

Introduction

Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique is the last work that the French poet, playwright, and novelist Raymond Roussel published during his lifetime. He began drafting it in 1915, but the poem was not to appear until the autumn of 1932, less than a year before its author was found dead in his room at the Grande Albergo e delle Palme in Palermo, Sicily at the age of 56. “*On ne saurait croire*,” he observed in his posthumously published essay, “*Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres*,” “*quel temps immense exige la composition de vers de ce genre*” (“It is hard to believe the immense amount of time composition of this kind of verse requires”).

The poem consists of four cantos of 228, 642, 172, and 232 lines respectively. Each is prefaced by a heading referring to a location in Egypt, and each begins with a few lines evoking the location in question. “*Rasant le Nil*,” opens Canto IV, which presents, initially at least, the Gardens of Rosetta as seen from a *dahabieh* (an Egyptian houseboat): “*je vois fuir deux rives couvertes / De fleurs, d’ailes, d’éclairs, de riches plantes vertes*” (“Skimming the Nile, I see flitting by two banks covered / With flowers, with wings, with flashes of brightness, with rich green plants”). The notion, however, that the poem will offer the reader a prettily versified travelogue is fast disrupted by the appearance of a bracket introducing a parenthetical thought, and soon after that, this parenthetical thought is itself interrupted by another bracket launching a second divagation, which is then itself interrupted by a third bracket and a new stream of related observations that are in turn interrupted by a fourth bracket, with its new line of discourse . . . Roussel also makes use of footnotes that may themselves contain as many as three sets of

brackets, removing us yet further from the canto's opening lines of description or meditation.

Each canto is, thus, grammatically, one enormously long sentence, and to complete its opening syntactic unit you have to turn forward to the lines that succeed the canto's final closing bracket. Canto IV, for instance, continues from the third line, "*Dont une suffirait à vingt de nos salons*" ("Of which one [rich green plant] could provide twenty of our salons") . . . [94 bracketed lines of the main text—and 134 lines in footnotes!] . . . "*D'opaque frondaison, de rayons et de fruits*" ("With thick foliage, with glinting lights and fruits"), which closes the canto. It might help to visualize each canto as somewhat like an onion: its pre-bracket opening lines, and post-bracket last lines (or in this case, last line), are its outer skin, the material between brackets one and two and between its penultimate and its final bracket, the next layer, between brackets two and three and the ante-penultimate and penultimate bracket, the next layer, and so on. As a way of distinguishing the different layers from each other, Roussel at one time considered having them printed in different colored inks, but he eventually abandoned this project because of the logistical difficulties and cost it would have entailed.¹

I hope that what Roussel meant when he talked of the immense amount of time demanded by "*composition de vers de ce genre*" is becoming clear. The main text of each canto contains only one full stop, that which comes after the final line, although he does make frequent use of exclamation marks, question marks, and ellipses [. . .] as means of avoiding infringing this taboo. The only full stop allowed in a footnote, similarly, comes at its conclusion. Each single, vast, labyrinthine sentence hangs, therefore, from a single main verb: in Canto I, it comes in line 7 ("*Elles présentes, tout semble dater d'hier*" ["In their presence, everything seems to date from yesterday"]); in Canto II we have to wait

1. In 2004 Editions Al Dante published a sumptuous edition "*mise en couleurs*" by Jacques Sivan, with the text printed in black, green, white, purple, red, and yellow, on a grey background, and with the pages uncut along the top, as in the original Lemerre edition.

until the canto's penultimate line (" *Fait que ...*" ["Makes . . ."]); in Canto III it is elided but implied in line 4 (" *Mais vers quoi ne courir . . .*" ["But what will a person not pursue . . ."]); and in Canto IV it occurs in line 1: "*je vois*"—which is the only time Roussel appears in person in the poem.

Like the vast majority of Roussel's poetry, *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* is written in rhyming alexandrine couplets (i.e., twelve-syllable lines) that alternate masculine and feminine rhymes (in French, feminine rhymes end in a mute *e*, masculine rhymes don't). From the outset of his career as a poet Roussel established the habit of kick-starting composition by setting out a list of rhyming words down the right-hand side of the page, and in the very early "Mon Ame," published in 1897, a poem that unequivocally and unabashedly celebrates his own extraordinary literary talents, he figures his creative soul as a factory in which a vast army of workers extract from the fiery gulf of his inner being numerous "*rimes jaillissant en masse*" ("rhymes flying like masses of sparks"). By the time Roussel temporarily abandoned verse in his late 20s, to write the novels *Impressions d'Afrique* and *Locus Solus*, he had already composed around 25,000 lines in rhyming alexandrines; it seems to me likely that the ingenious constraints he imposed on himself when he took up verse again in 1915 were a practical way of disciplining his almost unstoppable poetic fluency.²

2. *La Doublure* (1897) is 5,586 lines long, and consists mainly of descriptions of the floats and large papier-mâché figures that feature in the annual carnival at Nice. (It was while composing *La Doublure* that Roussel experienced *la gloire* – see note to Canto III, line 94.) *La Vue* (1904) is made up of three poems, "La Vue" (which runs to over 2,000 lines), "Le Concert," and "La Source" (both just over 1,000 lines each), in which Roussel describes in impossible detail the tiny scenes reproduced in the lens of a pen-holder ("La Vue"), in the sketch of a hotel adorning a sheet of hotel writing paper ("Le Concert"), and on the label of a bottle of mineral water ("La Source"). In 1989 a trunk containing nine cartons full of Roussel's papers was discovered in a warehouse of the Société Bedel, a furniture storage company, and among many surprises were two enormously long poems, *La Seine* and *Les Noces*, which date from the first ten years of Roussel's writing career. *La Seine* (probably 1900-1903) is 6,931 lines long, and the unfinished *Les Noces* (probably 1904-8) is 8,760 lines long, although two further sections remained to be written. Both have been published in Pauvert/Fayard's ongoing edition of Roussel's

If, from one angle, the brackets and footnotes of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* insistently disrupt and disjoin, frustrating, with their seemingly endless digressions and lists of examples, the reader's urge for completion, from another they serve as forms of connection, like rail - way points, that enable the poem to cross over into whole new regions of proliferating analogy and illustration. Sometimes these switchovers occur in rapid succession. In Canto III, for instance, Roussel offers a list of the different ways in which various people make lots of money in America; one person does so by selling heaps of pictures to a snobbish stockbroker:

Soit que par stocks on vende à l'agioteur snob
 (((Le rôle du snobisme (((((au vrai qu'était Jacob?!

1. Même est-on sûr que Dieu, quand il fit le snobisme
 (Si l'animal ne sait pas plus percer un isthme . . .

Whether one sells in heaps to the speculator who's a snob
 (((The role played by snobbery (((((in essence, what was Jacob?!

1. Can one even be sure that God, when he made snobbery
 (If animals no more know how to build a canal across an isthmus . . .
 (lines 55–56 and footnote 1, lines 1–2)

This is the poem's most accelerated series of transitions: the triple bracket introduces the assertion that snobbery will always play a major role in life, and the quadruple bracket the novel idea that Jacob—and Esau too!—were snobs in their wrangling over a birthright; the footnote launches the notion that God possibly made animals snobs as well as men, and the first bracket within the footnote ponders the relationship between men and animals, who may not be able to build a canal across an isthmus or do various other things that men can do—

complete works, *La Seine* (as volume III, edited by Patrick Besnier) in 1994 and *Les Noces* (as volumes V and VI, edited by Pierre Bazantay) in 1998.

but aren't we a bit like pigs, this particular parenthesis closes, or life - saving dogs?

*Ne retrouvons-nous pas nos instincts chez les porcs?
Chez les chiens sauveteurs qui foncent à la nage?*

Do we not rediscover our own instincts in pigs?
In life-saving dogs when they plunge into the water?),
(Footnote 1, lines 8–9)

Like much of Roussel's best writing, *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* is extremely funny, and beautiful, but its humor and beauty are not easy to define. Reading through the vast collection of his manuscripts housed in the Fonds Roussel in the Manuscript Department of the old Bibliothèque Nationale on Rue Richelieu in order to write my critical biography of him (*Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams*[2001]), I occasionally wondered if he suffered from Asperger's syndrome, or a mild form of autism. He had, to quote Robert Desnos, “ [un] esprit amoureux de logique,” a phrase Desnos used when recalling a meeting between Roussel and his publisher Désiré Lemerre during the First World War, which Roussel spent as a soldier of the *deuxième classe* in the 13th Vincennes Artillery regiment. When Lemerre came across Roussel he was counting petrol cans; Desnos writes:

The cataclysm stupefied him. His highly logical mind could not conceive of such an enterprise. When asked what had most struck him in the course of those tragic years, he answered—and it was a profound thing to say—“I have never seen so many men.”

This snapshot of the inordinately wealthy and supremely fastidious dandy caught up in the theatre of war is particularly interesting in the context of the genesis of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, which, despite the somewhat misleading account Roussel gives of the poem's origins in “Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres,” was indubitably being composed in the form that we know it by mid-1916 at the

latest.³ I wouldn't want to suggest that *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* is a war poem, though a machine gun briefly appears in a footnote in Canto III, and a blindfolded army emissary features twice (Canto II, line 327, Canto III, lines 18–19) and in a Zo illustration [no. 27]). To what extent Roussel's experiences at the front were a catalyst for the way *Nouvelles Impressions* uses "parentheses as a means of making language disintegrate," as Michel Leiris puts it, is impossible to know, but the poem's frankness about its own conceptual framework (whereas Roussel kept the *procédé* underpinning his fiction and plays a strict secret),⁴ and its many scatological images, do suggest the

3. In "Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres" Roussel suggests that *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* started out life as a poem in the mode of the three poems collected in *La Vue*.

It concerned a tiny pair of opera-glasses to be worn as a pendant, each of whose lenses, two millimeters in diameter and meant to be held very close to the eye, contained a photograph on glass—one of the bazaars of Cairo, the other of a quay in Luxor.

I made a description in verse of these two photographs. (It was, in short, an exact sequel to my poem, *La Vue*.)

Having completed this initial work, I took up the poem again from the beginning to polish the verses. But at the end of a certain time I realized that an entire lifetime would not be sufficient for this polishing, and I abandoned my task. This had in all taken me five years of work. If the manuscript could be retrieved from among my papers, it might perhaps prove interesting, such as it is, at least to certain of my readers.

Aside from a very brief fragment dating from 1906 set in an Egyptian bazaar, nothing of this sort has been recovered. On the other hand, throughout the First World War Roussel consistently dispatched drafts of work in progress to his business manager Eugène Leiris (the father of Michel Leiris) for safekeeping. Two of the envelopes that survive, those dated November 12, 1916, and March 2, 1917, contained manuscript drafts of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, drafts that did not concern two photographs contained in miniature opera-glasses, but proved to be passages from Canto I and Canto II. On March 6, 1917 Roussel sent Leiris a typed draft of Canto I, which is reproduced in facsimile in the miscellaneous collection of Roussel's writings, *Épaves* (1972). This is simply a not yet fully expanded version of the canto as eventually published. This and the other early drafts reveal that the methodology of the poem was established from the outset, rather than in 1920, as Roussel's essay seems to suggest.

4. For an account of the *procédé*, see note to line 1 of footnote beginning at line 62 of Canto IV.

eruption of certain energies that had previously been repressed. “What sluice gates,” as the devoted Roussel critic Jean Ferry has pointedly asked, “broke in him, allowing these malodorous jets to burst forth?”⁵

The quick-fire transitions of the lines quoted from Canto III are not, however, typical of the experience the poem as a whole offers. Roussel seems to have set himself an upper limit of five brackets, and although opening and closing pages present a flurry of opening and closing parentheses, there are long stretches in the middle of all of the cantos in which we forget about the poem’s peculiar structure, and are allowed to enjoy in peace the pleasures of the list. The punctuation marks that serve his turn here, and which feature far more often than the bristling bracket, are the semicolon and the dash. Roussel is one of the great exponents of the list in poetry, a rival of earlier great list-makers such as Christopher Smart or Walt Whitman. If the parenthesis is a means of interrupting or re-angling a train of thought, with the promise, always fulfilled, of returning to it, the list is Roussel’s way of expanding the digression the parenthesis introduces, on some occasions until it seems the list will stretch on, like the kings born of Banquo’s seed paraded by the witches before the eyes of the appalled Macbeth, “to th’ crack of doom.” These lists are often launched by an appeal to analogy as occurs, for instance, at line 20 of Canto I. Roussel has been describing how a person having his photograph taken stays as still as possible, but nevertheless wonders, should he move even a little bit, if his image will come out blurred:

—*Se demandant, pour peu qu’en respirant il bouge,
Si sur la gélatine, à la lumière rouge,
Dans la révélateur il apparaîtra flou,—*

5. Jean Ferry published two indispensable guides to *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique*. *Une étude sur Raymond Roussel* (Paris: Arcanes, 1953), which presents a line-by-line commentary on Canto III, and *Une autre étude sur Raymond Roussel* (Paris: Publications du Collège de Pataphysique, 1964), which offers a somewhat less detailed analysis of the other cantos. I, and all other Roussel scholars, are much indebted to Ferry’s pioneering researches.

*(((Tels se demandent:—S'il diffère d'un filou,
Le fat qui d'un regard . . .*

—Wondering, even if he moves only by breathing,
Whether on the gelatin photographic plate, in the red light,
In the developing fluid he will appear blurred,—
*(((Such also wonder:—If he differs from a thief,
The fop who with one glance . . .*

There follow after the example of this penniless fop, who, having just married a rich prostitute, wonders if he's any better than a thief, 53 further instances of people, animals, and things (including a lamppost, a thermometer, a billiard ball, the sole of a shoe, hot milk, and a wall) presented in analogous states of wondering. The list runs, with two further embedded brackets, and two footnotes as well, to line 135, and an astronomer wondering if he'll ever see a man walking upside down on the moon like a fly on the ceiling.

But this list is as nothing to that offered in Canto II, the Everest, or perhaps that should be the Great Pyramid, of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*. At 642 lines, Canto II is ten lines longer than the other three cantos put together, and 416 of these lines are occupied by a list that offers 207 examples of small things that might be mistaken for bigger things with which they have a visual similarity. For instance, to quote the first:

*—l'appareil qui, trouvé par Franklin,
Sans danger dans un puits fait se perdre la foudre
Pour un fil gris passé dans une aiguille à coudre;*

—the apparatus that, discovered by Franklin,
Makes lightning disappear harmlessly into a pit,
For a grey thread passed through the eye of a needle;
(lines 91–93)

Many of the examples in this list are presented in extremely condensed language, and Roussel's French can take some time to puzzle out:

—pour le goinfre à refrain
 Qu'à force d'applaudir on prend, le cousin braque
 Qui fonce en plein plafond;

(lines 215–17)

The “*goinfre à refrain*,” the one who keeps guzzling, is a mosquito, and he is taken, or really killed, by a clap of the hands, “*à force d'applaudir*”; this mosquito is visually similar to, but smaller than, “*le cousin braque*,” the crazy daddy longlegs who speeds about up by the ceiling.

Roussel's examples and images, I think it's worth pointing out here, all work. There is no more room for ambiguity or readerly “interpretation” in this poem than in a crossword puzzle; there is a correct solution to each vignette. *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* is, among other things, as Michel Leiris pointed out, a vast *casse-tête*, or brain-teaser, and one of the central principles underlying my version of it can be illustrated by the way I have rendered the lines above:

—for the persistently guzzling mosquito
 Whom one kills with a clap of the hands, the crazy daddy longlegs
 Who speeds about up by the ceiling;

My dominant intention was to offer the reader a precise and accurate “crib”; my translation is designed to make Roussel's French comprehensible, and I have not, on occasion, scrupled to expand what in the original is compressed to the point of obscurity. Where necessary, I have offered supplementary expositions of particularly knotted images in the notes, which also explain the various allusions the poem makes to such as Aesop, La Fontaine, and Pierre Corneille. All translators of poetry face hard choices. There is no way a version of *Nouvelles Impressions* can both be accurate and recreate the poem's rhythm or rhyme scheme, without straying very far indeed from idiomatic English; my determina-

tion to make Roussel's meaning as clear as possible has resulted in some sacrifice of his extraordinary concision, though this can always be savoured by glancing across at the French on the facing page.⁶ My version does, however, allow the Anglophone reader full access to the dizzying inventiveness, the uncanny feats of connection and visual analogy, with which he fulfilled the poem's mind-boggling overarching conceit.

Roussel's imagination, as *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* so dramatically demonstrates, was both severely logical and disconcertingly unboundaried. His "œil curieux," to use a phrase from the early long poem "La Vue," discerns, in this long central list in Canto II, similarities that are both compellingly exact and deliriously far-fetched:

—*pour un œuf au plat seul à l'écart,
Salé ferme à son centre, un baissé crâne à rite
D'âgé prêtre à jaunisse;*

—for a single fried egg, on its own,
With a vigorously salted yolk, the skull, bent in prayer,
Of an old priest with jaundice;

(lines 111-13)

—*Pour ce qu'un toussueur montre au docteur pour la gorge,
Un cavernaire arceau, par le couchant rougi,
A stalactite unique;*

—For that which someone with a cough shows to a throat doctor,
[ie. an inflamed uvula]
An arched cavern, reddened by the setting sun,
With a solitary stalactite;

(lines 289–91)

6. Two earlier translators of Roussel have attempted to match the constraints of the original: see Kenneth Koch's version in rhyming hexameter couplets of Canto III (first published in 1964, and reprinted in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books* (ed. Trevor Winkfield, Exact Change, 1995), and Ian Monk's version of the entire poem in pentameter couplets (Atlas Press, 2004).

The serene lack of affect with which Roussel presents such comparisons is a characteristic of the poem as a whole; and it is this rigorous impersonality which enables the poem to range so freely from the minute—a crumb caught between two teeth—to the cosmic, the “*profondeurs du grand vide céleste*” to which the astronomer at the end of Canto IV grows accustomed, and which Roussel selected as the subject for the last of Zo’s illustrations (no. 59): “A section of starry sky without any earthly landscape as if seen from some vantage point in space and giving the impression of infinity.”

The illustrations for *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique* were not the first commission Henri-A. Zo had received from Roussel. During the premier of *L’Étoile au front* at the Vaudeville Theatre on May 5, 1924, a pitched battle broke out between Roussel’s vociferous surrealist admirers, who that day included André Breton, Roger Vitrac, Michel Leiris, and Robert Desnos, and the more conservative, but equally vociferous, sections of the audience who were outraged by the play’s oddness. As Roussel recalls in “Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres”:

Another tumult, another battle, but this time my supporters were far more numerous. During the third act the furor reached such a pitch that the curtain had to be lowered, and was only raised again after a considerable interval.

During the second act, one of my opponents cried out to those who were applauding, “Go it, you hired band of clappers” [*Hardi la claqué*], to which Robert Desnos replied: “We are the hired band of clappers/the slap, and you are the cheek” [*Nous sommes la claqué et vous êtes la joue* ”]. This witticism caught on, and was quoted in various papers.

Roussel was so pleased with Desnos’s punning riposte that he commissioned Zo (who had illustrated a novel by one of Roussel’s great literary heroes, Pierre Loti) to paint a diptych featuring, on one side, the battle raging in the auditorium during the first night of Victor Hugo’s *Hernani*, and on the other the similar scenes that disrupted the premier of *L’Étoile au front*. A bronze plaque inscribed with Desnos’s jest was affixed to the bottom of the frame.

But on this second occasion Zo had no contact with the author himself; he received his instructions ⁷ for the fifty-nine illustrations that were to embellish *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, and establish his own claim on the attentions of posterity, not from Roussel, but through the intermediary of a detective agency called Agence Goron. He was informed, further, that he would not be allowed to read the poem for which his fifty-nine Chinese ink drawings were commissioned until after its publication. When Zo eventually found out the name of his employer, he at once fired off a letter of remonstrance:

Please allow me to tell you that I bitterly regret the fact you wanted this collaboration to be shrouded in such an impenetrable mystery. These are not the pictures I would have made if I had known I was illustrating Raymond Roussel!

In this letter he also complains that the precision of the instructions he received meant his drawings “*manquent de liberté, de fantaisie*,” and he goes on to wish that Roussel had agreed to engage with him in a genuine collaboration:

my illustrations . . . would have been more in harmony with your work if I'd been able to read the text, or had the honor of knowing the personality of the poet.

Clearly it was the prospect of just this sort of interaction that Roussel went to such lengths to avoid.

For Salvador Dalí, who considered *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*

7. Roussel's “*indications*” or instructions to Zo were preserved by the foreman at Lemerre's printing house, Eugène Vallée. After Roussel's death Vallée passed these on to Michel Leiris, who published them in the magazine *Cahiers G.L.M.* in March of 1939. The instructions are not to be considered as captions, for they were not included in the original Lemerre edition. For a comprehensive discussion of each picture and its relation to Roussel's text, see Laurent Busine's *Raymond Roussel: Contemplator enim* (La Lettre volé, 1995).

the most “ungraspably poetic” book of the era, the choice of illustrations was further testimony “to the genius of Raymond Roussel.” Their “militant banality,” to use a phrase of John Ashbery’s, contrasts powerfully with the strangeness of the poem confronting the reader, yet also matches its immersion in a generalized commonality. The pictures themselves are as mundane as illustrations in an early twentieth-century encyclopedia (and the portrait of Amerigo Vespucci is closely based, as Roussel’s instruction suggested it might be, on the picture of the explorer in the *Nouveau Larousse illustré*), but in the context of the poem from which the images are drawn, the characters and scenes that Zo presents come to seem, in their very ordinarieness, hauntingly singular too. Among Roussel initiates there has been much speculation, which was started by Michel Leiris in an essay published in 1939 entitled “Autour des *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique*,” about Roussel’s choice of images for illustration, and all lovers of the poem will have their favorite. My own is no. 52:

A walker, with his arm raised and his fingers open, who has just dropped a pebble (which is still visible) down a well, inclining his head as if to listen out for the splash (no other people).

By some strange coincidence, the rambler Zo drew in response to this instruction bears a ghostly resemblance to the Roussel of a series of photographs he had taken attired in one of his most elegant outfits at Carlsbad in 1912.

Undoubtedly one reason Roussel decided to have each page of his poem twinned with an illustration was to increase the bulk of the volume. The 160 worksheets relating to the composition of *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique* preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale truly reveal the immense amount of time demanded by verse of this kind, and some sheets record at the foot of the page his punishing work schedule: “11 h sam. 8 dim. 9¼ lundi. 10¼ mardi. 12¼ merc . . .” Still, at the end of these long years of dedicated industry, his poem remained dispiritingly short. Proofs were first printed off in 1927, and like Proust, Roussel

used these to expand and revise.⁸ Clearly he wanted the book, the last whose production he would be able to oversee, to resemble in size its predecessor (in name at least), *Impressions d'Afrique*, and yet in its final form the text ran to only fifty-nine pages. Zo's illustrations double that, and Roussel's decision to leave all the versos blank doubles that again. Further, he thought fit to reprint after *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, his last published poem, his first "Mon Ame" (not included here), in which he announced the arrival of his fecund genius to the world, or at least to readers of the July 12, 1897 edition of *Le Gaulois*.⁹ Its title, however, became "L'Ame de Victor Hugo," and he now introduced it with the following explanation: "One night I dreamed I saw Victor Hugo writing at his desk, and this is what I read as I leaned over his shoulder." It must have been with extreme reluctance that Roussel projected onto Victor Hugo, with whom Zo's diptych had already surreptitiously aligned him, the glorious reception that he had anticipated for himself. Traces, however, remain of the poem's original subject: Roussel couldn't bring himself to change a reference to his idolatrous admirers, his *roussellâtres*, to *hugoâtres*, leaving instead a blank followed by *lâtres* ("*Sans souci de ces lâtres / Qui me mettent au rang des dieux*"); and the poem's penultimate verse similarly gestures back to the original predictions Roussel had made in it, and which he now had to acknowledge had been spectacularly misguided:

*A cette explosion voisine
De mon génie universel
Je vois le monde qui s'incline
Devant ce nom: Victor Hugo.*

8. Roussel had so many sets of proofs drawn up for him that in June of 1931 Eugène Vallée had to write to him asking him to destroy all earlier sets of proofs to prevent confusion. Roussel failed to comply with this request. He was, however, popular with employees of the firm involved in the production of his books, for he used to offer cash rewards to anyone who spotted a misprint.

9. The poem was prefaced by a headnote, almost certainly written by Roussel himself, informing the reader that the poem was composed three years earlier when the author was just seventeen, and adding, "one can judge from that fact the sort of promise his precocious and fecund genius holds for the future."

At the explosion deriving
 From my universal genius
 I see the world bow
 Before this name: Victor Hugo.

Does Victor Hugo rhyme with *universel*? No, but it's not hard to think of a name that does.

The phrase "*Pas de personnages*" recurs repeatedly in Roussel's instructions to Zo. Like the inventor Martial Canterel, the hero of *Locus Solus* (1914), Roussel lived an essentially solitary life, ensconced behind the walls of his extensive property in Neuilly, embarking alone on travels in the footsteps of Pierre Loti, or having himself chauffeured around Europe in his custom-built *roulotte*, a kind of luxurious caravan of which he was so proud that when he visited Rome he set about arranging for both the Pope and Mussolini to inspect it.¹⁰ *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* was the last of the literary experiments with which Roussel hoped to dazzle and delight a mass audience, and like all his earlier books, despite the usual well-funded barrage of publicity, it failed to render him the toast of Paris. These poems, as Robert Desnos cautiously advised him, "*sont faits pour l'éternité plus que pour la popularité*." The demands they make on the reader are considerable, but I can confidently assert that they offer a challenge and an experience unique in literature. Although only 59 pages long, they seem to compress an entire lifetime's involvement in the bizarre and banal ways of the world, and a vast selection of the things, natural and artificial, that make it up, and the different media through which they impinge on us, into an all-accommodating, yet rigorously conceived and executed poetic symphony. The form of each canto means its end inevitably returns us to its opening, and this return creates a moment fraught with the sweet mel-

10. In December of 1926 Roussel wrote from Rome to his paid companion Charlotte Dufrenoy: "Mussolini came and spent a long time visiting the *roulotte*; he is very simple and very kind. I also had a long audience with the Pope, to whom I showed some photos of the *roulotte*, and who kept them (Mussolini, also, so now I have none left)." Roussel had hoped the Pope would inspect his vehicle in person, but had to be content with exhibiting it to the Papal Nuncio, who departed "*émervillé*."

ancholy pang of simultaneous completion and loss. Images of extinction and decay increasingly invade Canto IV, which is dominated by a long list of fires that go out, a list that can't help but summon up the death in Sicily awaiting Roussel less than a year after the poem finally saw the light of day:

*chez l'homme,
Le feu de l'œil s'éteint à l'âge où dent par dent
Et cheveu par cheveu, sans choc, sans accident,
Par l'action du temps, sa tête se déleste;*

with men

The fire in the eye goes out at the age when tooth by tooth
And hair by hair, without shock or accident,
By the mere action of time, the head is slowly unburdened;
(lines 88–91)

Roussel never lived to see the literary glory he predicted for himself in “Mon Ame,” and despite acquiring over the years numerous eminent admirers, including such as André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Raymond Queneau, Michel Foucault, Georges Perec, and John Ashbery, his work remains something of a cult secret. Readers of this edition of *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique* will, I hope, be persuaded that Roussel was indeed one of the “*élu*” irradiated by “*le saint feu du génie*,” a writer entitled to find

*au firmament les vrais astres piteux
Auprès de l'astre neuf qui sur son front rayonne*

the real stars in the sky pitiful
In comparison with the new star that shines on his forehead
(Canto IV, lines 72–73).

Mark Ford