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REVIEW

Paying Attention to Foucault's Roussel

**Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel*.
Translated by Charles Ruas. Introduction by James Faubion. Postscript by
John Ashbery (London: Continuum, 2006) ISBN: 0826464351.**

"No one has paid much attention to this book, and I'm glad; it's my secret affair.
You know, he was my love for several summers...no one knew it" (187).

This new edition by Continuum Press of one of Michel Foucault's earliest books is a perfect illustration of the idea that a book (just like *power* or the *subject*) is not a substance. On its first publication in French in 1963 (the same year as *Naissance de la Clinique*), the book entered a world in which Raymond Roussel (1877-1933), who had been a figure of minor interest (mostly associated with Surrealism), was finally becoming significant for readers of the then-emerging *nouveau roman*. Foucault himself, who had published work on Ludwig Binswanger, the book on madness, and a series of literary articles in *Critique* and *Tel quel* was also a minor figure, one who seemed to have a strong attraction for the exceptional, the marginal, and the transgressive. It is difficult to judge what impact the book had upon publication, but we can take as indicative the fact that it did not appear in an English translation until 1986. At that time, the book was published with an interview that the translator, Charles Ruas, had with Foucault in September 1983. In addition, a "Postscript" was added, consisting of an essay written by the American poet and critic John Ashbery in 1961 (hence, a "pre-script"?); an essay that introduced Roussel to an American audience presumed to have no knowledge of his work. And this "Postscript" to the book had itself another "Postscript" that was added by Ashbery in 1986. Finally, the English translation changed the title significantly, from the simple French title *Raymond Roussel* to the more elaborate, interpretive title *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel*. Now, in 2006, Continuum Press have re-published Foucault's book, with all the apparatus from the 1986 edition, but this time adding yet another layer; an "Introduction" by James Faubion that situates the original book, the Interview and the "Postscript" in the context both of the study of Roussel's work and the

subsequent development of Foucault's work. At the centre of this multiplicity is Foucault's 1963 book (originally conceived as an article for *Critique*), which itself begins as a commentary on Roussel's posthumous book, *How I wrote Certain of my Books*,¹ which is itself of course, also a commentary on some of Roussel's books. As if this Rousselian madness was contagious, this review will now comment on the recent re-edition as a twentieth-first century event in "Foucault studies," an event that gives us a chance to reconsider some of the often forgotten aspects of Foucault's work.

Today, forty-five years after the book's initial publication, the first question to be asked is, how should we read this book? Well, since we are talking about the version of the book that has recently been re-published, I would say that we should read it backwards and, not only that, but we should begin by reading something else, by which I mean, we should begin by reading some Raymond Roussel (the novels *Locus Solus* and *Impressions of Africa* would be good places to start²). Then we should read this edition, but beginning with John Ashbery's 1961 essay, working back through the 1983 interview with Foucault, then reading the "book" itself, and finally ending with James Faubion's Introduction.

But why make the effort to read this difficult book at all? If there is any justification for the proliferating apparatus that surrounds Foucault's book, it is precisely because that book is essentially difficult, obscure, and, as Foucault himself admits, convoluted.³ The first source of difficulty is the fact that it assumes the reader already has a detailed knowledge of Roussel's works and is also familiar with the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, et al. For example, Foucault has a tendency to weave references and allusions to events in the novels, poems and plays without alerting the reader to their origins or significance. A second difficulty arises from the style of the writing itself. It is a curious and striking fact that much of Foucault's writing on literature from the first half of the 1960's seems to be deliberately opaque. In some cases, such as his essays on Bataille and Blanchot,⁴ one has the suspicion that his writing style is a form of homage to the subject of the essay. The essay on Blanchot, in particular, is strongly reminiscent of Blanchot's own allusive, and elusive, style. However, it would perhaps be wrong in the case of this book to think that the difficulty stems from Foucault's mimicking of Roussel's style. After all Roussel, like Robbe-Grillet, his *nouveau-roman* admirer, could write prose with ex-

¹ Raymond Roussel, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, translated and edited by Trevor Winkfield (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1995).

² Raymond Roussel, *Locus Solus*, translated by Rupert Copeland Cunningham (London: John Calder, 1983); and Raymond Roussel, *Impressions of Africa*, translated by Lindy Foord & Rayner Heppenstall (London: John Calder, 2001).

³ See this volume, "An Interview with Michel Foucault", 187.

⁴ Michel Foucault, "The preface to Transgression" and "The Thought of the Outside", both in *Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 2, Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, edited by James D. Faubion (London: Penguin, 2000).

treme clarity. In this case, it may be closer to the truth to simply accept Foucault's own explanation: that this book was written by him in a matter of two months, it was a pleasure, a "secret pleasure", and he didn't subject it to his usual process of re-writing, simplifying, and clarifying.⁵

Perhaps the greatest source of difficulty for a Foucauldian reader today, therefore, does not come from a mirroring of style, but from the mirroring of the central concerns of Roussel's work. Foucault sees in Roussel a writer who is anxiously obsessed with language and who is constantly exploring the intimate connection between language and death. This concern is mirrored and amplified by a similar concern on the part of Foucault. In fact, in the 1983 interview, he admits that his own "obsessional side" (174) may partly explain his fascination with these works. In the last line of his book, Foucault generalises this experience by saying that what we share with Roussel is this "anguish of the signified" (169). A shared anxiety in the face of language is both what allows us to understand Roussel's works and what allows us (Foucault) to speak of them. However, it may also be what contributes to giving the book its labyrinthine opacity, its relentless turning around the question of what Foucault sees as the void that opens up at the heart of language and connects it inexorably with death.

For potential readers of the book today, therefore, the question remains: given its difficulty, its apparent marginality in Foucault's oeuvre, and the fact that few people today read Roussel, why should we read this book? Assuming that this question is addressed to those whose interest is primarily in Foucault, rather than in Roussel, I think there are two important, connected reasons. First, this book is the only extended example of Foucault's engaging in a form of discourse in which he was highly skilled, but which he had abandoned by the late 1960's, what we could call the formalist analysis of literary or artistic works. Striking examples of this form of discourse include his analysis of "Las Meninas" in *The Order of Things*, his short book on Magritte and his extended essay (now a book) on Manet;⁶ and of course his essays on Bataille, Jules Verne, and the *nouveau-romanciers*. The second reason has to do with the nature of this engagement itself, or at least with the literary side of this engagement. Foucault's deep involvement with literary analysis in the early to mid-1960s was a function of his interest in a range of fundamental questions about the nature of language and its relation to the world. The second reason for reading his book on Roussel, therefore, has to do with the contribution it can make to help us understand the form his questioning of language took at this time. However, it also has to do with helping us to pose, if not answer, a question about Foucault's subsequent turning away from using works of literature as a privileged access to the problem of the relation between words and things.

⁵ "An Interview...", 187.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *La Peinture de Manet, suivi de "Michel Foucault, un regard"*. Edited by Maryvonne Saison (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 2004).

Insofar as we read the book, firstly, as an example of Foucault's powers of literary analysis and insight, we have to recognise that for both Foucault and the reader the primary interest will be one of pleasure. Not only the pleasure for us of reading Foucault's convoluted, but at times dazzling, analyses; but also the sense we have of the pleasure Foucault himself is taking both in the writing of the book and in the reading of Roussel. Convolution, repetition, and mirroring were key features of Roussel's work and they obviously find a strong resonance in the Foucault of the early 1960s. In one of Roussel's last works, *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, a long poem that re-works some of the themes of the earlier novel *Impressions of Africa*, there is a complicated layering of parentheses within parentheses within parentheses. Foucault clearly enjoys calculating that, at one point, if we include the parentheses inside the footnotes to the poem, this layering extends to the ninth degree (130). It would clearly be next-to-impossible for a reader to navigate this complexity without confusion, and that is something that we will see could also perhaps be said of Foucault's book itself.

This kind of convolution and layering is a constant feature of Roussel's work. And, a significant part of the pleasure of those works comes from the fact that, at one level, they can be approached as a kind of mystery that both resists and invites explanation; in fact, as a mystery which is constantly being explained, but in ways which we cannot quite accept as reliable. In *Locus Solus* ("solitary place"), for example, we are introduced to the extraordinary garden of Martial Canterel. A group of visitors is led by Canterel through a series of marvels which he has assembled (literally) using his incomparable powers of engineering and chemistry. These include a series of vignettes, inside large glass-fronted refrigerators, in which cadavers that have been temporarily re-animated using two substances invented by Canterel ("resurrectine" and "vitalium") re-enact the most highly charged moments of their lives, before collapsing again into a state of death. Before any explanation is given, the visitors (and the reader) are taken from window to window to observe the curious actions of the inmates of each refrigerated cell. The scenes are described in meticulous, but baffling detail; neither we nor the visitors to the garden have any idea of the significance of the actions we are witnessing. After the eight scenes, Canterel explains both his discovery of the chemical compounds "resurrectine" and "vitalium" and, once again in great detail, describes the context of the moments that we had seen being recreated inside the refrigerated cells. This second description is, then, an explanation of the original description, but it is one that is almost as mysterious and inexplicable as the first.

One way of understanding these narratives, which bring together extraordinary machines with complicated plots, has been to see them as the product of a richly surreal imagination. Roussel was, in fact, a *cause célèbre* of the Surrealists who, for example, came to some of his plays to noisily support them against the attacks of bored and frustrated audiences. However, another approach would be to assume a

hidden meaning behind the inventions of plot and language, and to connect these with the singularities of Roussel's own life. According to this approach, Roussel's works would be seen as containing a hidden message that would be decipherable if we could find its key. In a 1963 review of Foucault's book,⁷ the novelist Philippe Sollers makes the point that whether or not this approach is legitimate, we should not (and Foucault does not) therefore think of Roussel as an initiate of an occult language to which we too would try to gain access. But this does not mean that we do not still try to find a key to the works; or, to adopt a recurrent metaphor, that we do not still try to find a thread that will lead us both into and out of the labyrinth that Roussel constructs.

And in fact, Roussel himself gave us just such a key – the posthumous text in which he explained how he had written certain of his books. For Foucault, this text demonstrates the sense in which Roussel's work should be read, not as a series of flights of the imagination, but as an experiment that is carried out on language, in order to expose both the labyrinth that it constructs for us and the abyss on which it rests. In *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, Roussel explains some of the basic techniques upon which he built "certain" of his books (principally *Locus Solus* and *Impressions of Africa*). The first technique consisted of choosing two almost identical words – for example *billard* (billiard table) and *pillard* (plunderer). To these he would add identical words capable of two meanings in order to produce two almost identical sentences with radically different meanings. Hence: "*les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux billard*" [the white letters on the cushions of the old billiard table]; and, "*les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux pillard*" [the white man's letters on the hordes of the old plunderer]. His task was then to construct a narrative that would begin with the first sentence and end with the second sentence. It was this story, Roussel tells us, that was the basis for his novel *Impressions of Africa*. A second technique was to take two words, link them with the preposition *à* [to/with], and attribute two meanings to each word, taking, for example, the word "*palmier*," which is both a kind of tree and a kind of pastry, we can get "*palmier à restauration*," which is both a restaurant serving pastries, and a tree that commemorates the restoration of a dynasty. It was from this play of words that Roussel derived the palm tree in *Impressions of Africa* that commemorates the restoration of the dynasty of Talou (the old plunderer).

The third technique that Roussel unveils moves even more in the direction of the use of found language. In this case, he would choose a random sentence from a song or a poem and modify it in order to produce a series of images that then constitute one part of a narrative. Hence, the line from the traditional song "*Au clair de la*

⁷ Philippe Sollers, "Choix Critique: Logicus Solus", *Tel quel*, 1963, 14, 46-50. Republished (untranslated) in *Michel Foucault: Critical Assessments 1: Situating Foucault: Archaeology, Genealogy and Politics*, 3 volumes, edited by Barry Smart (London: Routledge, 1994), 349-354.

lune mon ami Pierrot" becomes "*Eau glaire (cascade d'une couleur de glaire) de là l'anémone à midi négro*" [Glairy water (glairy-coloured waterfall) from whence the anemone with noon Negro]. In another example, Roussel takes a product name from an advertisement – "*Phonotypia*" – and produces "*fausse note tibia*" [false note tibia], from which he invents a Breton character that plays a flute that has been made from his own amputated tibia.⁸

As we have seen, the point to be made about these inventions is that they are not primarily the product of a rich, surreal imagination. Rather, they are the products of a process which extracts wonders (in a Jules Verne sense) from the limitless fecundity of language itself: "the reader thinks he recognises the wayward wanderings of the imagination where in fact there is only random language, methodically treated" (40). For Foucault, this is the key to the locked doors of Roussel's work: not so much the mechanics of the process itself, and certainly not the psychopathology of the author, but the sense in which the equal poverty and richness of language are capable of generating a world of crystal clarity and impossible mystery. However, this is by no means a naïve celebration of literary language. For Foucault, what underlies all of these experiments is an anxiety about words and their relation to things. Roussel's work both conveys and instills this anxiety, a "formless anxiety" relating to "the stifling hollowness, the inexorable absence of being...[the] expanse that Roussel's narratives cross as if on a tightrope above the void" (13, 21).

For Foucault, the significance of this process is that it gives a mechanism for spanning the gap between the everyday repetitions of language and the poetic annihilation of those patterns. If, as Foucault suggests, poetic language exposes an emptiness at the heart of the labyrinthine constructions of language, then Roussel's work is of interest for the way it allows us to see these two aspects at play. On the one hand, the incredibly rich and detailed descriptions of worlds that seem to be so real; on the other hand, the uncanny evocation of an emptiness that not only undercuts the descriptions themselves, but also seems to reach out and undermine our experience of the undoubtedly real worlds in which we live. In Roussel, therefore, as in the work of Robbe-Grillet, the effect of the incredibly precise descriptions of the world of things is, paradoxically, to undermine our faith in a direct and faithful relation between words and things.

One of the central features of this relation is that there are, quite simply, fewer words than things and that is why words take on meaning. If there were as many words as things, language would be a useless mirror of the world. Jonathan Swift has reduced to absurdity the dream of a language that would neatly and rigidly fit over the world of things. In his travel to Laputa, Gulliver meets the members of an academy who, instead of using words, carry around with them all the things to which they wish to refer. The only problem is that the more things they wish to speak about, the more things they must carry around, until finally they are weighed

⁸ Roussel, *Impressions*, 67-8.

down with heavy burdens that must be packed and unpacked for every conversation.⁹ For us, however, the poverty of language is the source of its richness. Out of its essential poverty springs the possibility for words to repeat in forms that appear to be the same, but are actually different. Hence, the point for Roussel is not to say the same things differently, but to say different things using the (almost) same words. For Roussel, as for Foucault, therefore, the relation between words and things can never be a straightforward one of reflection or adequate expression. The value of descriptive language lies not in its fidelity to the object. Instead of following and translating perceptions, language opens up a path for our subsequent perceptions; it is only then that “things begin to shimmer for themselves, forgetting that they had first been ‘spoken’”.¹⁰

Today, more than forty five years after its first publication, what does this book mean for our understanding of Foucault? Projecting forward from 1963, we can clearly see that Foucault is already immersed in the set of questions that animate *Les mots et les choses* (1966). Foucault famously attributes the seed of that book to his laughter at Borges’ account of the Chinese encyclopedia; that makes a nice story, but we should also add that Foucault’s entire interest in modern literature (from Mallarmé to Robbe-Grillet, via Roussel) also turns around similar concerns. Projecting backwards, we can say that Foucault’s earlier *History of Madness* was also written within a constellation of influences in which Roussel shone. In the 1983 interview, Foucault acknowledges that his intense reading of Roussel occurred while he was writing the book on madness. Both provoked him to search for a way of understanding the connections between language, madness, and history.

But how does this book fit into Foucault’s trajectory, as it unfolded in the twenty years after its publication? In the 1983 interview, Foucault seems to be happy that his “secret affair” with Roussel has not attracted much attention, and he even goes so far as to say that the Roussel book “does not have a place in the sequence of my books” (187). For a thinker who was constantly telling new narratives that would make sense of the sequence of his books, this is a surprising assertion. Is Foucault disowning the book? Is it something that he can no longer integrate into his sense of his own intellectual project? One way to make sense of the claim would be to see it in the light of Foucault’s undoubted turn away from literature by the end of the 1960s. While the early to mid-1960s had been a time of continuous engagement with literature, by the time of his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1969 Foucault had finally relegated literature to an area of marginal interest. And it is not just the Roussel book that gets forgotten in this shift; for example, in the pseudonymous entry he wrote on his own work for a dictionary of philosophy, he does not once

⁹ Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, Part III, chap. 5 (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, “Pourquoi réédite-t-on l’oeuvre de Raymond Roussel? Un précurseur de notre littérature moderne”, in *Dits et Écrits*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 422.

mention his work on literature. Instead, he characterises his work of the 1960s as involving the study of those discourses about the human being that take the form of scientific knowledge.¹¹

We could speculate that one of the reasons both for this turn and for the subsequent tendency to forget what had gone before is the fact that Foucault's overall approach to literature at this time was based on a philosophy of language which he was later to reject. In one of his *Tel quel* articles also from 1963, Foucault suggests the possibility of outlining a "formal ontology of literature".¹² This ontology would be based, primarily, on the observation that literary language involves a mirroring reflection on death and a consequent construction of a virtual space in which language repeats itself "to infinity".¹³ From Homer and Scheherazade, to Borges and Roussel (although Roussel is not mentioned in this article), literature would then be a unique practice of language in which we create for ourselves a world that in some way goes beyond the world in which we live and will die. But for the Foucault of this era, this fairly simple position is always expressed in an almost tortuous evocation of labyrinths, eternal mirroring, yawning voids, and transgressive repetitions. At the very least, it is clear that the metaphysical, almost mystical, style of Foucault's exploration of language and literature at this time quickly gave way to the more sober, and politically grounded, analyses that followed in the 1970s. And that is not something we should regret.

One of the important things about the Roussel book, however, is that it shows that approach to literature in full flight. And reading it is a pleasure, but a pleasure that is not unmixed with pain. Foucault's own enjoyment, not only of the texts of Roussel, but of the process of producing his analyses of those texts, is contagious. And if that makes us go back and read some of Roussel's work, then the book has served an important function. But, on the other hand, if we read the book today, having read so much of Foucault's later work, we may find it frustratingly obscure and unnecessarily convoluted. And that may be why Foucault was happy that it had not received much attention. But given Foucault's own fondness for subjugated knowledges and forgotten histories, we would be well justified in uncovering this secret love of an anguished and obsessive young philosopher.

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¹¹ Michel Foucault, "Foucault", in *Essential Works, Volume 2*, 460-61.

¹² Michel Foucault, "Language to Infinity", in *Essential Works, Volume 2*, 92-93.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 90-91.