

## towards an aesthetic of ~~ob~~scurity

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*Rats are rhizomes. Burrows are too, in all of their functions of shelter, supply, movement, evasion, and breakout. The rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers. When rats swarm over each other.*

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

### **burrowing and flight...**

There is rhythm in writing, rhythm in reading, rhythm in thinking. It permeates and contours the envelope of encounter – all the components that circumscribe, emplace, or relate to our act of speaking and listening. Perhaps if you imagine the sensation of my voice we ought to speak about resonance, the vibrations which haunt the interval that displaces and connects, about (b)orders, the miscreant feints and lunges towards which we surmise meaningful approaches and retreats, about grave misunderstanding and lambent reckoning. I do not intend to set forth a theory of rhythm or the articulation of melodic dialogue. Instead, I aim to generate a site of stylistic vectors that will saturate the essay and burden the fashionable connotations of the sundry “inter-nesses” in such a way that proximity and convolution will discover obscurity as a tool of flight that keeps its own questions open.

In this paper I interrogate certain of the writings of Raymond Roussel (1877-1933) to ascertain the semiotic promise of his *procédé*, its effects upon the language system itself, as well as the ensuing poetic and aesthetic investment it achieves. Although thinkers such as Michel Foucault and John Ashbury have examined Roussel’s work, he remains an obscure figure in modern literature. Not only do his works remain obscure, in the sense of being remote and occasionally difficult to comprehend (his work, *New Impressions of Africa* [1910], is an extremely sophisticated poem written in four cantos using the rhyming Alexandrine [a verse of six feet] where each canto is a single sentence interpolated by nested parenthetical

digression running up to five brackets within brackets), but the style in which he composes certain of his works is enigmatic and in all manners weird. Foucault, from whom I depart, suggests that Roussel's writing reveals a fundamental hollowness intrinsic to language. The way in which one word moves to another discloses the arbitrary nature of the sign. Though not dissimilar to de Saussure's concept of the arbitrary relation of the signifier to the signified, Roussel's stylistic opens writing to a void in which language becomes a labyrinth whose semantic manoeuvres are mobilized by a troping activity in which a word is both identical and other to itself in an instant (de)synchronized by the lever of a cryptic linguistic scheme.

I find in Roussel a poetic of obscurity that suggests a "viral-like" condition of becoming that challenges modernity's monological modes of representation and narrative coherence. It does this by expanding compositional strategies and narrative proclivities through a kind of transverse logic that connects seemingly incongruous signs experimentally and practicably. Gilles Deleuze comes closest to ascertaining the process at work in Roussel's style. He describes language as a system striving for equilibrium. However, a writer like Roussel manipulates this system in such a way so as to destabilize its tendencies to form propositions and make choices amongst its combinables and similars. Effectively, Roussel makes language stutter. Language stutters because it has been contaminated. Its syntactical operation, under the constraints of Roussel's *procédé*, is forced to achieve its aims according to the rules of this buried logic and by such is made to signify otherwise. The "viral" poetic that breeds these viable signs infects syntactic-semantic codes and sensual bodies with a perpetual becoming-other that compels meaning and affect to service alternative or eccentric means by way of metonymic erasure and accumulation. The "servicing otherwise" of signs inevitably implicates a dynamic in language that divides its tendency into a *poetics* that disassembles propositions and practices, and an *aesthetic* which (re)assembles codes and performances.

At stake in this work is the articulation of a gesture towards an aesthetic of obscurity that inheres within Roussel's poetic, an aesthetic that thwarts conceptual assimilation and institutional seizure by operating not only between terms and bodies, but also between and among tendencies of closure, ambiguity, and negation. The literary works of Raymond Roussel exemplify this notion of obscurity from the position of a writing that seeks to make language stutter, to cleave itself in order to generate a ramous, branching literature and multivalent subjectivities. Furthermore, I propose that this poetic-aesthetic movement can see art and theoretical practices inclined toward the obscure not as an obfuscating tactic, but as a radically intertextual and anti-cultural process, the corollary being that obscurity is not simply the determinate negation of pellucidity, but entirely the promise of nothing, the promise of nothing but "otherwise" in thought itself.

Roussel writes a story to begin and end with the same sentence. *Parmi les noirs* (Among the Blacks), a short story published in *Comment j'ai écrit certain de mes livres* (1977 [1935]), commences thus: "*les lettres de blanc sur les bandes de vieux billard*" (the white letters on the cushions of the old billiard table), and concludes accordingly: "*les lettres de blanc sur les bandes de vieux pillard*" (The white man's letters on the hordes of the old plunderer). A party of certain gentlemen and ladies enter the poolroom to find white letters inscribed in chalk along the perimeter of an old billiard table. Using only the chalk letters to form coherent words, the guests are asked to solve a rebus. We start with the pool table and end with "Booltable": a dusty moth-eaten green felt object meets an old plunderer.

Between these words you will notice gaps, gaps that express an obverse language whose meanings are tacit and between. The spoken interval that signifies the tongues of many silent voices assures semantic migration, a migration across the void of Raymond Roussel's "*les lettres de blanc sur les bandes de vieux billard*" that promises other lands colonized by "forms without parentage or species" (Foucault, 19). But now it feels as though I am writing

spectral concepts with phantom limbs for an imaginary me who would like to inhabit the body of these haunted words. Take “mobile,” “mobile,” and “mobile” for instance. The magnitude of difference between these “three” words is vast. Graphically they are identical. Phonetically, they deviate - mǝᵓbaɪ; mǝᵓbil; moᵓbəl. Semantically they diverge: a hanging sculpture, able to move freely, a vehicle. Yet, to utter them again - “mobile”, “mobile”, “mobile” – at once widens and narrows the breach that hovers over the void of language, a void obscured by the veil language suspends before itself desperately trying to conceal its insufficiency and excess. But there are moments when the veil tears. Raymond Roussel wrote prose and verse, but his words were culled not from a sensitivity to style nor from an elaborate eloquence. Roussel would always write twice, the same thing over again, until words were forced to cede their singularity and confess language’s excess and its lack. The technique of repetition, an instrument of rhythm, de-shelters language’s secret and hollow nature. Michel Foucault first wrote about Roussel in 1963; it’s the only work he ever devoted to the study of a single author. What he excavates in Roussel’s writing is “that there are fewer terms of designation than there are things to designate...words [which are] reveal[ed] as the unexpected meeting place of the most distant figures of reality” (ibid., 14). In rotation, or rather, repetition, language, appearing the same to itself, displaces and animates an interstitial space of the tropological where words and categories twist and turn to yield divergent forms of meaning and use.

### ***Impressions of Africa...***

A shipwreck leaves a motley crew of European travelers stranded in the territory of an unknown African nation. Greeted and detained by the emissary Seil Kor, the former passengers are delivered to the kindly Emperor Talou VII, whereupon each is instructed to write home and demand a “redemptive sum” in return for their freedom. Of course the

delivery of these letters to their respective recipients takes time to accomplish, therefore subjecting the shipwrecked to dalliance. In anticipation of Seil Kor's return, and in order to endure the wait, the assembly of hostages, at the behest of Julliard the historian, establish a "curious sort of club each of whose members should be required to distinguish himself either by an original work or by some kind of sensational performance" (Roussel (1910) 1983, 206). Thus was born the "Incomparables Club" whose design to celebrate the emancipating homecoming of Seil Kor led to a gala performance featuring the curiously bizarre absurdity of its members. An exhaustively detailed description of each exhibit, from both the Incomparables and members of Talou's empire, is witnessed by the reader in an exhaustive account of the array of fantastical feats, machines, recitals, and stories.

A typical scene: the musical performance given by the Hungarian Skariofszky's pet worm. The worm plays the zither via an elaborate trough-like contraption filled with a peculiar heavy liquid. Placing itself at the bottom of the trough along a narrow horizontal gap, the worm contorts its body variously to permit a certain passage of the liquid to fall upon the strings of the zither placed below it. Roussel's description of the episode is richly detailed and sets the fantastical nature of this scene as a simple, and entertaining, matter of fact. The work is comprised entirely of the episodic and detailed recounting of the bizarre. How he achieves this massive compilation of strange tellings is revealed in the semi-confessional, posthumously published work, *Comment j'ai écrit certain de mes livres*, in which he elaborates upon his "special method" – the *procédé*.

Roussel's imaginative lever - the *procédé* – is a "rhythmning", a particular movement of the syntagmatic chain and the deterritorialization<sup>1</sup> of the passage of language. In *Comment j'ai*

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<sup>1</sup>The concept of "deterritorialization" here is used to indicate the escape or flight of an event (syntactical for example) from its preliminary manner of behaviour; the event outflows from the milieu in which its activity/behaviour is coded – its territory – while simultaneously recoding this milieu with new lines of becoming and possibility.

*écrite certain de mes livres*, Roussel describes two versions of the “rhythmning” effect of the *procédé* that he used to fabulate *Impressions of Africa* as well as a number of his other compositions (*Locus Solus*, *L’Etoile au Front* and *La Poussière de Soleils*). The first warping the *procédé* performs on language is through an homonymic compaction that both diverges and converges meaning away/toward a single site – a semantic “to-ing and fro-ing.” Each word of the eponymous sentence is extended toward its bi-located meaning, rendering a secondary sentence with no meaningful significance to the first. Roussel explains: “Firstly, *lettres* in the sense of lettering, *blanc* in the sense of a cube of chalk, *bandes* in the sense of cushions; secondly, *lettres* in the sense of missives, *blanc* as in white man, *bandes* as in hordes” (1977, 3). This newly configured arrangement thus yields: “The white man’s letters on the hordes of the old plunderer.” Extending this procedure further, Roussel enfold the homonymic “rhythmning” into a movement that “burrows” metonymically<sup>2</sup> to a related word: as *billard* to *queue* (pool table: billiard cue). But *queue* also possesses its own homonymic rhythm – *queue* as billiard cue is turned toward *queue* as tail. And another extension: *chiffre* metonymically links to billiard cue as monogram (often inscribed on the cue) and homonymically links to *chiffre* as numeral. This generates the scene in Roussel’s novel, *Impressions of Africa*, of Talou (Booltable), the plunderer king, dressed in gown with the

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<sup>2</sup> Metonymy is more than simply contiguity and association. It denotes a process of making proximate, of establishing links and creating valences of things, forces and 'things.' Roussel's case is peculiar in that he uses the homonymic relation (the same name) to reach or make proximate 'things' (categories, actions, thoughts, classes, etc) that we would not ordinarily consider contiguous. Etymologically speaking, metonymy is more a power of utilizing a single quality to correlate with a more complex body. The homonym does not express semblance between the 'things' it signifies; it actually signifies difference. However, it does make difference (different 'things') proximate and in this sense falls under the rubric of metonymy. But this is a particular instance of metonymy that occurs not by sliding over or across things that are near to one another, conceptually or physically. In this case, connexion is made via a mediate signifier (graphically, phonically). The homonym links and makes contiguous, 'things' by a burrowing through, or a folding of linguistic space. Rather than transferring a host of associations onto another term, homonymic-metonymy accretes meanings that couple and subtend difference(s) lattice-wise beneath the semantic superficialities of language. Meaning then is not superposed, such would only render a compaction of meaning and thus ignore the syntagmatic furrowing of language that is necessary to re-contextualize the homonym so as to yield an alternate semantic furrow.

numeral 472 stitched on the back, followed by his retinue (queue). Roussel's third excursion of this homonymic exercise of the *procédé* is to place two homonyms in the allative case:

Taking the word *palmier* I decided to consider it in two senses: as a *pastry* and as a *tree*. Considering it as a pastry, I searched for another word, itself having two meanings which could be linked to it by the preposition *à*; thus I obtained (and it was, I repeat, a long and arduous task) *palmier* (a kind of pastry) *à restauration* (restaurant which serves pastries); the other part gave me *palmier* (palmtree) *à restauration* (restoration of a dynasty). Which yielded the palmtree in Trophies Square commemorating the restoration of the Talou dynasty. (ibid., 5)

The second operation of the *procédé* is slightly more cryptic, but more powerfully epitomizes the “rhythmning” of language. Using “anything at hand” Roussel exploited the disjuncture that exists between graphic and sonic segmentation. For example, beginning with the first line a song, “*J’ai du bon tabac dans ma tabatière*” (I have good tobacco in my snuffbox), he then transposes the line of segmentation by shifting the accents, changing the rhythm and deterritorializing the spoken language to harvest an assemblage of new words. “*J’ai du bon tabac dans ma tabatière,*” becomes, “*jade tube onde aubade en mat a basse tierce*” (jade, tube, wave/water, aubade, in, mat (matte object), third, bass) (ibid., 9). These new words furnish Roussel with the elements that begin *Impressions*. The *procédé* can be characterized as a burrowing or divericating logic that activates a metonymic “rhythmning” to open an interstitial space that denatures and dis-eases language. As mechanical as this procedure seems, it nonetheless configures a commentitious realm of literary passage from the mundane to the extramundane (extraordinary). Although Roussel employed the *procédé* as a creative mechanism, it reveals a fundamental hollowness of language and a relentless strategy to cover the tracks of its material insufficiency as it grapples with phenomenal excess and conceptual dearth.

Roussel's writing is a writing of difference. It is a writing of interdiction, not in the sense of prohibition, but in the sense of *writing away* from familiar language into excrescent territories remaindered by unfamiliar semiotic assemblage. One could suggest that his

writing is a type of colonization of ordinary language and common syntagmatic rhythm: the pedestrian and typical encasing the fantastic and unusual. However, it is more productive to see Roussel as struggling to make language stumble, as the philosopher Gilles Deleuze states: “[T]o place it in a state of perpetual disequilibrium” (Deleuze 1994, 27).

In order for language and its extrinsic objects to appear to become normalized language must restlessly cover its excess – the psychic residua that arise in any system that strives for a coincidence between its representations, experiential affects, and lack. Language must deceive its inability to represent the radical heterogeneity of a *hyperdifferentiated* host of phenomena. In a system of difference in opposition (repulsion), language functions and portrays heterogeneity by symbolically leveling this difference: all difference becomes equally meaningful. John Shepherd and Peter Wicke have noted in their study of musical signification that linguistic signification is based on “reference to an object world that is mediated and defined in an ultimately visual fashion, [and] does not as a consequence *have* to invoke the sonic characteristics of that world in realizing its fundamentally denotative function” (Shepherd and Wicke, 128; emphasis in original). Language and the “logical form of [its] proposition[s] which maintain a logical structure in relation to the phenomena represented...can only be abstract.... It can have no necessary connection to the spatio-temporal characteristics of the phenomena represented” (ibid., 137). Language can only serve to structure the world through relations of difference founded upon spatio-temporal characteristics that are cognitively imaged and symbolically maintained. Language is therefore radically alienated from its genitive site in the material grounds and pathways of the body and sound, and as such, debarred from directly imposing any material structuration upon it. In this way language possesses the capacity to form meaning and signify independently of the characteristics of its material conditions. Or perhaps, schizophrenically speaking, language lacks the material affectivity to ground its structurality, the process of signification and its manner of connexion. Consequently, however, this lack

of necessary relevance in the *way* language signifies subjects it to modalities of power that seek to inscribe their own order upon these processes to authenticate a transparent correspondence between words and things.

It is the fate of signification to corroborate with power in order to ground and stabilize its schizo-semantic coupling and de-coupling. Shepherd and Wicke indicate how power operates in language in two ways: one, by “the lifting of signification *away* from the material ground of the signifier and *onto* the material ground of the body” (Shepherd and Wicke, 137; emphasis in original), thereby stamping the power relations and difference of the symbolic order marked by the ambiguous signified/signifier “phallus”<sup>3</sup> upon the material world; and two, by “the extent that people misrecognize in language a signifying practice that unproblematically names the world” (ibid., 215)<sup>4</sup> The pervasive and profuse differentiating of language assumes the appearance of a thorough and even heterogeneity, a heterogeneity that in effect resembles homogeneity. Shepherd and Wicke continue: “The power of language flows from processes...extrinsic to the processes through which it generates meaning” (ibid., 215). It is language’s peculiar signifying nature to name and codify (capture and contain) the manifold goings-on of life without dependence upon the material characteristics of the extrinsic (material) processes from which it derives, that makes it susceptible, disposed even, to the performances that grant power and enforce order upon these extrinsic processes, and by such make it possible for this power to be exercised upon those goings-on. It is the work of complex discursive formations, the relentless marking of

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<sup>3</sup> Shepherd and Wicke draw upon Lacan’s linguistic model (which draws upon De Saussure’s and Lévi-Strauss’s structural linguistics and kinships systems respectively) to describe the process of subject formation through language. However, as they have indicated in their work the phallus is highly problematic for its function as the primary signifier in an endless chain of signification, which by Lacan’s reasoning can have no relevance to the character of its material grounds, is forced to function as both an originary “transcendental signified” (which must it then disavow the arbitrary correlation between signifier and signified) as well merely another sound-image with no *necessary* connexion to the material/symbolic world to which it points. The dual function of the phallus then operates to mark difference first by subrogating absence for presence by the material quality of sound (which can never fulfill the order of lack) and secondly by indicating gender.

<sup>4</sup> See pp. 214-216 for a more extensive discussion of how power operates in language.

difference that always signifies, producing “identity-effects”, which conceal the play of power that traverses the “equi-lib(e)riated” system of differences in language and the coeval “essenceless-ness” of its confabulatory scripts.

Strangely, the more effort exerted upon the signifying processes of language, the more language escapes predictable and controlled behaviour. The rules of language are always governed by variation. Ordinarily, ordinary language affects variation through the differencing littoral forces of competing ideologies and dominant modes of representation. However, when language is “shackled” by extreme constraints, its ebb and flow, its usual “rhythmning” is dislocated. The shackle imposes a new “rhythmning”, a foreign measure upon the syntactical line of language. Deleuze calls this new relay of forces “a ramified variation of the language system” (Deleuze 1994, 27). Under the “rhythmning” of the constraint, Roussel’s *procédé* in this case, “language is subject to a process of choices to be made and sequences to be established: disjunctions or selection of similars; connection or sequel of combinables” (ibid., 26). When the deterritorializing effects of this shackle bear upon language they place it “in a state of perpetual disequilibrium;” difference (disjunction) is no longer even and exclusive, connexions no longer progressive.

Subtended by the anarchic variation of the deterritorializing rhythm, “each state of a variable [takes] a position on a crest line which bifurcates and prolongs itself in other lines” (ibid., 27). The burrowing tracks in this new territory and new rhythm are syntactical lines that Deleuze describes as

constituted by means of the curves, links, bends, and deviations of this dynamic line as it passes by positions with a double perspective on disjunctions and on connections...no longer the formal or superficial syntax that presides over the equilibrium of language, but a syntax that gives birth to a foreign language within language and a grammar of disequilibrium. (ibid., 27)

In order to substantiate the illusion of an essential identity/difference in the flat differentiation of an “equi-lib(e)riated” system, language must be made to perform an

alchemy of strategic and ideological schemes to stabilize and fix its semantic slackness. However, there persist terms and concepts fundamentally ambivalent. For example, the terms “mimicry”, and the submarkers “queer”, “third-world”, and even “hybrid” signify an order of particularly slack identities/subjectivities that seem to implicate an internal incapacity for discourse to secure what it tries to represent. The operations designed to equalize and stabilize the linguistic-conceptual system of representation ultimately serve to undermine it.

### **subterranean flight...**

Roussel, like so many modernists, was fond of the self-reflexive, particularly through the literary device of the pun. But a difficulty haunts Roussel’s writing. This difficulty is not a stylistic trait that stakes its literariness on the banal address and detailing of the ultra-mundane; its challenge is in the way the narrative relies on stereotypes, on “identity-effects”, on the colonized “other” to ferry the fantastic.

But as problematic as this is, even these “identity-effects” are ultimately superseded by the effects of the *procédé*. Talou the African chief begins as a (savage) plunderer, but as the *procédé* reconfigures the rhythms of language to represent unlikely connexions, he becomes less evidently the menacing figure of the Dark Continent and more a problematized subject, a diacritical mark whose identity is essentially a mediated event in the ramified system of combinables and similars. For example, when we meet Talu he is the patriarchal representative of his nation, fully in command of his subjects, his land and his power. However, during the course of the Incomparables’ gala performance we learn that Talou insists upon ascending to the stage in order to perform a French vocal composition. This song is not simply sung but performed by the Emperor adorned in wig and dress and

executed in high falsetto. This image and characterization of the Emperor as transvestite is achieved not by Roussel's ambivalent homosexuality, but through the mechanical connexion and troping enjoined by his procedure. Roussel's *procédé*, by uniting difference through the same (homonymic compaction), demonstrates that language itself cannot maintain the demand of discourse. The *procédé* reveals how language and its categories of identity, difference, and being are fictitious and subject to discursively engendered grammatical-syntactic constraints.

Because Roussel's language is pressed into the service of the *procédé* his characters move further away from preconceived shapes of subjectivity. It was not Roussel's intention to overcome discourses of power; it was the inevitability of language constrained. Restricted language, if it is to move, *must* yield monstrous forms through relays of the obscure. Recall that language operates within a system of oppositional differences that "has no material *connectedness* of a logical or necessary, character, *either* to the material conditions of the world *or* to the material conditions of language" (Shepherd and Wicke, 164; emphasis in original). Language, under the order of the *procédé*'s "burrowing" logic, functions sub-rhetorically. Its rules of grammar remain unchanged but what it can possibly say is permitted, in fact, compelled towards the obscure. A language shackled by procedural constraints escapes extrinsic processes of sense formation, as well as subverts the dialectical processes of historical form. It affords the subjects it speaks to work radically with the multiplicity inherent in finite assemblies to decentre the mediating schemes of identity and power at play in aesthetic experience.

Roussel's shackled language operates "subterraneanly," so to speak, on itself by migrating crosswise beneath semantic codes and through a tropological space where its disjunctions, intervals, and connexions elaborate unknown subjectivities and suggest alternative relationships between things familiar. The modes of being in *Impressions of Africa* are

continually renovated via the troping of words into sensical alterity. Oddly, this does not exhaust language. It demonstrates the impure space of writing. The more language is constricted, the more remote its connexions, the more intertextual it becomes. It is necessary to keep in mind that it is not a restriction of words *per se*, but a limitation of how they mean and are able to move. In the *procédé* words are contagia; they transmit meaning from element to element, context to context, employing the existing codes of assemblage while concurrently re-writing them. Meaning in a sense is contaminated; it contaminates, it mutates, it repeats; it transforms its own conditions of relating.

A plunderer can as easily become a billiard table as a pastry becomes a palmtree. If one continually deploys the same process of discursion, it will fail to capture and control its excesses. A “mobile” (moʊbəl) becomes a “mobile” (məʊbaɪl) becomes “mobile” (məʊbɪl). Language counterfeits “normality” by keeping things – or rather thing’s/things? diacritical markings – as distant, as *different*, from one another as possible. In this manner, language perpetuates the belief that it sufficiently names things, and by such consolidates and exercises the power of prevailing hegemonic orders of representation.

But in art, which might be said to exist as viral-like accumulations of (psychic) carryings-on that subsist (remain) interstitially as practicable, motile and commentitious residue of social patterns and activities, the *procédé*, as “rhythmning” shackle, unleashes a tactical array of linguistic techniques upon the residual spaces of thought. And, if we imagine that the existing power relations serve the purpose of a shackle, whose aim it is to “naturalize” the subjects it produces through processes of culturalization – a “meta-narrative” of sorts – and as all narratives operate by distillation, generating categories of importance and waste, then the discharge or detritus of culturalization will accrete and generate a transitive zone of anti-culturalization, spawning monstrous births (ontologically indeterminate intervallic

bodies) whose viral becomings transfer and threshold (infect) the regime of passage that delimits the modes of relationality.

So what is at stake? Roussel opens a space of writing through the slippage intrinsic to the processes of signification in language, a symbolic system whose logical forms of proposition are utterly independent of the characteristics of the material grounds and pathways upon which it is based (sound). This space of writing that the principle of arbitrariness (the arbitrary association of an acoustical image with a concept) opens not only affords language to fail its conventions but promises it nothing, nothing but continual variation, (im)possible connexion, and radical obscurity. Although Deleuze may be correct in his account of how style is achieved through "making the language system stutter" (Deleuze 1994: 24), he fails to recognize the poetic activity of this stutter, of growing language *in media res* that lends itself to a type of viral becoming.

*"The Language system is not as a constant in relation to other terms, but as a series of differential positions of points of view upon a dynamism that can be specified."* (Deleuze 1994: 24)

Language conceived in this sense is an oriented relay of forces. But it is not enough to leave it there, for like any flow - information, genetic material, capital - it is susceptible to particular forces of desire. Within Roussel's writing is a poetic that "piggybacks" on the connotative level of the sign to achieve maximum connectivity. This poetic drive is aimed at the procreation and propagation of signification itself (*signifiance*<sup>5</sup>) whose byproduct is the necessary depletion of the sign's conventionality and the birth of the monstrously other, the many headed sign.<sup>6</sup> But this expression of desire for furtherance, at the cost of decreasing

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<sup>5</sup> *Signifiance* is a term borrowed from Kristeva's theory of poetic language and intertextuality to describe the sheer signifying potential of the text by the differential materiality of signs at the level of the signifier

<sup>6</sup> This appears to suggest the concept of polysemy; however, what must be distinguished is the level of the text from the level of the sign, and the operation of the poetic from the effect of the aesthetic. The

the semiotic bind between the signifier and signified, functionally imperils the semiotic potential of the "host" sign and reveals Roussel's style as a "viral poetic" whose implicit (burrowing) logic possesses an ineluctable orientation towards the obscure. The viral sign suffers depletion and distention: The *procédé* radicalizes the principle of arbitrariness by exaggerating its agglutinative property; the terms, and by extension, the meanings inflicted by the viral poetic are made to reproduce the conditions of their becoming, not as a re-inscription of how they are conventionally understood, but as the generation of the very process that permits agglutination and significance. But to tease out the consequences and sharpen our understanding of Roussel's "viral poetic", it is productive to place it in relief to another "style" whose obverse operation produces similar results. The work of Fernando Pessoa, a contemporary of Roussel, serves to obversely delimitate the viral poetic of the *procédé*.

### Poetics...

*I've created various personalities within. I constantly create personalities. Each of my dreams, as soon as I start dreaming it, is immediately incarnated in another person, who then is the one dreaming it, and not I.*

*To create, I've destroyed myself. I've so externalized myself on the inside that I don't exist there except externally. I'm the empty stage where various actors act out various plays.*

Benardo Soares (aka: Fernando Pessoa) "*The Book of Disquiet*"  
*The Selected Prose of Fernando Pessoa*

Roussel's work introduces us to the metonymic fold that expresses difference from the side of the Same. But another expression of difference is possible from the side of the other. It

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sign is subject to the desire of the poetic and is thus rendered multivalent. The aesthetic, however, participates in the textuality of the work. Stated analogously, the virus operates upon the individual cell while its effects are experienced upon the entire organism. Meaning is put to work through an architectonic process of signs clustered according to the codes of a certain syntax. Polysemy then applies to the aesthetic dimension affected by the subtending poetic.

is a difference expressed from the thither-side of writing. Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935), a Portuguese poet of the early twentieth century, is in a sense Roussel's "Other". Whereas Roussel circumscribes difference from the same name – the *homonym* – Pessoa limns difference from the other name – the *heteronym*. Pessoa's technique, although equally significant, was not the elaborate linguistic feat of Roussel's *procédé*. Throughout Pessoa's career as a writer of poetry, prose, plays, social commentary, and criticism, he deployed a number of literary alter egos to author his work, the most important of which were Alberto Caerio, Ricardo Reis, Alvaro de Campos, as well as Pessoa himself. The term "pseudonym" is not adequate, for according to Pessoa, the falsity of these identities extended far beyond their names. In his introduction to *The Selected Prose of Fernando Pessoa*, Richard Zenith writes: "They were false personalities, with biographies, points of view, and literary styles that differed from Pessoa's. They were names that belonged to invented *others*, whom their inventor called 'heteronyms'" (Zenith, xi; emphasis in original). We can only speculate how much psychic space these heteronyms occupied; Pessoa, a loner by choice, wrote about his heteronyms only from the position of 'other' heteronyms. But this needn't concern us here so much as it becomes clear in his work that the heteronyms, in a way prefacing the "death of the author," occupy just as much literary identity-space as Pessoa's, or any one else's, persona.

In contrast to Roussel who sought difference through the Same of the homonym, Pessoa engages difference through difference. Both had literary goals whose strategies effected singular results, and both created a space of writing irreducible to an individual essence. Roussel empties and erases himself through a banal and descriptive prose of unbelievable worlds; Pessoa engenders a literary scene that exceeds a "unique" composing subject through the proliferation of miscellaneous voices. Roussel's poetic has been seen to move language into remote regions via intervals and transilient affordances. Pessoa, however, triggers movement or passage by displacing "style", by increasing and saturating the

differential rhythm and syntax of writing. Walter Benjamin has noted that “language only communicates itself in itself,” and cannot privilege the presence of a speaker (Benjamin, 1998: 109). The assorted heteronymic voices circumjacent to Pessoa, or rather “Pessoa”, establish an heterogeneous field of subjectivities that express opposite and contrary positions to one another. Quite literally, Pessoa’s writing speaks another person(a), and “Pessoa” himself becomes a homonym for his heteronymic others. For example, Pessoa, known primarily as a poet, on 18 October 1931 claims he prefers prose to poetry, and in fact lacks the ability to write in verse. However, to state this, he hands the writing off to the persona of “Benardo Soares”, who extols in *The Book of Disquiet* (text 227), a dour collection of aphoristic essays, the values of prose over verse. Pessoa’s space of writing is populated with the personified *heteroglot* that Mikhail Bakhtin describes as the stratified field of multiple voices speaking concurrently, to and against each other, at different socio-ideological registers; the heteronyms comment upon the work – the style – of every other heteronym, each of which effectively becomes each other’s other (Bakhtin, 112-20).

Pessoa’s difference is oceanic. Unconcerned with communicating consistency or uniformity, he articulates, through heteronymic displacement, the multiplicity of thought that escorts and “cleaves” every discursive utterance. He enacts Deleuze’s “world of crowned anarchies and nomadic distribution” (Deleuze 1990, 263) by traveling the terrain of opinion and prospect, belief and scepticism, dialoging with his surrounding “others”, and interrogating the ways of being in the world. Pessoa’s work is properly an “anti-style” in that its syntax becomes through the contradiction and negation of its interlopers. Much of his writing is incomplete and elliptical. The poetics of this scattered syntax are accumulative and collective. It is not simply a relation of exclusion nor of complementarity; it is much more radical than that. Pessoa’s “anti-style” enables the affordance of a multiplicity of becomings, becomings which are becomings-other through the impossible array of trying to say everything. In saying everything Pessoa burdens language with a plenary hope, a hope of

parasitism that dwells within syntax and combination, within repetition<sup>7</sup> and the striving for limitless utterances.

It is important at this point that as we near the means of obscurity that we distinguish and define style from poetics. “Style,” Deleuze claims, “is a process of putting language into variation, a modulation and a straining of the whole language toward an outside” (Deleuze 1995, 140). It is similarly the movement of concepts as expressed in language. Style is the dual, but not necessarily synchronous, movement of words and concepts used to make language “stutter”. The “rhythmning” of language transfigures the pace and transduction of syntax, the codes of semantic figuration, and the territory of meaning. The metre that obtains in the stutter strives to modulate the dominant measure of language; it modulates and translates the perplexity of a mutant syntax into the poetics of its speakers.

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<sup>7</sup> Remarkably, or perhaps not so remarkably, repetition can be understood as both *erasure* and *accumulation*. In erasure, the return is the divergent series that Deleuze argues “displaces its difference along with all others” (1990, 264). Interrupting the enabling of simulations to effect an active forgetting of the similar heightens the power of difference. Erasure removes the “mask”<sup>†</sup> of simulation that “expresses the process of disguising,” (ibid., 263) and illuminates the radical heterogeneity – formlessness – that is the movement of the cosmos.

<sup>†</sup> (Derrida would argue that the removal of the mask is impossible. The “removal” is traceable but never directly experienced “unmediatedly”. Deleuze, however, elaborates an “immediate duality” where the expression is not a mere “double” that has the same “thesis” as that which receives it (1990, 122), which means to say that if the expression resembles resembled its condition, then the condition and conditioned would be the same. The expression, the theme or “sense” of something – difference – “possesses a neutrality which belongs to it essentially, although it is never a model or a shadow, never the double of the propositions which express it” (ibid., 122-123). The “mask” and “what it masks” (“that which express it”) are not the same thing, yet they are immediately present in the event of becoming. The mask (sense-form) is the *effect* of what it masks (nonsense-formless). The “nonsense” (what the mask masks) donates “sense” (the mask) to sense. What the mask masks is immediately the mask and yet is divided from it. Deleuze calls this double positivity or co-presence the “paradoxical instance”. It is a relation of “out of joint” (Derrida’s term) or “violent” (Deleuze’s term).

Expressing this “process of disguising” is like lifting the lid off chaos to reveal tessellated eccentric circles or spirals that continually displace one another in mutual transformation. Accumulation, another manner of repetition, plots chaos by the dense accretions of saying everything<sup>7</sup>. Accumulation gathers impossible<sup>7</sup> points of view, forces, affects from the discourses of science, art, philosophy, past and present, dominator-dominated to productively resonate and interfere with one another. The impossibility of the swarm of voices radiates from it lines of flight that innervate experimental tendencies and novel poetics, not for (aesthetic) sentencing, but for the vital possibility “to invent ourselves as another people” (Rajchman, 123).

When Deleuze defines Roussel's style as responding to a grammar of disequilibrium he rightly defines the stutter in Roussel's style as "syntax in the process of becoming, a veritable creation of a syntax that gives birth to a foreign language within language and a grammar of disequilibrium" (1994: 27). But this effect does not go far enough in theorizing and describing the becoming of syntax, nor does it aim correctly when it likens this "language within a language" to the musical "minorizing" of a "major" dynamic system. The becoming of syntax resembles more accurately the autonomous activity of a virus at work in the body: infection of a cell by a virus is carried out through the viral bacteriophage inserting its own partial DNA or RNA strand into the bacterium and hijacking the cell's machinery to reproduce its own genome and capsids. A virus is essentially dormant (a "viron") until it encounters the dynamic processes of a host cell, at which point it assumes a similar state of animation (responding to its environment, oriented towards replication, it becomes a "virus"). Acting in the body using the appropriated mechanisms of its cellular components, the virus is active entirely through its bond with the dynamic workings of life. Roussel's poetic and its syntactic corollary does not simply tend towards the limit of grammar, rather it is like the "viron/virus"; it is an inter-rhetorical obligate of *significance* whose purpose (desire) is to replicate and perpetuate the process of signification itself.<sup>8</sup>

"Poetics" must be understood as "poiesis," as the making or "formation of..." of something by metre, by measure, by rhythm – a manner of becoming. Poetics and style are both expressions of the movement of language that structure the space of writing; they suggest modes of becoming and declaim ways of being in the world. Both Roussel and Pessoa enact a poetic that forecloses assimilation by generating an anti-rhythm that crosses the dominant "metre" of writing. The anti-rhythm induces a slanted movement of accent and pattern that opens an excrescent syntactical territory of immanent translation and overdetermination

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<sup>8</sup> The effect of this viral poetic's desire affects the aesthetic level of textuality.

where neither “minor” poetics nor “major” syntax achieves an exclusive surfacing. Their styles diverge in method but converge in obscurity. Roussel’s poetic converges toward obscurity through the remote: words and language acquire distant meanings under pressure of the *procédé*; language passages obscurity in the (supra)ordinary by inflecting a burrowing erasure of fixed semiotics. Pessoa’s poetic becomes obscure by escalating the tenebrous and entangled: the proliferation of voices saturates syntactical operations and adumbrates language through heterogenous accumulation.

### **Viral Poetics...**

*Language is a virus from outer space.*  
William S. Burroughs, “Electronic Revolution”

Obscurity is immanent to a viral poetic. As was stated earlier, the meanings generated by a viral poetic are the by-product of a desire to reproduce the conditions of a syntactical becoming. The restrictions of this *a priori* syntactical scheme contort the syntagmatic flow of language – a series of differential positions of points of view upon a *dynamism* that can be specified – to obtain its grammatical configuration necessary to support its rhetorical utterance. Complying with the desire for impersonal *signifiance*, yet only able to utilize the accessible and existing mechanisms of grammatical assembly, the viral poetic forces language to signify as it does through the principle of arbitrariness, but in the service of a foreign rule that radicalizes this principle and impels it to stutter. Language is made to speak itself as a foreign tongue; its own terms are made to say things differently, to say different things, to differently *thing* sayings.

A poetics of obscurity then has as its non-resembling ground<sup>9</sup> a viral-like condition of becoming. The movement towards obscurity in the course of sign formation under the viral

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<sup>9</sup> (see † in footnote <sup>7</sup>)

poetic weakens the apparatuses that capture and institutionalize the multitudinous affects and processes of becoming by promising nothing, nothing because what it donates can never be anything but a violence, a paradoxical instance in which the obscure is immediately what it is not. This does not make the obscure “clear;” that would be simply a relation of exclusion, a mode of relationship requiring the absence of its opposite or contrary. Obscurity establishes multiple positivities that consist of immediate but unequal relations between variegated presences of other obscurities. It bears resemblance to what Deleuze, following Levi-Strauss, calls the *floating signifier*, “...the servitude of all finite thought, but also the promise of all art, poetry, all mythic and aesthetic invention,” and *the floated signified*, “what is given by the signifier without being thereby known” (Deleuze 1990, 49). A “thing-a-ma-jig.”

However, obscurity mediates more than two series. It effectively remainderers multiple power relations that configure “monumental” formulae of thought by radically ramifying interpretive strategies and narrative proclivities through an enforced “burrowing” logic where connexions are experimental and contingent, provisional rather than causal. The measure of obscurity is not against clarity, but against itself as it circulates and passages the singularities of multiple series (thing-a-ma-jigs); it remains out of joint with itself; it is violence. Promising nothing but “otherwise” (which is not a symmetry), obscurity provokes vital possibility over certain capture to create what Brian Massumi claims are “the conditions for a contagion of becoming-other” (1992, 101).

The “viral poetics” that engine obscurity consist of incomplete passages that infect surfeit bodies and semantic codes (of thought, identity, behaviour) with a becomings-other, a perpetual becoming (-viral) “that slides into a cascade of differentiations, with bodies moving in all directions of capture and escape that only increase the chance of collision and mutation” (ibid., 102). Like a virus, these becomings are not self-perpetuating; they require

a host in order to replicate, or rather to repeat. In the process they transform the host, themselves, and the codes that order becoming. Perhaps one could liken it to a type of syntactic-semantic “hijacking”: a borrowing/burrowing of discursive affect where the viral poetic puts the emblems of power to work against or alongside its conventional performance(s).<sup>10</sup>

A viral poetic makes meaning service alternative or eccentric means. This “servicing otherwise” implicates a dynamic in obscurity that divides its tendency into a *poetics* that disassembles and an *aesthetic* that reassembles. The *poetic* becoming of obscurity “invites” attention by weaving so many braids of conceptual tinsel into a “perplex” of experimental thought. The syntax of erasure and accumulation inhibit the application of ready-made concepts, breaking apart habits of inevitability and purpose. However, the multiple voices that manifest in disassemblage are “viral” singularities with residual intensities (the power to affect and to be affected) that mobilize *which* voices are heard and *what* meanings are produced. If the poetics of obscurity entails processes of disassembly, its remaindering of singularities tacitly implies the problematic of reassembly and nominates an affectively invested *aesthetic of obscurity* to renovate the conditions of becoming, a becoming vitally laced with the strategic and tactical effects of a network that expresses the demands of competing and interleaving purposes.

In this examination of Roussel’s writing I have endeavoured to articulate a poetic that functions by hijacking the semiotic potential of a signifying system coordinated by the principle of arbitrariness. The by-product of this poetic is instantiation of an aesthetic corollary whose semantic consequence is obscurity. However, I have only sketched the signifying-conceptual possibilities of a mode of thinking that seeks its own limits and strives

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<sup>10</sup> Virally, metonymy operates by borrowing the meaning(s) of its neighbour, however obtained - burrowed, or sidled - and forcing it to perform, "to mean," differently.

to put thought in variation and modulation, straining the whole of thinking toward an outside. What remains is to ascertain the application and experience of this aesthetic of obscurity.

I have proposed the metonymic and the viral as tropological agents exhibiting powers of semantic transduction that express the processual effort of an immanent obscurity that inheres within the signifying potential of language. The obscurity to which these powers defer is not “murkiness,” or what Allon White, in his work *Uses of Obscurity*, terms the “dark filter” notion that depicts obscurity as “a contingent and avoidable surface effect in a text which prevents us reaching an already constituted, pure message underneath” (White, 18). The poetic/aesthetic of obscurity outlined in this document never arrests meaning, never inhibits thought, but never guarantees meaning – fixed or otherwise. White’s writing is concerned with the early modernist literary transformation of the novel and the coeval transfiguration in the works of George Meredith, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad. He identifies the emergence in modernism of a “textual resistance” that positions obscurity as “*constitutive of the very being of the art work*”(ibid., 16; emphasis in original). Obscurity for White is a positive term in an “organizing metaphor” which aims for use “in a wide range of different ways, to produce new kinds of significance” (ibid., 17). Further,

[M]odes of obscurity are important signifying structures in literature and carry distinct and distinctive kinds of meaning which are not secondary to an anterior obscured content. Obscurity signifies in the very act of obscuring, and in a rich variety of ways which are linked to its contexts of appearance (narrative, cultural, psychological). (ibid., 18)

White’s obscurity is useful, but its ontological sedimentation as “constitutive of the work of art” and its deployment as a literary device does not take it far enough into the undecidability of being/meaning, nor does it enable the radical possibility of obscurity to signify *beyond* itself. For White, obscurity remains a function of denotation: Without a “guilt or nostalgia for the loss of denotation, then obscurity itself becomes an inadequate

term” (ibid., 20). Obscurity so defined remains bound to an authorial index of identifiable signification and meaning, even if that signification or meaning is “obscure.” As a matter of denotation, obscurity that constitutes the being of a work precludes it from rendering this very being possible. To take White’s example of *Finnegan’s Wake*, which he claims conceals no pretension to meaning whatsoever, we can see that the disappearance of any sentiment for signification creates something other than a being of obscurity. The delight of infinite connotation does not, according to White, create, obscurity; therefore, obscurity cannot constitute the work. I would agree that the dispersal of denotative effects does not comprise an obscure work; I would, however, posit that the diffusion of denotative effects, which engenders the reticulation of connotative effects, produces the proliferation of an indeterminate ontology of the subject that expresses the force of obscurity itself.

Surrounding “things” (categories, classes, actions) with questions and connotations provokes a context in which open wholes circulate, cluster, and scatter in such a way as to spur non-hierarchical connexions, establish zones of indeterminacy, and offer alternative modes of consciousness.

As it has been my endeavour in this work to move towards an understanding of a poetic whose logic carries its syntactical becomings through modes of mundane expression into obscure forms, and by such, maps an affective territory of indistinct subjectivities, I would like to end with a speculative suggestion that if meaning is impelled by residual intensities and affective latchings, then it might imply that some forms of thought are in effect viral. An extreme example can be seen in the obsessive-compulsive whose thinking is literally contaminated by ego-dystonic thoughts, thoughts at variance with the aims of the ego. To the obsessive-compulsive, these thoughts do not simply manifest in the mind and take their leave; whether they derive from one’s own string of thought or plucked from a fleeting comment, suggestion, reading, they invade the belief system (the ego) and infect it with a profound but irrational doubt. This in turn (and I use this phrase to evoke the idea of

“troping”) provokes a response in which the affected person seeks to attain certainty and reduce anxiety through an elaborate, though irrational, system of cognitive and behavioral performances. However, this inferential chain of thinking, in which each concatenation draws upon the already active powers of its neighbour-come-host, imparts its own affectivity that ramifies doubt. Doubt is carried along a network of multiple entries and exits, none of which is required or rational; it is what Deleuze and Guattari term a “rhizome”: “The rhizome connects any point to any other point, its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature. It brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even non-sign states” (1987, 21).

Deleuze and Guattari theorize the rhizome through the concept of schizophrenia. The obsessive-compulsive, unlike the schizophrenic, recognizes the irrationality of her thoughts and behaviour, but is nonetheless carried along, rhizomatically, to distant and obscure – irrational – shores of ideas, beliefs and connexion. Both the schizophrenic and the obsessive-compulsive demonstrate a rhizomic nature of thought; however, where the schizophrenic “delights” in the fundamental “lubriety” of cognition, the obsessive-compulsive eccentrically and affectively networks mentation. The latter is an extreme notion of viral poetics at work in the becoming of thought, but it serves to illustrate how thoughts, detrimentally in some cases, possess the capacity to wrest cognitive agency from the “ordinary” thinking subject and propel it elsewhere. It is interesting to speculate on how applicable this concept of a viral becoming is to the entire phenomenon of consciousness. If all thought proceeds by way of linkage and response to the coupling of affects, one could depathologize viral becoming by placing it in contexts that exploit the contaminative connexion to carry thought into an agnostic zone – the zone of art – where thinking translates viral becoming into “becoming-viral”. Becoming creative, becoming speculative, becoming both, and becoming neither, a thinking *thinking* other than itself to think its own excrement.

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