

Excerpt from a preliminary version of *No Dandy, No Fun*,  
being released by Sternberg Press, London, 2023.

On 6 July 1894, on a sunny afternoon in Paris, a man was served a glass of ice-cold champagne. He drank it in a single draught and keeled over dead. The heart attack suffered by Eugène Roussel, a stockbroker, left his seventeen-year-old son half-orphaned and with an immense fortune at his disposal. This did not make life any easier for Raymond. He had grown up on the Boulevard Malesherbes, a highly fashionable neighbourhood of Paris where his playmates had included Marcel Proust.

Contrary to appearances, however, he was not nurtured as a child. By the time he reached adolescence, his ears were ringing with the voices of those who regarded his passions as unnatural. That he was not free to be what he was left him with deep wounds. He might have used his inheritance, which amounted to about forty million francs, to comfort himself with the usual luxuries. But Roussel, who found it difficult to do things the way most people did, instead dreamt up objects that did not exist. He designed a nine-meter-long car. This hulking vision of a villa on wheels was built by the car company Lacoste. Roussel had himself driven across the whole of Europe in this fantastical means of conveyance. Across the windows in the rear part of the vehicle, the heavy curtains were kept drawn.

He held everyday reality at a distance.

He maintained only surreptitious contact with the outside world, listening to it through the radio.

When he appeared in public, a young woman was often seen at his side. Her name was Charlotte Dufrène. The attractive social columnist had been hired by Raymond's mother to ease her son's loneliness. This gesture of maternal love had a false bottom: aimed at concealing her son's sexual inclinations, it made clear to him that he should not be what he was. Despite these difficult beginnings, Roussel and his human alibi developed a mutual and lifelong devotion. This did not stop him, however, from consistently withholding some details of his life from the woman he called his *gouvernante*. Sometimes he would omit to show her his inventions, or he would set off on his own without her—small attempts at escape, for which she punished him with further demands for money.

Another quality of money became painfully clear to Roussel: he could now afford the life of an author who did not have to write books that sold. This was not what he would have wanted. But the failure of his early stories had cast the young writer into a profound crisis. No one wanted to read his books.

Not only his sexual desires, but even what he wrote, was wrong.

After initially withdrawing for a while as a writer, he began writing texts that struck a different tone. From this point on, they assumed an unprecedented form, one that turned words and phrases found in advertising slogans or newspaper announcements into fantastical narratives. He was now no longer the miserable creature who was writing these stories. Instead, an imaginary apparatus wrote the texts while he seemed to stand by and watch. Since no publisher would publish his experiments in writing, Roussel brought out the texts himself in limited luxury editions. He also had cheap editions printed in softcover, which sold like lead balloons. During his lifetime, his works were only read by a small public, but one that admired him all the more for his obscurity. Above all, Roussel's novels *Impressions d'Afrique* (1910) and *Locus Solus* (1914) would have an influence on the development of contemporary art that can scarcely be underestimated. That Roussel remained an outsider for so long is not only attributable to the fact that he couldn't find a proper publisher but that he was generally considered to be *weird*.

Just as Brummell forsook his humble background, so Roussel gave up being an *author* and assumed the mask of an automaton. No one could reproach him for having written a bad book. *He* hadn't written it. Despite this selflessness, he did like seeing his name on the cover of a book. The conceptual machines of imagination kept on writing through his vacuum—or more precisely, language wrote itself.

Roussel the language machine did not travel to Africa. Although he kept notebooks about his travels, these only ever marginally influenced his books. Hardly anything he saw went into them. It was not he who described the unknown continent; rather, visions of it were raised from the sea of words by the machines he invented.

Although these methods appeared to be completely new, they actually resembled ancient techniques of popular poetry and absurd humour. One mechanism he would use repeatedly carried out minor permutations, which completely transformed the meaning of a sentence by changing a single letter in it.

*Impressions d'Afrique* appeared in 1910, a year after Henry Ford invented the automobile assembly line. One of the most fascinating things about this fictional journey is how language sparkles in incandescent uncertainty. As Foucault put it, its shimmering makes it impossible to determine whether what is there conceals a secret or not. The unease concealed in this language has the effect that almost every word appears full of life; its sentences appear in danger of becoming lost in the expanses of complete meaninglessness. Roussel produced a void, if not the “self-destructive nothingness” which Giorgio Agamben would later claim was the current through which art was able to go on living.

Roussel's transformation into a machine that produced assemblages of words proved to be a form of time travel that would carry him to shores until then unknown—ones to which Dada, Surrealism, and the *nouveau roman* would later follow.

One person who sensed early on which doors Roussel was opening was Marcel Duchamp.

In 1912, the young painter and his friends attended a theatre performance of *Impressions d'Afrique* organised by Roussel himself. Once again, the auto-impresario of his own works had to note that the performance “had been more than a failure.” The critics declared the piece he'd brought on stage to be mad.

By contrast, Duchamp recalled: “It was extraordinary. On stage was only a shop window dummy and a snake, which moved very slowly. It was the very height of strange.” The evening was to become a key experience for him: “I had the feeling that a painter could be better influenced by a writer than by another painter. And Roussel showed me the way.”

This influence became the bridge over which the Dandy system passed from literature to the visual arts, which it then would go on to completely transform.

Roussel had turned his body into a factory, writing himself within the apparatus of language. The writer would use this to build the approach road to the junction where, 50 years later, the author would eventually die.

While imaginary machines helped Roussel with his writing, he delegated the illustration of his texts to a living person. However, he did not give the draughtsman he employed full passages of text, still less the entire manuscript of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*. Instead, he merely sent him a single sentence, or even just a single word. To maintain his anonymity as employer, Roussel hired a private detective to act as a middleman and organise the delivery of these instructions.

During his lifetime, Roussel kept the process by which he produced his texts secret. Although he wrote a kind of instruction manual, he did not have it published until after his death. This sober text, which set out the method of constructing his puzzles, revealed secret after secret about the private life of language, that strange entity which doubles as it divides. Foucault later remarked that *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres* (how I wrote certain of my books) ultimately dries up Roussel's work at its source. What this instruction manual does not reveal is any of the secrets hidden inside his texts. In 1932, Roussel let his *machines* produce their last lines. The engineer made himself redundant, dedicating himself instead to moving wooden pieces around a chessboard and consuming increasing quantities of drugs. He snorted mountains of cocaine and drank lakes of champagne. So much that one might have thought he was determined to die, as soon as possible, from the heart attack that had killed his father.

But in all probability, he was just empty and sad.

In the summer of the following year, Roussel stayed in the Grand Hôtel des Palmes in Palermo. Once again, he was accompanied by Charlotte Dufrène. She was staying in the room next door when, early in the morning of 14 July 1933, he was found dead in room 224. Whether this was the result of an accidental overdose of sleeping pills or a deliberate act of suicide was never clearly established. Even in death, Roussel remained as mysterious and as wilfully ambiguous as his writing.

On 9 March of the same year, Roussel had specified in his will that “I absolutely insist that my wrists be cut with a deep incision so that I am not buried alive.” The documents do not show whether this wish was actually carried out before he was buried in the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris. What can be said with certainty is that the tomb in the form of a library room, which Roussel had designed years before, was never built. Nor did any of his relatives avail themselves of the 230 places he set aside for them in his crypt.

Even in death, Roussel remained alone.