Foreword

by John Ashbery

It is unlikely that Raymond Roussel ever read John Keats’s more-than-accurate prediction: ‘I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death.’ Yet in his book Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres, published in 1935, two years after his death, he offers a similarly modest and touching estimate of his work: ‘... I may perhaps gain a little posthumous recognition for my books.’ Both the extravagantly impoverished Keats and the extravagantly wealthy Roussel were destined to die in a foreign land (Italy, in both cases) with a single friend for company and doubtless with little real confidence that their genius would indeed be recognized by posterity.

Keats, however, had a certain measure of fame during his lifetime. Roussel had only notoriety, the result both of the absolute strangeness of his work and the vast fortune he dissipated in trying to draw attention to it. Perhaps he might have been more successful if he had been poorer, but it is more likely that, as with Proust, we should never have heard of him if his means hadn’t allowed him the leisure to devote himself entirely to his writing, and, in Roussel’s case, to publishing it. Another advantage was that his financial adviser happened to be the father of the future Surrealist writer Michel Leiris, who, beginning in 1935, published a remarkable series of essays on Roussel’s work (eventually collected in a volume called Roussel l’ingénu in 1987, and reprinted in 1998 in Roussel & Co.). Thus his name, at least, was kept alive by the Surrealists and a few others until the 1960s, when a sudden explosion of interest gave birth to what can only be called a ‘Roussel industry’. Though the fame that has resulted would have pleased him far more than the attentions of the Surrealists, whose works baffled him, it seems that misunderstanding of a different, albeit benign,
sort has supplanted the scorn with which the world viewed him during his lifetime. From being always *le mal aimé*, he became almost too well loved, not only in the domain of literature but by the mass media as well, though it is chiefly his bizarre biography that interests the latter.

Though Jean Ferry’s book-length study, *Une Étude sur Raymond Roussel*, appeared in 1953, interest in Roussel had pretty much congealed by 1958, when I decided to do research on him with the aim of producing a doctoral dissertation at New York University. I had already spent three years in France, trying to learn the language chiefly in order to read this writer whose work had fascinated me since 1951, when Kenneth Koch had brought back some of his books after a Fulbright year in France. Even their physical aspect attracted me, published as they had been by the firm of Lemerre, whose heyday in the late nineteenth century had long passed and whose pale-yellow volumes of the likes of Leconte de Lisle and José-Maria de Heredia emitted an appealing air of desuetude. One Roussel book in particular, his *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique*, a long poem interrupted by sets of multiple parentheses and illustrated with curiously banal drawings like the ones in my high-school French grammar, intrigued me. It seemed impossible that I would ever be able to read it with any understanding, but for a long time it was the thing I most wanted to do. So I learned French with the primary aim of reading Roussel.

Eventually I began my research by writing to Michel Leiris, who kindly invited me to have a drink at his sumptuous digs on the Quai des Grands Augustins. He produced a stack of postcards from Roussel that he had received over the years, starting in childhood, which I began to devour eagerly – too eagerly, as I later realized. Although I am not exceptionally uncouth, I committed the faux pas of copying down some of the postcard messages, without, as I recall, even asking Leiris’s permission. I suppose I thought that he, as the principal guardian of the flame, would welcome the interest of a fellow Roussel enthusiast, or roussellâtre as they were called even during the master’s lifetime. How could I have been so stupid as to forget that tenders of flames rarely feel the need of outside assistance? After a cordial hour, Leiris withdrew the pack of postcards and
announced that they were the only Roussel documents in his possession. This proved to be false, and when I ran into him several years later, after the publication of a volume of Roussel's miscellanea called *Épaves* (Jetsam) that included several other previously unpublished texts from Leiris's collection, he said, 'But you know those were the last papers of his that I owned.'

Leiris did, however, give me the last address he had for 'Madame Dufrène', Roussel's sole companion, who had played the role of his mistress so as to shield his homosexuality from public knowledge. Eventually I was able to find her in 1960 at a public nursing home in Brussels, a far cry from the elegant flat near the Champs-Élysées she had occupied during Roussel's lifetime. During the course of several visits she told me of her platonic relationship with him and gave me a couple of photos – an elegant 'official' portrait of the supposed couple and a passport photo of Roussel. (Soon afterwards I mentioned her destitution to Leiris, who had her placed in a comfortable private residence where she lived till her death in 1968, aged eighty-eight.)

Meanwhile I had begun to pester everyone I could find who might have had a connection to Roussel, to the point where I became known (in the words of Paule Thévenin, a onetime friend of Antonin Artaud) as 'ce fou d'Américain qui s'intéresse à Raymond Roussel' – an indication of the state of Roussel's reputation at that time. Being American was, however, useful in at least one instance, since I was able to establish relations with Roussel's nephew and sole heir, Michel Ney, Duc d'Elchingen, who had hitherto refused to discuss his uncle with anyone, considering him the disgrace of the family. But an inquiry from America was welcomed, since it raised the prospect of possible revenue from Roussel's hitherto unsaleable writings.

In the early 1960s Roussel's stock began to rise. Michel Foucault's first book, a study of Roussel, was published in 1963. Alain Robbe-Grillet and Michel Butor, creators of the nouveau roman, acknowledged their debt to Roussel, and essays on him by Leiris, Breton and other Surrealists continued to appear. Michel Ney was now more than willing to talk about his uncle to anyone who would listen. He had remarried in the early 1960s and his new stepson, François Lorin, happened to be a
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writer who subsequently contributed an essay to a special Roussel number of the review Bizarre. Ney had, it seemed, kept nothing in the way of documents or mementos that might be of use to researchers. He did contribute recollections and some family photos to François Caradec’s ground-breaking biography of Roussel which appeared in 1972. Meanwhile, Roussel’s books were being reprinted by Pauvert, Gallimard and the Livres de Poche series. The Roussel revival was on, but the trail had grown cold. It seemed doubtful that any unpublished writings or further biographical materials would ever come to light. (I had meanwhile abandoned my project of a dissertation and returned to America for family reasons.)

Then in a coup de théâtre worthy of Roussel’s play La Poussière de soleils (which deals, like so many of his works, with a search for hidden treasure), a trunk filled with boxes of manuscripts, letters, photographs and other memorabilia was discovered by accident in a Paris warehouse where it had been deposited shortly after Roussel’s death, perhaps by Ney, and had been gathering dust ever since. The warehouse was itself moving house, and the trunk and its contents might well have been discarded had an alert workman not noticed a sumptuously bound volume of Roussel’s great novel Locus Solus, in which he had specified that it be bequeathed to the Bibliothèque Nationale. The library was notified, and most of the trunk’s contents are now in its possession in a specially created Fonds Roussel. (I couldn’t help feeling pangs of jealousy – when I was attempting to do research there some thirty years before, the subject index of the card catalogue, consisting of handwritten fiches, had progressed only as far as the letter M and was therefore of limited use to someone investigating a writer whose name began with an R, not to mention the normal bureaucratic roadblocks seemingly set up on purpose to discourage scholars in that once antiquated but now futuristic institution.)

So, valuable new studies of this great and elusive writer are now being made. Publication of the thousands of newly discovered manuscript pages is proceeding, albeit at a snail’s pace. Two enormously long, previously unknown early works have already appeared with the firm of Fayard/Pauvert. François Caradec, the grand master of roussellâtres, has published a new
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and vastly enlarged version of his earlier biography. And now Mark Ford has written the first major work on Roussel in English (Rayner Heppenstall’s brief and cursory study of 1966 doesn’t really count). It’s to be hoped that out-of-print translations of the works will be reissued and new ones undertaken, so that a new generation of Anglophone readers can discover what the fuss (created by a small but energetic minority of Roussel freaks) is all about.

I have purposely avoided describing the work since Mark Ford has done it so brilliantly. In particular, his intensive analysis of Roussel’s famous procédé, the gimmick at the core of his writing, sheds light not only on the passages where it was employed (in so far as they are known) but on his writing as a whole, and on its potential for writers to come. (It has already borne fruit in works of writers of the Oulipian group, most notably in major novels by Italo Calvino, Georges Perec and Harry Mathews.) Perhaps it’s necessary only to add that readers proceed with caution: Cocteau was correct in noting something ‘dangerous’ in Roussel’s writing, a ‘charm’ against which he had to build ‘defenses’. Pierre Loti’s writing was like a drug for Roussel, of which, he said, he had to have his daily dose. But Roussel’s is far more addictive. Caveat lector.