While in Paris in the course of researching this book, I visited a bookshop called the Librairie Colbert, which stocks the official publications of the Bibliothèque Nationale. I wanted to buy a copy of the 1992 issue of the *Revue de la Bibliothèque Nationale* that contains an account of the discovery of Roussel’s long-lost manuscripts and essays by various Roussel scholars on the literary significance of the find. I approached the young man on duty that afternoon, whose somewhat supercilious appearance conformed to my notion of a Parisian postgraduate eking out his grant while completing his doctoral assault on the philosophy of Derrida or Deleuze. I asked if he thought he might be able to find me a copy of issue 42 of the *Revue de la Bibliothèque Nationale*. ‘Je suppose,’ he answered with a shrug, and I followed him upstairs to the periodicals section. He extracted number 42 from shelves of the *Revue* in question, and handed it over with an expression of slightly disdainful puzzlement, as if to say, ‘What could anyone, let alone a non-French person, want with such a dull publication?’ It was the wrong number. I checked my notes and asked for the following issue. As he glanced at the photograph of the withdrawn, immaculately dressed young man (inscribed ‘ma photo à 18 ans’) adorning the cover of number 43, his face momentarily relaxed into understanding. ‘Ah... Roussel,’ he murmured, almost conspiratorially, and I felt like a neophyte who has just made his first successful contact with another member of a secret order he has recently joined.

‘Ah... Roussel.’ In many ways, that can seem the only appropriate response to this most peculiar of writers. Confronted with a bottle-imp containing miniature figurines dramatizing a large bird’s attempt to strangle Alexander the Great with a golden thread, or a bas-relief of a girl extracting from a cushion the doll of a one-eyed dwarf dressed entirely in pink, or a skull
INTRODUCTION

engraved with Old Norse runes sporting a lady barrister’s cap made out of pages (themselves printed with runes) from The Times, it is difficult, at least initially, not to feel lost for words, in all senses of the phrase. For Roussel’s own words are entirely self-sufficient, and require no gloss or explication. Although his vocabulary is at times dauntingly arcane, featuring sistrums and reiters and strange substances like erganasium or iradol, stylistically his work is lucidity itself. It contains no symbols, obscurities or metaphors that need to be explained. His French, as one of the actors who performed in La Poussière de soleils commented, is ‘irréprochable’. Nor are his narratives fissured by telling gaps or ellipses, or complicated by suppressed details: on the contrary, all aspects of the given situation are presented with exemplary thoroughness. In his poetry we learn everything conceivable about an individual’s dress, features, class, current activity and self-image, and in his prose we can rest assured that every element mentioned in the exposition will be shown to have a necessary function in the workings of the narrative. As Alain Robbe-Grillet noted in his 1963 essay on Roussel, his works are characterized by a ‘total transparency, which leaves neither shadow nor reflection behind it’.

Roussel’s ‘transparency’, however, as Robbe-Grillet goes on to argue, is of the sort that does not resolve mystery, but creates it. While Roussel’s writings make perfect, irrefutable sense on their own distinctive terms, viewed as a whole they end up posing questions one hardly knows how to formulate. ‘What he leaves us with’, John Ashbery has suggested, ‘is a work that is like the perfectly preserved temple of a cult which has disappeared without a trace, or a complicated set of tools whose use cannot be discovered.’ Conversely, one can make – as critics such as Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Maurice Blanchot and André Breton have – virtually whatever one likes of works that are at once rigorously self-explanatory and yet utterly reticent as to their ultimate motivation or raison d’être.

Until near the end of his life, Roussel himself expressed no doubts regarding the purpose and destiny of his poems, novels and plays: they were to win him fame of the sort enjoyed by Jules Verne and Pierre Loti, by Shakespeare, Victor Hugo, Wagner, Dante and Napoleon. Even his most fervent admirers
accept that such predictions are unlikely to be fulfilled: Roussel’s experience of la gloire pervades his entire œuvre, however, and is one of the main factors that make it difficult for critics comfortably to categorize his achievement in relation to the canons of European literature. ‘N’est-ce rien? Est-ce tout?’ inquired a bewildered contemporary critic: Is his work nothing? Is his work everything? What is clear is that it never accedes to a position between such poles: it acknowledges no relationship with the avant-garde movements with which it has been classified – indeed, seems to appeal to no literary criteria other than its own enigmatic but logical inner imperatives. In replying to Benjamin Péret’s request for a dialogue on the subject of Surrealism, Roussel instructed his business manager to explain that ‘il ne se classe lui-même dans aucune école’ – he does not class himself in any school. Convinced that the exaltation he experienced while writing La Doublure constituted an overwhelming proof of his transcendent genius, Roussel could not countenance the thought of belonging to some movement, or even one historical moment.

Roussel’s sense of election and singularity was a precondition of his writing. He turned to the Surrealists for support only after he had renounced his literary career and hoped merely for a little posthumous fame. Almost seventy years on, his reputation is still, in many ways, in the balance: although, as I show in my final chapter, Roussel’s work had a decisive influence on a number of the twentieth century’s most significant artists – Marcel Duchamp, John Ashbery, Georges Perec – he is still not much known outside France, and even there he has only relatively recently received the kind of attention and publication associated with canonical authors.

In this account of his life and writings I have set out to make as clear as possible the aesthetic appeal and implications of the esprit rousselien. The unearthing of Roussel’s manuscripts has allowed me to explore the genesis of his most famous texts, Impressions d’Afrique (1910) and Locus Solus (1914), and to establish the scope and nature of the ‘prospecting’ which preceded the discovery of his unique compositional methods. These manuscripts have also enabled me to trace in greater detail the evolution of various crucial antitheses – poetry/prose, black/
white, male/female – which I suggest structure the development of Roussel’s œuvre. Although this book does not attempt to be a ‘comprehensive biography’, where appropriate I have established connections between Roussel’s attitudes to writing and to living: Roussel himself discusses the relationship – or rather absence of one – between his work and his travels in his only autobiographical text, ‘Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres’. ‘His life was constructed like his books,’ Roussel’s psychiatrist Pierre Janet told Michel Leiris soon after Roussel’s death: it is my hope that this book manages to delineate the dominant patterns of Roussel’s imagination in both spheres.

Those interested in a more comprehensive account of Roussel’s day-to-day existence, his travels and his family’s social milieux should turn to François Caradec’s superb biography Raymond Roussel, first published in 1972, updated and reissued in 1997. Caradec’s book is something of a bible for enthusiasts, and my conception and presentation of Roussel are both greatly influenced by his pioneering researches. When we met in June 1999 he told me of various fresh trails he was exploring: these included a recently unfrozen Swiss bank account held in the name of Raymond Roussel, a projected limited edition of Roussel’s brother Georges’s poetry, and a mysterious uncle who appears to have been banished from the family after some unknown scandal but who, he conjectured, greatly influenced Raymond during his childhood.

Mine is only the second book ever written on Roussel in English. The first was by the novelist Rayner Heppenstall and was published in 1966. Although useful as far as it goes – it is less than 100 pages long – the book offers only a cursory introduction to the work. For reasons that remain unclear Heppenstall does not, as he acknowledges, ‘feel bound to attempt any large critical assessment’ of Roussel, who emerges as an engaging curiosity rather than an interesting writer. While it is difficult to calibrate the exact nature of the ‘interest’ possessed by Roussel’s work, I have tried to explain why I and certain others have come to see him as one of the most exhilarating, entertaining and inspiring writers of the century.

In France, on the other hand, Roussel has been the subject of several book-length critical studies: the most important of these
are Jean Ferry’s *Une étude sur Raymond Roussel* (1953) and *L’Afrique des impressions* (1967), Michel Foucault’s *Raymond Roussel* (1963), Sjef Houppermans’s *Raymond Roussel: Écriture et désir* (1985), Philippe G. Kerbellec’s *Comment Lire Raymond Roussel* (1988) and *Raymond Roussel: au cannibale affable* (1994) and Annie Le Brun’s *Vingt mille lieues sous les mots, Raymond Roussel* (1994). Over the last thirty years there have been numerous special issues of magazines devoted to his work, a number of conferences and several collections of essays published by academic presses. When I visited the writer and Rousselian enthusiast Pierre Martory in Paris in 1996, he talked, not wholly approvingly, of the ‘Roussel industry’, an industry greatly boosted by the unsuspected appearance in 1989 of what became known as *la malle de Roussel* (Roussel’s trunk), which included not only drafts of work in progress, fair copies and typescripts, but also a number of wholly new texts.

It was the emergence of this material which prompted Pauvert/Fayard to undertake their ongoing edition of Roussel’s complete works; this will run to at least twelve volumes, and possibly many more. Here Roussel appears in full academic dress, re-edited, introduced, annotated, and with all significant textual variants noted in appendices. It is as yet unclear, however, to what extent this enterprise will help to create for Roussel a genuinely secure position in the canon; John Sturrock, for instance, in a recent essay on Roussel, argues it will merely ‘ensure that his next relapse into obscurity is some years off’.

My own interest was first kindled by the American poet John Ashbery’s two wonderful essays, ‘Re-establishing Raymond Roussel’ (1962) and ‘In Darkest Language’ (1967). Ashbery originally intended to write a doctoral thesis on Roussel, and in the early 1960s he assembled all the evidence then available on Roussel’s life, publishing career and theatrical extravaganzas. This project was never completed, but Ashbery’s miscellaneous writings on Roussel (see bibliography for full details) undoubtedly constitute the best introduction to his work in English. His enthusiasm, furthermore, inspired others associated with the New York School, such as Harry Mathews, Ron Padgett and Trevor Winkfield, to explore and translate Roussel’s work. In 1977 Winkfield edited a compilation of extracts from Roussel’s
INTRODUCTION

writings, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, which reprinted both of Ashbery’s essays and included translations by himself, Kenneth Koch, Mathews and Ashbery. Eighteen years later he published an expanded version of this which contains additional translations by Ashbery and Mathews (but not Ashbery’s second critical essay); it is with this quite widely available anthology that any Anglophone reader looking to initiate him or herself into the mysteries of the Rousselian should begin.

Despite the lucidity or transparency of Roussel’s writing, his work does pose very particular problems for the translator. Versions in English tend to dilute the radical compression of his prose style, and inevitably cannot capture the ‘poetic’ effects of the puns underlying each episode. The first full-length Roussel text to appear in English was *Impressions d’Afrique* (as *Impressions of Africa*) in 1966, translated by Lindy Foard and Rayner Heppenstall; *Locus Solus* followed in 1970, in a superb version by Rupert Copeland Cunningham, and in 1987 Atlas Press issued a volume entitled *Selections from Certain of His Books* that included translations of his two plays, of his early long poem ‘La Vue’ and of his final, unfinished prose text *Documents pour servir de canevas* (1935).

Both Roussel’s novels were published in Britain as part of a John Calder series called *French Surrealism*. As I hope I make clear in my discussion of Roussel’s ‘little posthumous fame’, Surrealism was only one of a series of artistic movements eager to consider Roussel a significant precursor of its own innovations: nouveaux romanciers, pataphysicians, literary theorists and Oulipians have all claimed him as one of their own. Without question the single most influential and rewarding commentator on Roussel’s work in French has been Michel Leiris, whose essays were collected first in *Roussel l’ingénu* (1987) and then in the expanded *Roussel & Co.* (1998), which contains, in addition to the five essays and interview that make up *Roussel l’ingénu*, a transcript of a notebook in which Leiris composed rough drafts of his articles on Roussel. Like Ashbery, Leiris planned to write a full-length study that was never completed, and his ‘Cahier Raymond Roussel’ contains many new facts and provocative lines of inquiry. I have, throughout this book, relied heavily on Leiris’s anecdotes of his friend’s habits and behaviour,
and also on his analyses of Roussel's work. In my 'Coda' I briefly outline some of the ways in which his writings seem to have influenced Leiris's own.

Perhaps the major difficulty faced by all who have undertaken critical considerations of Roussel's work is its seemingly unassailable self-referentiality: to describe one of his novels, plays or poems, Ashbery once noted, 'is like trying to summarize the Manhattan telephone book'. I have assumed that most readers of this study will have little or no acquaintance with Roussel's œuvre, and I here apologize to roussellâtres who will find my expositions of various episodes from his fiction and drama redundant. However, I could find no way of conveying the extraordinary nature of Roussel's vision without presenting his inventions in some kind of detail. Ashbery is probably right to declare that the power of Roussel's writing is 'something that can be felt but not communicated'. Nevertheless, in the hope of rallying as many new faces to his cause as possible, I have at least tried to evoke the pleasures of immersion in his world: 'Then instantly, I abandoned myself, out of my depth, in the Gulf Stream of your fantasy,' wrote André Gide to Roussel on receiving Pages choisies (1918), a selection of extracts from his fiction. It is my hope that this book will induce readers in the twenty-first century to undertake this miraculous plunge.

However, and without intending to compromise his self-evident uniqueness, I have on occasions pointed up analogies between Roussel and other French writers such as Proust and the Marquis de Sade, particularly as presented by Roland Barthes in the essay collected in Sade/Loyola/Fourrier (1971). And while my focus has been principally on the patterning and symmetries created by Roussel's works, these are, where appropriate, located in a variety of social and cultural contexts: the Belle Époque and its collapse, the tradition of the dandy, the double life of the fin-de-siècle homosexual, the idealization of artistic genius as a form of displaced religion, the birth of Modernism, and the overwhelming fragmentations of the First World War.

My ambition above all, though, has been to make Roussel available to English readers: I determined to try to make him appear as a writer who is worth reading, rather than as an engaging exotic or an intriguing case history. I myself find the
INTRODUCTION

narrative of his career simultaneously sublime and ludicrous, heart-breaking and bewildering, outrageous in its innocence and logic. Yet there is also something dangerous about Roussel: Cocteau feared that over-exposure to his writings would place him ‘under a spell from which I could see no escape’, while Ashbery has argued that ‘there is hidden in Roussel something so strong, so ominous and so pregnant with the darkness of the “infinite spaces” that frightened Pascal, that one feels the need for some sort of protective equipment when one reads him.’ However well one knows *Locus Solus* or *Impressions d’Afrique*, they never lose their capacity to unnerve, never come to seem familiar: as I hope this study makes clear, it is in the uncanny distance the work establishes between writer and reader that the peculiar, addictive fascination of Roussel resides.

[ xxviii ]