



The Dark Side of Nature: Science, Society, and the Fantastic in the Work of Odilon Redon (Refiguring Modernism)

Barbara Larson

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“The artist . . . will always be a special, isolated, solitary agent with an innate sense of organising matter.”
—Odilon Redon

“Disturbing,” “hallucinatory”—words that evoke pathology rather than history— have long framed our understanding of Odilon Redon (1840–1916), a French artist admired by the Surrealists as a precursor in their exploration of the irrational. In this book, Barbara Larson takes a radically different view of Redon, one that does not attempt to deny him melancholia but does go a long way toward dismantling the paradigm that treats the cult of the irrational as the essential condition of his work. Larson instead contends that Redon should be seen as a gifted mediator of a context in which new scientific ideas mingled with the fears of social and racial decadence widespread in France after the debacle of the Franco-Prussian War.

Larson begins by investigating Redon’s early years in the Bordeaux region, where he met Armand Clavaud, a botanist who encouraged his interest in the mixture of botany, geology, zoology, and landscape studies then called Naturalism. Subsequent chapters integrate Redon’s concentration upon black-and-white graphic media and his absorption of Darwin’s teachings and new trends in physiology, psychology, and microbiology. All this enables Larson to offer insightful readings of Redon’s predilection for bizarre, polymorphous forms.

The Dark Side of Nature demonstrates that, at least insofar as Redon is concerned, late-nineteenth-century science meant not positivistic engagement with a stable material world, but rather the exploration of vast “invisible” realms, from microbes to electricity. With its clear exposition of scientific thought, Larson’s book will undoubtedly make a significant contribution not only to Redon studies but also to the interdisciplinary study of art and science.

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