

Into the Primeval Slime: Body and Self in Redon's Evolutionary Universe

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Article abstract

Publié en 1883, l'album de lithographies *Les Origines* de Redon offre une vision fantastique et souvent cauchemardesque des origines de l'univers. Alors que cet album a souvent été étudié dans son rapport avec l'intérêt de Redon pour la science et l'évolution, cet article défend l'idée que *Les Origines* marquent un tournant historique crucial dans notre conception du corps et du moi et représentent de ce fait l'une des expressions les plus radicales et modernes de son époque. Tout au long de cet album, Redon attire notre attention sur le statut rétrogradé du corps sous la loi évolutionnaire : toujours entre deux catégories, toujours incomplet, le corps évolutionnaire est un corps désirant qui veut être, mais n'est jamais complètement.

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Résumé

Publié en 1883, l'album de lithographies *Les Origines* de Redon offre une vision fantastique et souvent cauchemardesque des origines de l'univers. Alors que cet album a souvent été étudié dans son rapport avec l'intérêt de Redon pour la science et l'évolution, cet article défend l'idée que *Les Origines* marquent un tournant historique crucial dans notre conception du corps et du moi et représentent de ce fait l'une des expressions les plus radicales et modernes de son époque. Tout au long de cet album, Redon attire notre attention sur le statut rétrogradé du corps sous la loi évolutionnaire : toujours entre deux catégories, toujours incomplet, le corps évolutionnaire est un corps désirent qui veut être, mais n'est jamais complètement.

The preoccupation with Origins and Becoming is indeed the most powerful motor force for human thought....I do not believe there could be found a time when the search for the unknown has more impassioned the human spirit. This reveals itself in all forms, in science, in art, in religion, in politics; this passion even goes on, in certain corners of our society, until it causes suffering, until mental exacerbation leads to madness.

Pierre Robbe, responding to an exhibition of works by Odilon Redon, 1894¹

Odilon Redon's 1883 album of lithographs, *Les Origines*, pictures a fantastic universe teeming with impossible creatures (figs. 1a, 1b). While certain of these creatures hail from identifiable sources—the satyr, the Centaur, and the Pegasus reference classical literature—others, like the melancholic eye/flower, or the disembodied heads floating aimlessly through space, seem to reference nothing but the artist's mysterious inner visions, leaving his critics to wonder about the meaning of these grotesque forms. Yet despite its seemingly inscrutable imagery, the album's iconographic program is quite explicit. *Les Origines* stands as one of the few works of art from the late nineteenth century to deal explicitly with the subject of evolution, with a title that boldly references Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Just what it meant for an artist to take up the theme of evolution in 1883, when "the preoccupation with Origins and Becoming" had so gripped a generation, and what Redon saw as the consequences of this new theory, is the subject of this essay.

The universe conjured up in *Les Origines* is chaotic and unruly, and the evolutionary story it tells seems to be a very anxious one. Because the story it tells is also confusing—this is, after all, science through the eyes of a Symbolist—much of the scholarship on the album has focused on making sense of the plates. Sven Sandström was the first to organize Redon's imagery, perhaps against its will, into a coherent evolutionary story. Selecting several plates from *Les Origines* and several more from another album of lithographs—*Dans le Rêve* of 1879—Sand-

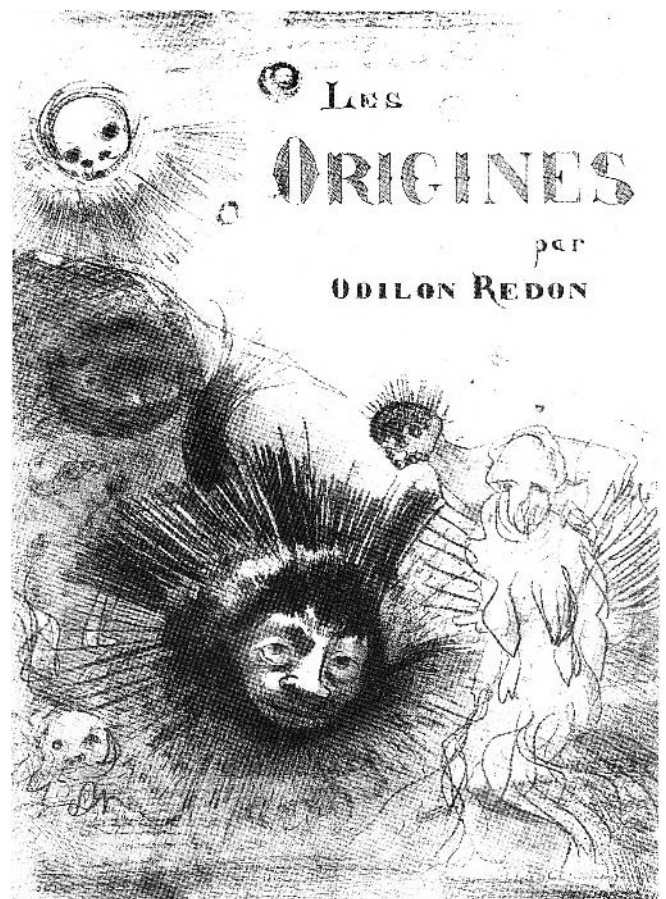


Figure 1a. Odilon Redon, cover-illustration for *Les Origines*, 1883. Lithograph in black on dark gray wove paper, 30.7 x 22.5 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, The Stickney Collection, 1920.1577 (Photograph © The Art Institute of Chicago).

ström assembled a sequence that seems to illustrate the consecutive phases of the history of the universe.² The first stage, he suggests, is represented in a plate from *Dans le Rêve* titled *Blossoming*³, which depicts the profile head of early man as a kind of germ or egg enclosed by a spherical structure. *Germination*⁴, from the same album, pictures the next step. Here, the

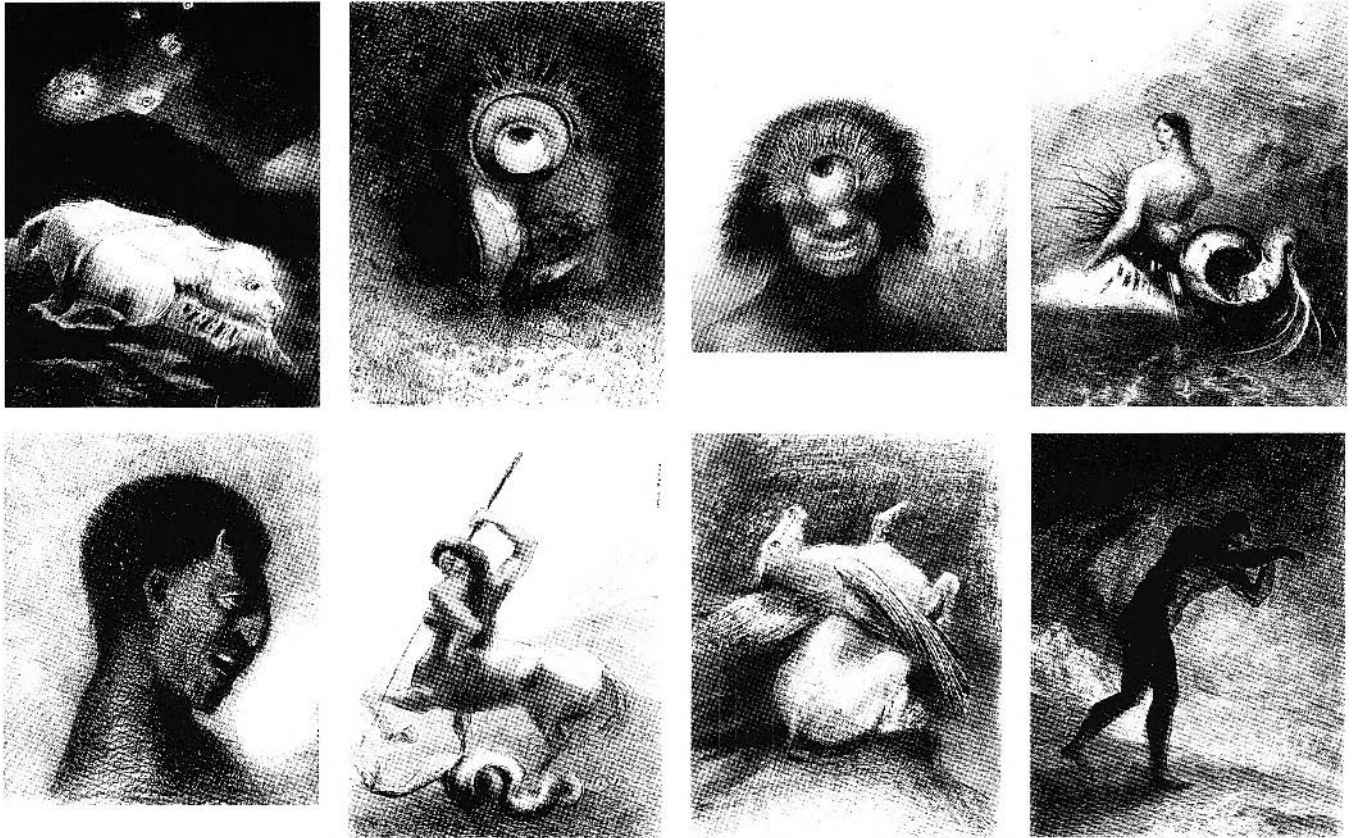


Figure 1b. Odilon Redon. *Les Origines*, album with 8 plates, 1883. Lithograph. The Art Institute of Chicago, The Stickney Collection (Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago). From left to right, top row: plate 1, *When Life Was Awakening in the Depths of Obscure Matter*; plate 2, *There was Perhaps a First Vision Attempted in the Flower*; plate 3, *The Misshapen Polyp Floated on the Shores, a Sort of Smiling and Hideous Cyclops*; plate 4, *Siren Coming out of the Waves, Dressed in Flames*; bottom row: plate 5, *The Satyr with the Cynical Smile*; plate 6, *There Were Struggles and Vain Victories*; plate 7, *The Impotent Wing Did Not Lift the Animal Into That Black Space*; plate 8, *And Man Appeared, Questioning the Earth From Which He Emerged and Which Attracted Him, He Made His Way Toward Somber Brightness*.

head is released from the globe/germ, becoming the endpoint of a chain of disembodied heads shown in varying degrees of development as they drift from distant background to foreground space. These floating heads appear again in *When Life Was Awakening in the Depths of Obscure Matter* (from *Les Origines*); trailing off into the distance, they intimate the origins of the universe in outer space (fig. 1b, plate 1). “When the seed from space arrives on earth,” Sandström writes, “life starts in early states to develop from matter.” This last idea, he suggests, is represented by a canine creature whose fibrous underbelly suggests his emergence from primordial ooze. Sandström proceeds in this manner, taking us step by step through Redon’s evolutionary schema, matching up various plates to their corresponding phases in the trajectory.

More recent scholarship has focused on elaborating the various contexts in which Redon’s Darwinian imagery was produced. Barbara Larson, for example, offers a more nuanced un-

derstanding of the scientific climate of the time and identifies the various strands of evolutionism running through Redon’s work.⁵ Looking at themes of regression and degeneration in the *noirs*—the lithographs and charcoals Redon produced during the 1870s and 1880s—she connects them not only to the diffusion of Darwinism during those decades, but also to the political climate in France. Redon’s monstrous creatures, Larson argues, tapped into national fears of regression following the loss of the Franco-Prussian war. Redon’s Darwinian imagery has also been analyzed in the catalogue to the 1994 exhibition *Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams*.⁶ Douglas Druick and Peter Zegers decode Redon’s strange new iconography through the lens of French politics, scientific currents, Spiritualism, the artist’s biography, and Symbolist aesthetics. These are extremely rich analyses that reveal not just the range of sources the artist drew upon, but the multiple meanings his imagery produced for contemporary audiences.

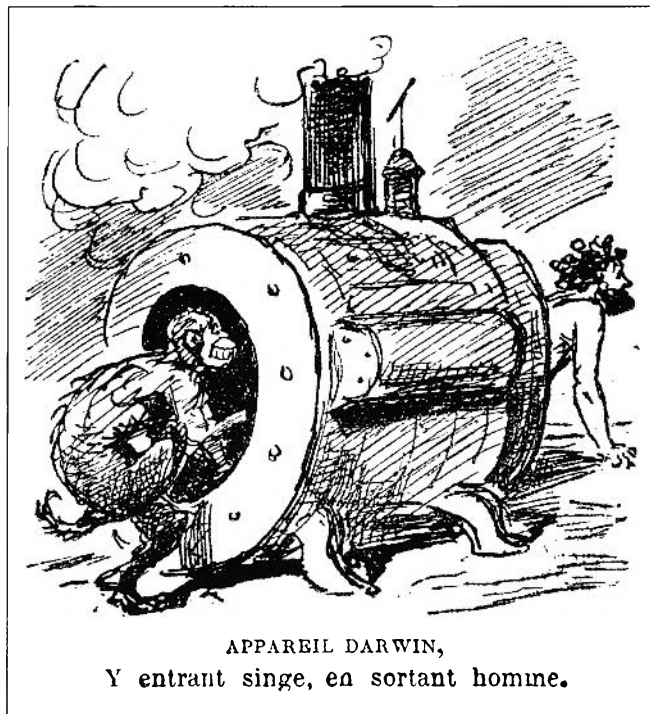


Figure 2. "Appareil Darwin. Y entrent singe, en sortant homme," *Le Charivari*, 19 May 1878.

What is left out of these discussions, however, is the question of the human body. Redon's evolutionism, I will argue, is essentially *about* the body—about the implications of Darwinian thought for the possibility, or impossibility, of stable human form. We should also consider these questions: What did "origins" mean to viewers during Redon's time? What kinds of fantasies and anxieties were bound up in the question of origins in 1883? Redon's album is not just a whimsical diagram of the origins of the universe; rather, it is a devastating essay on the human body, its abject beginnings, and its demoted status under evolutionary law.

Origins in Paris

The question of human origins was a major preoccupation in late nineteenth-century Paris, where Redon was living and working. *The Origin of Species* had been translated into French in 1862 and *The Descent of Man* a decade later. Evolutionism was debated in the halls of science and outside them as well: there were articles on the theory of mutability in popular science journals; there were public lectures considering the ramifications of the theory; and there were anthropology exhibitions where viewers could consider Darwinian principles first-hand. One such display at the 1878 World's Fair, organized by the Société

d'Anthropologie, compared the anatomies of apes and humans and prompted cartoons like the one from *Charivari* titled "The Darwin Machine: you enter as an ape, you emerge as a man" (fig. 2). These were also the decades when the fossilized remains of man's prehistoric ancestors were unearthed and displayed for the first time. Neanderthal skulls and weapons could be seen at the newly established Musée des Antiquités Nationales, and at the World's Fair in 1878, the anthropology pavilion presented a dizzying array of over 1400 ancient bone fragments. A new genre of popular science books emerged in which the daily life of prehistoric man was imagined in often amusing detail.⁷

The 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris featured a simulacrum of a prehistoric dwelling as part of its exhibition called "L'Histoire d'Habitation Humaine." An illustration published in 1889 shows fair-goers with top hats strolling through this simulacrum, chatting with an actor dressed as a Stone-Age man (fig. 3). While the display demonstrates the late nineteenth-century fascination with human origins, it also speaks to the relationship between origins, loss, and desire. This recreation of a prehistoric space that ordinary Parisians could enter and experience as "real" suggests an almost nervous desire to deny the "irrecoverability" of prehistoric times—a loss that was repeatedly acknowledged by paleontologists struggling to piece together a picture of ancient existence.

But if this preoccupation with human origins was rooted in nostalgia for what has been lost, it was also driven by a marked anxiety. As the "Darwin Machine" cartoon suggests, the major threat of Darwin's theory for contemporary audiences was not just its challenge to long-held definitions of species rehearsed in the halls of science. The cartoon, though comical, is riddled with anxiety about something much more tangible to the average Parisian: the human body. The subject of "The Darwin Machine" is the body in the process of change, though this process is not actually shown. Rather, it is hidden from view, taking place inside the machine, suggesting the "magical" (and thus preposterous) notion of the human form turning from one thing into another. We might say that the human body—its form, its boundaries, its very ontological status—was at the centre of the evolutionary debate. It was the *body* that bore the sign of man's less-than-noble origins that Darwin had asserted in *The Descent of Man*; and so the body came under increasing scrutiny during these first decades of evolutionary debate, emerging as a site of tremendous anxiety in the natural sciences, in public discourse, and in visual culture.

A case in point was the Paris Salon of 1880. The scandal that year was a painting by Fernand Cormon, his monumental *Cain Fleeing with his Family*⁸, in which biblical figures are recast as a tribe of prehistoric cavemen. Clad in animal pelts, toting Stone-Age weapons, the tribe trudges across the desert hauling its cargo of bloody carcasses. This was an entirely new interpre-

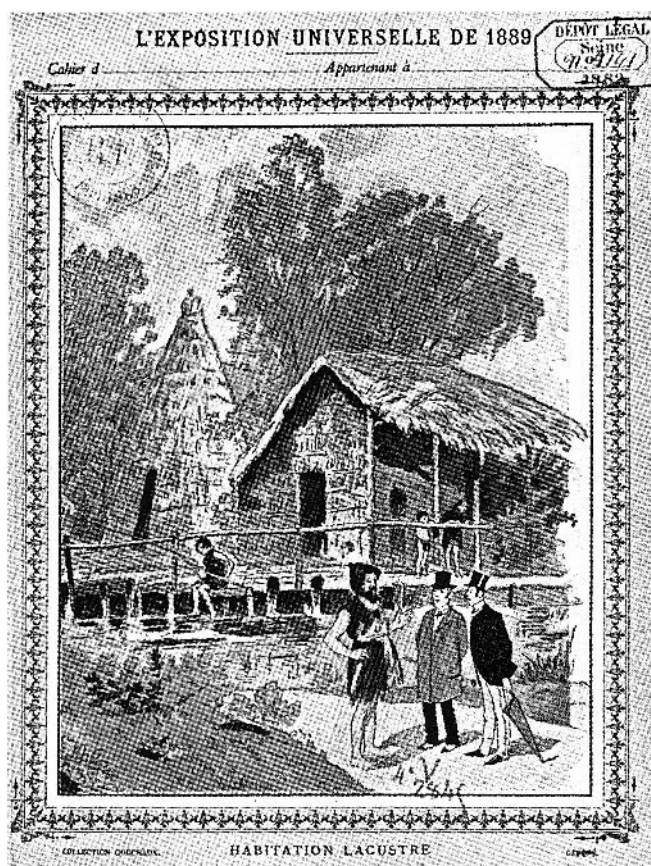


Figure 3. "Habitation Lacustre," from *Exposition Universelle de 1889* (recueil de couverture de cahiers scolaires, avec vues colorisées des curiosités de l'Exposition), Paris, 1889.

tation of a traditional biblical story, and Salon audiences were well-prepared to recognize the signs of its refashioning.⁹ They would have seen the ancient weapons carried by the tribe illustrated in popular science reviews, or in books like Ludovic Lépici's *Les Armes et les outils préhistoriques reconstitués*, published in 1872. Viewers crowded around the painting at the Salon: here, the unimaginable history of early man came to life in a thrilling panorama complete with emotional drama, gore, and scientifically accurate props.

But while contemporary audiences were dazzled by Cormon's vision, they were also deeply unsettled by it. No other work that year generated so much controversy, so much critical reflection, so much public scrutiny. For all its dazzle, the painting offered an unprecedented—and unwanted—history of the human body according to Darwin. Throughout Cormon's canvas, bodies are insistently earth-bound, more horizontal than vertical, with bent legs, stooping postures, and sagging breasts. In the Cain figure, especially, the retreating forehead and pro-

truding brow immediately announced a lower evolutionary status. The figure's arm dangles almost to his knee, while the exaggerated arc of the back, almost a perfect half-moon, declares itself against the blank landscape.

That the painting produced Darwinian meanings for contemporary viewers is clear from a cartoon published in 1880, in which Cormon's figures are re-issued as a band of simian creatures, with the caption "Famille d'orangs-outangs en déplacement."¹⁰ In their Salon reviews, outraged critics described the figures as "frightening, simian types," and "intermediaries between man and beast." Another accused Cormon of "bringing us too close to our origins."¹¹ It is this last remark that is so interesting: as much as contemporary audiences were fascinated by origins—as much as viewers pined away for their early prehistoric selves—the recovery of the origin was more horrifying than the prospect of its loss.

Like Cormon, Redon was interested in new ideas about human origins, and in the relationship between evolutionism and the morphology of living organisms. Very much in tune with the scientific questions of the day, Redon attended lectures on osteology at the *École de Médecine* and went often to the *Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle*, where he studied the anthropology collections and comparative anatomy displays.¹² His notebook of 1880–81 contains a carefully rendered skull, labelled "Homo Sapien," in the manner of comparative anatomy illustrations that proliferated in the scientific literature of the time.¹³ His introduction to specifically Darwinian concepts was most likely the result of his friendship with Armand Clavaud, a botanist and director of the *Jardin des Plantes* in Bordeaux. As Sandström writes, "It was he who introduced [Redon] to the ideas of evolutionism, telling him of Darwin's theories when they were still new and still vehemently contested by the defenders of tradition."¹⁴ Douglas Druick adds that Redon's membership in the Parisian literary group "Le Cercle littéraire et artistique" would have further exposed him to Darwinian thought. Within this group, which gathered during the early 1860s to discuss the larger intellectual and social issues of the time, Darwin's ideas were recognized as "the only possible one[s] today."¹⁵

Redon's journals are full of evolutionary language and statements: "A bit of comparison at the museum gave me the idea of the relative context of all living things," he wrote.¹⁶ But his Darwinism is perhaps nowhere more evident than in his reaction to an exhibition at the *Jardin zoologique d'acclimation* in 1881, in which living *Tierra del Fuegians*, dressed in traditional costume, were presented in a simulacrum of their native habitat.¹⁷ Like the majority of the spectators, Redon took this primitive village to be an accurate picture of life in prehistoric times, and the *Tierra del Fuegian* bodies to be striking approximations of the physiognomy of our earliest ancestors. He wrote in 1882:

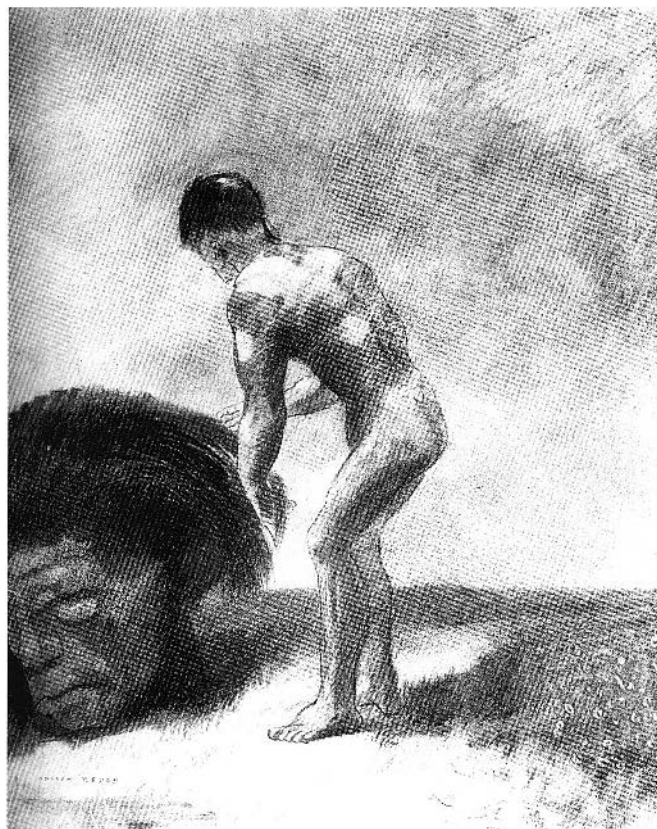


Figure 4. Odilon Redon, *Primitive Being*, ca. 1875. Various charcoals, with wiping, stumping, erasing, and subtractive brushwork, on cream wove paper altered to a golden tone, 44 x 36 cm. Marc de Montebello, New York (Photo: reproduced from Douglas Druick, *Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams 1840-1916*, exh. cat. The Art Institute of Chicago, 1996).

[T]hey provided me with a dream of primitive life, nostalgia for the pure and simple existence of our beginnings. I have never felt with as much force the gap our own nature spans between the crawling beast and our higher destiny....What a poem, this quite perfect organism, *emerging from the primeval slime* to [stand] beside us and stammer out the first stanzas of a universal hymn.¹⁸ (italics mine)

Given his fascination with these “prehistoric” anatomies, it comes as no surprise that Redon’s Darwinism often emerges as a testing out of the various signifiers of atavism. A drawing from around 1870, for example, titled *The Eternal Silence of These Infinite Spaces Frightens Me*¹⁹, presents what appears to be prehistoric man alone against a barren landscape, on all fours, gripped by existential anxiety. Massive shoulders reiterate his quadruped status. In *Primitive Being*, a charcoal drawing from 1875, early man is presented standing but hunched over, investigating a disembodied, gigantic head on the ground; he has these same exaggerated shoulders, and his rounded back stands

out sharply against the sky (fig. 4). As he leans down, his hand touching the creature’s hair but almost dangling, ape-like, as in the Cain figure, he takes on a horizontal posture we have come to associate with an earlier evolutionary state. In other works Redon experiments with the facial features of prehistoric man: the profile in *Blossoming*, for example, presents a low forehead and undeveloped jaw. J.-K. Huysmans famously described Redon’s imagery in his 1886 *À Rebours*, focusing in one passage on the atavistic forms seen in so many of the *noirs*:

Sometimes even the subjects seemed to be borrowed from prehistoric times; a monstrous flora spread over the rocks; everywhere were erratic blocks, glacial mud streams, and amongst them human beings whose ape-like type—the heavy jaws, the projecting arches of the brows, the receding forehead, the flattened top of the skull—recalled the ancestral head, the head of the earliest quaternary period, when man was still a fruit-eater and speechless, a contemporary of the mammoth, the woolly-haired rhinoceros, and the giant bear. These drawings passed all bounds, transgressing in a thousand ways the established laws of pictorial art, utterly fantastic and revolutionary.²⁰

For Redon, however, atavistic proportions were not enough to articulate the status of the body in a Darwinian universe. Redon’s evolutionary body reaches its most devastating expression in *Les Origines*, where we find not so much Cormon-esque renderings of distorted human anatomy, but rather an obsession with anatomy’s *absence*. In *Les Origines*, Redon pulls the body back into the primeval slime, taking it apart before our eyes. His interest, in other words, is not so much evolutionary *form*, but rather evolutionary *formlessness*.

Les Origines imagines a universe in which shapeless creatures float around in indeterminate space, struggling for definition. The album’s cover teems with bodies devoid of volume and materiality: the creature at lower right is described only by a few anxious marks, while a faintly indicated face in the lower left seems also on the verge of non-being, its circular outline dissolving into the space around it (fig. 1a). In the second plate, showing an eye/flower, the boundaries of a composite being bleed at several points into the darkness (fig. 5). A line beginning at the organism’s bottom left disappears into a sea of cilia, while its base dissolves into a mass of tiny specks. The lashes/cilia framing the head are directed outward, as if to suggest a being that is about to come apart, this fate perhaps intimated by the formless matter making up the peripheries of the image.

Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois have analyzed formlessness as a prevailing characteristic of twentieth-century art.²¹ Invoking Bataille’s definition of the *informe* as a tendency to “bring things down in the world,” they identify an impulse in modern art beginning with the Surrealists toward baseness and abjection,

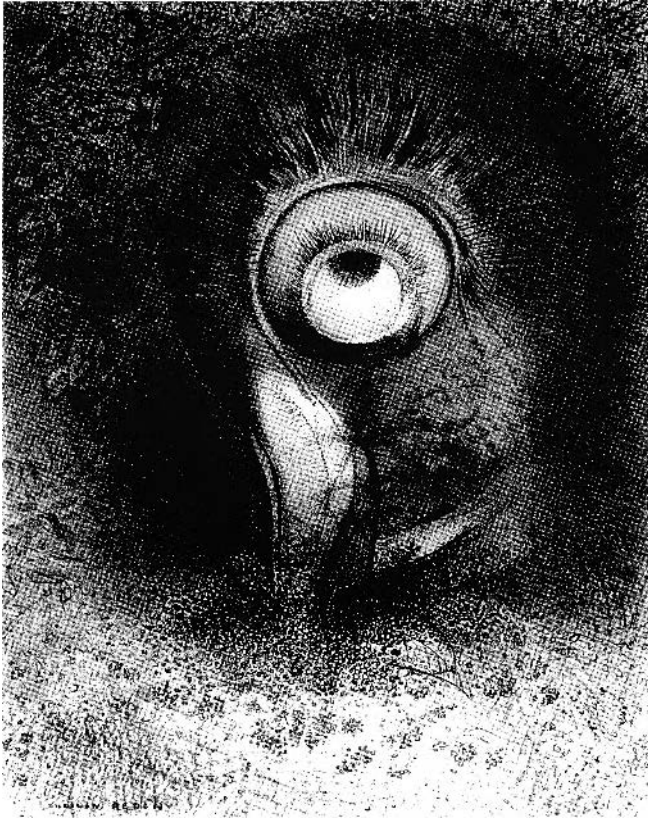


Figure 5 (detail of Figure 1b). Odilon Redon. *There Was Perhaps a First Vision Attempted in the Flower*, plate 2 from *Les Origines*, 1883. Lithograph in black on light gray chine laid down on white wove paper, 22.5 x 17.7 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, The Stickney Collection, 1920.1579 (Photograph © The Art Institute of Chicago).

revealing the strategies (such as base materialism and horizontality) through which artists knock form and meaning off their pedestals, allowing for a return of what has been repressed. Redon's imagery fulfills many of the criteria for their strict definition of the *informe*. Yet I don't want to nominate Redon as a precursor to the kind of formlessness Krauss and Bois describe. In their definition, the formless is a closed system operating largely outside the bounds of history, and there is little explanation as to why its onset should have occurred with the Surrealists. In Redon's practice, by contrast, the tendency toward the formless is grounded in a specific historical moment—a moment when “form” and “formless” emerged as key concepts in scientific discourse, taking on unprecedented value and meaning.

Emblems of the *Informe*

In the science literature of the late nineteenth century, the world at its origins was imagined as a place of chaos and indetermi-

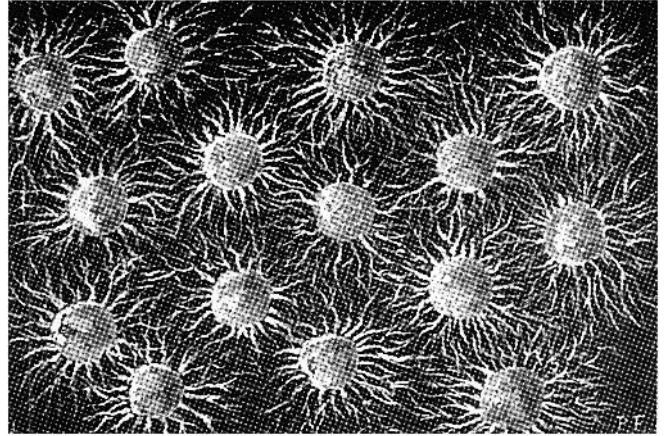


Figure 6. “Les Premiers Organismes,” from C. Flammarion, *Le Monde avant la création de l'homme*, Paris, 1886.

nacy, of murky swamplands and amorphous geological masses. The earliest life forms were invertebrates floating around in the prehistoric mire: mollusks, hydra, crustacea, along with the microscopic beings making up the protoplasmic ooze. Descriptions and illustrations of these lowest life forms filled the pages of books on the prehistoric world and its inhabitants, such as Camille Flammarion's extremely popular *Le Monde avant la création de l'homme* (1886). Describing a type of protoplasm he writes, “[The monère] is an organism without organs: no head, no limbs, no stomach, no heart, no nervous or muscular system. Matter without structure, simple, homogeneous, this living grain was just as much plant as animal...it is the elementary form par excellence.”²² An illustration pictures them, “Les Premiers Organismes,” as globules surrounded by web-like matter, floating in an undefined space (fig. 6).

Flammarion's description is typical in its emphasis on structural lack. These creatures were not merely simpler in composition; they were *without form*. Edmond Perrier, the well-known Professor at the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, wrote in his book *Le Transformisme* that “the first living beings would not have had any form, nor dimensions, nor limits.”²³ They lived undifferentiated in a primitive gel, he argued, and eventually separated from each other, their structures becoming gradually more complex. Perrier's accompanying drawing of protistes, which he labels “intermédiaires entre les animaux et les végétaux,” seems a diagram of structural absence.

With the notion that the universe moved from a structureless, unorganized state to one more fully defined, the idea of “form” took on exceptionally positive value in the evolutionary discourse. Evolution could be thought of as the gradual acquisition of form; the degree to which an organism had attained form determined its place on the evolutionary scale. This is the



Figure 7. "L'Ascension de la vie," from C. Flammarion, *Le Monde avant la création de l'homme*, Paris, 1886.

defining principle behind Edmond de Pressensé's popular science book *Les Origines*. Published in 1883—the same year that Redon produced his album—Pressensé's tome is a celebration of form set against a disdain for its enemy, the formless. At "the origin of things," he writes, living organisms were nothing but an "indistinct, confused mass"—or what he calls "base matter." Life at this stage should be defined more as "the possibility of being rather than the reality." In the primordial state "nothing changes, because nothing really lives, because this formless existence is reduced to a state of non-being."²⁴ It is the introduction of form to the primordial organism that gives it definition, he argues, that lifts it up from its debased existence so that the organism may correct itself and become something: "Everything changes when unto this abstract, dead quantity, appears a qual-

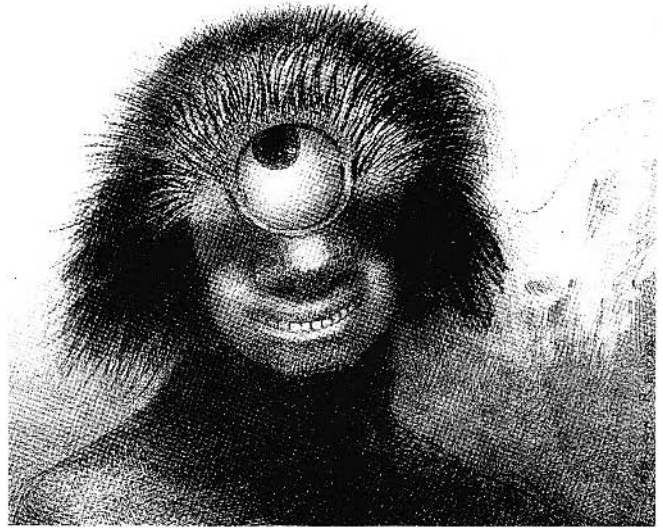


Figure 8 (detail of Figure 1b). Odilon Redon, *The Misshapen Polyp Floated on the Shores, a Sort of Smiling and Hideous Cyclops*, plate 3 from *Les Origines*, 1883. Lithograph in black on light gray chine, affixed to white wove paper, 21.3 x 20.0 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, The Stickney Collection, 1920.1580 (Photograph © The Art Institute of Chicago).

ity—that is to say form, which differentiates it, harmonizes it, molds it according to a goal and an ideal."²⁵

While Darwin suggested that the human body was merely a more complex version of our basest, most formless ancestors, opponents of evolution insisted that man was fully developed when he entered the prehistoric scene. Sure, there were hierarchies of elementary to complex organisms, but the theory of the fixity of species ensured that they were in no way connected to each other; there could be no "intermediaries." This was still very much the established view during the 1880s, and it is exemplified here in another illustration from Flammarion's *Le monde avant la création de l'homme* (fig. 7). The image shows a Great Chain of Being, with species arranged in a hierarchy from simplest to most complex. Formless, sea-dwelling creatures can be seen in the bottom register, while Adam and Eve stand on the horizon, their arrival heralded by that of the rising sun. Man here is safely set apart from other species: while humans and the lowest life forms exist in the same universe, there is no suggestion that one emerged out of the other in a series of mutations. On the contrary, the human body at its origins is whole, complete, its boundaries intact.

The status enjoyed by the human body in such images is utterly disrupted in the evolutionary universe that Redon conjures up. *Les Origines* takes us back to the moment "when life was first

awakening,” when the lowest life forms were splashing around in the prehistoric ooze, a time well before the appearance of man. Protoplasmic organisms hover in the background of *When Life Was Awakening* (fig. 1b, plate 1) and swarm into the foreground of the album’s cover (fig. 1a). But there is something troublingly familiar about these primordial creatures: in plate 1, the creature whose body seems to dissolve into the earth has a vaguely human face; and in the centre of the album’s cover, a pair of melancholy human eyes peers out from a frame of cilia. By animating these emblems of the *informe* with unmistakably human features, Redon casts man into the middle of this “indistinct, confused mass” described by scientists, rather than above it.

The third plate, titled *The Misshapen Polyp Floated on the Shores*, shows another anthropomorphized being from a seemingly primordial world: there is something almost human, sympathetic, about this monster, who seems to be posing, from shoulders up and with a dumb smile, as if for a portrait bust (fig. 8). The creature’s primordial formlessness is suggested first of all through its grotesque features—a distorted face and a single eye—and then cleverly reiterated in the plate’s title: “Misshapen Polyp.” This phrase is often explained as a literary reference: “Polyp” is short for Polyphemus, the one-eyed monster in Homer’s *Odyssey*.²⁶ But “polyp” also refers to a single-celled organism that was the subject of much scientific investigation at the time, not just as one of the earliest forms of life, but also because it was strangely unclassifiable (fig. 9). Not quite plant, not quite animal, it was singled out by naturalists as an emblem of formlessness and indeterminacy.²⁷ Indeed, the long, highlighted lashes above the eye in Redon’s creature seem a deliberate reference to the tendrils of the polyp organism.

What do we make of this thematics of formlessness? Certainly there is a sense of irrecoverability, a sense of lost origins, evoked by these shapeless creatures, which is evoked further still by a consistently dark and murky visual field. Compare Redon’s dark universe, with its incoherent space, to illustrations from the science literature of the time. In those, we are allowed to see clearly back into remote times, mastering and organizing the chaotic prehistoric world. One engraving from F. Guerin’s *Dictionnaire pittoresque d’histoire naturelle* of 1834, for example, shows “extinct animals” arranged with grid-like legibility. The eye is allowed to penetrate the ocean’s surface, entering prehistoric space much like the visitor to the “Stone-Age dwelling” at the 1889 World’s Fair. In an illustration from Louis Figuier’s popular 1865 volume, *La Terre Avant le Déluge*, the muted light and decaying tree come closer to conjuring up the mystery and chaos of prehistoric life—and yet it is chaos presented with implausible order and clarity (fig. 10). Trees fall, but they fall along a perspective line, and the eye is allowed to travel along the meandering swamp to a reassuring vanishing point in the distance. In Redon’s imagery, by contrast, the viewer is unable to

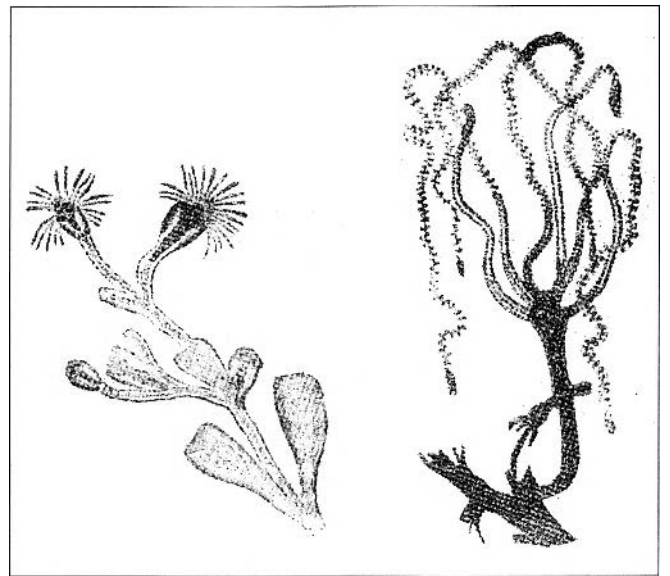


Figure 9. “Polypes,” from E. Perrier, *Le Transformisme*. Paris. 1888.

peer through primordial darkness. Redon’s primordial universe is unknowable, and perhaps this is why Gustave Kahn, in 1887, described Redon’s art as “the perpetual waiting for something to define itself, the sorrow produced by meaningless chance.”²⁸ Even the Polyp, with his hidden, truncated body and his own impaired vision, conjures up an eerie unknowability.

But if the album evokes on the one hand a kind of sorrowful nostalgia for something lost, it also articulates a nightmare of the body that new evolutionary models of human origins conjure up. Sexless, sightless, and biologically indeterminate, this Misshapen Polyp, like the other shapeless creatures floating through the pages of Redon’s album, are the emblems of man’s originary lack. By grafting human features onto the most shapeless creatures known to science, Redon has radically revised long-held models of human corporeality rooted in the idea of an original wholeness: man’s origins are as formless, as base, as the earliest primordial matter. Moreover, what Redon seems to articulate in this album is that this original, lacking state can never be overcome; as we will see, the album presents a network of bodies whose boundaries are never secure.

By Pressensé’s account of origins, the structureless, primordial organisms that Redon imagines should correct themselves through the introduction of form. It is form that differentiates the formless, Pressensé writes, that molds it “according to a goal and an ideal.” Redon’s imagery, however, pessimistically closes off this possibility: there is no goal, no ideal, no resolution for man’s original lacking state. Redon denies the prospect of form, presenting bodies that constantly dismantle their own progress.



Figure 10. "View of a Forest and Swamp," from L. Figuiet, *La Terre avant le Déluge*, Paris, 1865.

Plate 2, for example, shows a flower in an undefined space, its stem suggested by a curving black line holding up the head, the centre of which is marked by an eye (fig. 5). Cilia extend upwards and outwards. Looking more closely we see that the parts describing the flower also belong to another form, that of a faintly present human head. The flower's eye/head is also the centre of the face on which it is superimposed, and the plant's cilia serve simultaneously as human eyelashes. The illuminated passage suggesting the flower's leaf simultaneously describes the right lower half of the face. Our apprehension of the image is frustrated, as the sign is always distracted by its competing role in a different morphology.

This same oculus is carried over into the next plate where it is placed in yet another context. Here, in *Misshapen Polyp*, the head/cilia of the flower becomes the eye and hair of the cyclops (fig. 8). The same eye appears yet again in an 1878 charcoal drawing, *Eye-Balloon*, where it makes up the centre of a balloon hovering over an indeterminate space, the lashes doubling as lines suggesting its upward movement (fig. 11). The forms that describe the balloon also constitute the parts of an eye—not just the eyeball, but the entire organ. The strings connecting balloon to basket are also the tendons of an eye dislocated from its socket. And its references continue to multiply: the trace of the cyclops can be seen in the faint lines etched into the sky, hinting at the hair and thus the face to which this eye once belonged, or will belong. If a sign acquires a meaning in one image, it stands in for something else in the next. In Redon's work such displacements are endless, piling up so quickly that meaning is undermined even as it is being asserted.

Arbitrariness is evoked in *Les Origines* not just through metaphoric extension—one sign standing for several things—but also through the use of several signifiers evoking the same

referent. In plates 4 and 6 (fig. 1b), a human torso is completed variously by a serpent and a horse-body. Looking beyond the *Origines* album, there are dozens of images that seem also to arise from this Darwinian universe of free-floating signs and parts. The fuzz-ball body of *Smiling Spider* is host to a faint, grinning face that seems borrowed from the cilia-framed creature on the *Origines* cover, and has elements of *Misshapen Polyp* as well. In *Crying Spider* this face/body is exchanged for a human head resting on a plate.

What Redon has produced, in effect, is a semiotics of evolutionary lack—of structure and of sexuality. A head in one picture is completed in another with spider legs, and in another these spider legs are randomly exchanged for something else. In *Crying Spider* the human head seems to mourn its lost body, as it does in *Marsh Flower*, where it has been exchanged for a stalk. Much like Darwin's work unsettled long-held systems of classification, in fact deeming the term species "arbitrary," Redon utterly disrupts the idea of a stable universe and its promise of corporeal wholeness.

Indeed, throughout the *noirs*, Redon presents us with an endless catalogue of parts imaged vividly, but the whole body to which they belong is unavailable. This is especially striking in the cover of the *Origines* album (fig. 1a). What we see here is not so much a scene from prehistoric life, in the narrative sense, but rather evolutionary history compressed into a tight, undefined space. The composition implies a temporal progression beginning in the upper left corner and spilling into the foreground. Floating around in the deluge is the cast of evolutionary history: embryonic beings move towards us, creatures utterly strange and familiar, on the verge of disappearing. They are lined up and facing front, as if the viewer's gaze has interrupted their evolutionary flux. Our eye arrests on each object, but only because there is no whole to speak of: we must be content with parts.

The critic Jules Destrée's attempt to translate the *Origines* cover into words testifies to the kind of metonymic reading it demands. His description written in 1891 is carved up with semi-colons, always anxious to move onto the next image:

All around the title swirl the beginnings of beings, tadpoles with vibrating tails, the germs of organisms in formation; minute particles sketch themselves, who spin like tops across space; monsters with a human face and the body of a fish descend in a ray of light; anthropoid, flaccid forms reveal themselves;...the birth and hatching of forms, all an impatient and disordered life.²⁹

We reach the assumed endpoint of the evolutionary trajectory in the cover's lower right corner, only to discover that the embryonic beings never acquire solid form. Our eye meets with a creature whose flesh is comprised by the negative space of the paper. With suggestions of legs, torso and head, it is the

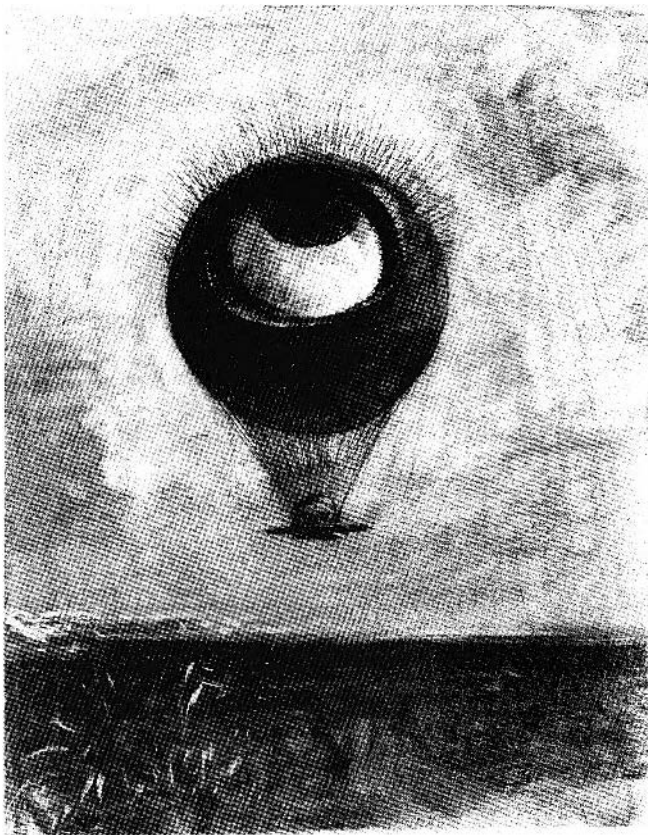


Figure 11. Odilon Redon, *Eye Balloon*, 1878. Various charcoals, with stumping, erasing, and incising, heightened with traces of white chalk, on yellow-cream wove paper altered to a pale golden tone, 42.2 x 33.3 cm. New York, Museum of Modern Art (Photograph © Museum of Modern Art / Art Resource, NY).

closest Redon comes to offering a whole body, but whether the figure is in the state of becoming or unraveling is uncertain.³⁰ Like the beings hovering around it, Redon's figure is neither human nor animal, not quite male or female. It stands at the edge of categories, in a kind of abject indeterminacy. In the album's cover and in this figure in particular, the evolutionary body is swiftly defined: always incomplete, and in a continuous state of re-formation, the evolutionary body is a desiring body that wants to be but that never fully *is*.

Body and Self

Several authors have discussed "boundedness" as one of the reigning conventions of the nude in Western art, noting the body's continual construction during the nineteenth century as a sealed vessel with impenetrable contours.³¹ While on the one hand impenetrable contours were simply the standard for

beauty in painting at the time, they could also carry specific meanings in scientific debate: they implicitly upheld the doctrine of the immutability of all organic form.³² Moreover, the image of a securely bounded body had important political resonances in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Tamar Garb has shown that the rise of the "physical culture" movement, which promoted the ideal of a healthy, virile body, was a direct response to anxieties about the modern French body following France's humiliating loss to the Prussians in 1870.³³ The defeat suffered by the French army was thought to reflect the actual physical decline of the population; notions of the modern body as weak, deformed, and as having devolved from the physical peak represented by the ancient Greeks, were rampant in medical and political discourse. Moreover, the barbarism of the Commune seemed to signal civilization's imminent regression to an atavistic state. As Garb explains, "Modern men were in such a sorry state, claimed hygienists, doctors, and politicians alike, that they threatened to produce damaged offspring whose progressive degeneracy spelled nothing less than the end of France."³⁴ The physical culture movement was meant to resist the spectre of a declining French race, as individual health and "wholeness" came to stand for a stable body politic.³⁵

In this context, Redon's presentation of the human body as a fluid, mutating entity certainly may be seen as a transgressive political statement.³⁶ What I want to consider here, however, are the consequences of continual evolutionary flux for conceptions of the self. In Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, the significance of corporeal boundaries is located in the realm of the psychological: the boundaries of the body define and demarcate one's sense of being in the world. If we understand the persistence of the ideal nude in official French art as the promise of an idealized, totalized self, we might see Redon's formless creatures as a troubling disruption of that promise. His imagery presents the body as limitless under evolutionary law, and the conundrum such fluidity presents for the self is plainly crystallized in Kristeva's question: "How can I be without border?"³⁷ Writing in 1883, a good century before Kristeva, Pressensé seemed also to be concerned with questions of the self in his own work on *Les Origines*; recall his description of matter before it has form as existing in a state of "non-being."

Redon's creatures present the subject not merely as indeterminate and in-between, but as *not-yet-formed*. They are potential selves, which conjures up a particular brand of abjection.³⁸ Kristeva imagines the originary, pre-conscious state as one where the abject should have no place due to the not-yet-subject's inability to register the signifiers of his or her own indeterminacy, or "otherness." Yet this moment triggers the abject in spite of itself. She writes of a state when "consciousness has not assumed its rights and transformed into signifiers those fluid demarcations of yet unstable territories where an 'I' that

is taking shape is ceaselessly straying. We are no longer within the sphere of the unconscious but at the limit of primal repression that, nevertheless, has discovered an intrinsically corporeal and already signifying brand, symptom, and sign: repugnance, disgust, abjection. There is an effervescence of object and sign—not of desire but of intolerable significance.”³⁹

Redon seems to have represented this Kristevan moment prior to consciousness, before the acquisition of language—a moment when things cannot possibly signify, yet nonetheless assume an “intolerable significance.” Meaning is produced, but only at the most abject level—that of the purely corporeal. Redon conjures up a state of primordial horror rather than ignorance and bliss; his potential selves, with their big, melancholy eyes, seem to know their incomplete status. In a scathing review of Redon’s 1894 retrospective, the critic Thiébaud-Sisson calls the exhibition a “spectacle that will be painful to all others,” singling out for special attack “those polyps in which the face is a caricature of ourselves.”⁴⁰ For this critic, Redon’s polyp/cyclops is not just a mythological monster, but a horrifying mirror image.

Les Origines, Redon’s story of the origins of the universe, is not a diagram of actual evolutionary processes but rather an anxious statement about the status of the human body according to new Darwinian paradigms, making the album one of the most radical and modern expressions of its time. At a moment when the French nation’s self-image was particularly pinned to the image of the body, Redon’s attack on corporeal integrity was undeniably loaded on a political-historical level. At the level of the subject, however, the album is perhaps even more radical, for it articulates a major historical shift in our conception of body and self.

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Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

Notes

¹ Cited in Stephen Eisenman, *The Temptation of Saint Redon: Biography, Ideology and Style in the Noirs of Odilon Redon* (Chicago, 1992), 172. The exhibition, a retrospective held at Durand-Ruel in 1894, focused on the artist’s lithographs and charcoals.

- ² See Sven Sandström, *Le Monde Imaginaire d’Odilon Redon* (Lund, Sweden, 1955). It is important to note that the lithographs comprising these albums were not conceived of as a series. They were first produced as charcoal drawings and were placed into the albums later.
- ³ See <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/179309>.
- ⁴ See <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/95599>.
- ⁵ Barbara Larson, *The Dark Side of Nature: Science, Society and the Fantastic in the Work of Odilon Redon* (University Park, PA, 2005). See also Barbara Larson, “La génération symboliste,” in *L’âme au corps: arts et sciences, 1793–1993* (Paris, 1993).
- ⁶ Douglas Druick et al., *Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams, 1840–1916* (New York, 1995). See also Jodi Hauptman et al., *Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon* (New York, 2005).
- ⁷ Examples are P.-J. Hamard, *L’Âge de la Pierre et l’Homme Primif* (Paris, 1883); and N. Joly, *L’Homme avant les métaux* (Paris, 1883).
- ⁸ See http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/index-of-works/resultat-collection.html?no_cache=1&zoom=1&tx_damzoom_pi1%5Bzoom%5D=0&tx_damzoom_pi1%5Bxm1Id%5D=000141&tx_damzoom_pi1%5Bback%5D=en%2Fcollections%2Findex-of-works%2Fresultat-collection.html%3Fno_cache%3D1%26sz%3D9.
- ⁹ See Martha Lucy, “Cormon’s *Cain* and the Problem of the Prehistoric Body,” *Oxford Art Journal* 25, 2 (2002): 107–26.
- ¹⁰ The cartoon was published in Nidrac’s *Le Salon Comique de 1880* (Paris, 1880).
- ¹¹ On the critical reaction to the painting, see Martha Lucy, “Cormon’s *Cain*”; see also Geneviève Lacambre, “Le *Cain* de Cormon,” in *Gloire de Victor Hugo* (Paris, 1985), 625–27.
- ¹² For an extensive discussion on Redon’s interest in science, see Larson, *The Dark Side of Nature*.
- ¹³ The drawing is Folio 42 from *The Art Institute of Chicago Sketchbook*. See Druick, *Odilon Redon*, 138, fig. 21.
- ¹⁴ Sven Sandström, “Odilon Redon: A Question of Symbols,” *Print Collector’s Newsletter* 6, 2 (May–June 1975): 31.
- ¹⁵ On Redon’s involvement in *Le Cercle*, see Druick, *Odilon Redon*, 35–36. The group’s interest in Darwin can be discerned from the writings in *Le Progrès*, a review started by the group. The assertion that Darwin’s ideas are “the only possible one[s] today” is from an article by Paul Laforge, cited in Druick, *Odilon Redon*, 389, n. 133. See Paul Laforge, “La Pingènese darwinienne,” *Le Progrès*, 10 Octobre 1868, 353–58.
- ¹⁶ Cited in Druick, *Odilon Redon*.
- ¹⁷ As Druick discusses, this was the seventh in a series of “ethnographic” exhibitions held at the Jardin d’acclimation in the Bois de Boulogne. The first was a presentation of Nubians in 1877. See Druick, *Odilon Redon*, 139.
- ¹⁸ Cited in Druick, *Odilon Redon*, 140.
- ¹⁹ See <http://odilonredon.eu/blog/odilonredon/?p=1391>.
- ²⁰ J.-K. Huysmans, *À Rebours* (1886; trans. New York, 1951, repr. New York, 1969), 60.

- ²¹ See Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York, 1997).
- ²² "C'est un organisme sans organes: ni tête, ni membres, ni estomac, ni coeur, ni système nerveux ou musculaire. Matière sans structure, simple, homogène, ce grain vivant est aussi bien plante qu'animal....Il est...la forme élémentaire par excellence." Camille Flammarion, *Le Monde avant la création de l'homme: origines de la terre, origines de la vie, origines de l'humanité* (Paris, 1886), 127.
- ²³ "Les premiers êtres vivants n'ont dû avoir ni forme, ni dimensions, ni limitées." E. Perrier, *Le Transformisme* (Paris 1888), 125. Perrier here is paraphrasing the German evolutionist Ernst Haeckel, whose writings were widely diffused throughout Europe. His book *Histoire de la création des êtres organisés d'après les lois naturelles* was translated into French in 1874, and his ideas often summarized French authors writing on the origins of life.
- ²⁴ "Là, rien ne change, parce que rien ne vit réellement, parce que cette existence sans form est réduite à l'état de non-être." E. de Pressensé, *Les Origines: le problème de la connaissance, le problème cosmologique* (Paris, 1883), 173.
- ²⁵ Pressensé, *Les Origines*, 175. Pressensé reasoned that if the universe at its origins existed in a formless state, then its beauty resided in the fact that natural laws propelled things to overcome this state; these laws were evidence of a grand design, an indication that nature operated with a goal.
- ²⁶ Stephen Eisenman has discussed the predominance of cyclops imagery in Redon's work. The monster can not be a literary reference, he argues, for in none of the cyclops imagery is there a reference to Homeric narrative. Instead, he suggests, the recurring cyclops reveals Redon's interest in local oral culture. See Eisenman, *The Temptation of Saint Redon*, 118.
- ²⁷ E. Perrier writes, "Quels arguments plus précieux pourrait-on recueillir en faveur de la mutabilité des formes spécifiques? Les polypes hydriques nous montrent déjà comment un organisme simple peut revêtir les formes les plus diverses, redescendre l'échelle de l'organisation ou la remonter; ils nous permettent, encore de nos jours, de suivre pas à pas cette merveilleuse métamorphose." Edmond Perrier, *Les Colonies animales*; quoted in Flammarion, *Le Monde avant la création*, 169.
- ²⁸ Gustave Kahn, "La Vie Artistique," *La Vie Moderne*, 9 April 1887.
- ²⁹ "Tout autour du titre tourbillonnent des commencement d'êtres, des têtards à la queue vibratile, des noyaux d'organisme en formation; s'ébauchent des corpuscles, qui gonflent comme des toupies à travers l'espace; des monstres à face humaine et à corps de poisson descendent dans un rayonnement, des formes antroïdes et flasques s'indiquent; turbule la gésine des devenants, la naissance et l'éclosion des formes, toute une vie impatiente et déréglée." Jules Destrée, *L'Oeuvre lithographique d'Odilon Redon* (Brussels, 1891), 26.
- ³⁰ This play with the appearance and disappearance of the body is also present in *Germination*, from the *Dans le Rêve* album. A long chain of faces in varying degrees of definition floats toward us, with a "fully formed" female profile at centre. But, as Eisenman notes, we could just as easily read the image in reverse, following the trail of heads into nothingness, as they disintegrate into tiny specks.
- ³¹ See, for example, Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (Routledge, 1992).
- ³² On the classical body as a guarantor of secure form in late nineteenth-century evolutionary debates, see Martha Lucy, "The Complexity of 'a simple Greek torso': Classicism in the Age of Evolution," in Andrew Graciano, ed., *Visualising the Unseen, Imagining the Unknown, Perfecting the Natural: Art and Science in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (Cambridge, 2008).
- ³³ Tamar Garb, *Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-Siècle France* (London, 1998).
- ³⁴ Garb, *Bodies of Modernity*, 56.
- ³⁵ On the enlisting of the ideal body into political ideologies, see also Fae Brauer and Anthea Callen, eds., *Art, Sex and Eugenics: Corpus Delecti* (Aldershot, UK, 2008), which examines the promotion of the genetically perfect body in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western thought and visual culture.
- ³⁶ That Redon would have intended to make a political statement certainly seems likely given the artist's involvement in the war and his opposition to it. See Druick, *Odilon Redon*, 78, for a discussion of allusions to the war in Redon's imagery; one group of works from 1871–72, the authors suggest, calls upon "the theme of pride and its fall."
- ³⁷ See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York, 1982), 4.
- ³⁸ On "potentiality" in Redon's work, see Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, trans. Mark Treharne (London, 2001).
- ³⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 11.
- ⁴⁰ Cited in Eisenman, *The Temptation of Saint Redon*, 141.