

# Ghost Stories: Redon's 'transmission' of Gothic literature

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# Ghost stories: Redon's 'transmission' of Gothic literature

## Keywords

Odilon Redon  
Gothic literary  
strategies  
Occult  
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transtextual studies  
psychicones  
illustration

## Abstract

*This article focuses on a rarely studied set of images: Redon's album La Maison Hantée, published in 1896 (M 160-166) based on his friend and patron Philipon's translation of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's story The Haunted and the Haunters: Or, the House and the Brain (1859). Bulwer-Lytton was regarded as a significant writer in the 1830s and The Haunted and the Haunters was a well-known ghost story that contributed to establishing some recurrent narrative strategies of Gothic literature. Odilon Redon (1840–1916) was an avid reader who believed in the power of reading to explore the imagination. While Redon claimed he was not influenced by literature, he mingled with many literary figures of his time and published series of drawings linked to Poe, Baudelaire and Flaubert's texts. Redon developed strategies to 'interpret' texts, rather than traditionally illustrate them, such as condensed narrative or the selection of existing drawings. Rather than base his works on narratives, he often sought another type of connection between the image and text, what he called a 'transmission'. Setting itself in opposition to Leeman's claims in his 1994 book that Redon's images for this project are 'reductive, purely illustrative visuals',*

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*this article aims to show that there are essential and complex connections between Bulwer-Lytton's Gothic text, its reception in late-nineteenth-century France, and Redon's artistic production and interest in the occult at the time. Using Genette's notion of 'hypertextuality' the article argues that this set of images is an exploration of Gothic techniques and tropes, a 'transmission' of Redon's curiosity for occult practices and imagery.*

It was Darkness shaping itself forth from the air in very undefined outline.

(Bulwer-Lytton [1859] 1897)

Odilon Redon, an artist mostly known for his *Noirs*, was an avid reader who cultivated many friendships in various literary and artistic circles, including occult ones. While Redon claimed he was not influenced by literature, he published series of drawings related to texts by Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire and Gustave Flaubert, among others (Miller 2004: 234–42). However, Redon did not consider himself an illustrator and even saw the word illustration itself as deficient. In a letter to André Mellerio, Redon famously stated:

I have never used the defective word 'illustration'. You will not find it in my catalogues. The right term has not yet been coined. I can only think of 'transmission', of 'interpretation'. Still these are not sufficiently precise to completely express the [process] by which one of my readings [prompts] me to go through my organized noirs.

(Redon and Leblond 1923: 31–32)

Admittedly, his process was unusual for the time (Hamon 2001; Stead 2012; Sitzia 2012) as Redon often first looked through his earlier drawings to find works that responded to the text in spirit before creating any new images (Leeman 1994a: 179). Redon developed various strategies to interpret texts rather than base his works on narratives (Gamboni 2011; Sitzia 2016). Redon was very selective in his illustrative projects (for lack of a better phrase) (Hauptman 2005: 92). For Redon, word and image worked together to enrich the viewing and reading experience, creating layers and a complex maze of associations (Sitzia 2016).

This article will focus on a rarely studied set of images: Redon's album *La Maison Hantée*, published in 1896 (M 160-166) (Redon 1896). Philipon, his friend and patron, financed the production of the album containing six lithographs and a frontispiece, based on Philipon's own translation of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's story *The Haunted and the Haunters: Or, the House and the Brain* (1859). Bulwer-Lytton was regarded as a significant writer in the 1830s and *The Haunted and the Haunters*

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was a well-known ghost story that contributed to establishing some recurrent narrative strategies of Gothic literature. The album by Redon (Figures 1–7) was published as a separate item from the text (Leeman 1994b).

This article sets itself in opposition to Leeman's claims that Redon's images for this project are 'reductive, purely illustrative visuals' (Leeman 1994b: 223). Instead, it argues that they denote a bold project by Redon to work on occult subject matter that interested him at the time. In his otherwise interesting work on 'Redon's spiritualism and the rise of mysticism', Leeman devalues this particular project and his insistence that Redon's 'art did not evolve as an intentional depiction of objects or concepts' (Leeman 1994b: 215) is reductive and for some of Redon's project such as this one inaccurate.

I aim to show that there are essential and complex connections between Bulwer Lytton's Gothic text, its reception in late-nineteenth-century France, and Redon's artistic production and interest in the occult. Rather than seeing these illustrations as a nostalgic moment or as the work of someone trying to please a collector and friend as Leeman (1994b: 223) claims, I argue that this set of images is an exploration of Gothic techniques and tropes fed by Redon's curiosity for occult practices and imagery.

In order to do so, I will analyse the images in the context of their production as well as investigate the strategies Redon used for his adaptation/creation of images. Applying Gérard Genette's transtextual studies to intermediality, the relationship between the text and image (considered as a derivate text) can be considered one of hypertextuality. In *Palimpsest* Genette defined hypertextuality as the relationship between a derivate text [hypertext] and its source text [hypotext] (Genette 1997: 1–7). Genette further explained that this relationship of hypertextuality can be established through transformation or imitation. By considering the illustrations as a text, we can explore precisely this relationship of transformation and/or imitation through transposition that Redon's illustrative practice and unusual process implies. Illustrations are engaged in visual communication over several levels. Recent semiotic works on illustration also consider the image as a text exploring various components of illustration analysis (such as context, encoders, code and decoders) (Doyle et al. 2019). As this article aims to focus on the relationship to source text, it is essential to consider the image as an equal, as a text in its own right, and in this case, as a text that enters a dialogue with its hypotext. As a result, Redon's images have varied relationships to what we can call their hypotext; that is, the literary text illustrated, transposed, interpreted, transformed or imitated. This methodological approach is particularly fruitful when considering the evolution of the traditional relationship between visual arts and literature in art movements such as Neo-classicism or Romanticism to Redon's 'transmission' approach. As the visual arts throughout the nineteenth century progressively asserted their independence from literature and liberated themselves from narrative obligations, the role of narrative imagery underwent profound changes (Sitzia 2012). Redon's work is typical of that shift in image-text relationship in late nineteenth-century France.

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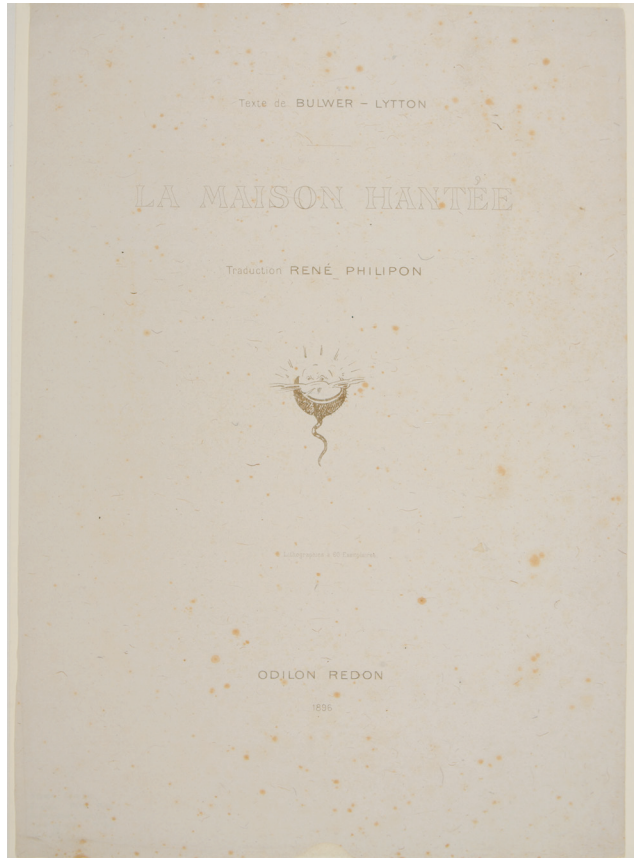


Figure 1: Odilon Redon, Frontispiece, 1896. Lithograph. 45 cm x 32 cm. In *La Maison Hantée* at the Harvard Art Museum. Courtesy Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Philip Hofer, Photo President and Fellows of Harvard College, M4242.

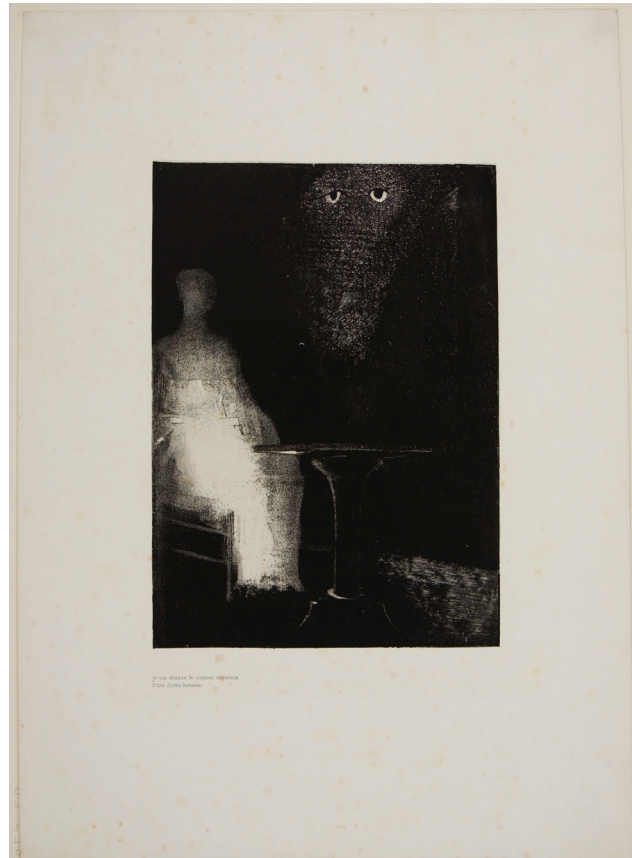


Figure 2: Odilon Redon, *Je vis dessus le contour vaporeux d'une forme humaine* ('I pursue a human form beneath the vaporous edge'), 1896. Lithograph. 25,3 cm x 18,1 cm. In *La Maison Hantée* at the Harvard Art Museum. Courtesy Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Philip Hofer, Photo President and Fellows of Harvard College, M4243.

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Figure 3: Odilon Redon, *Je vis une lueur large et pâle* ('I pursue a large and pale flash'), 1896. Lithograph. 23 cm × 17 cm. In *La Maison Hantée* at the Harvard Art Museum. Courtesy Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Philip Hofer, Photo President and Fellows of Harvard College, M4244.



Figure 4: Odilon Redon, *Il tenait ses yeux fixes sur moi avec une expression si étrange* ('He fixed his gaze on me with a very strange expression'), 1896. Lithograph. 22,8 cm × 15,3 cm. In *La Maison Hantée* at the Harvard Art Museum. Courtesy Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Philip Hofer, Photo President and Fellows of Harvard College, M4245.

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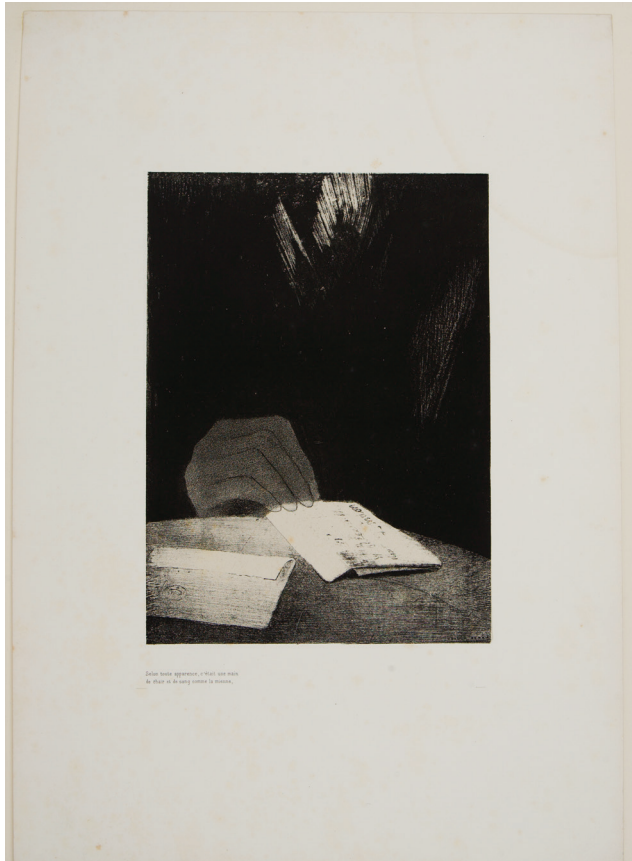


Figure 5: Odilon Redon, *Selon toute apparence, c'était une main de chair et de sang comme la mienne* ('According to all appearances, there was a hand of flesh and blood like my own'), 1896. Lithograph. 24,5 cm × 17,8 cm. In *La Maison Hantée* at the Harvard Art Museum. Courtesy Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Philip Hofer, Photo President and Fellows of Harvard College, M4246.



Figure 6: Odilon Redon, *Des larves si hideuses* ('Hideous phantom'), 1896. Lithograph. 17,9 cm × 17 cm. In *La Maison Hantée* at the Harvard Art Museum. Courtesy Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Philip Hofer, Photo President and Fellows of Harvard College, M4247.

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*Figure 7: Odilon Redon, La largeur de l'aplatissement de l'os frontal ('The breadth of the frontal bone flattening'), 1896. Lithograph. 14 cm × 9 cm. In La Maison Hantée at the Harvard Art Museum. Courtesy Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Philip Hofer, Photo President and Fellows of Harvard College, M4248.*



I will first investigate Bulwer-Lytton's original text as a representant of Gothic literature and focus on the late nineteenth-century occult context in which Redon read the text. I will also show that Redon had an ongoing engagement and interest with Gothic literature. The second part of the article comprises a close reading of *La Maison Hantée* (images and the text) and uses Genette's transtextuality as a framework to investigate what precisely constitutes the close relationship between text and images, which strategies Redon adopted from Gothic literature, and how his images relate to occultist concerns and imaginaries of the time. I argue here that, in this set of images, Redon not only explores Gothic techniques and tropes but also shows a keen observation of contemporary occult practices and imagery.

## **Redon in context: Gothic literature and the occult in nineteenth-century Paris**

### ***Gothic literature and Bulwer-Lytton***

As David Punter and Glennis Byron (2013) noted, the Gothic positioned itself as counter to modern progress and is defined mostly in opposition to classical aesthetics and values. Nineteenth-century Gothic literature in particular saw a shift in focus from political concerns to more psychological matters. Punter and Byron further argue that mid-nineteenth-century 'Victorian ghost stories typically centre on the irruption of the supernatural into the familiar, comfortable and [...] the mundane everyday world' (Punter and Byron 2013: 475). Most major authors of the period produced such stories (Rem 2000).

Bulwer-Lytton was regarded as an important writer in the 1830s (Sutherland 1988: 390). *The Haunted and the Haunters* was 'one of the best-known ghost stories of the 1850s' (Knight 2006: 246) and is often considered part of the canon of Gothic literature. The story contains most of the tropes that can be expected from a Gothic ghost story: a haunted house, a mysterious monster, persecution and paranoia, a female anti-hero, scenes of the uncanny, a history of abuse, hallucination and hints of madness. The story is that of a man who decides to investigate a haunted house in London with his faithful servant and his dog. The nightly apparitions grow more and more frightful until the servant runs away and the dog dies of fear. Upon further investigation, the apparitions are discovered to be caused by a mysterious occult apparatus, set out by an ill-meaning character in a hidden room, which channels the terrible events that took place in the house.

Bulwer-Lytton had begun his active study of the occult in the 1830s, and, as Robert Lee Wolff observed, it 'became increasingly important to him as the years went by' (1971: 148–49). In this, the author was not alone; theosophical and occult concerns were widespread throughout the western world throughout the nineteenth century. Late nineteenth-century France was a particularly fertile ground for the reception of such a text as *The Haunted and the Haunters*. Indeed, the development of parapsychology, the tackling by modern science and psychology of spiritism, and attempts to

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capture the shape of the soul through modern means such as photography, show that spiritualism and occultism were then 'considered scientific endeavours' (Pethes 2016: 326). The opening of the French branch of the Theosophical Society in 1884 and the counter-movements led by influential figures such as Stanislas de Guaita, championing occultism brought more prominence to occultist discussions in France. Medium and spiritism sessions were generally understood as a specific form of entertainment that was growing in popularity (Natale 2011).

Furthermore, an interest in fluidic photography initiated by Parisian neuropsychiatrist Jules Bernard Luys with his *photographies des effluves*, in which he tried to capture the radiating energies around human bodies, began to create a specific visual culture around matters of the spirit (Pethes 2016: 329). One of his colleagues at the Salpêtrière hospital, Hippolyte Baraduc, had a reputation for curing patients through magnetic energy. He also experimented with capturing human souls or states of minds through photography. He called such images 'psychicones' and published his research in a book, *L'Âme humaine*, in 1896 (Pethes 2016: 329). His work on capturing souls was then perceived as a logical extension of his medical work.

### **Redon and the occult**

The popularity of occult circles in late nineteenth-century France was not new at this point (Harvey 2005). Redon had a complicated relationship with these circles. On the one hand, he was introduced to some key occult texts by his friend and mentor Armand Clavaud and was a regular visitor at Edmond Bailly's occult avant-garde culture bookshop, the Librairie de l'art indépendant. Redon even exhibited works there in spring 1893. Bailly was a theosophist and the publisher of many occult books and magazines. Redon also regularly spent time with Edouard Schuré, the author of the spiritualist bible *Les Grands Initiés* (Paris 1889). On the other hand, Redon was quick to distance himself from any labels as his withdrawal from the Rose+Croix exhibition shows or as does the fact that he asked Mellerio not to mention his Bailly exhibition in his 1913 catalogue (Leeman 1994b: 217).

This ambivalence was to some measure due to his suspicion towards what was a fashionable set of beliefs and his position as an artist in a shifting market. It was only in 1894 that Redon had his first major one-man show at the Durand-Ruel Gallery in Paris (Stevens 1994: 197). While this was a sign of recognition and some measure of success, by late 1894 Redon had serious money issues (Sharp 1994: 247). Redon suffered illness in the winter of 1894 to 1895 and lost his Peyrelebadé home between 1894 and 1896. As Dario Gamboni notes, it certainly was a period of questioning for Redon and a general change of direction for the artist (Gamboni 2011: 217).

At that time, Redon drew closer to occult circles and sold numerous works through this channel (Gamboni 2004: 69). In doing so, he cultivated a second generation of collectors. Redon most likely met René Philipon, a young occult writer, through Bailly and they became very close friends.

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They saw each other almost weekly in the first six months of 1895 and Philipon quickly became one of the most significant collectors of Redon's works acquiring almost half of Redon's total production between 1894 and 1895 (Sharp 1994: 248–49). Philipon was a count, a specialist in occultism, a collector, a writer of many esoteric texts and a translator.

Redon's friend and patron, Philipon, financed the production of the six lithographs and a frontispiece of *La Maison Hantée* (M 160-166), which was published in 60 sets by August Clot. The album is based on Philipon's translation of Bulwer-Lytton's story *The Haunted and the Hunters; Or, the House and the Brain* (1859). Philipon's text had been first published as a serial under the pseudonym 'Jean Tabris' in *L'Initiation* in 1894 and as a book in 1895. The album by Redon was planned as a supplement and was published in December 1896 (Leeman 1994b: 223). His illustration was therefore a translation of a translation and this impacted his reading of the text. While Redon's interest in this commission certainly had a financial aspect, it also echoed his existing interest in the occult and in Gothic literature.

### **Redon and Gothic literature**

By the time Redon illustrated *The Haunted and the Hunters*, he had already thoroughly explored his affinity with Gothic literature. An early short story by Redon himself, 'Nuit de Fièvre' (n.d.), for example, takes place in an eerie inn, on a stormy night. In the narrator's room, a large wooden trunk appears to come alive, moving with a spirit locked inside. As the morning dawns, the mystery is explained (Redon and Moran 2005: 65–72). In terms of illustrations/response/adaptation, in 1882 Redon had published his album *A Edgar Poë* and in 1883 he had drawn four images directly linked to Poe's tales: *The Mask of the Red Death*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Cask of Amontillado* and *The Teeth* (Gamboni 2011: 100–17). Key motifs and tropes of Gothic literature were already present in those images: haunted houses, monsters (real and imaginary), persecution, abuse, hallucination, psychological issues and the uncanny (Sitzia 2016: 137). Redon's affinity with Gothic literature is far from superficial and he would carry on his exploration of Gothic tropes and techniques further nourished by an end-of-century French understanding of the genre and his and his contemporaries' interest in the occult. This article will now focus particularly on the illustrations of *La Maison Hantée*, identifying specific gothic literary strategies and how these images relate to occultist concerns and imaginaries of the time.

### **The application of Gothic literary strategies to occult illustrations**

Redon's approach to his illustrations for *La Maison Hantée* are transformations and/or imitations of his hypotext. Redon investigates in particular a few Gothic literary strategies and tropes – such as the use of fantastic realism, the equivocal, the uncanny and the focus on the psychological impact – that he adapts to a public eager for the occult.

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### ***Fantastical realism***

Many Victorian Gothic ghost stories were anchored in reality (Punter and Byron 2013: 487). Indeed, in his novel, Bulwer-Lytton turned the traditional ghost story into an investigation of the supernatural by a rational character, looking to horror in society and human behaviour to explain the apparition. Furthermore, the apparitions themselves are explained by an apparatus installed by an ill-meaning deceased character that mesmerizes visitors using brainwaves. Horror in Bulwer-Lytton's text is anchored in scientific possibility, which maintains at least a semblance of reality (Knight 2006: 249). This aspect would have been particularly well received in late nineteenth-century French occult circles. Many occult practices and spiritualist phenomena were approached and investigated from a scientific perspective.

In the French artistic context, Realism had been popular since the 1850s; but by the end of the century it was being put into question. Redon's images and his illustrations in particular, are rarely direct representations of nature. It is unusual for his work to have clear realistic settings and backgrounds; his spaces are usually dark, minimally suggestive spaces, rather than built perspectives. Leeman claims that 'when Redon created a work to accompany a text, he usually avoided portraying action scenes or a particular situation or objects' (1994a: 186). In the illustrations Redon produced for Bulwer-Lytton's text, this is definitely not the case. Redon uses realistic concrete elements from the texts – such as the table, the chair and the staircase – and his illustrations look at specific moments of narrative action.

Furthermore, if we compare here the hypotext and Redon's hypertext we see that Redon, to some measure, emulates the careful Realism of Bulwer-Lytton. For example, in *Je vis dessus le contour vaporeux d'une forme humaine* (Figure 2), a glowing white shadow is seated on a chair with a round table in front while a pair of ghostly eyes appear in the background darkness. The imagery used here aligns with Baraduc's 'psychicones' and uses common occult imagery in terms of spirit representation. Baraduc's photographs of spirits also present the viewer with a clear realistic background and a diffuse image of the spirit. There is stillness and a menacing silence in Redon's image and even though no other details are visible, a clear perspective is created through minimal use of line. This creation of a realistic space is unusual for Redon and places the viewer in the image. The realistic details of the chair and table also contribute to this merger of the fantastic and the realistic, creating an effect of fantastical realism.

If we look at the hypotext, it is interesting to note that Redon merges elements from different parts of the story. The short caption is an extract from a longer sentence, although the caption is only here to evoke, not describe. Bulwer-Lytton's text runs as follows: 'I continued to gaze on the chair, and fancied I saw on it a pale, blue, misty outline of a human figure, but an outline so indistinct that I could only distrust my own vision' (Bulwer Lytton [1859] 1897: 95). The

menacing ghostly eyes come from a different moment in the tale (Bulwer Lytton [1859] 1897: 198–211). The ‘mahogany round table’ is also taken from another moment in the text (Bulwer Lytton [1859] 1897: 225). Here Redon used a process he often employed when adapting original texts; that is, he picks and chooses elements and composes a condensed form of narrative. Such summary images play on the tension between the diachronic dimension of the text and the synchronic quality of the image. Choosing symbols from the text, Redon creates an emotionally loaded image, echoing the fear of the main character. An instant impact on the viewer is created (through the synchronic quality of the image), mirroring the effect created over time by Bulwer-Lytton’s text.

Redon’s choice of realistic objects and use of realist picture space within the image anchors him in the Gothic writing process, which connects Realism and horror. Interestingly, Redon’s images are more efficient in creating fear because of this process of fantastic realism. *Je vis une lueur large et pâle* (Figure 3), with its dark, empty yet menacing staircase is arguably more likely to create a sense of unease in the viewer than *‘Des larves si hideuses’* (Figure 6), which is detached from any naturalistic anchoring. The latter is more typical of Redon’s work, where the fantastical exists in its own realm and does not enter reality. This mingling and merger of Realism and horror, unusual in Redon’s work, is a staple of Victorian Gothic literature and late nineteenth-century spirit imagery, and is very efficient in creating a sense of fear in the viewer – something that Redon certainly understood.

### ***The equivocal: Between abstraction and representation***

Redon valued the equivocal quality of literature and equally valued this quality in his own art (Redon 1971: 100). Redon populates darkness (blackness) with mysteries (Danguy 2012: 49). Laurence Danguy identifies two variations for Redon’s equivocal figures: the figure of radiating white light on a black background and the figure of glowing black light on a white background (2012: 49–50). Such images are reminiscent of fluidic photography, which attempts to capture the radiating energies around human bodies. Oscillating between abstraction and representation, Redon’s ghosts live in the realm of suggestion. As Hilton Kramer claims, for some of his illustrations Redon created ‘highly metaphorical meditations on the emotions harboured in these texts’ (Kramer 1974: 50).

If we look again at *Je vis une lueur large et pâle* (Figure 3) and compare it to its hypotext, the process of creating equivocal images becomes clearer.

We both saw a large, pale light – as large as the human figure, but shapeless and unsubstantial – move before us, and ascend the stairs that led from the landing to the attics. I followed

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the light, and my servant followed me. It entered, to the right of the landing, a small garret, of which the door stood open.

(Bulwer-Lytton [1859] 1897: 119)

Bulwer-Lytton's text focuses on the white light and the human scale and form of the figure. In Redon's image the empty staircase and the very vague and undefined glowing shape (unlike the previous one) prompts the viewer to explore the darkness to see the spectre.

While in *Je vis dessus le contour vaporeux d'une forme humaine* (Figure 2) we have a glowing white figure on a black background, as described by Danguy, in *Je vis une lueur large et pâle* (Figure 3), the process is different and the evocation more subtle. Redon creates a gritted and layered texture that interrupts the grain of the paper. Emptiness is filled with suggestive forms; loneliness, emptiness and fear are instilled in the viewer, who starts to scan the uneven surface looking for the spectre. Redon, in *A soi-même*, explained that this was one of his talents: '[a]ll my originality is to give human life to unlikely beings according to the laws of reality, putting, as much as possible, the logic of the visible to the service of the invisible' (Redon 1971: 28). In that image Redon has the viewer scrutinize the visible until the invisible is seen.

This play with emptiness and suggestion is not unusual for Redon. Such a process creates ambiguity and what Gamboni (2004) calls a 'potential image'. In the case of this particular ghost story, such an image makes us aware of the subjective nature of seeing apparitions in the darkness – something that the text cannot convey. This process certainly links well to spiritism sessions that were popular in late-nineteenth-century France. Indeed the image allows the viewer to question their own sense of seeing and to experience first-hand a hallucination, seeing something that is and is not there and that is specific to each viewer (as are the visions in Bulwer-Lytton's tale). The image here makes the viewer experience what can only be loosely described in the hypotext. Redon enhances the effect of the hypotext, engaging the body of the reader/viewer in a Gothic hallucinatory experience, a session of spiritism.

### ***The uncanny and impending madness***

Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle define the uncanny as having 'to do with the sense that things are not as they have come to appear through habit and familiarity' (Bennett and Royle 1999: 37). In the visual arts it often translates into the creation of visual tensions that engenders an uncanny effect. In *Selon toute apparence, c'était une main de chair et de sang comme la mienne* (Figure 5), a disembodied but live hand delicately grasps a letter. Detached body parts are not unusual for Redon, but the firmness of the letter contrasting with the diffuseness and transparency of the hand creates a visual tension, a sense of the uncanny that makes the viewer doubt the accuracy of the sight. The

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apparition becomes a sign of impending madness. If we look at the hypotext, we see how Redon, once again, exploits the Gothic text:

My eyes now rested on the table, and from under the table (which was without cloth or cover – an old mahogany round table) there rose a hand, visible as far as the wrist. It was a hand, seemingly, as much of flesh and blood as my own, but the hand of an aged person, lean, wrinkled, small too – a woman's hand. That hand very softly closed on the two letters that lay on the table; hand and letters both vanished.

(Bulwer Lytton [1859] 1897: 225)

Redon's hand, emerging from darkness, is not that of an old woman. The tension between the firmness of the letter and the transparency of the hand is absent from the text. The uncanny effect in the text is precisely created by the 'aliveness' of the detached hand. In order to recreate that uncanny effect, Redon goes against the textual information to recreate an essential impact on the viewer: the fear of impending madness.

This effect of the uncanny is also created in *La largeur de l'aplatissement de l'os frontal* (Figure 7) by representing the portrait of the man responsible for the installation of the apparatus creating the visions in the house. The portrait is described with great precision in the hypotext in a masterful ekphrasis:

The portrait was that of a man who might be somewhat advanced in middle life, perhaps forty-seven or forty-eight. It was a remarkable face – a most impressive face. If you could fancy some mighty serpent transformed into man, preserving in the human lineaments the old serpent type, you would have a better idea of that countenance than long descriptions can convey: the width and flatness of frontal; the tapering elegance of contour disguising the strength of the deadly jaw; the long, large, terrible eye, glittering and green as the emerald – and withal a certain ruthless calm as if from the consciousness of an immense power.

(Bulwer Lytton [1859] 1897: 390)

Lines define the physiognomy of the character who seems to emerge from the darkness of his hair. The serpent-like features are reinforced by the suggestive lines of a forked-tongue in the brow line. The protruding eyes and the strange jawline merging into the neck – due to lighter shading at the bottom of the face and the back of the neck – give the character an odd sense of transformation, as if he is changing skin and shape under our eyes. The single line indicating the shoulder also reduces his humanity. Here again, the uncanny is at play. While the character looks mostly human, the suggestion of his animalistic transformation also brings the viewer to doubt what he or she is seeing. While the text details the human features, Redon focuses on the 'mighty serpent transformed into man'. The

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choice of the caption shifts the viewer's attention from being too obviously focused on the serpent to a more generic element of his physiognomy. Redon uses the tools of suggestion and the uncanny to create Gothic hallucinations and to foreground the occult questioning of the nature of reality.

### ***Psychological impact: Fear?***

The challenging aspect that Redon had to contend with in Bulwer-Lytton's story was to convey fear. While Redon was keen to explore darkness and create monsters, he was not an illustrator of horrors – at least not in the same sense as we might think of Goya's work, for example. Redon himself doubted whether he would be capable of conveying such an extreme emotion through his work, questioning it in a letter to Bonger (Redon 1987: 48).

Redon's choice of key images for the tale focuses on the psychological impact of the story on the reader rather than on the developing narrative. Most of the images are drawn from the apparition part of the story rather than spread across a range of key narrative moments – such as the servant running away. For this album, as is the case for many of Redon's albums, the narrative is held together by the format of the album itself, where the succession of images (re)creates the narration (Gamboni 2011: 124).

The spectres and larvae, the deep blacks and eerie atmosphere of Redon's images convey the isolation and oppression created on the viewer by the tale. The emphasis in the images is not on the evocative and poetic aspect of the writing, but on the fantastic elements of the tale and the fear created by the story. Instead, the images offer psychological insight onto the effect of the text itself. The images are stripped from their mimetic function to become a commentary on the text, the fear created in the viewer, and the spiritual world brought to light.

*Des larves si hideuses* (Figure 6) is particularly interesting as it explores themes of the occult in a way very typical for Redon. The hypotext is relatively precise in its description:

And now from these globules themselves, as from the shell of an egg, monstrous things burst out; the air grew filled with them: larvae so bloodless and so hideous that I can in no way describe them except to remind the reader of the swarming life which the solar microscope brings before his eyes in a drop of water – things transparent, supple, agile, chasing each other, devouring each other; forms like naught ever beheld by the naked eye. As the shapes were without symmetry, so their movements were without order.

(Bulwer Lytton [1859] 1897: 251)

The text focuses on movement, rather than a clear image, and draws comparison with a vision of the world through a microscope. The image created by Redon draws on his repertory of images

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of monsters. Since 1857, Redon's friendship with Armand Clavaud, a botanist working on cellular embryology, had allowed him to specifically develop this kind of imagery derived from scientific research. Furthermore, the image of the larvae is a common symbol in occult culture. In 1893, the Rose+Croix cofounder and occultist Papus wrote an article on 'larvae' as 'psychic parasites', that is, demonic ghosts that are found in occult literature. The article was illustrated with images 'showing spermatozoids with human faces' (Leeman 1994b: 219). Interestingly this is the iconography chosen by Redon for the frontispiece.

Other motifs such as the bubbles or the black sun in that image are often found in Redon's works. Overall, *Des larves si hideuses* (Figure 6) is a standard Redon composition: there is no depth, but a flow of images stems from the focal point of the black sun in the corner; animalistic faces appear in darkness; and there are parts of a fish tail, a hint of a skull, floating faces in bubbles, rays stretching across the composition, aquatic monstrous representations, but no fear. The focus is not on the psychological impact, nor on the fear created by the tale; rather, it is on occult motifs, on representations of monsters in a manner very typical for Redon. While there is definitely a fantastic representation of the spiritual world here, there is no terror, just fascination and fantasy.

The frontispiece (Figure 1) – a sort of spermatozoid in which a radiating half head with evil eyes emerges from the mist – is a condensed version of the tale (again taking elements from throughout the story) with a clear reference to occult images. The eyes and radiating head refer to a sort of mesmerization and to the radiating brain of the dead culprit that creates larvae-spirits in the brains of the haunted house's visitors. The menacing gaze implies the fear that should be created by the tale, but the focus is on the strangeness and occult iconography above all. It functions as an advertising poster and as a summary symbol of the text, invoking the Gothic spiritual world without giving away anything of the narrative.

To conclude, one can note that Redon's illustrations of Bulwer-Lytton's text are unusual images for the artist: Redon stays relatively close to the text, uses realist strategies to create fear, and masterfully uses black and chiaroscuro effects at a time when, specialists agree, Redon had progressively abandoned the *noir* for colour (Stevens 1994: 204; Danguy 2012: 62). Nevertheless, these illustrations are certainly not 'reductive' (Leeman 1994b: 223). Rather, through my analysis I have shown that they gave Redon an opportunity to explore Gothic techniques and tropes and feed Redon's interest in the occult practice and imagery (especially the psychicones). The images act as 'transmission' – a putting into dialogue/creating a movement – between the author, the translator, the illustrator, the reader/viewer and their visual worlds. Images are not mimetic there but are a commentary, a questioning of the text and its narrative strategies. In regard to occultism, Redon's position certainly was not that of a preacher, but that of an observer, a keen participant of his time. As he noted in a letter to Denis: '[a]rt can never specifically support the propaganda of a belief or a cult, or, for that matter of a social idea. I have sometimes made a Venus or an Apollo without wanting people to become

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pagan' (Redon cited in Leeman 1994b: 234). Redon's use of fantastic realism, his use of the equivocal and the uncanny, and his exploration of the psychological impact and representation of the spiritual world create a web of connections between the Gothic text, Redon's images, and his occult context. Redon uses the hypotext as an opportunity to explore the overlap between Gothic and occult themes and aesthetics and his own.

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