

# Out of Order



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RAYMOND ROUSSEL  
AND THE REPUBLIC OF DREAMS

Mark Ford

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To some, he's a busted novelty act, a rich kid grown old who bankrolled his own mad stabs at literature because nobody with a grain of sense should have backed his poems, novels, and plays; to others, he's a genius who wrote astoundingly rarefied works by applying himself to methods of composition that adhered to a strict sense of order. His fame (or notoriety) sprang from playhouse riots started by the surrealists, whose stuff he neither understood nor had much in common with, and his literary legacy has been sustained by stories about him that emphasize his wackiness as much as by the wacky stories that he wrote. A new critical biography of Raymond Roussel (1877-1933)—and the first written in English—might have had a field day exploiting his eccentricities, particularly since his writing scrupulously avoids all direct autobiographical references yet seems to derive inescapably from a private existence of incomparable strangeness.

Mark Ford's *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams*, however, is a meticulous and superbly balanced examination of the output, working methods, and habits of a writer. To be sure, Ford does include plenty of spicy tidbits about Roussel, but these peeks at a man whose mother insisted he undergo a complete medical check-up every day often come tucked away in footnotes or else seem rather staid when compared to the procedures he used to produce his work.

As explained by Ford, these procedures make perfect sense, particularly when compared to Roussel's own explanation, which was published,

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as he directed, after his death, and is the title essay of *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, a collection of essays by and about him and excerpts from his works, edited by Trevor Winkfield (Exact Change, 1995, expanded from Sun, 1977). That essay has the rather endearing Rousselean quality of becoming more confusing as it becomes more clear. Nevertheless, the procedures can guide fellow writers who are bent on methodical deviation. Musicians go crazy trying to follow Harry Partch's *Genesis of a Music*, as do writers who would learn their craft from Gertrude Stein's *How to Write*, but those who would follow Roussel might fare quite well, and then go nuts once they arrive at a destination anywhere close to the territory he ruled.

After a novel, *La Doublure* (1897), and a book of poems, *La Vue* (1904), Roussel came up with a pun-based process that led his composition of fiction. His novels, *Impressions of Africa* (1910) and *Locus Solus* (1914), and his plays make use of this, and, as a result, have a rigidity of structure and diction more often found in poetry than prose. He would take a phrase and change one piece of it (a letter, an accent), thereby completely altering the meaning of the phrase. He would then begin a story with one of the paired phrases and aim to reach an ending stated by the other one. For example, "*Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux billard*/The white letters on the cushions of the old billiard table..." must somehow reach the phrase, "...*les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux pillard*/letters [written by] a white man about the hordes of the old plunderer."

Although Ford impresses upon us how it took more than a little effort for Roussel to do the "prospecting" that would find such paired phrases,

the literary exercise of connecting one to the other doesn't seem much harder than that of composing a Fractured Fairy Tale for the Bullwinkle show. Many of Roussel's stories resemble fairy tales that are energized with a Jules Verne-inspired reinterpretation of the physical universe. What drives his twisted narratives (often into gargantuan cul-de-sacs of exposition), however, is a complex system of homophonic associations Roussel made in order to derive words from words with similar sounds.

What made these procedures especially difficult to execute was Roussel's exacting sense of the effects he wanted to produce. It wasn't enough for him to create something interesting by using some weird process: he agonized over the time he needed to do things right. As he became more efficient at devising and solving literary stratagems, he pushed himself into more difficult methods. He abandoned the prose methods for his last major complete work, the 1,274-line poem *New Impressions of Africa* (1932), and used instead a structure of rhyme and metaphor arranged with multiple parentheses and copious footnotes. One line could take most of a day to compose and the whole poem took sixteen years to finish.

In an effort to explain his subject's motives, Ford makes a good case for Roussel's desire to return via his writing to a sort of childhood paradise—or, at least, to return to “the glory” Roussel claimed to experience in creating his first novel—but at the beginning of the book Ford seems at a loss to come up with any reasons a writer might choose to put himself through such a rigmarole of methods. The book builds to a conclusion that answers this, going beyond the staunch support of the surrealists and the nouvelle roman writers. Cocteau might have taken Roussel to heart and Robbe-Grillet might have emulated his obsessively detailed yet detached descriptions, but it was the writers of the Oulipo, with their use of constraints to produce fiction and poetry, who

methods when Perec wrote *Life A User's Manual*.

And yet, despite Ford's superb and indispensable portrait of the artist, Roussel's place in literature and this book's place in the world pose challenging questions. Consider the context of a book in English about an obscure French writer whose work is so intricately constructed by French language manipulations that very little of his oeuvre has been translated adequately into English. Is Ford's book primarily for Roussel scholars (or even primarily for constraint-driven writers) but ultimately for English-speaking people who can't read Roussel in French? Together with Winkfield's book, with its fine partial translations by Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery, and Harry Mathews, Ford's critical biography (with a foreword by Ashbery, translations of passages by the author, and intriguing photos) provides a thorough introduction to Roussel that working writers will find more useful than Michel Foucault's excellent *Death and the Labyrinth* (Doubleday, 1986).

For me, one of the most useful aspects of this book is its correction of my impressions of Roussel's career as literary outsider, an image the surrealists projected (and he abetted in “How I Wrote...”). So people never thought he was as great as he wanted to be or even as great as he was. So what? With all due respect to his psychiatrist, Pierre Janet's interpretation of Roussel's ambition as something like a the raving ecstasy of a saint, I think Ford demonstrates that Roussel knew very well who he was and what he was doing. Call it notoriety, but he also received more serious recognition for his work in his time than most artists receive, and, thanks to the efforts of writers like Winkfield, Ashbery, Koch, Mathews, and now Mark Ford, Raymond Roussel may someday attain a good measure of the reputation he knew he deserved.

*Doug Nufer is writing a constraint-driven circus novel that must be called Circus Solus. Let the bidding war begin.*

