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"

Michel Leiris

"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 great 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 people believed him to be a fictional character.2

A new biography 'Raymond Roussel' by François 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 foutu 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 unimpressed by introspection or sentiment, unhamped 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 utilitarianism.4 In Roussel's case, it appears he 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 symphonies between music and poetry and prose developed gradually.

"The quotation 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 no means all—of his writing techniques, is, as I say, essential reading. As a vade mucum it doesn’t necessarily make the books easier to penetrate, but it does provide some clues 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.

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 billiards (bolder). 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."

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:5

"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. The 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

[Image]
Danton, we come to the central and longest passage: a description of eight curious tableaux swarms 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. 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 5000 Le Siècle 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." 

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 glory. Only the contemporary avant-garde—the surrealists, whose work he professed not to understand—were enthusiastic..." 

Nothing interesting ever persuaded the Bourgeois multitude, but he confuses us here with the idea 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 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 incoherences 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 hok ecat in vots of this particular genre. It ends up giving these combinations, which are above all else eccentric and bizarre, a bourgeois appearance."

Roussel wrote more to vainly immortalize himself than to please the Bourgeois multitude: wealth freed him from that nightmare. Caradec considers 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 aero-plane 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 Ashbery suggests that just as the mechanical task of finding a rhyme sometimes inspires a poet to write a great line, Roussel's "rimas 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 (trinos) 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" 

**Newelles Impressions d'Afrique**

Roussel's 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 extra-ordinary 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 a 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 Collège 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 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 recent 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."

**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 hair on his nearly bald head periodically detach themselves to mimic the dance. Egroizard experiments with an array of strange objects, until he constructs a Goldberghian 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 satirical cursus 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 Michael 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 Muller'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." Else where he suggests that these childish devices led Roussel back to a common source of mythology or collective unconsciousness." 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 bourgmise multitude was outraged.

"There is no one who has not cared some ambitions 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 trampo-
lines? The Second World War erased just about every-
things 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
Osipolo (Ouvur de Litterature 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 obviously aware of
some other ordering principle beneath the sur-
face, as similar elements keep recurring in unpre-
dictable patterns. Both Caradec and Ian Monk
are members of the Osipolo. As the Atlas website
put it: ‘Our aim as publishers has been to delineate
a coherent “anti-tradition” whose roots reach back to
Romanticism, the spontaneous 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 given period or “movement” 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 coming 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 mis-
regarded 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
plays Les Mamelles de Tisèïas, to designate an
analogical way of representing reality beyond real-
ism—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 vocif-
erous reactions by the audience. Here, according to
Foucault the Surrealists tried to ‘orchestrate the
character of Roussel’ with contrived demonstra-
tions. Andre Breton, Aragon, Picabia, Robert
Debross and Michael Leris (all on complementary
tickets and probably out of their heads) went to
the premieres and provoked the stunned audi-
ence. 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 metaphorical and artistic
language which slightly illustrates how close these ‘styles’
are and how Roussel could encompass them.”
When revived in 1960 and 1967 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...” 21
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 redis-
tribution 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 Impressions d’Afrique appeared in
a move away from viewing Roussel in
relation to his times. His very involvement with
the disruptive world of theatre displaced his
own position in the upper class and he seems
(almost by chance) to express its social values paradoxically. 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 elabo-
rate practical joke, that they were somehow being
swindled: “Appolinaire knew he was collaborating in an elaborate
and mystification called modern art. Manet’s public
proclamations 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 end 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

Somehow the ambition of a rich man is disin-
genious compared to that of the bourgeois theatre
owners, newspaper critics or actors: because he
can purchase their support. Roussel’s theatric-
als 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?”

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 his music of the plays largely
untouched and it is still in the early stages of criti-
cal comprehension. Yet no one can deny that

Left: Roussel’s
motorised caravan
Roger Vitrac (1928)

heater to a friend who has asked

“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 fab-
ulous wealth (mostly on his writing) and his curious
mental state are the subject of numerous anec-
dotes 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 things look like best-sellers he produced
several impressions at a time, printing ‘tenth
impressions’ on the covers of brand-new publica-
tions. Roussel was the child of an overbearing
mother: according to Ford after the death of his
brother “Madame Roussel insisted that her sur-
viving son should undergo a medical examination
every day.” On their last foreign holiday they
gone 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, rachahout); 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.”

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 cen-
tral 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 enig-
matic insight into his later works) while working
on the history of madness. But Roussel’s ‘mad-
ness’ 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 attract-
ed 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 madness’ is brought together in a unique form: dual,
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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, rachahout); 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.”

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 cen-
tral 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 enig-
matic insight into his later works) while working
on the history of madness. But Roussel’s ‘mad-
ness’ 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 attract-
ed 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 madness’ is brought together in a unique form: dual,
numerical insight into his later works) while working

Roussel’s extravagant squandering of his fabu-

lous wealth (mostly on his writing) and his curious
mental state are the subject of numerous anec-
dotes 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 things look like best-sellers he produced
several impressions at a time, printing ‘tenth
impressions’ on the covers of brand-new publica-
tions. Roussel was the child of an overbearing
mother: according to Ford after the death of his
brother “Madame Roussel insisted that her sur-
viving son should undergo a medical examination
every day.” On their last foreign holiday they
gone 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:
There are some similarities with Flann O'Brien's
15.
14.
13. Another connection does exist between the two
Atlas Anthology, Ashbury quoting Leris.
12.
11. Trevor Winkfield, Reading Raymond Roussel
6. Roussel Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres.
5. Introduction to Foucault's 'Death and the Labyrinth.'
4. "But the strangest document is certainly the por-
trait of Loti in the uniform of the Academie franc-
caise 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.
Volume22Issue6/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 even-
tual revelation of what lay beneath his work, writ-
ing in 1931: “...during his lifetime few people had
clearly sensed that he owed his prodigious gift of
invention to a technique he had himself discover-
ered, 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. Lexey 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 influ-
enced 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 Dalí’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).
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.