VERNE/ROUSSEL

"I have travelled a great deal. Notably in 1920-21, I travelled around the world by way of India, Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific archipelagi, China, Japan and America... I already knew the principal countries of Europe, Egypt and all of North Africa, and later I visited Constantinople, Asia Minor, and Persia. Now, from all these voyages I never took a single thing for my books. It seemed to me that the circumstance deserves mention, since it proves so well how imagination counts for everything in my work." (Raymond Roussel, *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres).*

He completed his world tour in under three months. Asked by a Parisian friend to send back a present which would be "rare and evocative of the local colour [of India]", Roussel sent an electric fire. In China he never left the hotel bedroom. In Tahiti he avoided watching the spectacular sunsets. He professed great admiration for Pierre Loti, whose books of foreign travel, such as *Aziyadé* and *Le Mariage de Loti,* inspired many Parisians with longings for the Orient but, unlike Loti, Roussel never felt tempted to dress up in regional costumes or to become part of the local life. The most he managed was to eat kangaroo soup in Australia.

 In 1925-26, he took things a stage further and constructed the world's first mobile home, a motorised *roulotte,* or gypsy caravan: an automobile 30 feet long by 8 feet wide containing a sitting-room (complete with armchairs, wireless set, electric heating and a safe), bedroom, bathroom and even servants' quarters! The *Revue du Touring Club de France* published a feature article about this vehicle under the heading: "Full-scale motorised camping". In his Paris-on-wheels, Roussel could avoid the tiresome business of checking-in to foreign hotels, dealing with the natives, or even seeing the local landscape.

Given this indifference to place, what could have been the motivation for Roussel's meanderings? There does not seem to have been any undue personal pressures upon him at that time which might have caused him to flee. He was not undertaking any obvious research, in the way that Verne did during his trips around the world, or up in a balloon. As a millionaire, perhaps Roussel was bowing to some such social pressure as: "if you've got the money, why not see the world?" But it seems hardly likely that a man of Roussel's fixity of purpose would have gone to such lengths in the interests of social conformity. The only explanation which bears scrutiny seems to be that, contrary to his statement above, he did indeed "take something for his books" from all this travel. However, this "something" was not information about the real world, but rather an understanding of the inner world (the world of Conception, Roussel would have called it) and, crucially, its *interaction* with the act of travel.

That Verne was the model for his work was fully acknowledged by Roussel, but the precise nature of this indebtedness can be understood on several levels. It is most important to establish first that the most obvious and straightforward way in which Verne could have influenced Roussel is *not* one of them. However "fantastical" and imaginary Verne's tales may have been, he went to great lengths thoroughly to research factual details, in order to give as much appearance of verisimilitude as possible. Indeed, he was to some extent guilty of overkill in this regard. English translations of Verne's works are often heavily edited, to remove the interminable lists of flora, fauna, place-names, geologies, local customs, and so on, with which they are filled. Since these lists frequently occur at the beginnings of chapters, with the

incentive of the "action" driving the reader on through them, it is a relatively straightforward job to make the necessary cuts. Verne's information was culled from various sources, including newspapers, libraries, journals and word-of-mouth, so a number of the "facts" were rather questionable. Nevertheless, Verne's books undoubtedly had an educational value and the thrill of adventure they describe was as much a thrill of the discovery of *information* as of discovery of new worlds, or the quest for self-knowledge which drives many of the characters.

Here is a considerable divergence between the two writers, for Roussel's works, although obsessed with detailed description, shun any connection with the world of external reality, and so contain no "factual" content whatsoever. Also, although informed by learning, they contain no educational material and are of no potential "use" to society at large. The various machines and inventions they describe have no prospect of ever coming into existence, unlike those of Verne, whose predictive powers are legendary. The anthropological content of Roussel's work is at best irrelevant and at worst a travesty of reality, whereas Verne's does ring true to some extent, at least as an accurate depiction of the way in which the colonialist powers saw the world. Finally, Roussel had no discernible political or social agenda, whereas Verne's works are informed by his political ideas and several are, in effect, political tracts.

Given such an apparent gulf between the two, how can Verne's all-pervading influence upon Roussel be so confidently asserted, not least by Roussel himself?[1] In what sense can Roussel be said to have modelled himself upon the older writer?

The first and most obvious direct influence is in the prose style. Both writers employ a prose which is deliberately flat, neutral and sparing in its use of adjectives. This is the case even at the most "sensational" moments of the narrative, for which a single expression of amazement by one or more characters, plus a key adjective from the narrator normally suffices. Apart from encyclopaedias and dictionaries, the major stylistic precedent for this technique is de Sade, whose detailed cataloguings, fantastic machines, predictive powers (!) and boundless imagination rival those of Verne and Roussel. But, of course, the inaccessibility of de Sade's work rules him out as an *influence* upon the two writers.

The effect of this stylistic neutrality is to throw the objects and events being described into sharp relief, in the manner of a catalogue. Unobtrusive prose supports description, of which there is a great deal in both writers' works, often presented under the guise of "conversation" or reported speech. Consider the following examples:

"You have undoubtedly noticed that [the] summit [of this tower] is surmounted by a very tall metal pylon. This pylon is a 'wave projector'. The tower bristles, moreover, with a number of points; these are smaller projectors."

"Wave projectors, you say?" asked Dr. Châtonnay.

"I'm not going to give you a course in physics," said Marcel Camaret smilingly. "But a few explanations of its principles are however necessary. I will remind you, then, if you know it already, or tell you, if you don't, that a celebrated German physicist called Hertz noticed some time ago that when an electric spark from an induction coil flashes across a short gap between the terminals of a condenser

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[1] There does not appear to have been an influence the other way, although it would be interesting to know the details of their discussion when they met in 1898.

- or a resonator or oscillator, whichever word pleases you best - that spark sets up between the two poles of the instrument an oscillating discharge.

       The gap is crossed by an alternating current, or, in other words, (...)" etc. etc.

       (Verne, *L'Étonnante Aventure de la Mission Barsac*)

       (TO FIND: Similar quotation, mentioning Canterel's name, please!)

       (Roussel, *Locus Solus)*

       Both these episodes last several pages, and it is characteristic of both writers' main protagonists to embark upon lengthy exegeses of this type. In fact, many of the books are themselves entire monologues or journals, "spoken" by one of the characters, or shared between characters. This can result in episodes of reported-reported-reported speech! The character/narrator's desire to be objective and factual is then implicitly given as the reason for the flat prose. Sometimes, when the narrative reaches a particularly tense moment, this can be signalled by the neutral tone beginning to waver. Frequently the narrator him-/her-self emerges as less-than-hero ("Dr Watson"-style), but in these cases the reader is supposed to accept their word all the more readily since they display, often humorously, "human" failings.

       A number of the scenarios described are astonishingly similar. Verne's *Les Naufragés du* Jonathan (entitled The *Masterless Man* in the Granada edition translation, but, literally, "The shipwrecked people from the *Jonathan*") has precisely the same starting-point as Roussel's *Impressions d'Afrique:* a group of Western travellers is shipwrecked and thrown into a foreign situation surrounded by "savages" (who turn out to be as, or even more, civilised than themselves) and are confronted with the need to organise themselves. In Verne's story, this turns into a series of social and political experiments, each system failing until anarchism (which Verne sees as freedom from government, rather than insurrection) finally triumphs. In Roussel's version, the "rules" explored apparently govern the ordering and construction of entertainments devised to while away the time until a ransom is paid. This in turn proves to be a pretext for a more mysterious set of rules governing the elements of each entertainment and, ultimately, the tale itself. Both worlds are entirely imaginary: Verne's is located on an imaginary Tierra del Fuego, Roussel's in an imaginary Africa. The geographical details are precisely given in both cases, the difference being that Verne's accord with the known facts of real geography, whereas Roussel's are plainly impossible.

       Another such parallel exists between *Locus Solus* and *The City in the Sahara,* which is Book II of *L'Etonnante Aventure de la Mission Barsac* (The Astonishing Adventure of the Barsac Mission). In the latter story, a mysterious place is created in an unknown location somewhere in the middle of the Sahara desert. The scientist-genius who builds this city, Marcel Camaret, is an unwitting collaborator in the creation of Blackland: a society gone wrong, which eventually brings about its own

destruction. Through Camaret, Verne predicts the invention of the helicopter and other scientific devices. Martial Canterel is plainly another version of the Nemo-Camaret archetype, and his place alone strongly resembles Blackland, except that it lacks the sense of morality and social commentary. Furthermore, its inventions prefigure no subsequent developments in science. Interestingly, both of Verne's stories cited above were published posthumously[2], which suggests either that Roussel saw sketches or discussed them when the two writers met, or that their minds worked along parallel tracks.

That this latter suggestion is most likely is demonstrated by an examination of the profound similarities which occur at the level of formal construction of the tales. In both cases, this has a remarkable similarity to music (Roussel actually trained as a musician), in its quasi-symphonic "development" of a key motif, in the integration of the ideas, in the substrating opposition of what one might call "tonalities". Verne explores this connection overtly in the story *Monsieur Ré-Dièze et Mademoiselle Mi-Bémol* (Mr D Sharp and Miss E Flat). Both writers often employ a "chaining" or linking device which drives the narrative forwards. In Roussel's play *La Poussière de Soleils,* for example, the device is buried treasure, each scene culminating in the revelation of a new clue. Verne's work is almost entirely constructed in this way, and it is no accident that he admired Poe, the inventor of the detective story, for the "treasure" that is discovered at the end of the book is often a truth, either about a person (e.g. Captain Nemo; Captain Hatteras; etc.) or the world (e.g. the international dateline in *Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours)*. Music, too, employs this stratagem: the first movement of Beethoven's *Symphony No.3 'Eroica'*, for example, only reveals its unadulterated principal theme at the end, thus making the movement a journey of discovery.

Underlying this narrative device, however, is a an enigmatic method based upon wordplay. Roussel called this his "procedure" or, to distinguish it from Verne's technique, his "poetic method". An indication of its existence lies in the names given to characters and the titles of the books. Captain Nemo is, of course, "no-one" or "no-name", in the manner of Ulysses hiding his identity from the Cyclops, but he is also an Omen in reverse; Marcel Camaret (*L'Étonnante Aventure de la Mission Barsac)* is the great scientist/inventor, oblivious to the use to which his inventions may be put by the evil, and evilly-named Harry Killer (which itself turns out to be a pseudonym); the Kaw-Djer (*Les Naufragés du* Jonathan) is the embodiment of a savage wisdom, a mysterious being of entirely non-European culture who instinctively understands both Nature and himself, just like J.-J. Rousseau's "noble savage".

In Roussel's work, similar types are linked to similar names: the unpublished tales[3] refer to characters simply by initials, thus: A.... . In *Locus Solus,* the scientist hero is Martial Canterel; in *Impressions d'Afrique* (Impressions of Africa) the "savage" Seil-Kor is the intelligent, sensitive son of the brutal King Talu. The titles of these books are themselves word-plays: *Impressions d'Afrique,* for example, also puns as *Impressions à fric,* - in slang, a book published at the author's own expense, which was indeed the case - it's entire narrative scenario being not an example of travel writing, but the chance collision of the meanings of three words. *Locus Solus,* too, has several meanings. Roussel himself points out that there is a "lake" on the Moon named Lacus Salus.

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[2] *Les Naufragés du* Jonathan in 1909, and *L'Etonnante Aventure du Mission Barsac* in 1920.

[3] of which many more have recently been discovered.

Verne's fondness for codes and ciphers was a matter of public knowledge. At one point, he published a challenge in a national newspaper to any member of the general public to decipher an "insoluble" cryptogram of his own invention, and was most surprised and disappointed when the solution was discovered quickly and rather easily. Characters in the novels often have to unravel or decode hidden messages and the word Mystery is much used. For Verne, the greatest mystery was the World or, indeed, the Universe and so, taken as a whole, Verne's writing may be seen as an attempt to map and decipher Universal Meaning. The Earth itself is circumnavigated, penetrated, viewed from space and the moon. Lines are drawn across its surface as if to expose its hidden order: North by Captain Hatteras; longitudinally/latitudinally by Captain Nemo; through Time by Phileas Fogg; and so on. Like the Qaballah's dissection of Scripture, this constant delineating and mapping seeks to uncover, anagrammatically or cryptographically, the Word of God. The cryptanalyst, presented with a page of apparently random letters, seeks to discover patterns, trying to isolate first the letter "e" (the most common letter in both French and English), then "t" and so on. Lines are drawn across the cryptogram. Connections and resemblances are noted. Eventually, with a mighty jolt, the whole structure tumbles into meaning. Through his characters and his work, Verne tries to apply a similar method to the fundamental questions of all the disciplines of Philosophy: ethics, epistemology, physics and metaphysics. The wonder is that narrative survives such a grand endeavour: indeed, sometimes it does not. The apocalyptic ending of *L'Île Mystérieuse* is as much the immolation of narrative as of Captain Nemo and the *Nautilus*.

With Roussel we reach 'pataphysics, which, as Jarry states in *Faustroll*, [4] "is to metaphysics as metaphysics is to physics". It is here that the depth of Roussel's indebtedness to Verne becomes clear, for he modelled himself not so much upon the older writer himself, but more upon his *characters*, as the exponents of a hidden and mysterious order. The chain of reasoning behind this is obvious enough: to Roussel, Verne's characters seek a truth, which they apparently discover; this truth then forms the basis for Roussel's own explorations. To model oneself upon fiction in this way is destructive of both oneself (and Roussel was a suicide) and of the external world (hence Roussel's insistence upon Conception as opposed to Reality). It affirms the supremacy of a truth discovered in fiction, and by fictional characters, over any truths isolated by "science". The plays-on-words in which these truths reside become doorways both to a superior and parallel world and to the properties of that world. In much the same way that the veils which surround the mysteries of alchemy turn out *to be those mysteries themselves*.

Roussel's "poetic method" is partially explained in his short text *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres,* and has been the subject of a great deal of painstaking research and exegesis ever since, beginning with Jean Ferry's seminal studies.[5] The essence of the method is the pun, usually culled from the alternative definitions of words given in Roussel's favourite dictionary: *Bescherelle*. He cites two main types of example in *Comment j'ai écrit...* .The first is a phrase or sentence, sometimes a

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[4] Alfred Jarry, *Les Gestes et Opinions de Docteur Faustroll, Pataphysician* (Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician)

[5] Ferry, J. *Une étude sur Raymond Roussel* (Arcane, Pairs 1953)
  – *Une autre étude sur Raymond Roussel* ("Bizarre" nos. 33-34, 1964)
  – *L'Afrique des Impressions* (Jean-Jacques Pauvert, Paris, 1967)

popular saying, whose meaning can be entirely altered by the substitution of one letter for another, for example:

> Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux <u>bi</u>llard
> (the white letters on the cushions of the old billiard table)

> Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux <u>pi</u>llard
> (the white man's letters on the hoards of the old plunderer)

This is given as the generic phrase of the basic scenario of *Impressions d'Afrique,* in which both cryptography (chalking the letters of a message one at a time around the North, South, East and West cushions of a billiard table), and the capturing of whites by an old plunderer (King Talu) play a part.

 The second is a substitution method in the standard French construction "......... à ...." (e.g. machine à coudre = sewing-machine). Thus "sabot à dégrès" becomes both a "stepping-clog" and a "thermal-dud-violin", which partly gives rise to the chemist Bex's orchestrion: a thermally controlled music-machine which produces clog-dances for violin according to changes in temperature to which the imaginary chemical *Bexium* (named after its "inventor") is sensitive. This same construction may also be found in the names of characters: thus the limbless midget Tancrèd Boucharessas, or "bouche à ressasse" (   ), whose name describes his character and activities, in the manner of Nemo.

 All the incredible machines and scenarios in Roussel's work, and much of the "action" and dialogue are constructed from such plays-on-words. Roussel's creative task was to develop the results of the collisions of meaning in his imagination. Once again, narrative tends to crumble under the weight of this conception and in any case, Roussel's tendency to an extreme concision means that any narrative <u>device</u> proclaims itself as such even more loudly than in Verne. But the most perplexing aspect of the "poetic method" is that, even after its revelation and explanation, the enigma of Roussel's work remains. This effect may be directly experienced by reading *Impressions d'Afrique* in which the first half of the book, designed to "set the scene" and causally explain the various bizarre events described in the second half, this "first" half is shifted to begin <u>after the second half ends</u>, apparently offering the reader first a mystery, then a revelation. In point of fact, however, the "revelation" succeeds only in deepening the mystery, leaving the reader still more perplexed by the end of the book. This same puzzlement operates between Roussel's work taken as a whole and the revelation of the "procedure".

 At the end of *Voyages et aventures du capitaine Hatteras,* the eponymous Captain, having travelled to the North Pole and having been transformed by the process, is incarcerated in a lunatic asylum near Liverpool.

 "For a considerable time the captain had been in the habit of walking in the garden for hours, [...] but his promenade was always in one direction in a particular part of the garden. When he got to the end of this path, he would stop and begin to walk backwards. If anyone stopped him he would point towards a certain part of the sky, but let anyone attempt to turn him round, and he became angry [...].

 The Doctor, who often visited his afflicted friend, noticed this strange proceeding one day, and soon understood the reason of it. He saw how it was that he paced so constantly in a given direction, as if under the influence of some magnetic force.

This was the secret: John Hatteras invariably walked towards the North." [6]

So we return to the image of Roussel in travel. Modelling himself upon Hatteras, he allows his external state to mirror his internal life. His Conceptual journeyings are echoed in his physical travels. He is offering an image of apparently irrational behaviour, behind which is concealed a deep and mysterious knowledge. It is for us to decipher this, and it is this which makes Roussel a science-fiction writer in an absolute sense, for his knowledge, his *science,* is fiction.

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[6] Incidentally, I would assume that Verne was familiar with the phrase "mad <u>as</u> a <u>Hatter</u>", appropriate for an Englishman. Perhaps, too, there is a pun on "n'a terre as" or something like it, meaning "not of the Earth"