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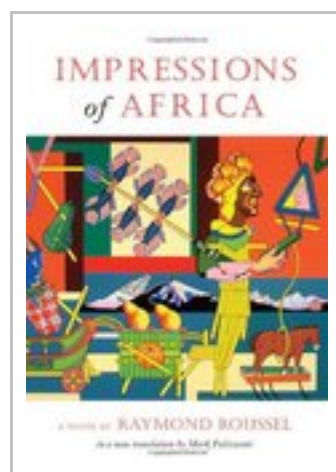
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SUMMER 2011

A Movable Feast

Raymond Roussel's extravagant, hermetic universe

ERIC BANKS

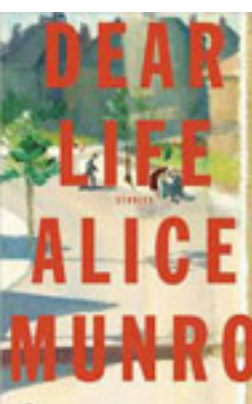
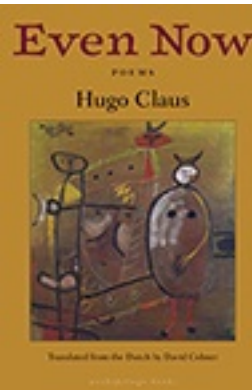


In 1924, the writer Raymond Roussel designed a dream vehicle for himself, a nearly thirty-foot-long house on wheels that permitted him to crisscross Europe in the manner he wished and that his astronomical wealth made possible. The *maison roulante* was a thing of wonder: It created a stir among the car buffs who saw it at the 1925 Salon de l'Auto in Paris, and Roussel was so taken by his stroke of engineering genius that he took the "land yacht" to Rome the following year to show it off to Pope Pius XI and Mussolini. Built to his specifications at an enormous sum, Roussel's proto-RV came

complete with bed- and bathrooms, a studio, and separate quarters for his chauffeur. It met his creative needs as well: All he had to do was lower the curtains and he could work away on his manuscripts—his elaborate constructions in verse and prose that rank among the most intricately strange, aggressively unclassifiable, and formally exuberant artifacts of the first part of the twentieth century—without any distraction from the world outside. With typically Rousselian logic, his portable mansion, as Mark Ford put it in his 2000 biography of the writer, *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams*, allowed him "to travel, almost literally, without traveling at all."

Roussel's paradoxical achievement in devising a mobile model of his own hermetic universe is of a piece with his extravagant modus as a writer: A neurotic, obscenely wealthy dandy with an impulsive weakness for self-promotion and a complete disregard for financial restraint, Roussel displayed in every work a genius for invention and obsession with creating literary worlds that obeyed his own eccentric whims down to the last detail, worlds he spun to strange life in two fantastic "novels," *Impressions d'Afrique* (1910) and *Locus Solus* (1914), numerous volumes of poetry and plays, and his final, magnificently labyrinthine poem, *Nouvelle Impressions d'Afrique* (1932). Even in the Banquet Years milieu that flattered every extreme of bohemian flamboyance, Roussel stood apart as a paragon of extremity, both financial and personal. Born in 1877, raised in a palatial home off the Champs-Élysées, and, after his mother's death, the inheritor of the family's Neuilly estate and its staff of sixteen, he burned through nearly every penny in chasing literary fame before his death, apparently by suicide, in 1933. He paid for the publication of all his books out of his own pocket, at grossly inflated fees jacked up by a publisher who knew that the otherworldly Roussel was easy to fleece, and spent huge sums on stage productions to bring his difficult texts to the public. Unsurprisingly, they were flops, though they did draw boisterous crowds of students who showered the actors he hired with rotten vegetables and well-aimed coins. What readers Roussel did have came exclusively from avant-garde

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circles, who patronized him as much as for the public spectacle his plays created as for the wild creativity of his texts. To his dismay, his writing remained, as he once said about the Surrealists who during his lifetime were virtually his only audience, *un peu obscur*.

What is remarkable about Roussel's torturous commitment to his literary career is that he ever entertained the notion that his intricate, tautly rendered feats of almost impenetrable brilliance would appeal to a mass readership. Never has a writer so misgauged the nature of his work or the scope of its appeal. It is thanks largely to the avant-garde he spurned that Roussel's fragile literary standing was secured. With the exception of Michel Leiris, whose father was Roussel's accountant, those who most appreciated his proleptic ingenuity discovered him in the decades after his death. Alain Robbe-Grillet found in Roussel's obsessive attention to the mundane thinginess of the world a predecessor to the *nouveau roman*: His first novel, *Le Voyeur*, was originally titled *La Vue* in homage to Roussel's long 1904 poem of the same name, a work that minutely describes a variety of miniature scenes, including a fifty-page digression dedicated to the spa pictured on the label of a bottle of mineral water on the narrator's table. Raymond Queneau and Georges Perec admired his remarkable ability to spin thickly structured narratives from a hidden network of obscure puns, buried double entendres, felicitous homonyms, and devilish mondegreens, the "special method" of linguistic gamesmanship he revealed in the short volume published after his death, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*. Michel Foucault wrote a critical study, *Death and the Labyrinth*, after the chance discovery of one of Roussel's volumes in an antiquarian shop across from the Luxembourg Gardens. And in several critical essays, John Ashbery enthusiastically imported Roussel, extending his influence to the New York School of poets.

Despite (or perhaps because of) his cult status, Roussel has remained a spectral figure outside France, a writer of legend whose texts have remained largely unavailable to an English-reading public, but two Rousselians have now bravely taken up the challenge of translating his most notoriously difficult achievements, *Impressions of Africa* and *New Impressions of Africa*. Each poses a unique set of hurdles for any translator (except for the three words they share in their titles, the two are wildly different affairs). The prose work *Impressions of Africa*, translated by Mark Polizzotti, more closely hews to the techniques Roussel elaborated in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, unfurling an extravagant fabric of bizarre scenes engendered by the author's complex method of linguistic free association. *New Impressions of Africa* (translated by Ford, Roussel's biographer and a poet), a four-canto poem written in rhyming alexandrines that nominally spins off from a number of Egyptian settings, obeys its own beguiling rabbit-hole logic in a way that anticipates the Oulipian games decades in the future. *Impressions of Africa* mostly delineates an imaginary territory that seems frighteningly real, laconically describing the strange events in the ersatz sub-Saharan kingdom of Ponukele; *New Impressions of Africa* delineates nothing but its own convulsing poetic structure.

For all these differences, both titles bear the mark of Roussel's acid approach to his language, with each line or sentence worried to within an inch of its life. ("I bleed over every phrase," he once said, and he took great pride in his surgical precision, which added years to the composition of each book. He worked and reworked the 1,274 lines of *New Impressions of Africa* over a seventeen-year period, rewriting each one as many as twenty times to attain an astringent concision.) Both Ford and Polizzotti convey Roussel's strange voice, in all its particularities—its peculiar start-and-stop pace, its finicky, oddly impersonal flatness of tone (reminiscent of Ashbery and another Roussel aficionado, Harry Mathews), its bookish exactitude of often arcane vocabulary, the mesmerizing rhythm of its syntax.

The story told in *Impressions of Africa* is a nominally bare-bones fantasy. The shipwrecked inhabitants of the *Lyseus*, en route from Marseille to Argentina, are captured by an African potentate, Talou, who holds them hostage while awaiting their ransom. The ship's manifest include actors, singers, musicians, fearless naturalists, a slew of carpenters, and, fortuitously, a trove of instruments, lumber, scientific equipment, and trained animals. Partly to keep themselves busy, the motley Europeans, dubbing themselves the Incomparables, decide to stage a set of performances. Converging with their gala is Talou's military triumph over a rival clan (and the execution of a handful of unloyal subjects). This

THE ANTIGONE POEMS

'...I deem this a holy book—written in ecstasy and the madness of genius...'

Grace Cavalieri



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"A writer with talent, instinct, and profound courage."
SIMON VAN BOOY,
author of *The Illusion of Separateness*



is the backstory of *Impressions of Africa*, literally. It is not revealed until page 130; in original editions, Roussel inserted a paper slip encouraging those who weren't already familiar with his work to skip to the end before reading the beginning. Only a writer as particular as Roussel could imagine that this digressive set of culminating explanations of the circumstances of the *Lyseus's* voyage, the royal history of Ponukele, the derring-do of various subjects, and so forth would lend coherence to the 130-page-long opening description of the bizarre gala as it unfolds. But the revelation makes the elaborate architecture of *Impressions of Africa* tangible. It doesn't explain the Incomparables' performances so much as recast them as events fulfilling the inexorable logic of Roussel's creation, which at last becomes fleetingly clear at the end of his roundabout tale.



27 An emissary with his eyes blindfolded (an officer)
led by two soldiers wearing uniforms different from his.
No other people. (line 327)

The gala itself is a farrago of performances, described with an ironically mechanical precision. A singer warbles the four parts of "*Frère Jacques*" simultaneously from different parts of his mouth. A ten-year-old stages a game of capture the flag with a basketful of cats wearing green and red ribbons. The marksman Balbet shoots the white off a soft-boiled egg, then engages in a bout of fencing against a mechanical opponent. Gradually, the events become even more complexly orchestrated. A trained worm executes a zither performance triggered by drops of liquid. A fanciful loom is powered by the paddles extended into the nearby river to generate strange tableaux. A performance of the finale of *Romeo and Juliet* ("with many new editions taken from Shakespeare's original manuscript") is performed by silent children on tightrope. Strangest of all is the finale, in which a painting machine duplicates the color spectrum of the kingdom's sky at dawn. It is linked to the performance of a trained magpie and a stage set exhaustively described at the outset, featuring a sculpture-bearing cart that rolls over a rail constructed out of a red gelatinous substance made from cows' lungs.

As preposterous as each episode is, what's remarkable is the level of detail Roussel piles on top of each description—and the hypnotic effect the scenes begin to have over the reader. Cobbled together yet ingeniously constructed machinery begins to dominate the performances, and for each virtuoso human performance there seem to be as many that are pulled off thanks to some bit of mechanical wizardry or legerdemain of science, no doubt influenced by Roussel's infatuation with Jules Verne. But *Impressions of Africa* is hardly science fiction—its felicitous language and chorus of arresting images make sense only according to the rules of the capacious textual theater Roussel constructs at the very moment he unveils them. Like much of Roussel's game-of-mirrors universe, it's turtles all the way down. Or zither-playing worms.

The land mapped out in *Impressions of Africa* is a fiction of Roussel's imagination. By contrast, *New Impressions of Africa* charts a real poetic space that it seems impossible to escape. Roussel's poem is a feat of misdirection, with sentences abruptly interrupted by

parenthetical elaborations and digressions that beget further parenthetical elaborations and digressions that beget—you guessed it. To complete the syntactic units, the reader is constantly moving forward and backward and sideways like a chess-piece knight across the text. A sentence begun in the ninth line of canto 1 is completed some 216 lines later; one begun in the thirteenth line isn't picked up again until line 168; the parenthetical remark that interrupts it, in line 14, is itself resolved only in lines 165–67. At certain thickets the parenthesis-inside-a-parenthesis regression reaches the order of five—i.e., ((((/))))). And not content with such linear disruptions, Roussel also throws in footnotes, themselves composed in rhyming alexandrines and also containing the same nesting parentheses.

New Impressions of Africa, published here in a bilingual edition, is one long great digression, with list after list filling up the space of the poem. These lists comprise remarkably vivid comparisons of like things that unknot themselves as the poem is unspooled. Describing a photographer, Roussel digresses to consider whether “Each person, infatuated with self-love, when he proudly has / Someone take his photograph, keeping as still as he can, / —Wondering, even if he moves only breathing, / Whether on the gelatin photographic plate, in the red light, / In the developing fluid he will appear blurred.” What ensues are fifty-four examples of figures or conceits involving wondering (a drunk “whose nose is turning poppy-red / If the bottles of Clicquot are waltzing or not”; “The foreigner if the term *vice* is completely amoral / In ‘vice-president’ or ‘vice-admiral’”; “If, before peeing on it, Cerberus would methodically / Sniff it with all three of his noses, the lamppost;” “When a shoe sole is sticky, and has the good fortune to stink, / If its twin is jealous of its lucky fate”).

The obdurate items that *New Impressions of Africa* catalogues jump across semantic registers with a logic that seems childlike in its ability to draw formal resemblances across disparate domains. What other book brings together, in a long set illustrating things cut in half, “The conquered sword that a knight breaks on his thigh on the stage,” “The asparagus stalk put aside after it’s been bitten,” and “When a spade is being used, a worm that suffers a fatal accident”? Or visually counterpoints the comparison-within-a-comparison of “For a humble chapel in which one bangs one’s head / The monstrously large cathedral in the middle of Cologne” and “The brutal iceberg, a native of the North Pole / For the narrow easily carried block of ice which is made to serve us / Broken into small pieces suitable for drinks in the pantry”? In his excellent introduction, Ford quotes Leiris’s description of *New Impressions of Africa* as, among other things, a massive brain teaser, and many of its riddles are as humorous as they are tricky. The rebuslike nature of Roussel’s lines is amplified by the drawings he commissioned for the volume through a detective agency, supplying the contracted illustrator, Henri-A. Zo, with one-liners from the text (“Two men in clogs, in snowy weather, knocking their soles together to warm up their feet” or “A man with his arm in a sling—the sling pretty wide” or “A portrait . . . of Amerigo Vespucci”). These amusing deadpan images further punctuate the text; they seem at first the visual analogue to the second half of *Impressions of Africa* in offering a key to the puzzles the text poses but ultimately only deepen the sense of playful circularity.

Considering Roussel’s arsenal of formal devices, how much can *any* translation preserve the enigmatic snare of his snaking language and its cul-de-sacs of text? Ashbery once wrote that the idiosyncratic textual machinery the author devised “imparts an undefinable, hypnotic quality to the text” that he doubted could survive translation. Both Polizzotti and Ford have unapologetically striven to retain the undertone of intransigent obliqueness that suffuses Roussel’s work while managing to preserve his manic, funny, exhausting circularity. What is ineffable about Roussel remains happily ineffable in both these excellent volumes. The Roussels they’ve given us are as intelligent, irascibly intelligible, and definitive as any we’re likely to see.

Eric Banks is the former editor of Bookforum.

