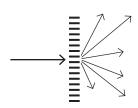# roussel's three (or is it two?) tricks

Raymond Roussel revealed his compositional method in a striking exposé, *How I Wrote Certain of my Books* (*Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres*, 1935). His method, called his *procédé*, began with a word or phrase that was reworked, with puns or re-associations of letters making different words, into a word or phrase that ended the book. The two different readings formed a problem that the narrative endeavored to resolve. This may be a technique that Roussel discovered/found in the carnival floats and *têtes de carton* he saw during visits to Nice, where local politicians were mocked with effigies bearing a slogan that could be read in 'subversive' ways. Some works, however, made use of different techniques. In one, Roussel advised a different order of reading a novel, and in a series of three poems collected under the title of *La Vue* involved a multiplication of descriptive detail revealed by imaginative entry into extremely small images, one a jewel in a souvenir pen-holder, another a label on a bottle of mineral water, still another the scene used on hotel guest stationary. In each of the three poems, time is suspended during an extensive inventory of details that seem impossible to observe even in ordinary circumstances.

1. the procédé

When Michel Foucault turned unexpected attention to Roussel in his book, *Death and the Labyrinth* (1963, English 1986), he emphasized the technique called the *procédé*. In his youth, Roussel's family made regular visits to Nice during carnival. Festivals in that city included large floats and *papier mâché* effigies of political figures, called *têtes de carton,* accompanied by captions involving witty puns and plays on words with subversive intent. A bald (*chauve*) man singing the Marseillaise is captioned: *Je suis chauve, hein!* (*Chauvin* meaning chauvanist). In a story, '*Parmi les noires*', Roussel uses a phrase and its punned inverse to generate a story (*texte genèse*): '*Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux billard …*' initiate a story created by changing one letter: *billard* to *pillard* (the phrase *les bandes du vieux pillard* then becomes 'the hordes of the old plunderer').

Tête de carton, Nice carnival 2005.

The principle here is a kind of verbal anamorphosis: within the conventional meaning of an expression lies a subversive antipodal meaning that, when mapped, creates a landscape in between that can be filled with narrative, a journey 180º around the 'globe' conceptualized around a minimal shift of meaning. The *procédé* also anticipates an idea central to artificial intelligence theory, the 'minimal definition of thinking' that is actually employed by physicians treating brain-damage victims. A phrase is spoken to the patient as brain activity is measured. The phrase involves a word with a 'normal' context that is reversed by the end of the expression. Mental activity that registers this change is regarded as evidence of thought. Like Alan Turing's famous test, this 'minimalist' test is based on a difference rather than a positive expression. Turing realized that a computer could be programed to respond to any variety of questions or responses, but that a subject would judge computer response to be 'real thought' only if it were capable of reversing an expected meaning, a reversal capable of indicating a different context.

American version of a mineral water fantasy label

Michel Foucault regards Roussel's word play as a serious exploration of language's interior self-reference and self-negation, what we might play out through the distinction of 'representation' and 'artifact' (Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth*, 1986) The subject is 'interpellated' by a conventional meaning of a word or phrase, but then, through the discovery of a double meaning, allowed to 'interpolate' between alternative meanings. The image in the book, *Parmi les noires*, of the billiard table suggests the analogy of the frame (the *bandes*), upon which are written letters in chalk (*lettres du blanc*), also 'correspondence from the white man' whose relation to the *pillard* (African despot) and his tribe of outlaws (*bandes*) which not only creates the story line's antipodal points but specifies the linguistic theory by which the narrative depends.

2. the view

Roussel typically composed in triads. *La Doublure*, *La Vue*, and *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* form a triptych that Roussel claimed did not make use of the *procédé*. *La Vue* was in turn composed of three poems, *La Vue*, *Le Concert*, and *La Source*. In the poem '*La Vue*', a souvenir pen-holder is fitted with a small lens placed over a printed view that could be seen by holding the eye close to the lens. Roussel magnifies the potential of this small lens further, proposing that the viewer is able to journey into the world of the scene and partake in impossibly small details: 'Roussel describes not only the promenaders on the beach, but a yacht and various small craft in the offing. We learn of a fisherman who is becalmed out at sea that his jacket is tight under the arms and worn at the cuffs, that his beard is rather untidy and that his left eyebrow is lightly shaggier than his right' (Mark Ford, *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams*, 2000, p. 84).

privation - prohibition
representation - artifact
interpellation - interpolation

The logic of the view was developed later in a story by Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Aleph', about the discovery of a bright object hovering in the air beneath a cellar stairway, serving as a 'hole through space' through which an observer might view the future and the past as well as any distant location in exquisite but horrifying detail. This story is deepened and extended by 'Funes the Memorious', about a brain-damaged youth who

The Æneid, Book VI, Æneas at the Gates of Hades (Cumæ)

'The Eye of Allah' (excerpt)

in *Debits and Credits*

Rudyard Kipling

'I would say then'—Thomas rushed at it as one putting out his life's belief at the stake—'that these lower shapes in the bordure may not be so much hellish and malignant as models and patterns upon which John has tricked out and embellished his proper devils among the swine above there!'

'And that would signify?' said Roger of Salerno sharply.

'In my poor judgment, that he may have seen such shapes—without help of drugs.'

'Now who—who,' said John of Burgos, after a round and unregarded oath, 'has made thee so wise of a sudden, my Doubter?'

'I wise? God forbid! Only John, remember—one winter six years ago—the snow-flakes melting on your sleeve at the cookhouse-door. You showed me them through a little crystal, that made small things larger.'

'Yes. The Moors call such a glass the Eye of Allah,' John confirmed.

'You showed me them melting—six-sided. You called them, then, your patterns.'

'True. Snow-flakes melt six-sided. I have used them for diaper-work often.'

'Melting snow-flakes as seen through a glass? By art optical?' the Friar asked.

'Art optical? I have never heard!' Roger of Salerno cried.

'John,' said the Abbot of St. Illod's commandingly, 'was it—is it so?'

'In some sort,' John replied, 'Thomas has the right of it. Those shapes in the bordure were my workshop-patterns for the devils above. In my craft, Salerno, we dare not drug. It kills hand and eye. My shapes are to be seen honestly, in nature.'

The Abbot drew a bowl of rose-water towards him. 'When I was prisoner with—with the Saracens after Mansura,' he began, turning up the fold of his long sleeve, 'there were certain magicians—physicians—who could show—' he dipped his third finger delicately in the water—'all the firmament of Hell, as it were, in—' he shook off one drop from his polished nail on to the polished table—'even such a supernaculum as this.'

has gained perfect memory from his injury. The Borges stories show how Roussel's pen-set and bottle-label do not vary in their operational logic. Like the Aleph, these are small points of passage where the viewer is given magic access by virtue of disembodiment. The same relation between the optics of 'seeing the Truth' and a small object serving as passageway is the subject of Rudyard Kipling's short story, 'The Eye of Allah'. But, perhaps the ultimate precedent is Book VI of Vergil's *Æneid*, where Æneas stands before the gates of Hades, taking in the images engraved on the bronze doors left behind by Dædalus, who took refuge at Cumæ after his disastrous escape from Crete. The images on the door suggest but do not resolve the puzzle-story of the Minotaur and the labyrinth, the theme that figures again in Foucault's reading of *Parmi les noires*.

The homology is between the situation of passage, the incidence of interruption, gazing, puzzling, and subsequent travel into forbidden space. Where privation (the inability to see the 'invisible', either because it is impossibly small or a part of the realm of the dead) becomes prohibition (the initial refusal of passage and the subsequent granting of it), the 'artifact' of the concealed meaning comes to light. In a sense, the 'passage into impossible detail' that Roussel uses in La Vue amounts to the same idea as the *procédé*'s more language-based technique.

3. hopscotch

In passing, it is worth mentioning that Roussel was recognized for prefiguring the technique used (and named directly) by Julio Cortàzar in his novel *Hopscotch* (*Rayuela*), 1963. Cortàzar may have been looking at Roussel as the most local source, but his ultimate precursor was Ramòn Llull, the Catalan mystic whose combinatorial memory techniques involved fragmenting and recombining texts to create 'alternative stories within stories', a kind of narrative *mise-en-abîme* that Roussel would have endorsed. Roussel's experiment is brief. He advises the readers of one novel that they might as well begin on an alternate internal page and save the first section for later. But, clearly, his model of reading put forward by the image of the billiard table is not only more in keeping with Llull's memory magic, it provides a deeper appreciation of what actually goes on in language when the alternative orders are created by openings in the artifacts of homonyms and minor word distortions.

Hopscotch coupled with the 'Aleph' trick can then stand for the Rousselian magic act in its entirety. What could be the 'standard formula', abstracted in its several steps, that might enable us to see other variations in history, art, and literature? Foucault reminds us that it is important to see Roussel's initial act as a 'split' of a whole, a presumably 'intact' word that, once split through a slight shift of a letter here or a meaning there, 'divides itself in two, and produces new figures (It's a proliferation of distance, a void created in the wake of the double, a labyrinthine extension of corridors which seem similar and yet are different.)' (p. 14). This involves a conversion of the apparently 'straight line' of words into a circular return to origins. In this way, we, like the 18c. grammarians, discover the 'marvelous property of language to extract wealth from its own poverty' (p. 15). Through privation turned into prohibition, also the interpellation which concealed the 'alternative meaning' within the artifact of words and phrases, we have the billiard-ball-style interpolation between alternatives, within a charged 'domain' of potentialities.

Put in terms of the interrupted journey to the underworld and the *ekphrasis* of descriptive wonder, we have as ancient an example as Virgil's to consider, and the tradition of the *katabasis* to add to Roussel's kit of tricks.