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book review of

*The Brush and the Pen Odilon Redon and Literature* by Dario  
Gamboni

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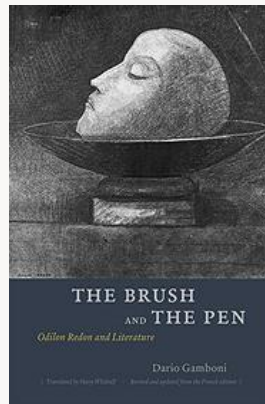
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Dario Gamboni, translated by Mary Whittall, *Brush and the Pen: Odilon Redon and Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 401 pp; 94 b/w illustrations; indexed \$65.00 (hardcover) ISBN: 9780226280554

Jorge Luis Borges once wrote of a mythical land in which the desire for “scientific exactitude” was so great that cartographers constructed ever larger maps until the scale grew to be one-to-one, documenting but obscuring the entirety of the empire itself. Borges’s short tale in many regards serves as a metaphor for the task and potential pitfalls of historians, who in their desire to secure incontrovertible truth, at times lose sight of the fundamental task of *histoire* as a narrative born inevitably of selection. In *The Brush and the Pen: Odilon Redon and Literature*, Dario Gamboni seeks out the borderlands of disciplines and artistic practices, masterfully surveying the complex relationship of Odilon Redon (1840–1916) to the literary sphere. In perusing these overlapping peripheries, Gamboni examines not only correspondences in Redon’s imagery to prose and poetry, but also Redon’s participation in, reliance upon, and ultimately rebellion against, the coalescing field of modern literary art criticism. Gamboni’s study, however, is not simply a report of findings among archival sources and period publications, but a subtle historiographic reflection on the various ways in which art critics, art historians, and the artist himself have utilized text to construct an historical portrait that has often subsequently dominated the interpretation of his work.

The subject at hand is particularly well suited for such an approach, as Redon privileged evocation over narrative in his art and for many years relished silence as an effective means of preserving the obscure origins of his imagery and its elite, esoteric meaning. As an artist who lived to the age of seventy-six, through a period that witnessed the ascendancy of the art critic, however, Redon also typifies the modern artist who experienced an increasing urgency to defend himself from what he considered to be misrepresentation in print. By the time of his death in 1916, he had taken up the pen himself to author an account of his art and life that would be published six years later as *À soi-même: notes sur la vie, l’art et les artistes* (*To Myself: Notes on Life, Art, and Artists*).

The newly revised and translated edition of Gamboni's study, first published in 1989 as *La plume et le pinceau: Odilon Redon et la littérature*, is not only a welcome resource for English-language scholars of Redon and the synesthetic overlaps between art and literature in the long nineteenth century, but also an intricate case study of the plight of the artist in what Harrison and Cynthia White have described as the "dealer-critic system," and a sensitive and insightful meditation on art historical methodologies.<sup>[1]</sup> Although Gamboni touches upon iconographic and psychoanalytic approaches to Redon's work, methods from which he largely distances himself, the mode that he most forcefully employs is social context, or, more precisely, rigorous case study as means of understanding better the operative forces of the moment (330). Gamboni's approach, like his subject, is markedly interdisciplinary, which he contends in the introduction enables an examination of the arts "as they should be studied: across fields" (10).

Gamboni's examination of the relationship of image and text in Redon's work is more complex than simply addressing the most obvious unions in the many print albums Redon dedicated to writers, including Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert, and Stéphane Mallarmé. Gamboni argues that it is as significant to consider the engagement of the painterly brush and the literary pen in Redon's career as it occurred in the emerging arena of professional art criticism. Gamboni consequently examines at length Redon's relationship, at first collaborative, then fraught, with prominent French art critics as well as Redon's own activities as a writer of criticism, prose, print captions, and memoir. Alienated from academic art after an adverse experience as a short-lived student of Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904) and hesitant to align himself decisively with seceding exhibition groups, Redon's position was one, Gamboni argues, "depend[ent] on criticism to an unusually exclusive degree" (6). Gamboni asserts this contention as one of the key premises of his study of the crossing of the pen and brush in Redon's career, arguing that it "affected the form and content of his work as well as its diffusion and interpretation" (6).

Gamboni notes that Redon was at first welcoming of, and grateful for, the attention paid to him by critics (94), most notably Émile Hennequin (1858–88) and Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907), who also actively cultivated the artist's growing reputation, composing "literary transpositions," authoring reviews, and conducting campaigns to solicit support from other critics. Hennequin died young, however, and Huysmans and Redon's collaboration ultimately did not end happily. By the 1880s, Huysmans renounced his former art critical vocation as the domain of "a man of letters who has been unable to produce a true oeuvre of his own" (81). Huysmans later mocked his former friend, dismissing him as having "a goldfish bowl in his eye" (209), and Redon in return quietly suggested that he viewed the relationship in retrospect as parasitical, remarking, "I believe I helped in his development, but I was left behind" (289).

The end of this relationship marked a cooling in Redon's attitude to the critical literary support he had formerly welcomed and a concomitant distancing of the relationship between image and caption, image and literary transposition for which his work had become known. Gamboni focuses upon these turns in Redon's attitudes as particularly significant, seeking not to reconcile them to a coherent account of singular artistic conviction, but rather examining them as indicative of the benefits and costs of synesthetic Symbolist alliances. Redon's working methods and artistic priorities were similarly characterized by contradiction. He valued the medium of printmaking for its ability, like printed text, to disseminate thought (108), yet he

strove to preserve the relative aura of the art object by issuing his print portfolios in limited editions. His move in 1890 from the monochromatic charcoal palette of his *noirs*, which he characterized as “my shadows” (22), to the vibrant colors of his subsequent paintings and pastels was accompanied by a move thematically away from the esoteric, oneiric qualities of his early work (215). One of the few criticisms that might be made of the new edition of Gamboni’s study is the lack of color illustrations in chronicling this key metamorphosis.

Among the key contextual issues that Gamboni examines in accounting for this abandonment of literary collaboration is the denigration of illustration as subservient to text. In 1900 Redon was described by the critic P. G. Knonody as, “the illustrator *par excellence* of decadent poetry and literature” (97). In a section on Redon’s lithographs in his 1891 catalogue, however, Jules Destrée (1863–1936) demurred that “illustration” was an inadequate description of the relationship of Redon’s images to literary texts. “The truth is that even if Redon appears to put himself at the service of some phrase or other from the work on which his pencil comments,” Destrée remarked, “he expresses neither its letter nor its spirit; and most of the time, his plates have only a remote and very artificial relationship with the text they point to” (227–28). Redon himself repeatedly declared his artistic autonomy from direct literary prototypes, and we might better understand his prints devoted to Poe, Flaubert, and Baudelaire in light of the generalized description of Maurice Denis (1870–1943) as, “the decoration of a book...without subservience to the text, without exact correspondence of the subject with writing; but rather like an embroidery of arabesques on the pages, an accompaniment of expressive lines” (243).

Redon spoke repeatedly of his belief in the suggestive. The sensitive contemporary commentator Destrée wrote of *The Eye, Like a Strange Balloon, Moves Toward INFINITY*, “[T]he power of suggestion of these figures is so strong that one stays in front of them for a long time, dreaming. Explanations form and dissolve like the shapes of clouds. Is it a symbol? Did not Redon wish to tell of the painful nullity of things in this sadly dark and empty earth, of man’s eternal, vain aspiration to get to the bottom of the problem of philosophies and peer into infinity, and of the atrophy, the degeneration, the waste of thought in this hopeless search? . . . Perhaps? Who knows? Why ask for a precise explanation?” (189). Similarly, Redon himself struggled with the inclusion of evocative captions, excluding them from two albums of lithographs that did not reference literary sources, *Dans le rêve (In Dreams, 1879)* and *Les origines (Origins, 1883)*, and commenting to a collector requesting titles, that he had throughout his career imparted them “with some anxiety, finding they determine too much, or not enough” (50). This is indicative of one of the most intellectually compelling aspects of Symbolism—the invitation to the viewer to become an active participant in the continual creation of meaning. Gamboni must contend, however, with a desire shared by critics and historians alike to fill up the indeterminate with articulation, recalling a line from Pascal that Redon once referenced himself, “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me” (172). Although Gamboni does not resolve this dilemma, his study is a subtle exercise in neither permitting the artist himself to close meaning nor to insist that a single art historical account, by a scholar or by the artist, can offer such certitudes.

Redon himself remarked, “All the errors of criticism committed with regard to me at the beginning of my career were due to [the critics’] failure to see that nothing should have been defined, or comprehended, or limited, or specified, because everything that is sincerely and innocently new—like beauty itself—carries its meaning within itself” (288–89). Redon had

briefly begun work in 1897 on assembling notes “on art and even on my life” (283) when André Mellerio (1862–1943) requested material to include in a catalogue of prints, but he still maintained in a letter to Mellerio that, “there is nothing more to it than a little black, oily liquid, transmitted with the help of the greasy body and the stone, for the sole purpose of producing in the viewer a kind of diffuse and compelling attraction into the obscure world of the *undetermined*” (296). In the last decade of his life, between 1909 when he was asked by a collector and ardent supporter André Bongér (1861–1934) to compile an autobiographical account of his art, and 1916 when he died, Redon returned to a concerted effort to organize his notes and letters, in a move that Gamboni characterizes as “the brush tak[ing] up the pen” (281). He writes, “In contrast to the gratitude and approbation expressed earlier, the 1909 text amounts to a sweeping condemnation of the initial critical writing about his work” (288). If art is merely suggestive, however, offering to the reader or viewer the pleasure of “guessing little by little,” as Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–98) famously described Symbolist poetry, one might query how Redon could condemn misinterpretation and insist upon authorial intent.<sup>[2]</sup> In 1912, writing shortly before his death, Redon opened another possibility—one of criticism as communion, if not communication. Although declaring that “Art criticism is not creative” and condemning commentary for its own sake, Redon allowed for the possibility that a linguistic response to art might take the form of “a flame springing from the divine fire, which spreads and excites other flames” (299). Redon’s remarks are useful not only to the professional critic, but also to the art historian who seeks not to obscure but to maintain the vitality of the art examined. As Redon wrote in a note to himself, “What did I put into my works to suggest so many subtleties? I put a little open door in them, giving onto mystery. I made fictions. It’s up to them to go further” (271).

In *The Pen and the Brush*, Gamboni offers the account of an artist struggling theoretically and practically with artistic silence as well as a historian taking account of the volumes of criticism, commentary, literary transposition, and art historical accounts that Redon’s work has generated. Gamboni’s task is a particularly difficult one, as he must contend as an art historian with an artist who spent much of his life obfuscating his origins only to turn, at the end of his life, to inscribing around himself a textual account of his life and thoughts in which autobiography effectively limited for many the subsequent interpretation of his images under the aegis of “let[ting] Redon speak for himself” (302). At the beginning of his career, Redon stressed indeterminacy and wrote in *Une histoire incompréhensible* (*An Incomprehensible Story*) of a protagonist who relished “a particular pleasure in being unknown and misjudged” (12). He spoke in an article published in 1869 of his mentor Rodolphe Bresdin (1822–85) as “a man in love with solitude, fleeing the world, fleeing frantically below a sky without a fatherland, suffering the anguish of a hopeless, endless exile” (20), and asserted to his interlocutor Mellerio that “it is good to surround all genesis with mystery” (13). By the end of his life, however, the romanticism of obscurity had substantially faded, largely, Gamboni argues, as an outcome of his experiences with art critics, and in 1910, shortly after his last one-man exhibition, Redon confided to a journalist that he had resolved not to exhibit further, out of a desire for “tranquility” and a fear “of being misunderstood” (264–65).

The fear Redon expressed was not simply of personal exposure, but also that he did not want his admirers “to be misled,” presumably by critics (265). Redon’s attitude toward critics had changed throughout his career from one in which he described criticism as “a mode of creation like any other,” to the assertion near the conclusion of his career that, “Art criticism is not creative at all. The artist draws no benefit from it; he is his own source. He is the active



generator who moves, follows his course, evolves according to his secret intuition” (299). Gamboni astutely points out, however, that while the relinquishment of state control of the French Salon in 1881, the date in which his study largely begins, secured for modern artists a measure of independence, it also served as the impetus for some new means of investiture of value, one that led to the flowering of French art criticism. Redon himself encountered the pitfalls of indiscriminate opportunity for exhibition at the Salon des Indépendants, the organizing society of which he was a founding member in 1884, but which quickly became overcrowded exhibitions that he did not participate in after 1888 (57).

Redon maintained, “I have made an art according to myself alone” (297–98). As art historians, however, we have the opportunity to query what role biography plays in making relevant art that is both intensely subjective and non-literal. Are an artist’s autobiography and confessions the keys to the meaning at the core of his images—the cryptic “truth” on which Redon was insistent? Even with written testimony from the artist, we might ask: Does the artist remember fully? Confess honestly? Obfuscate intentionally? Gamboni assesses insightfully that, “these claims to autonomy fulfill a communicative function despite their solipsistic appearance: they establish the artist himself as the ultimate authority concerning his art, even—or especially—when he refrains from disclosing anything about it” (298). Perceptively noting this, Gamboni avoids the strategy of allowing Redon, as Charles Fedgal advocated in 1929, to merely “speak for himself” (302)—an art historical approach reinforced in 1956 in Jeanne Bouchot-Saupique’s introduction to the catalogue of the first comprehensive exhibition of Redon’s work, held at the Musée de l’Orangerie, in which she wrote, “Why not look into what he himself said so well for a sensible explanation that has all the persuasion of absolute sincerity?” (303). That same year Roseline Bacou asserted in her two-volume study of Redon that, “no one spoke better on the subject of Redon than Redon himself, a lucid observer and a polished writer” (303). This methodology, however, returns us full circle to the question of the role of the viewer in activating work, the critic in evaluating it, and the historian in contextualizing it. One might further counter that for an artist who prioritized the suggestive throughout his artistic career, a late-life insistence on authentic interpretation via artistic intent is a particularly unsatisfying closure of meaning. Redon himself questioned forcefully in *À soi-même*, “An inquiry into the lives of painters? What for? Can one believe that he will find revelations there that will bring justice to them? What’s the use?”<sup>[3]</sup> Rather than take Redon’s testimony at face value, Gamboni reveals Redon’s contradictions and indecisions, advocating for a study that takes into consideration Redon’s textual self-portrait as part of the historiographic record itself. Gamboni argues persuasively that, “Escaping from the grip of Redon’s own dicta and denials is the only way to find new ways of understanding his work and opening it up to the questions we believe relevant today” (329).

“To see,” Redon wrote in *À soi-même*, “is to spontaneously grasp the relationship between things.”<sup>[4]</sup> Among the questions that Gamboni’s study implicitly raises is the role of art historians. Is our profession closer to the scientist, striving for the potentially folly-ridden documentary climes of Borges’s cartographers, or do art historians function as aesthetic and theoretical critics of the past? In the preface to the newly published edition, Gamboni proposes a subtle response to what some may point to as the false dichotomy of such a question. He writes of the influence of his own teacher, Pierre Bourdieu, whose approach he describes as “relational through and through...he knew, as very few others did, how to articulate empirical research and theoretical reflection, convinced that ‘research without theory is blind, and theory without research is empty’” (xv). Gamboni’s study offers not simply factual

information for scholars of Redon specifically, and Symbolist image-text symbiosis in general, but also as importantly the model of art history as the critical practice of *seeing*, appreciating as Redon advocated, “the relationship between things,” both aesthetic and contextual.

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## Notes

[1] See Harrison C. White and Cynthia A. White, *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World* (New York: Wilney & Sons, 1965; new ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

[2] See Richard Smith, *Mallarmé's Children: Symbolism and the Renewal of Experience*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 36–37.

[3] Odilon Redon, *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art, and Artists*, trans. Mira Jacob and Jeanne L. Wasserman (New York: George Braziller, 1986), 100.

[4] *Ibid.*, 40.