the technique of the stories with multiple interlocking episodes (tiroirs) so frequent in Roussel’s work, but here the episodes appear in the sentences themselves, and not in the story, as though Roussel had decided to use these parentheses to speed the disintegration of language, in a way comparable to that in which Mallarmé used blanks to produce those ‘prismatic subdivisions of the idea’”¹²

Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique

His master work is perhaps *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique*¹³ which comprises of four long Cantos, each containing a single sentence which starts out as a simple poetic statement or description. Roussel uses a series of parentheses which run to a maximum of five brackets-within-brackets, occasionally a footnote refers to a further poem containing its own ‘onion-like’ sets of brackets. Everything is written in rhyming ‘Alexandrines’ (French heroic verse of six feet), which is extraordinary given the self-imposed constraints of Roussel’s procedure.

The presence of parentheses within parentheses produces multiple trains of thought. Not all the parenthetical rings sit neatly within one another. Canto II, for example, dips in and out of the fourth parenthesis at irregular intervals, but the poem gradually focuses into an impressive simplicity, like music. Roussel himself was a musician and the structuring of these images and ideas resemble musical form more than conventional poetic form.

If you can’t face actually reading it, Juan-Esteban Fassio, of the College de Pataphysique, has invented a machine to do it: a kind of card index on a revolving drum with a handle. As one critic notes Roussel managed to enable himself to read his own books as if he hadn’t written them. In 1950 Michel Butor stated that:

“It is not the juxtaposition of words which explains the wealth of repetitions and of reproductive apparatus encountered in these texts. On the contrary, it is this

Robert de Montesquiou

obsession which makes us realise what an irresistible compulsion, and authentic and deep-seated instinct, led Roussel to choose these singular methods, and not any others, for writing these works.”¹⁴

One of the most remarkable peculiarities of *Locus Solus* and *Impressions d’Afrique* is that nearly all the scenes are described twice. First, we witness them as if they were a ceremony or a theatrical event; and then they are explained to us, by their history being recounted. This is particularly the case in *Impressions*; the author went to the trouble, after publication, of inserting a slip of green paper on which he suggested that “those readers not initiated in the art of Raymond Roussel are advised to begin this book at p. 212 and go on to p. 455, and then turn back to p. 1 and read to p. 211.”¹⁵

Speak, my darling

Although complex, Roussel’s methodology is one for writing; not for reading, which is performed in the normal way:

“Lucius Egroizard, who was driven insane by the sight of drunken brigands trampling his infant daughter to death: Not only does Egroizard compulsively sculpt lightweight gold figurines that repeat the brigands’ lethal jig in mid-air, but the very hairs on his nearly bald head periodically detach themselves to mimic the dance. Egroizard experiments with an array of strange objects, until he constructs a Goldbergian contraption that produces a sound identical to his daughter’s voice “It’s you, my Gillette. They haven’t killed you. You’re here next to me Speak, my darling.” And between these broken phrases, the fragment of the word, which he constantly reproduced, returned again and again, like a response. Speaking in hushed tones, Canterel led us quietly away, so as to allow this salutary crisis to run its course in peace.”¹⁶

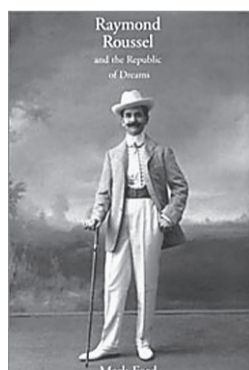
Roussel loved children’s shows and the popular theatre, disdaining the ‘theatre of ideas.’ One American critic dismisses Roussel as composing simply “fractured...fairy tales energised with a Jules Verne-inspired reinterpretation of the physical universe”—yeah that old thing. The fact that a book may resemble children’s stories does not necessarily imply it was childishly written: as *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Alice in Wonderland* and most of Borges would suggest. Roussel was greatly interested in children’s games and puzzles (as was Lewis Carroll).¹⁷

Michel Leris says, “Roussel here discovered one of the most ancient and widely used patterns of the human mind: the formation of myths starting from words. That is (as though he had decided to illustrate Max Müller’s theory that myths were born out of a sort of ‘disease of language’), transposition of what was at first a simple fact of language into a dramatic action.” Elsewhere he suggests that these childish devices led Roussel back to a common source of mythology or collective unconscious.

But it was with Roussel’s plays that the ideas of *Impressions of Africa* and *Locus Solus* came to life and caused chaos in French theatre. Yes—the bourgeois multitude was outraged.

‘There is no one who has not caressed some ambitious dream.’ Raymond Roussel

How did Roussel become so obscure? I hear no one ask. Literary and artistic success are often based on mass marketing masquerading as artistic achievement; media attention dictates ‘literary establishment.’ But Roussel paid for loads of it. Literary history has a political economy which we are taught to believe (and not participate) in... or could it just be that reading the work is like wan-



dering on a complex system of invisible trampolines?

The Second World War erased just about everything in Paris and the post-war literary climate was dominated by Sartre and existentialism. But the late 50s saw the emergence of the Nouveau Roman (Alain Robbe-Grillet, et al.) and the Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle—Workshop of Potential Literature founded in Paris in 1960 and including writers such as Georges Perec and Italo Calvino) a group of ‘Rousselian’ enthusiasts who extended his “generative device,” where the reader is obscurely aware of some other ordering principle beneath the surface, as similar elements keep recurring in unpredictable patterns. Both Caradec and Ian Monk are members of the Oulipo. As the Atlas website puts it:

“Our aim as publishers has been to delineate a coherent “anti-tradition” whose roots reach back to Romanticism, an oppositional literary and artistic manifestation which, in its various guises, has maintained an obstinate presence within an inimical host: the literary establishment...We see no necessity to acknowledge any idea of “progress” in this tradition, although naturally enough, it manifests itself in new forms at different times and in different places... Likewise, we do not subscribe to the notion of the end of modernism, of the concept of an avant-garde, of “experimental” writing, call it what you will. The writing we are committed to publishing is modern, despite its being from the last hundred and fifty years...”

Roussel entrusted his literary fate to a small gang of Parisian Surrealists—as can be seen from Caradec’s examination of his will—which he misregarded as his dedicated coterie. It is because of a few genuine admirers such as Michel Leris that his work has survived. It is a pity Apollinaire—who coined the term ‘surréalisme’ for his own play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, to designate an analogical way of representing reality *beyond realism*—did not write about him. But along with Marcel Duchamp he delightedly attended Roussel’s plays and both were heavily influenced.

Put on at Roussel’s own vast expense, they enjoyed some vogue largely because of the vociferous reactions by the audience. Here, according to Foucault the Surrealists tried to ‘orchestrate the character of Roussel’ with contrived demonstrations. Andre Breton, Aragon, Picabia, Robert Desnos and Micheal Leris (all on complementary tickets and probably out of their heads) went to the premieres and provoked the stunned audience. This ended with the police being called to assist with something like a rugby scrum between the actors the audience and (as the ball) the Surrealists. The events are genuinely hysterical; it is a strange thought that we could have had a sound and film recording of the events: nothing remains...(?)

Antonin Artaud observed that the issue is to “rediscover the secret of an objective poetry based on the humour that theatre renounced, that it abandoned to Vaudeville, before cinema got hold of it.” Someone said that Roussel put an audience through a worse theatre of cruelty than Artaud dreamed of.¹⁸ It was crippling obvious the actors were in it for the money, but this made the theatre come to life and life all the more theatrical. After a sober description of the cast Caradec describes the first night of *Impressions d’Afrique* with “All hell broke loose”. Descriptions of it would have to range from the Carry On films crossed with Terry Gilliam’s animations...and that was just the stalls...but we should strip away these influences and imagine it watched by an audience barely acquainted with Chaplin...it was like nothing else.

A few critics worried that the plays were the

new *Ubu Roi* or *Calagari* (sets were variously described as Dada, Cubist and Expressionist which slightly illustrates how close these ‘styles’ are and how Roussel could encompass them). When revues of *Impressions d’Afrique* appeared in the popular press Roussel felt that he had passed ‘quite unnoticed’. This is not unsurprising because as a young man he dreamed of supreme glory:

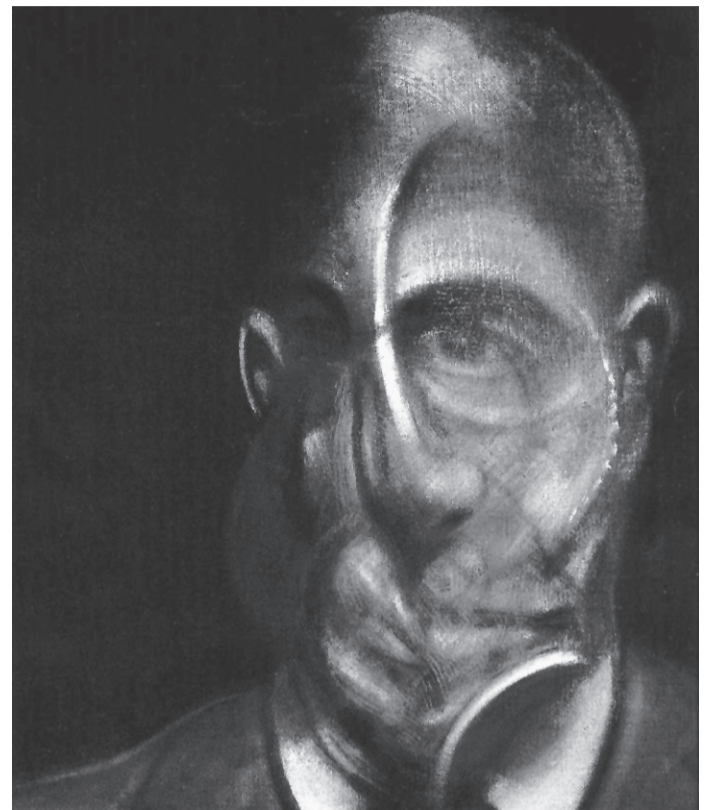
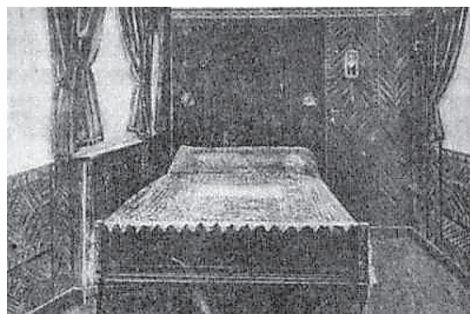
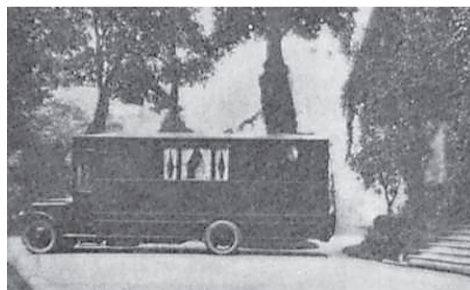
“...What I wrote was surrounded by radiance, I closed the curtains, for I was afraid that the slightest gap might allow the luminous beams that were radiating from my pen to escape outside, I wanted to tear the screen away suddenly and illuminate the world. If I left these papers lying about, they would have sent rays of light as far as China and a bewildered crowd would have burst into the house...”¹⁹

Roussel’s extravagances are no worse than Hollywood producer’s love letters to themselves in multi-million dollar crap. The Surrealists (yet to enter their political phase) did not fail to notice that he was a walking advertisement for the redistribution of wealth, and sponged off him, as did practically everyone in the art world he came into contact with. He had to pay the actors extra money to go on stage giving them pearls and rare gifts and simply more cash.

‘A conspiracy of knavery’

The focus on the method and the structure has engendered a move away from viewing Roussel in relation to his times. His very involvement with the disreputable world of theatre displaced his own position in the upper class and he seems (almost by chance) to express its social values parodically. One of the characters in *Impressions d’Afrique* devises a parody of the stock exchange and we can choose to see Roussel as the drop-out Dandy son of a stockbroker, mocking the stock market as the absurd basis of the stability of our society. Perhaps, but people simply felt that he was having them on, that his work was an elaborate practical joke, that they were somehow being swindled:

“Apollinaire knew he was collaborating in an elaborate and sly mystification called modern art. Manet’s public provocations and Toulouse-Lautrec’s cabaret posters had introduced the principle that the studio joke can carry all before it. What begins as parody and protest ends up as the dominant style [...] it is possible to claim that the art of the early twentieth century in France is based on an elaborate hoax—a dare, a conspiracy of knavery on the part of many artists—and to make the claim without dismissing that art as worthless. After Jarry and Apollinaire and Duchamp, we have had to deal with several generations of gifted impostors. They were also dedicated to art.”²⁰



Francis Bacon’s portrait of Micheal Leris

Somehow the ambition of a rich man is disingenuous compared to that of the bourgeoisie theatre owners, newspaper critics or actors: because he can purchase their support. Roussel’s theatrical ambitions clearly delineated that any aspect of the tightly controlled artistic society could be bought: and that notions of artistic integrity were illusory. That probably made people uneasy too. From this distance Roussel comes out of it all looking like a hybrid of an artist and patron and a paragon of charm, wit and elan, unconsciously exposing an art world blind to its venal aspects and confined within the boundaries of simplistic rules.

“The actors were selected with a view to attracting the public. Roussel was open handed and paid them what they wanted. When observing how hard it would be to make one of the lines work, which, despite its dullness, Roussel was particularly keen on keeping, Pierre Frondaie exclaimed in desperation; “To make that work we’d need Sarah Bernhardt!” Roussel replied: “Do you think she would accept? How much would she want?”²¹

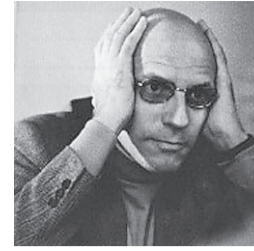
Yet he seems to have been devastated by the reviews. Pierre Frondaie (who had been hired to adapt *Locus Solus*) had slipped in cutting jibes at the reviewers sitting there on the first night. Still devastated ten years later Roussel wrote that afterwards there followed a ‘river of fountain pens’ from the critics. Nevertheless, he had an almost clockwork confidence, an indefatigable ability to persevere, oblivious to the insanity of his plays:

“Thinking that the public’s incomprehension perhaps derived from the fact that I had until then presented only adaptations of novels, I decided to write something specifically for the stage.”

Even after the stockmarket collapse the third play was put on with slightly more modest resources, here we see Roussel ‘composing his audience’ as if it were part of the casting. Although it has something of the Ernie Wise about it, one expects him to sound like one of Michael Palin’s characters: surely a film will one day be made of Roussel’s life. One has been made of the Petomane—with Leonard Rossiter—and surely Roussel had just as much to say, albeit by a different procedure.

Writers have left the music of the plays largely untouched and it is still in the early stages of critical comprehension. Yet no one can deny that

Left: Roussel’s motorised caravan



Michel Foucault

Roussel was proficient musically, having studied at the Paris Conservatoire. When things got completely out of hand with the plays he, on occasion, would dive down to the piano and rattle off a crowd pleaser. At one performance they performed the whole thing to one guy in the audience and then gave him his money back.

“Was it not from India that Raymond Roussel sent an electric heater to a friend who has asked for something rare as a souvenir?” Roger Vitrac (1928)

Roussel’s extravagant squandering of his fabulous wealth (mostly on his writing) and his curious mental state are the subject of numerous anecdotes of self-indulgence and pretence. Practically no one bought the books. The first edition of *Locus Solus* was not sold out until 22 years later. To make them look like best-sellers he produced several impressions at a time, printing ‘tenth impression’ on the covers of brand-new publications. Roussel was the child of an overbearing mother: according to Ford after the death of his brother “Madame Roussel insisted that her surviving son should undergo a medical examination every day.” On their last foreign holiday they went to Ceylon and Madame Roussel brought along a coffin, so as not to inconvenience the other travellers in case she passed away. Supposedly Roussel, through a detective agency, commissioned a commercial artist named Henri Zo to provide 59 illustrations for one of his last works. Roussel supplied Zo with simple verbal descriptions for each image and, without ever meeting the artist, accepted the results that emerged. Roussel also travelled around Europe in a giant plushly furnished motorised caravan: forty years ahead of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. He displayed this in front of the Pope and Mussolini who were suitably impressed and it appeared in the equivalent of *Hello* magazine. But, and its a huge psychological but:

“Daily contact with reality which to him seemed strewn with pitfalls obliged Roussel to take a number of precautions. During a certain period of his life when he suffered anguish whenever he happened to be in a tunnel, and was anxious to know at all times where he was, he avoided travelling at night; the idea that the act of eating is harmful to one’s ‘serenity’ also led him, during one period, to fast for days on end, after which he would break his fast by going to Rumpelmeyer’s and devouring a vast quantity of cakes (corresponding to his taste for childish foods: marshmallows, milk, bread pudding, racahout); certain places to which he was attached by particularly happy childhood memories were taboo for him: Aix-les-Bains, Luchon, Saint-Moritz...; also, afraid of being injured or causing injury in conversations, he used to say that in order to avoid all dangerous talk with people, he preceded by asking them questions.”²²

‘Language is a form of human reason, which has its internal logic of which man knows nothing.’ Claude Levi-Strauss

Roussel’s final *How I Wrote certain of My Books* (and the second part of *Impressions d’Afrique* and the explanatory narratives of *Locus Solus*) are central to Foucault because they are Roussel’s attempt to mythologise his life and work: Foucault is also fascinated by Roussel’s suicide, which he glamorises. (what else to do?)

“In a way Roussel’s attitude is the reverse of Kafka’s, but as difficult to interpret. Kafka had entrusted his manuscripts to Max Brod to be destroyed after his death—to Max Brod, who had said he would never destroy them. Around his death Roussel organised a simple explanatory essay which is made suspect by the text, his other books, and even the circumstances of his death.”

Roussel, in a tragic state of barbiturate dependency, with all his money gone, surrounded by empty pill bottles was found on a mattress at the threshold of his pretend mistress’ adjoining bedroom. This for Foucault becomes a metaphor, a rebus-like suicide note:

“Whatever is understandable in his language speaks to us from a threshold where access is inseparable from what constitutes its barrier...”

Roussel wanted to achieve an aesthetic control of imaginative standards and to create the tools for an operation dictated by their shape, to achieve the transformation of his being through writing. As Foucault puts it:

“The identity of words—the simple, fundamental fact of language, that there are fewer terms of designation than there are things to designate—is itself a two-sided experience: it reveals words as the unexpected meeting place of the most distant figures of reality. (It is distance abolished; at the point of contact, differences are brought together in a unique form: dual, ambiguous, Minotaur-like.)”

Foucault wrote his book (which gives an enigmatic insight into his later works) while working on the history of madness. But Roussel’s ‘madness’ was not the initial concern: he was intrigued by an escape from the existentialist school and phenomenology coming from the left and the ‘End of History’ ideology (then all pervasive in France thanks to the CIA). Foucault was attracted by Roussel’s literary perverseness.

For Michel Butor (writing in 1950) all of Roussel’s writing, like Proust’s, is a search for lost time, but this recovery of childhood is in no sense a retrogressive movement; rather it is “a return into the future, for the event rediscovered changes its level and meaning.” Cocteau (who met Roussel in what would now be termed a rehab clinic) called him ‘the Proust of dreams,’ in this sense Proust—thought of as the ‘final elaboration of 20th century fiction’ in taking the novel to extremes—is rivalled, yet Foucault offers this disclaimer:

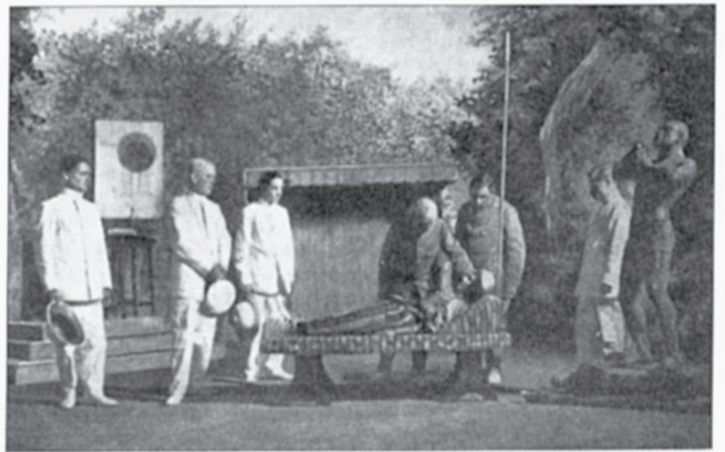
“His was an extremely interesting experiment; it wasn’t only a linguistic experiment, but an experiment with the nature of language, and it’s more than the experimentation of someone obsessed. He truly created, or, in any case, broke through, embodies, and created a form of beauty, a lovely curiosity, which is in fact a literary work. But I wouldn’t say that Roussel is comparable to Proust.”²³

notes

1. Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth* Athlone Press 1987 p172.
2. C. O'Farrell *Foucault: Historian or Philosopher?* Macmillan London 1989.
3. <http://www.nypress.com/14/19/books/books.cfm>
4. *Préciosite and Dandyism: Ages of Beauty* by Iole Apicella. Moliere wrote the play *Les Précieuses* based on (and ridiculing) an earlier French form of dandyism termed 'Préciosite'.
5. Trevor Winkfield, *Reading Raymond Roussel*.
6. Roussel *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres*.
7. Introduction to Foucault's *Death and the Labyrinth*.
8. Pierre Loti (pyer lôte') is the pseudonym of Julien Viaud, 1850-1923, French novelist and navy officer. He achieved popularity with his impressionistic romances of adventure in exotic lands. Roussel's nickname was *Ramuntcho* possibly from the 1897 Loti story of French Basque peasant life. Both on p183 and p271 Caradec repeats minor details of Loti's wife. On Flammarion Caradec enigmatically states that: "There are also, perhaps, traces of the astronomer's scientific mysticism and parapsychic research still to be discovered in Roussel's writings, despite his materialistic scepticism." (p225).
9. Quoted from Raff.
10. *ibid*
11. Robert de Montesquiou (*Raymond Roussel Life, Death and work*, Atlas). Caradec maintains that Willy worked out his procedure in 1925. Reviewers also say that Ford's book gave the impression that Roussel viewed his *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* not as an innovation in structure, but as the ingenious equivalent of a "crossword puzzle," Caradec has an indignant sideswipe at this saying that crossword puzzles weren't known in France at the time.
12. *Atlas Anthology*, Ashbury quoting Leris.
13. Another connection does exist between the two titles, namely: *impression a fric*, that is to say "a publication at the author's own expense" and so: "a new publication at the author's own expense."
14. *Atlas Anthology*.
15. *Locus Solus* is available in French at <http://wwwusers.imaginet.fr/~werkh/roussel/>
There are some similarities with Flann O'Brien's novels, Michel Leiris, writing in 1954 states that there is no Rousselian work in which the end and the beginning do not join each other. At times we seem transported to the world of De Selby. After pages setting out Roussel's fervent admiration and worship of Pierre Loti, Caradec states:

"But the strangest document is certainly the portrait of Loti in the uniform of the Academie francaise which was found among Roussel's papers: on the photo, somebody has inked in two large ears, before crossing out the face...the intention could be either mocking or malevolent, but we do not know who disfigured the photo, or why Raymond Roussel kept it." p183.

16. Ford's translation.
17. Doug Nufer <http://www.litline.org/ABR/Issues/Volume22/Issue6/abr226.html>
18. Andre Breton *Anthology of Black Humour*. Roussel's writing doesn't quite concur with Breton's ideas of 'pure psychic automatism', which permitted no revision. Neither does it directly concur with his later obsession with the occult. Breton seems surprised by Roussel's eventual revelation of what lay beneath his work, writing in 1933: "...during his lifetime few people had clearly sensed that he owed his prodigious gift of invention to a technique he had himself discovered, that he was making use, as it were, of a crib for the imagination, like a crib for memory."
On the inspiration of occult writing techniques on the early symbolists, such as texts with keys and hidden meanings, ciphers and encryption see <http://www.fiu.edu/~mizrachs/poseur3.html>
19. Roussel *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres*.
20. *Apollinaire on Art* ed. Leroy C. Breunig, from the forward by Roger Shattuck. There was a recent presentation in the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum of Roussel's writing and artwork influenced by him. Apollinaire, Duchamp and Picabia were impressed by the stage adaptation of *Impressions d'Afrique* which was partly responsible for Duchamp's ready-mades and directly inspired his enigmatic masterpiece *The Large Glass* (begun around about 1913). Picabia later incorporated his impressions of Roussel's plays into a collection of poems entitled *Fille née sans Mère*, copiously illustrated with schematic drawings of machines. Roussel's meticulous style with its abundance of puns and double meanings also influenced Salvador Dali's well-known landscape-cum-self-portrait named after *Impressions d'Afrique*. One can find slight similarities to Roussel in some of the more obscure written works (exploring the nature of language) by Duchamp, particularly 'The' (1915) (p639 *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, Arturo Swartz).
21. Caradec.
22. Michel Leris 1954, Caradec follows that quote a little bit too closely.
23. Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth*, from the interview by Charles Ruas.



Scenes from *Impressions d'Afrique*