



Raymond Roussel's (New) Africa

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Raymond Roussel's 1932 book-length poem *New Impressions of Africa* contains parentheses (The effect is like a Russian nesting doll ((Or perhaps it is like *Tristram Shandy*, that masterpiece of digression (((How thrilling are digressions within digressions! (((How thrilling is recursiveness!)))) It is as if the mind delights at the prospect of never arriving at a telos (((Imagine, for example, hiking in unmarked woods (((((Meaning there are no trails or paths which you can follow.)))))) and becoming lost. You hadn't intended to wander far from your campsite, but first one thing, then another, has led you astray (((((In succession: a quaint pond, several hundred yards behind the campsite; a massive boulder, on the other side of the pond; an enticing kaleidoscope of sunlight piercing the tree line; the ghastly underbelly of a large, uprooted tree; a disarmingly lush fern patch.)))). Suddenly, an hour later, you look around, standing amidst a sea of fern, and realize that you don't know your way back to the campsite. You think it might be to the south, but you're not sure. Each direction looks the same: ferns afoot and, as far as you can see, a smattering of frighteningly nondescript, toothpick-like trees. A warm sensation of terror slowly descends upon you. You don't know to what extent you're in danger, but you know that you are most assuredly in it (((((If I walk in the wrong direction, you wonder, just how far does this forest continue?)))). Your enraptured wandering has put you at considerable risk. Now, if you had been a writer

((((Composing a poem about your impressions of Africa, say.)))) and divagated similarly with words, the risks, comparatively, would be nugatory (((((When, only ten lines in to *New Impressions*, Roussel swerves¹ off course, and then swerves away from his initial swerve, frustrated readers are at liberty to put down the book and resume the business of their day or, better yet, to continue reading and to luxuriate in the tangents. Either way, they face no grave danger from his Byzantine peregrinations.)))). Digressions, in other words, allow for safe, controlled (((((Constraints induce a severe, rough-and-tumble dialectic between control and wildness. Every constraint-based writer knows that we are least in control when we are most in control ((((((Or something like that)))))).)))))) thought-adventure. If we must think of digressions as swerves (((((Delightful word, that: it literally swerves off the tongue.))))) , let us cast aside the term's pejorative connotations and instead understand swerving as a healthy, cathartic action². We swerve to prolong tension, to

¹ Thus: Anything else might date from yesterday:
 The name whose proud yet crushed bearer can say
 From memory, straight off and without fail
 (As the occupant, by the topmost rail
 Of a high block, in airy garret, knows —
 A photographer skilled in hiding crows'
 Feet and pimples with wily stratagems —
 ((Art of retouching! As, decked out in gems
 ((Each, when having a proud photo taken
 Of his beloved self, will stand unshaken

(And so on ((I include this quote more to provide the flavor of a typical passage from the poem than to illustrate a particularly important point or idea contained within it. The poem continues on for 125 more pages in this vein. It is, from a practical standpoint, unreadable (((By claiming Roussel as an important forebear, the Oulipo situates its writing praxis at the borderland of readability (((Raymond Queneau's *100,000,000,000,000,000 Poems* (((A series of 10 sonnets with interchangeable lines, thus yielding 10^{14} , or 100,000,000,000,000,000, potential poems. Queneau calculated that it would take a person reading the poem twenty-four hours a day 190,258,751 years to finish it.))))) is a good example of an unreadable Oulipian poem.)))). It is not that the Oulipo aims to create texts that cannot be read in their entirety, or texts that tax the patience of readers, but that they delight in the creation of dense, knotty structures. Theirs is an aesthetic of frustration and bedazzlement—an aesthetic, in a word, of the pointless raised to the status of the exalted (((I am really getting carried away here; I have no idea what I mean by that.)))). For example, Oulipian Ian Monk explains in his "Introduction" to *New Impressions* that in the poem's long second canto, "608 lines separate the subject of the initial sentence from its main verb" ((p.5)). No reader can juggle the thread of that sentence (((And as the primary sentence of the canto, it is presumably the most important one: all the others are subsidiary, asides (((Though it hardly needs pointing out that for Roussel (((as well as for myself)))) the asides *are* the point (((What sort of aesthetic might that suggest? I quaver to broach the question within this already bloated footnote.)))).))))) as they read through the second canto.)) it goes.)

² The clinamen (I always wonder ((Other things I wonder: Where do porn stars come from and how do they ((whoever they may be))) find so many people willing to perform in pornography? Why must happiness be

make the return voyage sweeter. We swerve in prose because we cannot easily do so in real life³ (((((In his essay “How I Wrote Certain of my Books,” Roussel declares that from his extensive travels ((((((He was born into a wealthy family.)))))”), “I never took anything for my books” (((((p.20)))). He declares this because he believes “it clearly shows just how much imagination accounts for everything in my work.” Perhaps, if he is to be believed (((((Remember D.H. Lawrence’s dictum: “Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.”)))))”), but it also demonstrates that Roussel understood writing as a defiant swerve away from the world of actuality.)))).)))). at the prospect of eschewing purposiveness ((((*Purposive purposiveness*, Kant called it. Or was it the other way around? That art should aspire to such a condition seems, of course, effete, ineffectual. Aren’t we supposed to be changing the world for the better? Unmasking the insidious power structures that govern our lives? (((((This is another question I quaver to address. Not for reasons of space, but because I doubt ever being able to answer it satisfactorily. It is, though, a specter that haunts Oulipian practice: How to justify their participation in the art for art’s sake tradition? Without attempting to answer the question ((((((Ok, I’ll make one attempt. In an interview, film director Elia Suleiman (((((((Director, among other things, of *Divine Intervention*, a work of pro-Palestinian agitprop.))))) was asked what he understood the political role of art to be. He replied that the best art, the best cultural production, makes its audience want to go out in the world as better people—it uplifts and invigorates. In other words, art can change the world, but only indirectly, obliquely, by transforming individual attitudes. Coming from such an artist (((((((that is, someone whose films are directly motivated by a political agenda)))))”), I find this account of

fleeting? Should I get a late night snack from the fridge?): Am I the only person who feels the word “clinamen” sounds like a dirty word ((The astute reader will have observed (((Like Auguste Dupin in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*.))) that my feelings about the dirtiness of the word “clinamen” are what led me to articulate my wonderment about porn stars (((Porn stars are definitely a swerve.)))?), an important concept in Oulipian and Pataphysical practice, comes from the Greek *klesis*, “a bending,” and denotes those moments in a text when the author disobeys the rules of a constraint for aesthetic purposes.

³ This, incidentally, is the essayist’s credo.

cultural work wholly convincing: he has no delusions that his film will single-handedly liberate Palestine--it performs its political work at the level of individual consciousness))))), I'd note that critics are much more concerned about the question of the Oulipo's literary politics than about the question of Roussel's ((((((*The Noulipian Analects*, a recent critical compilation concerning the legacy of Oulipian practice on contemporary Anglophone poetics, contains numerous essays that address the question of the Oulipo's politics, all of which wonder, in essence: *What exactly are they and why is the Oulipo so silent about them?* Formal radicalism, however, does not entail political radicalism. Just because the Oulipo's practices are artistically avant-garde does not mean that their politics must be radical as well. In point of fact, as many critics in the *Analects* note, numerous Oulipians are, or have been, involved in progressive political movements. What troubles the critics, then, it seems, is that the members of the group never explicitly link their artistic practices to their political beliefs and actions.)))). It is as if the apolitical nature of Roussel's literary practice can be excused as the workings of a bourgeois eccentric, whereas the Oulipo's literary practice, because collective, must spell out some sort of larger political program.)))). For myself, at least, it is enough that art bring a modicum of pleasurable thought into my life, whatever tectonic changes it may or may not effect upon the larger world.)))).), delay and interruption (((*New Impressions*, you could say, exemplifies a poetics of interruptions⁴: a poetics aimed specifically at thwarting readers' habits and desires (((I return to the question of what sort of aesthetic such a poetics implies. Obviously, one that considers postponement integral to pleasure (((((This quality alone argues for the importance of *New Impressions* in today's world, a world drunk on the internet's velocity.)))).). Less

⁴ Some strategies that Roussel employs to this end (in addition, of course, to the rampant use of parenthetical asides): footnotes (From Ian Monk's "Introduction" to *New Impressions*: "The role of the footnotes works exactly the same way as the parentheses, in other words they interrupt the linear reading of the book, and it is not always easy to see why Roussel decided to choose one or the other solution at a given moment, since some footnotes could easily be new parentheses ((*me*: Indeed, the footnotes even respect the rhyme and meter of the main poem.)) and *vice versa*" (p.9).), interpolated illustrations, (Drawn by H.-A. Zo.) and the very shape of the physical book itself (The tops of the pages containing the illustrations remain uncut, which forces the reader to either cut them before reading or to peer underneath them to the extent possible while reading.).

obviously, it is an aesthetic that craves readership (((((Roussel, it is well known, was convinced his writing would secure him an exalted posthumous reputation.))))) , challenging readers to stick with the text, in spite of all its excesses, to affirm, tacitly, by turning page after page, the merit of the poem. Whatever else it may be, artistic difficulty is almost always a come on, coquettishly flattering its audience’s discerning judgment.))))) and horseplay, that incomparable romp through the possibilities of the book.)), in that each successive doll seems, somehow, more and more improbable. Until finally, after peeling away countless layers of this strange onion, the last nub of a doll emerges, smooth, waxy, smiling, a tiny nugget of color as splendid in its own way as any of its bulkier kinfolk.) embedded within one another.⁵

⁵ Guttled of their digressions, the primary sentences of *New Impressions*’ three cantos are (like my own primary sentence) frightfully mundane. The primary sentence of Canto II:

Merely to cite him joining in combat,
 At an age when his coat and *little hat* —
 The full-length greatcoat — from which each construes
 A daunting aura, whatever his views —
 ----- (me: The parentheses begin here.)
 Still on that last sheer rock his uniform
 Had not begun to magnify his form,
 Means, pensive, we forget for a moment
 Egypt, its evenings, sun and firmament.

(In other words, what the poem “forgets,” what its far-ranging digressions and asides occlude, is Africa itself, and the author’s impressions of it ((I leave it to better (((less mischievous?))) minds than mine own to determine how problematic this textual eclipse is, and whether or not we get something – if not finer, then equally exotic (((This word obviously has pejorative colonialist connotations in this context, but I use it nonetheless. At bottom, *New Impressions of Africa* is a text about exoticism (((This topic – exoticism in *New Impressions* and its colonialist implications – deserves an essay in its own right. Should anyone ever write this essay, I permit them to insert it here (((**Insert essay here.**))))), provided, of course, it’s any good.))), a text about the allure and the perils of the unknown.))), in its stead.))