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In a solitary place: Raymond Roussel's brain and the French cult of unreason

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Abstract

French surrealist author Raymond Roussel's novel *Locus solus* depicted a brain-in-a-vat apparatus in which the head of the revolutionary orator Georges Danton was reanimated and made to speak. This scene of mechanically-produced language echoes Roussel's own method of quasi-mechanical literary production as presented in *How I wrote certain of my books*. Roussel's work participates in a wider fascination in modern French thought with the fragile connection, or violent disjuncture, between the body and mind. This paper discusses a number of instances in which bodiless and reanimated heads played a central role in reflections on knowledge, art, and individuality. Roussel's works offer a sidelong commentary on the notion of explanation in the sciences and the cult of reason in a technocratic society.

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1.

Raymond Roussel began his first published poem with the line, 'My soul is a strange factory'.¹ This essay considers one of that factory's later products, a scene in *Locus solus*, his novel of 1914, which features the preserved brain-in-a-vat of the guillotined revolutionary orator Georges Danton. In Roussel's *tableau vivant*, the skull and skin of Danton's head have decayed, leaving only the cerebral matter and the nerves and muscles of the face. By a special method involving a talented and hairless Siamese cat, Kóng-dek-lèn—a method I will explain in greater detail

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¹ Roussel (1994), p. 41. The first stanza reads: 'Mon âme est une étrange usine / Où se battent le feu, les eaux, / Dieu sait la fantastique cuisine / Que font ses immenses fourneaux'.

below—the tissues are reactivated, making the remains of the great patriot reproduce the persuasive speeches he had uttered before his execution.

Like the central figure of *Locus solus*, a wealthy scientist and inventor who lives in the vast estate which gives the book its title, Roussel, born in 1877, led an eccentric life of great secrecy. In the villa he shared with his mother outside Paris, he wrote for a set number of hours each day with the curtains drawn: ‘I bleed,’ he said, ‘on each page’ (Roussel, 1935, p. 180). In his infrequent public sightings, he presented a supremely rarefied and meticulous appearance (Fig. 1); the notorious dandy Robert de Montesquiou—the alleged model for Proust’s Baron de



Fig. 1. Roussel aged 19 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

Charlus—was struck at their first meeting by ‘a young man who was very polite, very gracious and gentle in manner, wearing grey shoes, like Spinoza’, though later, following what Mark Ford has reconstructed as a ‘horticultural gaffe’, Montesquiou noted his awkwardness in company and his penchant for horrible puns (Ford, 2000, p. 138 n.). Others remarked on his gleaming white collars and gloves, said to be discarded after one wearing, or his set of remarkable teeth (Vitrac in Ferry, 1964, p. 80). He toured Europe in his mobile salon, ‘La Roulotte’, a truck fitted out with several sumptuous rooms, a kitchen, and a bath, impressing both the Pope and Mussolini (ibid., pp. 49–50).² His personal psychologist, Pierre Janet, documented (Janet, 1926) the fit of ‘gloire’ that overtook him at age nineteen while he wrote his first book-length poem, during which he was convinced that:

what I wrote was surrounded by light rays, I closed the curtains, because I was afraid of the least crack that would have let luminous rays pass outside, I wanted to pull back the screen all at once and illuminate the world . . . yet try as I might to take precautions, rays of light escaped from me and crossed the walls, I had the sun in me and I could not prevent this formidable lightning coming from myself. (Roussel, 1935, p. 179)

Roussel’s ostensible suicide by overdose of barbituates in Palermo in 1933 remains cloaked in mystery. The limited renown he enjoyed while alive came almost exclusively from the plays based on his books, which he paid exorbitant amounts to have performed at a substantial financial loss. Audiences baffled by the plotless succession of scenes and the seemingly senseless imagery of his lines—like the ‘rail of calf lung’ which plays a pivotal role in *Impressions of Africa*—led to mocking calls of ‘Auteur!’ and to gleeful riots in which he was defended by a shock-troop of avant-garde provocateurs, although he once allowed that he found his Surrealist champions ‘a bit obscure’ (Leiris in Ferry, 1964, p. 42).

The visceral and imaginative charge of the severed head has made it an exceptionally potent symbol, one well worth preserving and reanimating over the course of the two centuries that followed the French Revolution. The first section of this paper will analyse Roussel’s brain imagery in *Locus solus* and its connections to his literary method; the second half will discuss some of Roussel’s precursors and successors in modern French thought, touching on a handful of reflections on knowledge, art, and individuality in which bodiless heads played a central role. Roussel’s depiction of Danton’s brain must be understood within the context of an ambivalent fascination in France with decapitation, one connected with questions about the rhetoric and machinery of reason, its role in artistic creation and in public life, and the status of the human in a technological society. Roussel’s extreme solitude and his truly unique method of literary creation echo the solitary place, or ‘locus solus’—a laboratory, cabinet of curiosities, and memory theater—in which the novel is set; these in turn recall the utter isolation of the brain in the vat. Though Raymond Roussel has stood alone in French literature, his work participates in a

² Vitrac asked, ‘Est-ce lui cet homme avec les dents?’ (in Ferry, 1964, p. 80).

wider cultural reflection on the connection, or violent disjuncture, between the body and mind.

2.

Il nous faut de l'audace! Encore de l'audace! Toujours de l'audace!
Georges Danton³

In its typical renderings, the brain in the vat can be considered under two contradictory aspects.⁴ From the point of view of the isolated, passive, mystified, and powerless subjectivity floating in the tank, the image suggests complete doubt about our knowledge of the external world. Yet from the perspective of the technical apparatus that preserves and stimulates this physical correlate of consciousness (the 'super-scientific computer' in Hilary Putnam's 'brains in a vat' scenario, or Daniel Dennett's military-industrial wetware fantasy (Putnam, 1981; Dennett, 1981) the implication is of a complete trust in the powers of reason and invention. In Roussel's works—in both their depiction of elaborate machines for producing language and in their unveiling of the mechanism that generated these very texts—the scepticism and the certainty implied by the brain in the vat vie with each other. The result is an ambiguous clarity, a 'reasonable delirium' (Alistair Brotchie in Roussel, 1991, p. 9).

In *Locus solus* a reclusive scientist named Martial Canterel leads a group of unnamed participants on a suspenseless tour through the marvels assembled on his estate. Canterel is a sort of symbolist Willy Wonka;⁵ he resembles Jules Verne's scientists and the popular astronomer Camille Flammarion, as well as such fastidious imaginary hermits as Des Esseintes in Huysmans' *A rebours* and the Thomas Edison imagined by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam in *L'Ève future* (Huysmans, 1998; Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, 1986). Each new bizarre machine or prodigious acquisition met along the tour is explained by another equally wondrous set of events and objects, forming a deliriously convoluted structure of interlocking tales and tableaux. Janet wrote that Roussel's books 'contain nothing real, no observation of the world or minds, nothing but completely imaginary combinations' (Janet in Roussel, 1963, p. 183); Roussel himself declared that his extensive voyages provided none of the inspiration for his books, which he said were the product of imagination alone. Continuous with a line of literary thought going back at least to Baudelaire's *Les paradis artificiels*, Roussel's fantastic contraptions and their fairy-tale explanations place the reader in a perfectly artificial landscape.⁶ The world of *Locus solus* is like

³ Lacotte (1987), p. 169. Danton, member of the Committee of Public Safety, uttered this, his most famous quote, during a speech to the Legislative Assembly, 2 September 1792; his speech galvanized national feeling in support of war with the Austrians, led by Brunswick and rumored to be in collusion with expatriated French monarchists.

⁴ Although I hope other articles in this collection will provide a more complete genealogy of the brain in the vat, classic and influential versions are Siodmak (1942) and Gernsback (1956).

⁵ Roald Dahl, author of *Charlie and the chocolate factory*, used the image of the brain in the vat in his story 'William and Mary' in Dahl (1990).

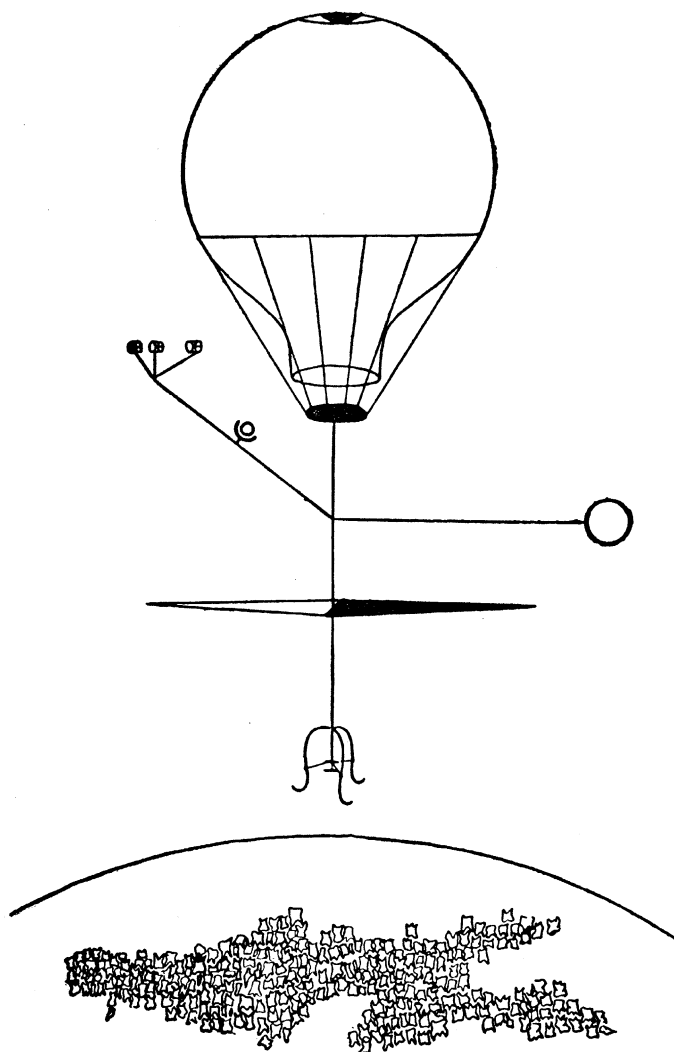
⁶ See Levy-Bertherat (1994).

that inhabited by the vat-brain: a complete simulation, a self-enclosed spectacle of imagery disconnected from real objects.

The objects on the tour are enshrined and cared for with an unabashed fetishism, a theme carried over from Roussel's *Impressions of Africa*; one of the first items described is in fact a 'tribal artifact', 'Le Fédéral', the statue of a boy created from the dirt of the different African tribes whose peaceful relations it commemorated.⁷ The next marvel moves us to the technological fetishism of the modern world. A small dirigible called the '*demoiselle*', with several delicate instruments attached, drifts in precise but irregular motions following the wind—which Canterel can predict, thanks to his mastery of meteorology—between a hoard of teeth in a range of colors, and a half-finished mosaic (Fig. 2). The teeth were extracted, instantaneously and painlessly, by a new electromagnetic procedure of Canterel's invention; the mosaic's different shades are provided by the variations in the extracted teeth, ranging from blue milk teeth and brown tobacco-stained molars to 'a marvelous canine whiter than a pearl, which according to Canterel came from the dazzling dentition of a ravishing American woman' (Roussel, 1965, p. 60). The gentle and predetermined motions of the '*demoiselle*'—whose mirrors, chronometers, and magnetic extractors are described in dizzying detail—produce, tooth by tooth, a scene from a fairy tale that Canterel reports, in which a sleeping horseman (*reître*) on a mission to defraud a princess, dreams of eleven frightened youths. In an oblique, reflexive comment on the bizarre sights of the tour, the narrator notes that the 'apparent disorder' of the teeth 'was without the slightest doubt the laborious result of profound studies' (Roussel, 1965, p. 33): the precise, flat, emotionless tone and the density of the prose, ringing out with a classical exactness, suggest a deliberateness and underlying rationale to the outlandish scenes witnessed so far.

Soon the group comes upon a large glass tank with the shape and brilliance of a diamond. It is filled with a remarkable hyper-oxygenated water, *aqua-micans*, in which mammals can breathe and which electrifies all objects placed in it, making the luxurious blond hair of Faustine, the ballerina who sits on a ledge in the tank, stand on end and dance. Each fiber is enshrouded in an electrical aura and endowed with a peculiar sonic property; the undulating hairs produce an eerie music, an underwater symphony composed by the aleatory combination of notes. Canterel then pours a bottle of Sauternes wine into the vat; the wine forms a golden sun around which a team of fiercely competitive sea-horses gathers to enact a *tableau vivant* of Apollo's chariot. In the name and delicate presence of Faustine,

⁷ This religious devotion to objects in his works and life was not entirely unconscious, as his poem 'Le fétichisme' reveals, though we could probably identify an Oedipal dimension in it. His mother once wrote to him that 'All the world agrees that I have created a physical and moral masterpiece (apart from a few distorted ideas, but these are almost already in the past). So, no more bad jokes against my dearest darling, to whom I have raised an altar in my heart from which no one will dislodge him' (in Ford, 2000, p. 31).



La hie ou la demoiselle de Roussel.
Schéma exécuté par Roger Aujame.

Fig. 2. The 'demoiselle' reconstructed by Roger Aujame (from Carrouges, 1954).

as well as in the miniaturized replication of Olympian acts, the destructive and demiurgic potential of a Faust is contained and reduced to a charming ornament.⁸

⁸ On Roussel and the pathos of the miniature, see Stewart (1993), pp. 51–54; works by both Nerval (translator of *Faust*) and Huysmans feature characters named Faustine.

To Canterel, the extraordinary properties of the *aqua-micans* suggested investigation into animal magnetism, the subtle fluid associated in the enlightenment with electricity, thought, and life itself. He owns the perfect object for such an experiment: the partially preserved remnants of Danton's brain, passed down to him from his great-great-grandfather, a friend of the patriot. After Robespierre and the Comité de Salut Public turned on Danton and his ally Camille Desmoulins—a point at which the Terror seemed most thoroughly disconnected from any rational restraint—and executed both of them, Canterel's ancestor persuaded the executioner Samson to flip the head into a special basket lying next to the scaffold, once its distinctive features had been shown to the crowd, as Danton had famously requested: 'Sanson, tu montreras ma tête au peuple, elle en vaut la peine' ('Show my head to the people, it's worth the bother', Lacotte, 1987, p. 252).⁹ He then embalmed the worthy object—imperfectly, it turns out, since the skull and skin decayed in the intervening years—and passed it along as an heirloom.

Canterel suspects that the *aqua-micans* can be used to generate a reflex response from this dead matter and conceives of 'a half-biological experiment aimed at a sort of artificial resurrection' (Roussel, 1965, p. 87). His assistant is the cat Kóng-dek-lèn (the first 'e' of which requires a special typographical marking not reproducible here), who had previously demonstrated his intelligence by learning to perform graceful somersaults in the breatheable water. The docile feline once possessed a coat of white fur, but when immersed in the gleaming diamond, his hair glowed with a blinding radiance, producing electrical counter-currents that rendered any experimentation impossible. Canterel found a way to remove the cat's hair, painting him with 'a very active coating'; he then turned him into a 'living battery' by feeding him a centupled dose of bright red *erithyrite* pills. Then began the training. Kóng-dek-lèn learned to tread water and insert his muzzle into a metal cone that channeled his body's electricity into a single point at its tip.

The moment of truth has arrived. As the visitors watch, Canterel utters a command to the cat swimming in the tank:

Kóng-dek-lèn, perfectly trained, went down to the bottom to mask himself in the cone in order to swim toward the brain of Danton, which he brushed against gently with the point of the metallic appendage. The joyful master saw his hope fully realised. Under the influence of the powerful animal magnetism that the cone released, the facial muscles quivered, and the fleshless lips distinctly moved, energetically pronouncing a mass of soundless words. Lip-reading like the deaf, Canterel came to understand different syllables by the lips' articulation; he thus discovered chaotic bits of discourse succeeding one another without connection or repeating themselves abundantly at times with a singular insistence. (Roussel, 1965, p. 88)

⁹ The tragic inevitability of Danton's betrayal by Robespierre was famously dramatized in Büchner's 'The death of Danton'.

In this technocratic restoration of the passions of the Revolution, the words that united the nation and drove it to war are reproduced by a mechanical procedure; they are rendered mute and impotent, transformed into a precise and senseless spectacle. Yet for the narrator, the ‘explanation’ of the experiment is simply the description of the various elements that make it up; no deeper significance is proposed.

Like the *demoiselle*’s extremely complicated technology for ‘automatically’ generating the mosaic from dead body parts, this Rube Goldbergesque contraption which draws unexpected language out of an inert object comments obliquely upon *Locus solus*’ scenes, which also ‘[succeed] one another without connection or [repeat] themselves at times abundantly with a singular insistence’. In his posthumously published discourse on method, *How I wrote certain of my books*, Roussel takes on the role assigned to Canterel in *Locus solus* by offering a rational explanation for the ‘apparent disorder’ of his works and the seemingly irrational wonders within them. The words and images in the text are rooted, he claims, in a logical and strict procedure, two versions of which he describes in detail. In the first, he takes a word with two meanings and joins it to another word with two meanings, as in the example, *maison à espagnolettes*. The phrase can mean either a house (*maison*) with small windows (*espagnolettes*), or a lineage (*maison*) begun by two Spanish girls (*espagnolettes*). His earliest stories would incorporate images derived from both sets of meanings. The other procedure alters certain consonants or the division into words of a given phrase, thereby creating a new one. Thus his first example:

1. *Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux billiard* ... [The white letters on the cushions of the old billiard table]

2. *Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux pillard* ... [The white man’s letters on the gangs of the old plunderer] (Roussel, 1935, p. 4)

A narrative that incorporates both the original phrase and the other lying as it were ‘buried’ within it—he frequently refers to his work as ‘mining’ (Fig. 3)—will then be built around these central jewels. Out of the phrase *demoiselle à prétendant* [a young girl with a suitor] he extracted the phrase *demoiselle* [a tool used by pavers to set stones into the ground—what we would now call a piledriver] *à reître* [a mercenary soldier] *en dents* [in teeth]: ‘I consequently found myself confronted with the following problem: the execution of a mosaic by a paving tool’ (Roussel, 1977, p. 11). The solution was the floating tooth-extractor with its compasses, mirrors and claws and the tale depicted in the mosaic, with its princess and horseman. He does not provide the phrase that originated the scene with Danton’s brain, though an aspect of the cat’s appearance is suggested by the ‘chapelet’ (rosary or recitation of words) that Faustine later accepts from the young magician Noël and his pet rooster Mopsus (the bird who coughs out alexandrine predictions in blood). The introduction of this string of beads, which brings to mind the chains of bubbles that spell out words in the tank as much as Roussel’s own litany-like descriptions, may have also been another twisted way to skin a cat: inside ‘chapelet’ lurks a ‘chat pélé’, or ‘peeled cat’ (Trevor Winkfield in Roussel, 1977, p. 26).



Fig. 3. Roussel dressed as a miner (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

One of Roussel's claims to fame was a new chess strategy he discovered, 'Check-mate by bishop and knight'; the fixed rules of chess, like those he imposed in his own language games, served him as a stimulus for invention.¹⁰ *How I wrote certain of my books* gives the rationale for a troublingly depersonalized and emotionless process for producing endless language and imagery, one in which reason is disconnected from moral guidance or narrative desire. At the same time, the process operates as though without a choice, on the basis of chance resemblances among words. In the essay in which he introduced the thought experiment of 'brains in a vat', Hilary Putnam invited us to consider the case of an ant who by pure happenstance traces a recognizable picture of Winston Churchill in the sand; because the ant has never seen Churchill, and had no intention of depicting him, we cannot say that the image refers to the English statesman (Putnam, 1981). Likewise, Roussel created his scenes—one of which involves, oddly enough, the bodiless head of another stout wartime orator—by a rational method which operates without a will, a solipsistic mode of literary inspiration which proceeds without a head.

¹⁰ See Roussel (1964), pp. 133–152. A critical appreciation of Roussel by one of his contemporaries, Roger Vitrac, ends with an allusion to the famous chess-playing automaton analyzed in Poe's 'Maelzel's chess player'; Roussel's *Comment j'ai écrit* contains many striking parallels to Poe's 'Philosophy of composition', which also suggests a mechanical method of poetic composition (on Poe's games with reason and mechanism, see Tresch, 1997). It is striking to find two of the puzzles most adored by twentieth-century philosophers of mind—the vat-brain and the chess-playing machine—closely linked in Roussel's work.

3.

As severed heads go, Danton's is slightly less well-known than that of the decapitated king Louis XVI (Fig. 4). Yet by featuring the former, Roussel reminds us of the latter, and of the decisive role the act of decapitation has played in



Fig. 4. Louis XVI's head, 'Matière à réflexion pour les jongleurs couronnées', 1791 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

French history. The notion of a disconnection between head and body has been a recurrent focal point for a wide range of epistemological, political, and aesthetic positions. An overview of other moments in which the image of the severed and reanimated head played a central role will allow us to situate Roussel's tableau more precisely within ongoing debates about the place of reason and individuality in public life and art in France.

Like many stories in history and philosophy of science, this one begins with Descartes' *Meditations on first philosophy*. Although the twentieth-century brain in the vat replaces the fireplace, bedroom, and dressing gown in Descartes' scene of scepticism with the electronically-fitted laboratory and the lab coat, both juxtapose an annihilating doubt with a supreme faith in conquering reason. Descartes' epistemological fable raised the seemingly insoluble question—how do I know that all I perceive is not an illusion created by an evil deceiver?—only to resolve it with a new method of natural philosophy based on clear and distinct ideas, grounded in God's perfection. Cartesian natural philosophy's new world order was built on a basic disconnection: a primary decapitation, figuratively speaking, which severed thinking substance from extended substance, the rational consciousness from its physical home, however closely the two were 'commingled'.¹¹

For the *philosophes* of the enlightenment, Descartes' mechanical explanation of the world, and the improved version offered by Newton, provided a model for a social order grounded on reason and nature instead of arbitrary authority. Nevertheless, Descartes' detractors worried that his removal of God from the realm of extended matter was a slippery slope to blasphemy and anarchy.¹² Their worst fears were realized when the dream of a state organized according to purely rational principles gave way, under the Terror, to the nightmare of a body politic gone mad. With the French Revolution and its endless procession of beheadings, from the murder of the commanding officers defending the Bastille to the executions of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, performed by the device of Docteur Guillotine, the split between body and mind that Descartes announced and claimed to have resolved took on a political weight and a bloody immediacy. The lifeless heads of the royal family symbolized the end of the Old Regime, represented in traditional iconography as a body whose head was the king.¹³

Many commentators condemned the revolution as sheer barbarity. In removing the monarchy and ending the traditional privileges of the nobles, 'le peuple' had switched over into 'la foule'—a headless body of individuals united by passion, or by a reason that had crossed over into insanity. The conservative political philosopher Joseph de Maistre denounced the revolution as the result of deceptive philosophies that blasphemously privileged reason and innovation over faith and

¹¹ The connection between the two substances, soul and extended matter (to leave the third substance, God, aside), was described metaphorically in the *Meditations* as 'commingling', while the *Treatise on man* gave a more elaborate explanation in terms of the pineal gland which is the point at which the animal spirits responsible for the passions and for sensation are assembled within the brain. See Descartes (1972), p. 108.

¹² See Jacobs (1997), pp. 34–50.

¹³ On body imagery and the nation, see Maza (2003), Ch. 2; Duby (1980); Arasse (1987).

tradition: ‘The tiger that rips men open is following his nature; the real criminal is the man who unmuzzles him and launches him on society’ (de Maistre, 1965, p. 112). He debunked the liberal utopia of the social contract freely entered into by rational individuals, stating that:

Wherever the individual reason dominates, there can be nothing great, for everything great rests on a belief, and the clash of individual opinions left to themselves produces only scepticism which is destructive of everything. (de Maistre, 1965, p. 110)

De Maistre’s particular philosophical target was empiricism, an English disease transmitted by French philosophers like Condillac; for de Maistre, the innate idea of God’s supremacy and perfection set limits on men’s minds and provided the outline for a natural order of society, one exemplified by the medieval fusion of the spiritual and temporal powers in a united church and state. Like Edmund Burke, he advanced an organic conception of society, a body which had reached its state of equilibrium on the basis of generations of adjustment, not on *sui generis* disembodied calculation. He urged a return to the theological and authoritarian principles of society, a rule of just force legitimated by God. Despite his condemnation of the revolutionaries’ bloodthirstiness, de Maistre placed a striking emphasis on the ambivalent, extrasocial figure of the executioner:

And yet all grandeur, all power, all subordination rests on the executioner: he is the horror and the bond of human association. Remove this incomprehensible agent from the world, and at that very moment order gives way to chaos, thrones topple, and society disappears. (de Maistre, 1965, p. 192)

For de Maistre, punishment was the inevitable correlate of original sin; the executioner, the ‘incomprehensible agent’ of the transcendent and irrational foundations of society, guarantees the life of the body politic by his power to chop off individual heads.¹⁴

In the first half of the nineteenth century there was an inversion in this evaluation of individualism in relation to the body politic, one signaled by the use of severed heads and other body parts in fantastic literature. In this period, Alexis de Tocqueville first expressed his fears about the ‘tyranny of the majority’ that threatened liberty in America. Unlike de Maistre, who framed his attack on democracy as a refusal of individual reason as the basis for social order, de Tocqueville warned of democracy’s tendency to erode the uniqueness and distinction that were now perceived as defining traits of the waning aristocracy. In his writings on France, he was equally wary of claims that the revolution could somehow undo the long-standing despotic tendency to concentrate power in the state: ‘Every time that an attempt is made to do away with absolutism, the most that could be done has been to graft the head of Liberty onto a servile body’ (De Tocqueville, 1983,

¹⁴ Connections between de Maistre’s conservatism and the nineteenth-century cult of the dandy which Roussel inherited are established in Jamieson (1985).

p. 209). Likewise, Susan Hiner has suggested that the recurring images of severed and revived body parts in fantastic literature of the nineteenth century are figures of ‘the persistence of a political and cultural memory’, representing ‘a resurgence of what Rousseau called “la volonté particulière”, the particular, individual will, which would line up with counter-revolutionary politics’ (Hiner, 2002, p. 301) against the ‘general will’ that Rousseau argued was the basis for a rational society.¹⁵

In fantastic literature, nostalgia for a lost order of society was often overlaid with references to magic and lost traditions of knowledge. Resemblances between alchemical themes of the mastery of spiritual forces and the new sciences of electricity, light, and thought inspired stories on the borderline between fairy tale and science fiction; anxiety about new sciences and their effect on earlier understandings of humans’ place in the universe often took the form of tales of haunting, resurrection, and automata. E. T. A. Hoffmann’s ‘The sandman’ (Hoffmann, 1969, pp. 137–167) posed the question of the difference between human life and its mechanical imitations; Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘A predicament’ and ‘The tell-tale heart’ (Poe, 1982, pp. 241–247, 445–448) used imagery of decapitation and literal excoriation to push against the limits of reason; Victor Hugo’s *Le dernier jour d’un condamné* (Hugo, 2000) makes a case for the abolition of the death penalty with gruesome scenes of still living, decapitated heads (see Figs. 5 and 6).¹⁶ Joining his compatriots Nodier, Nerval, Gautier, and Barbey D’Aurevilly, Alexander Dumas (the elder) made a major contribution to the genre of the fantastic in 1849 with his collection of stories, *Mille et une fantômes* (Dumas, 2001). In three interwoven tales from this collection—a clear source for the scene with Danton’s brain in *Locus solus*—Dumas embeds a mechanically romantic investigation of the dividing line between life and death within a nostalgic critique of the Revolution, a sentimental tale of true love interrupted by the executioner’s blade.¹⁷

At a dinner in Fontenay-en-Roses, conversation turns to the question of whether thought and sensation continue after decapitation. The host, Ledru, who has performed research on this very question, claims to have witnessed two such cases. He was present at the legendary execution of Charlotte Corday, murderer of Marat, ‘l’ami du peuple’, a revolutionary pamphleteer as well as a researcher into mesmerism and electricity. Corday’s moral and political ambiguity—counter-revolutionary murderer or defender of the traditional order, demon or saint?—was magnified by her proud and simple bearing on the scaffold.¹⁸ Ledru states, ‘even though I was

¹⁵ See also Nochlin (1995).

¹⁶ On Poe, see Tresch (2001). Further explorations of post-revolutionary decapitation imagery in the arts, focusing on Géricault’s famous series of studies of severed heads (see Fig. 6), can be found in Athanassoglou-Kallmyer (1996).

¹⁷ ‘Le soufflet de Charlotte Corday’, discussed in Hiner (2002), is combined with Dumas’s subsequent chapters, ‘Solange’ and ‘Albert’, into a single tale in the translation quoted here, ‘The slap of Charlotte Corday’, in Kessler (1995), pp. 145–171.

¹⁸ On the Corday myth in the wider context of mind–body issues raised by the scaffold, and the debate by Cabanis and Sue over the persistence of consciousness after decapitation, see the fascinating account in Outram (1989), pp. 106–123.

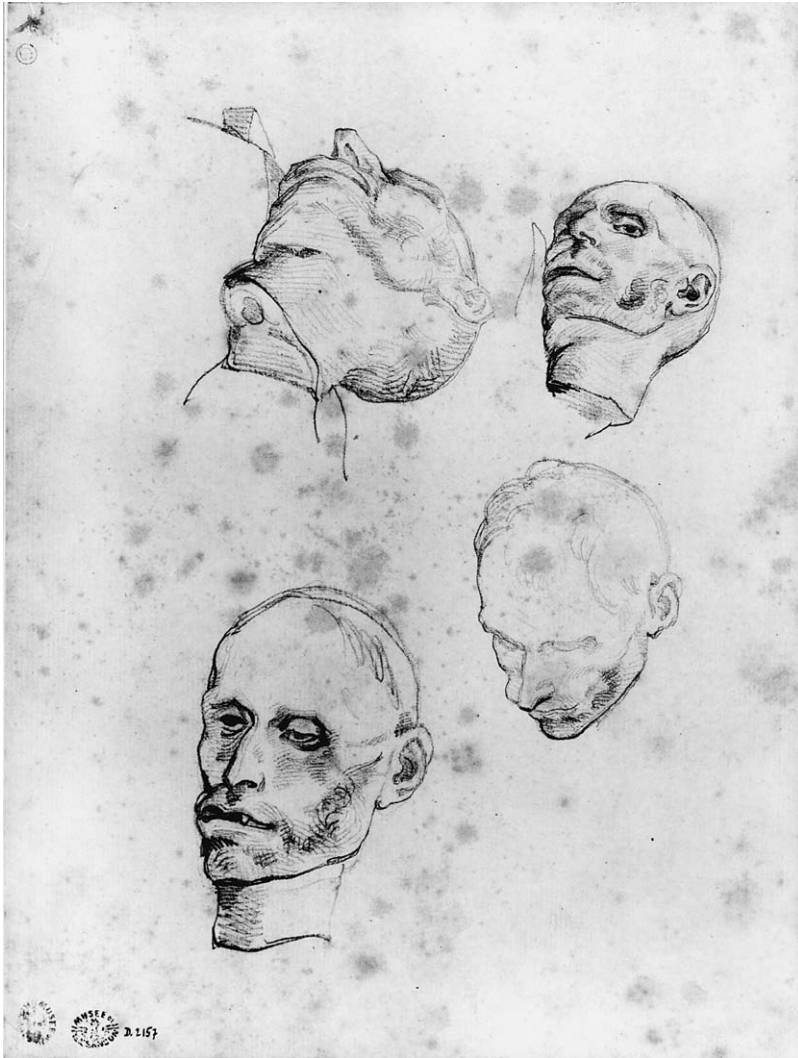


Fig. 5. Théodore Géricault, 'Etude de têtes coupées' (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Besançon).

appalled by this murder, I could not have told whether what I beheld was an execution or an apotheosis' (Dumas, 1995, pp. 151–152); as in de Maistre's writings on the purifying power of sacrifice, a spiritual force seems to descend upon the executioner's victim.¹⁹ When the blade of the guillotine falls, the executioner picks up the head and gives it a slap; both cheeks blush, 'because that head still had feel-

¹⁹ For reflections on the ambivalent political signification of the sacrificial victim and rituals of regicide, see Bataille (1967); Girard (1987); Agamben (1998).



Fig. 6. Victor Hugo, 'Justitia', 1857 (Maison Victor Hugo, Paris).

ings, and it was indignant at being made to endure a shame that was not part of the sentence' (Dumas, 1995, p. 152). The pride of the unbowed individual continues beyond the death of the body.

In the second case Ledru was touched directly. One night during the height of the Terror, he comes across a young woman whose identity is being questioned by a citizens' patrol of *sans-culottes*. Drawn by a certain proud ferocity and a well-hidden tone of mockery, he pretends to know her, calling her 'Solange', and answers when she calls him 'Albert'. The National Guardsmen's continuing suspicions are only silenced when Ledru-Albert takes them to the Cordeliers'

political club where his friend, Citizen Danton himself, vouches for both of them. The well-known facts of Danton's eventual betrayal and beheading at the hands of Robespierre foreshadow Solange's fate. She is indeed an aristocrat in hiding, awaiting the first chance to flee the country with her father; Ledru-Albert arranges for his escape, earning her love. Meanwhile, his scientific curiosity spurred by Charlotte Corday's blush, he expands his psycho-electrical investigations into the persistence of life, testing the hypothesis that the severed head remains capable of sensation and individuated consciousness: 'even if it should last but a few seconds, during those few seconds, *one's feeling, one's personality, one's sense of the 'I',* remains intact; the head hears, sees, feels, and observes the fragmentation of its very being' (Dumas, 1995, p. 165). To pursue his experiments, the remnants of the day's guillotining are brought to his laboratory which is, appropriately enough, in light of the positivist spiritualism he is pursuing, an abandoned chapel fitted out with an electrical stimulator.²⁰

One night, as Albert awaits a word from Solange—who is unaccountably delayed—the executioners make their gruesome delivery. He hears his name being called. In a panic, he dumps out the sack of freshly severed heads, discovering one that is (was?) unmistakably Solange's. Her identity had been revealed that day by the interception of a letter from her father; she was immediately tried and executed. In the chapel, her still-living head calls out the name of her beloved and even kisses his hand. Then her eyes 'let fall two tears, and flashing forth moist flames as though her soul were escaping, closed once more, never to open again' (Dumas, 1995, p. 171). The tale works against the narrator's carefully highlighted republican sympathies (the tale was published during the Second Republic); it seems to share de Maistre's nostalgia for a pre-revolutionary social order, one in which the heads severed by the Terror might still be attached. Nevertheless, a shift can be noted in the semiotics of decapitation: what is threatened by the new regime, but uncannily persists, is not the organic social unity dependent on deep, collectively held beliefs that de Maistre championed; instead, Dumas laments the painful quenching of the spark of individuality and of a private passion that defied the public morality of mob rule.

In like manner, halcyon myths of lost aristocratic independence and originality were marshaled by artists and critics of the second half of the century to develop the cult of the doomed individual of genius. Artistic personae like the dandy and the accursed poet accompanied the relative 'autonomisation' of the arts and the sciences: the creation of distinct fields of cultural production with their internal standards of comparison and evaluation.²¹ Works informed by the notion of 'l'art pour l'art'—an opposition between society and the pure creative consciousness—frequently deployed images of decapitation. In 'Une martyre' in *Les fleurs du mal* (Baudelaire, 1975, pp. 111–113), Charles Baudelaire again picked at the scab that

²⁰ A prominent theme in many other fantastic works, including notably Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Poe's 'The facts in the case of M. Valdemar'.

²¹ See Grana (1991); Seigel (1986); Bourdieu (1992).

separates action from dream, spleen from ideal, fashioning a *memento mori* out of the corpse of a decapitated woman. The image of the delirious Salomé bearing the head of John the Baptist was elaborated as a symbol of the hypnotic, destructive, and anti-social power of art by Flaubert, Moreau (Fig. 7), Huysmans, and Mallarmé—whose poetic attempt to create a self-enclosed language disconnected from reference can be read as another figure of the decapitated consciousness.²²

The symbolist pursuit of pure form, in which release was sought from an increasingly materialistic, utilitarian, and scientific society, prepared the way for the surrealists of the early twentieth century. But where a language of deliberation and calculation could be heard in the critical writings of many symbolists, the surrealists launched their movement with a battle cry to liberate humanity from the tyranny of order and reason.²³ As André Breton put it in the *Surrealist manifesto* of 1924:

We are still living under the reign of logic, but the logical processes of our time apply only to the solution of problems of secondary interest. The absolute rationalism which remains in fashion allows for the consideration of only those facts narrowly relevant to our experience ... In the guise of civilization, under the pretext of progress, we have succeeded in dismissing from our minds anything that, rightly or wrongly, could be regarded as superstition or myth; and we have proscribed every way of seeking the truth which does not conform to convention. (Breton, 1974, pp. 9–10)

Turning the heroes of the nineteenth-century philosophy of progress into villains, Breton in some ways recalled de Maistre's denunciation of reason in the state by proclaiming that truth would be discovered by an embrace of the irrational. He defined surrealism as 'pure psychic automatism', as 'thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason, and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations' (Breton, 1974, pp. 42–43). Such literary experiments as the automatic writing of Breton and Apollinaire, including the word game of spontaneous poetry which produced the famous 'exquisite corpse', aimed at a creation that proceeds without the guidance of any single ruling consciousness—as in Roussel, without a head. The juxtapositions deployed by the dadaists and surrealists shared much with the unexpected pageants of Roussel, whose purposeful but seemingly irrational mechanical imagery had a direct impact on a number of surrealists: Marcel Duchamp acknowledged Roussel's influence upon his most famous painting, the *grande verre*, 'La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même'; in addition, the

²² On Salomé, see Christie and Verne (2000), p. 116; Miller-Frank (1995) also contains insightful studies of images of mechanism and automatism associated with the feminine in nineteenth-century literature.

²³ On the connection between algebra and, for example, Mallarmé's poetry, see Valéry, (1998). On links between the illuminism found in fantastic literature and that of symbolism and surrealism, see Eigeldinger (1979); Schaffer (2001) explores parallels between turn-of-the-century images of reclusive, inspired scientists and artists.



Fig. 7. Salomé, dancing for Herod, struck motionless by the apparition of the radiant head of John the Baptist. Gustave Moreau, 'L'apparition', 1874–1876 (Musée du Louvre, Paris).

Picabia–Man Ray–Léger film, *Le ballet mécanique* may have taken its name from a line in the play version of *Locus solus*.²⁴

Yet Roussel was once quoted as saying, 'People say that I'm a Dadaist. I don't even know what Dadaism is' (Ford, 2000, p. 23). Beyond further confirmation of

²⁴ Roger Vitrac reports on the play: 'Puis, se reprenant, [Canterel] annonce d'une voix d'automate: *Ballet Mécanique*. Et nous assistons aux danses allégoriques de la Gloire et de Mort' (in Ferry, 1964, p. 80).

Roussel's deliberate isolation, the comment points to a basic distinction between his conception of his methods and the expressive, illuminist antirationality championed in Breton's manifesto. In *How I wrote certain of my books*, the method's productivity was proportionate to the strictness of the rules it imposed. On the contrary, the surrealists claimed an erotic and emotional liberation of the body from the rational and moral dictates of the mind; at the same time, they saw themselves as participating in a mystic knowledge that escaped temporal and physical constraints.

This 'disembodiment' frequently produced images of disfigured and fragmented bodies. The link between mutilation and liberation was perhaps expressed most succinctly by Breton's sometime ally, the theorist of transgression and sacrifice, Georges Bataille. In helping to found the *Collège Internationale de Sociologie*, one of Bataille's goals was to explore other means of seeking the truth than those prescribed by the canons of scientific rationality. His 'repudiation of reason' explicitly took the form of a vision of an 'acephalous' society or Nietzschean new human.²⁵ In a text written for the Acéphale group he invokes a new being who escapes previous human limits:

Man has escaped from his head like the condemned man from prison. He has found beyond himself not God, who is the prohibition of crime, but a being who knows nothing of prohibition. Beyond what I am, I encounter a being who makes me laugh because he is without a head . . . He is not a man, he is not a god either. (Bataille, 1963, vol I, p. 445)

For Bataille, all art requires such joyful, transgressive overcoming of prohibition and reason: his discussion of Van Gogh and his ear implies that creation begins with self-mutilation. In his literary works, including *Histoire de l'oeil*, published anonymously or under a pseudonym, Bataille traced delirious adventures of a sexual explicitness and cruelty that self-consciously recalled the Marquis de Sade's repetitive investigations of devices to extend pain and pleasure. This was pornography with a purpose, that of expanding the limits of experience, deliberately superseding moral bounds in the quest of a new, deliberately mindless subjectivity.²⁶

After World War II, authors affiliated with the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentiel*, including Raymond Queneau, Georges Perec, and Harry Matthews cited Roussel as a precursor for their works built on rules and prohibitions that bypassed both the notion of literary inspiration and the depiction of psychological motivations. For members of Oulipo, art was not an escape from logical limitation; it was a choice of rigorous constraints. Roussel's procedure of systematic permutations of a given phrase inspired the formulaic theme and variations underlying Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*; comparable rules guided Perec's *La vie, mode d'emploi* and *La disparition*, his novel written entirely without the letter 'e' (Cal-

²⁵ Dean (1986) brings up the inevitable psychoanalytic association between decapitation and castration.

²⁶ Bataille (1970–1988), p. 445 ('La conjuration sacrée'); p. 497 ('Van Gogh Prométhée'). See Suleiman (1995) and Charlie Gere in this volume.

vino, 1981; Perec, 1979, 1993).²⁷ Though not a member of Oulipo, Alain Robbe-Grillet made a similar renunciation of subjective theories of character development found in the ‘bourgeois’ novel of the nineteenth century. His manifesto *Pour un nouveau roman* (Robbe-Grillet, 1963) contained a chapter in praise of Roussel’s ‘transparency’ and uncanny absence of ‘depth’ which, like Magritte’s paintings, paradoxically produces an experience of ‘la mystère’.²⁸

Writing into the same confluence of structuralism, accelerated technocracy, and disgruntlement with Marxist orthodoxy, Michel Foucault published a study on Roussel in 1963 (Foucault, 1963).²⁹ Although the book’s doubles and labyrinths betray a heavy influence of Borges and Bataille, the text can also be read forward as a template for themes in Foucault’s later historical and philosophical works.³⁰ The panoptic machine which shapes individuals by placing them in isolation and on display, the obsessively ramifying systems of practices and utterances that generate new objects, and the impersonal discursive formations that constitute a subjective interiority or an ‘author-function’, can be seen as the fruits of an *applied surrealism* which can be directly traced back to Roussel’s quasi-positivist recomposition of words and things. Foucault also took great delight in playing the philosophical executioner, as witnessed by his ceremonious public beheadings of ‘the author’, ‘the subject’, ‘the transcendental ego’, and ‘the great man’ of history. His investigations of the irrational doubles of reason and the technocratic production of the body and soul serve as a fitting headstone for the cult of decapitation this paper has exhumed.³¹

4.

Beyond their important contributions to the history of the French avant-garde—perhaps in spite of their author’s intentions—Roussel’s works can be read as a chapter in the cultural history of science. The anthropologist and novelist Michel Leiris wrote that Roussel’s range of references was ‘essentially popular and childish (melodrama, serial novels, operettas, vaudeville, fairy tales, picture books)’ (Roussel, 1972, p. 23); to this list we must also add science and its popular repre-

²⁷ Mark Ford (2000) discusses Italo Calvino’s ‘Comment j’ai écrit un de mes livres’ and Georges Perec’s *Pourquoi je n’ai écrit aucun de mes livres*, pp. 233–239; on Roussel and Oulipo see also Magné (1993); for the wider intellectual context of Oulipo, see Aubin (1997).

²⁸ See Robbe-Grillet (1963); Robbe-Grillet named his novel *Le voyeur* in homage to Roussel’s poem ‘La vue’.

²⁹ See Ross (1995) on the technical and cultural environment of France in the 1960s.

³⁰ Deleuze (1986) persuasively reads Foucault’s books on Roussel and Magritte as neglected keys to his method.

³¹ Recent sites for brain-in-the-vat imagery in France include Jeunet and Caro’s nostalgic/fantastic bande-dessinée, *The city of lost children* (1995), and Bruno Latour’s *Pandora’s hope* (1999), where the hope in question is that of reconnecting the (bizarrely mistranslated) ‘mind in a vat’ with the world from which three centuries of post-Cartesian epistemology has separated it.

sentations. He wrote to a friend who asked to borrow one of his books by Jules Verne:

Ask of me my life, but do not ask me to lend you a Jules Verne! I have such enthusiasm for his works that I am ‘jealous’ of them. If you reread them, I beg you never to speak of them, never even to pronounce his name in front of me, for it seems to me a sacrilege to pronounce his name except on one’s knees. It is He who is, and by a long way, *the greatest literary genius of all time*; he will ‘remain’ when all the other authors of our time will be long forgotten. (Ford, 2000, p. 18)

While Roussel’s gadgets, inventors, explorers, and adventurous anecdotes testify to his passion for Verne, his endlessly descriptive guided tours of unexpected objects equally suggest the influence of the popular astronomer Camille Flammarion, for whom he showed a similar near-religious devotion.³² In the 1930s Georges Bataille came into possession of a star-shaped glass box which had belonged to Roussel; according to the inscription on the reverse, the star-shaped biscuit it still contained had been served at a luncheon hosted by Flammarion at his estate outside Paris (Leiris in Roussel, 1972, p. 26). Such a fetishization of the relics of the public representatives of science points to an irrationality underlying the public cult of reason of which Verne and Flammarion were the popular priests. Roussel’s work can indeed be read as an ambivalent comment on the very notion of scientific ‘explanation’, on the progress of technology, and on the ability of consciousness to master its own foundations.

Locus solus makes great show of providing logical explanations for its miraculous displays, scattering phrases like ‘The enigma, henceforth, was resolved’ (Roussel, 1965, p. 168), or ‘The procedure of indication, this time again, was rational’ (Roussel, 1965, p. 186) throughout the work. Yet the reader who awaits a technical explanation in accordance with the laws described by science (as in Verne), the rules of deduction (as in Arthur Conan Doyle), or symbolic significance (as in any number of hermeneutic schools) will be sorely disappointed. Rather than clearing up the mystery, Roussel’s explanations themselves beg further explanations. To take one example from the latter chapters of *Locus solus*—after the *danse macabre* of corpses who repeatedly carry out their final acts, thanks to the application of *vitalium* and *resurrectine*—Canterel demonstrates the properties of a remarkable Tarot card, the Tower. Unlike on an ordinary card, here the pictures move; it exhales haloes of green gas and emits an eerie, irregular music, a tune entitled ‘The blue bells of Scotland’. Fear not, for each mysterious phenomenon has its precise explanation: there is a paper-thin set of gears and a trained team of flat insects (*émeraude*s) inside it, stimulated to an amorous release of green light that congeals in the air by the sounding of the note *fa* (Roussel, 1965, p. 260). Roussel’s explanations cheerfully conclude as though he

³² Le Brun, (1994), pp. 243–247; on Flammarion, see Bigg (2003).



Fig. 8. Roussel, aged 3, rides a white swan (Photo Benque, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

has reached a satisfactory depth, when what he really provides is another baffling surface. Not unlike the portrait by Putnam's accidental ant artist and the words used by his brains in the vat, Roussel's explanations never reach beyond their self-enclosed frame. Further, when Roussel unveils the rules by which he 'wrote certain of his books', he only poses new mysteries. He gives the rationale for certain linguistic deformations, but not for the precise form that each took: why *pillard* instead of, say, *milliard*; why *bande* and not *bonde*? In his writing, as in his writing about writing, Roussel insists on a mechanical explanation, then

provides one that is as eerily dubious as the phenomenon it purports to explain.³³

Roussel's works take the idea, much celebrated in his age, that the sciences have *explained* the universe—that the mysteries have been solved, the clouds of ignorance dispersed—and turns it inside out. A cold shower of sparks explodes from the contact of the two positions implied by the brain-in-the-vat: at one pole, the notion that knowable and repeatable rules underlie all features of nature, including our perceptions and knowledge; at the other, the sceptic's anxiety that the current state of our knowledge is only a provisional surface whose underlying structure remains unknown. If we immerse Roussel within these wider historical and epistemological currents, the world of *Locus solus* may appear less isolated than it did. In the pageant of appearances that makes up the real world, our discoveries and inventions often escape our control; a patient phenomenology reveals that we never have more than a partial grasp of the foundations of our thought. We may be led by a nagging sense of incompleteness to suspect that the things we treasure most—the objective facts by which we produce mechanical marvels, the subjective sense of our unique individuality—may be nothing but empty forms. Repeated exposure to Roussel's hypersane incantations makes the worlds of common sense and logic look more and more like endlessly intricate illusions on the screen of an impersonal, bodiless mind.

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³³ In this, Roussel brings to mind certain strands of cognitive psychology, continuations of socio-biology, which rely on 'reverse engineering'. Confronted with a wonder-inducing phenomenon such as, for example, human language, the scientist presents the model of a mechanism, a module, summoned into existence by evolution. The mystery is explained by the postulation of a hidden mechanism—a technological *deus ex machina*; see Pinker (1995). As Alain Robbe-Grillet put it in his study of Roussel: 'Now these chains of elucidations, extraordinarily precise, ingenious, and farfetched, appear so derisory, so disappointing, that it is as if the mystery remained intact. But it is henceforth a mystery that has been washed, emptied out, that has become unnameable. The opacity no longer hides anything. One has the impression of having found a locked drawer, then a key; and this key opens the drawer impeccably ... and the drawer is empty' (Robbe-Grillet, 1963, p. 76).

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