Odilon Redon and the Pasteurian Revolution: Health, Illness, and *le monde invisible*

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**Argument**

Odilon Redon's dark-spirited charcoals and lithographs of the last quarter of the nineteenth century responded to developments in science, including the Pasteurian revolution. Rather than celebrating the progressive potential of science, Redon's *noirs* engaged national anxieties that attended scientific advances. His position was close to the Decadents of the 1880s who dwelled on themes of illness and decay. While the artist's original biographer André Mellerio referred to the artist's fascination with Pasteur and his microbial world, where in a single drop of water "there arises the spectacle of giants of a gripping horror and a frightful, predatory nature," the topic has virtually disappeared from Redon literature. By recovering the scientific/medical issues that stimulated Redon's creation, this article restores the subjects of pathogenic organisms and contagious illness to their rightful place in Redon's oeuvre. Further, it provides the reader with a discussion of the cultural context in which Redon's interest was generated.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century the French artist Odilon Redon created macabre charcoal drawings and lithographs that often featured hybrids like spiders or fish with human heads, plant-humans, or cyclopean monstrosities. Certain of the *noirs* have figures with emaciated physiognomy, skeletal forms, and expressions of despair. As the Decadent novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans wrote in regard to Redon's figure drawings in *A Rebours* (1884), the book that introduced the artist's work to the public, "Some of these faces staring out with wild eyes evoked in Des Esseintes recollections of typhoid fever, remembrances that had stuck persistently in his head of hot nights of misery" (Huysmans [1884] 1959, 80). Indeed, by the early 1880s Redon had become interested in the subject of contagious illness, including Pasteur's work on pathogenic microorganisms as the underlying cause of infectious disease. His dark-spirited works now included individual "germs" along with suffering humans. In the 1880s, Redon sent Pasteur an admiring letter along with a set of his lithographic prints *Origins* (1883). The scientist's comment that it took the hand of Redon to give life to monstrosities would be treasured by the artist throughout his life (Mellerio 1923, 155, n. 3).

Redon's late-nineteenth-century works were spawned within the context of a scientific revolution that was revealing powerful, invisible forces at work in the world. His original biographer André Mellerio, who based his writings on interviews and
papers provided by the artist, commented on the central importance of Redon's fascination with science including evolutionary theory, prehistory, cosmic principles, psychology, and microbiology (Mellerio 1913, 14–16). While Mellerio referred to the artist's interest in the microbial world where in a single drop of water "there arises the spectacle of giants of a gripping horror and a frightful, predatory nature," the topic has virtually disappeared from Redon literature (ibid., 15).

France's Third Republic, which consolidated in the late 1870s, supported advances in science as having the potential to regenerate a nation that had recently lost a major war with Germany (1870–71), and made Pasteur a national hero (Latour 1990). Redon had come of age with the Franco-Prussian War. His experience fighting as an infantryman in 1870 was decisive for his mature oeuvre; he was elated by his own courage and deeply saddened by the loss of the war. As he noted, "Of all moral situations most favorable for producing art or thought, there are none that are more fecund than great patriotic grief" (Redon 1922, 44). Despite the official celebration of scientific progress in the postwar period, Redon dwelled on man's vulnerabilities in light of scientific developments. In so doing, he responded to an anxious postwar generation susceptible to scientific discourses that emphasized man's fragility in light of new developments in science.

France was pathologized by those medical practitioners and politicians who believed that an organic national condition was at the root of the unexpected loss of the war (Ellis 1990, 176–77). Degeneration theory, circulating in the last three decades of the century, included ideas that the nation had slipped from power because of general physical conditions such as the lack of corporeal strength, shorter stature than in past generations, and the fear that the French race was aging and thus in decline. Degeneration theory was based on Lamarckian notions of transgenerational heredity, in this case with progressively negative results. Alcoholism and syphilis were among the conditions thought to contribute to hereditary degeneration. While notions of national decline were not new, Robert Nye has demonstrated the central importance of degeneration theory in the practice of medicine after the Franco-Prussian War (1984). Pasteur's germ theory of disease contributed to public fears. Pasteurian hygienists emphasized the ability of germs to "invade" the body, provoking an immediate sense of biological threat to constitutions already perceived as weak (Vigarello 1984, 217–29).

The morbid aspects of Redon's work of the 1880s were realized within the context of the Decadent movement, itself rooted in degeneration theory. Decadent tendencies within the arts favored pessimism, nocturnal terrors, and themes of neurosis, illness, corporeal decay, and death (see, for example, Bernheimer 2002 and Pierrot 1981). Decadents like Huysmans or Émile Hessequin, both of whom had befriended Redon in the early 1880s, were also interested in earlier Romantic writers like Gustave Flaubert, the Goncourt brothers, Théophile Gautier, and Charles Baudelaire, who

had delighted in the subjects of illness and decay (Spackman 1982 and Williams 1980). Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* (1857), one of Redon's favorite texts, included characters who demonstrated heightened sensibilities to putrefaction—sometimes to the point of eroticism. The combination of life-death forces took on new meaning with the advent of Pasteur's work.

Before the age of Pasteur, disease was attributed to miasma, or the idea that illness was the result of noxious exhalations and odors; other theories focused on climatic or geographical conditions, negative heredity, or the idea that a decaying organic object placed next to a healthy one would create infection and putrefaction in the latter. Many infectious illnesses like diphtheria and childbed fever were defined as putrid before 1880 (Bynum 1998, 118). The Hungarian doctor Ignaz Semmelweiss, often thought of as a precursor to Pasteur, was in fact a proponent of this theory. He worked in a Viennese hospital in the 1850s where there was a high incidence of women who died of childbed (puerperal) fever after giving birth. Semmelweiss believed this was due to the fact that many doctors went from autopsies to deliveries without washing their hands; however, the means of transmission was not living germs but putrid matter. In his early experiments on fermentation of wine in the 1860s Pasteur proved that putrefaction was a vital process, caused by living substances. Of the role of microorganisms he asserted, "Life takes part in the work of death in all its phases" (quoted in Bynum 1994, 127).

Microorganisms had been described and detailed as early as the seventeenth century by Antoni van Leeuwenhoek. Known as animalcules, they remained largely curiosities until the nineteenth century and the pathogenic potential of certain of them was never proven before the age of Pasteur. The pathogenic microorganism or germ was most commonly called a "microbe," a word coined by the surgeon Charles Sédillot in 1878. Microbes were divided by Pasteur and his followers into bacteria (vegetal organisms), protozoa (one-celled animal organisms), and tiny viruses (Bouisson 1967, 308).

While the immediate impact of Pasteur's work was on medical practitioners and hygienists, his ideas gained widespread public acclaim after his introduction of an anthrax anti-toxin in 1881 and a rabies vaccine in 1885. His public displays at Pouilly-le-Fort in 1881 were much in keeping with the spirit of nineteenth-century spectacle. Pasteur vaccinated farm animals against anthrax, then presented them to the public again several weeks later along with specimens that had not been vaccinated. He then

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2 On pre-Pasteurian concepts of illness, see Laberge 1992. On miasma, see Chevalier 1984 and Corbin 1986.
3 Pierre Bretonneau suggested microbes as the cause of diphtheria in 1821 although his ideas were not widely accepted. One year later Enrico Acerbi proposed that typhus was caused by a parasite. In 1840 Friedrich Henle determined that *corynebacterium diphtheriae* caused illness and further that one could determine which individual microorganism caused what disease. In 1854 Filippo Pacini had identified the cholera bacillus, but again this work did not gain inroads into medical practice (Rosen, 292–309).
4 On the first two "waves" of Pasteurian medicine and hygiene (1878–1880 and 1881–1885), see Leonard 1981, 241–327.
injected all the animals with a virulent culture of anthrax, and the crowd watched those unprotected die before their eyes (Bynum 1994, 129).

Redon's fascination with the power of the invisible had initially begun not through Romantic/Decadent literature, or the publicity given to Pasteur's work, but rather through his early friendship with a botanist from Bordeaux, Armand Clavaud. Redon grew up in Bordeaux, and Clavaud became his intellectual mentor by the 1860s. Clavaud was well-read; it was he who introduced Redon to the writings of Baudelaire. Clavaud did research on metabolic and fertilization processes in plants, and his work with microscopic investigation was highly memorable for Redon. He also worked on a species of algae that exhibited both plant and animal properties. Redon remarked, "He worked with the infinitely small. He searched at the edge of the imperceptible world for that life which lies between plant and animal" (Redon 1922, 19). Nineteenth-century developments in microscopy transformed biology, allowing scientists like Clavaud to examine the minutiae of life down to individual cells (Bynum 1994, 100–101; and see Bracegirdle 1978). The compound achromatic microscope made it possible to investigate individual microbes as well.

Vaccination against most common infectious illnesses was not available to the public until the 1890s and after; although researchers were rapidly identifying microbes in the 1880s, cures were not immediately forthcoming. Redon's images of microorganisms are in keeping with scare tactics of Pasteurian hygienists who preached prevention by revealing the hidden enemy to the public as something more powerful and destructive to humans than any conceivable visible danger (Vigarello 1984, 218–25). In his paper "Ennemies de l'espece humaine" delivered at the 1888 conference for the Association francaise pour l'avancement des sciences, Raphael Blanchard, professor at the Faculty of Medicine in Paris, described legions of microbes proliferating in the digestive tract. With water as a vehicle for germs, the undetectable enemies were ready to invade and destroy the system (Blanchard 1888, 7). In Les Monstres invisibles of 1897, a hygiene manual written by Florimond David for primary school children, dust was said to carry within it living beings more dangerous than wolves, lions, or tigers (David 1897, 7–8). Illustrations of enlarged microbes were common in science texts and popular science journals of the period such as La Nature. Redon's Phantom is close to one frequently reproduced image originally bearing the subtitle "This is what we are breathing, microscopic animal and vegetal matter in the air" (figs. 1 and 2). The fantastic aspect of microbes even became a part of public entertainment. In 1883 the show "Les Invisibles" at the Théâtre des menus-plaisirs in Paris showed microorganisms to a large audience through a solar microscope. Mellerio also evoked the fear of invisible, teeming pathogenic microorganisms bent on the destruction of man in his Redon biography: "One finds this complex universe in the smallest part of our body - secretly like termites they eat at our living architecture which is destined to be finished by them" (Mellerio 1913, 15).

5 On Clavaud's work, see Schotsman 1971, 212–83.
From his earliest postwar exhibitions, Redon’s critics would note his interest in this gruesome world. Drawings such as In the Primeval Slime of 1880, exhibited in the artist’s second one-man show of 1882 (fig. 3), encouraged the writer Huysmans, one of the first critics to write on Redon, to note of this exhibition: “There were charcoals of vibrios and volvox of animalcules that crawl in glucose tinted with soot” (Huysmans 1883, 300). Emile Hennequin wrote in 1882, “Kind of *infusoria*, half-*vibrios*, half-*radicles* crawl in shadowy depths and present their deformations to the spectator, heinous, wicked, false or ridiculous with a human face” (Hennequin 1882, 137).

*In the Primeval Slime* is an ambiguous image evoking both notions of primeval evolution and pathogenic germs. Redon’s description of this work is equally ambiguous: “sorts of monads, germs with human faces” (Druick and Zeegers 1994, 399, n. 58). Although the term “monad” was originally used by the philosopher Gottfried Leibniz in the late seventeenth century to denote the invisible, indivisible substance that he believed constituted the universe, by the nineteenth century “monad”
Fig. 2. "This is what we are breathing; microscopic animal and vegetal matter floating in the air." From C. Flammarion, *Astronomie populaire* (Paris: C. Marpon and E. Flammarion, 1880).

was used to suggest a hypothetical tiny organism assumed as the first step in the evolutionary ladder. It also referred to a family of organisms intermediate between algae and mushrooms with origins in an aquatic environment. Germ, even in this early period, meant not only rudiment or beginnings, but was already nomenclature synonymous with bacterium.

For the public during this still early experimental period, germs or microbes, cells, and primordial forms were all lumped together under the concept *l'infiniment petit*. Redon's own images lent themselves, perhaps purposefully, to this confusion. He would use ciliated forms to suggest either pathogenic germs or origins. Mellerio wrote of such images, "With a Darwinian vision he embraced initial chaos where protoplasm with ciliated vibrating forms move with agitation in a confusing manner"; but in his
Fig. 3. Odilon Redon, *In the Primordial Slime*, 1880, charcoal on paper. Kunsthandel Wolfgang Werner KG, Bremin/Berlin.
view they were also "minuscule insects" that cause "death and decomposition of the organism" (Mellerio 1891).

*In the Primeval Slime* was exhibited again in Redon's first retrospective in 1894. In the catalogue essay for the exhibition Mellerio wrote, "His work was from Darwinian epochs...in the protoplasm of strange spurring bacilli, of unknown cells. It is the terrible in the infinitely small. Then silhouettes begin vaguely to form, in a painful unconscious effort of matter in the direction of organized being" (Mellerio 1894, 6).

Here, Mellerio has confused microbes and origins, since "bacillus" is a term that refers specifically to bacteria, not to evolutionary forms. Many critics were struck by the number of works at this show with the theme of death and those with primary ciliated forms meant to evoke microbes as much as evolution. According to Auguste Barbey, "In the obscure depths of marshes, illuminated suddenly by a phosphorescent glow, vibrios and germs, bacilli and infusoria big with human faces, sad or inexpressive, produce a dreadful effect" (Barbey 1894). "Vibrio," is a pathogenic microorganism. Gerard Beauregard would call the oeuvre in general "germs" and would remark, "It is all right to exhibit again the fantastic and terrible, but why these microbes...these 'vibrios'?" (Beauregard 1894).

Jean Lorrain would also evoke germs in his review: the works were "nightmares crawling with vibrios and volvox, all of these animalcules that are revealed by the microscope and all the larva of black magic" (Lorrain 1894). While a vibrio is pathogenic, volvox is a tiny organism intermediate between two kingdoms. The volvox, a term Huysmans had used in 1882, is a vibrating ciliated organism found on the surface of stagnant water. This microscopic chlorophyll-filled organism, which in certain species has ova and spermatozoa, was assigned to the protozoa by some microbiologists, to the green algae by botanists. The volvox had attracted a great deal of attention because certain zoologists had attempted to attribute a mouth, organs, and even an eye to it. Because germs and primal evolutionary forms were both attracting a great deal of attention in this period, it is likely that these critics, like Mellerio, were adopting terms used in the popular press without a clear understanding of individual differences between one tiny organism and another. The life and death force of the microorganism carried with it its own poetic power.

In the 1894 exhibition Redon also showed drawings called *Germes* and *Lune noire*. In his review of the show Jean Schmitt noted that the catalogue added "miasma" to the title of the latter, asserting, "This seems to signify: be on your guard against microbes" (Schmitt 1894). It may have been Hennequin who originally gave Redon the idea of the additional title, for when the image was first exhibited in 1882, he had written, "Black moon dancing on top of a puddle of water, it seems to be the materialization of a miasma" (Hennequin 1882, 137).

Redon's *Masque of Red Death* of 1883, also shown in the 1894 retrospective, was one of his best known and most exhibited works (fig. 4). The confined figures in a cold interior with its high walls suggest the urban dweller in compressed spaces, who cannot escape the presence of illness. Although *Masque of Red Death* is based on a macabre
fantastic story by Poe, in which a figure dressed as death at a costume ball turns out to be death itself, the work would have resonated with an audience all too aware of the possibilities of epidemic disease: the masked stranger could be interpreted as the invisible microbe, the crowd as the urban environment, and the ball as a public arena where pathogenic germs could be found.
Along with the popularization of germ theory came an increased awareness of the body and the dangers of crowded spaces. Congested cities brought people from various stations of life into closer contact with one another. At the same time, new railway lines and progress in modes of transportation made travel easier to urban centers, and voyagers and foreigners — some from the colonies — circulated among urban dwellers. These groups were especially suspected of bringing germs with them on skin or clothing or by infected individuals themselves. Sailors and non-nationals were considered a particular menace. As early as 1881, Pasteur had set up a laboratory near Bordeaux to study yellow fever being brought in by immigrants from Senegal. By 1890 Pasteurian outposts were being instituted throughout the colonies to safeguard the health of France and “civilize the natives” with their virulent diseases.6

As an artist whose work engaged the fabric of French fin-de-siècle biological anxiety and Decadent concerns, Redon would have been sensitive to ongoing fears of epidemics, a major focus of the medical community at the end of the nineteenth century. An epidemic illness was even blamed for the defeat of 1871. Even though the smallpox vaccine was the one vaccine available before Pasteur’s time, it was not used to inoculate French troops in the event of an epidemic. France lost 20,000 military men to the disease in 1870; it was the most serious smallpox epidemic in France’s history. Redon had managed to escape this particular epidemic disaster in the war, having been diagnosed simply with “fever” when he was released from the military, but he would have been well aware of the many lives lost around him. The epidemic spread throughout the country in 1870–71; 2,650 lives were lost in Bordeaux alone by the time Redon was recuperating at his home at nearby Peyrelebade (Guillaume 1979). The simple fact that the French had neglected to vaccinate their troops at the outbreak of the war was later interpreted as part of the overly confident attitude of the self-indulgent Second Empire under Napoleon III. Zola takes up this theme in Nana of 1880. In the novel, the prostitute Nana, with her rapidly disintegrating physiognomy, dies not of syphilis but of smallpox on the day the Franco-Prussian War is declared. Her festering, decaying body suggests the once smug and ever immune, but now rotting corpse of France. Epidemic disease could have a moral interpretation.

Typhoid and cholera, both water-borne, were two of the most serious forms of contagion threatening urban communities in fin-de-siècle France. Redon’s decision to create Masque of Red Death in 1883 was probably the result of two epidemic threats. One was the highly publicized 1883 cholera outbreak in Egypt, which menaced western Europe. As the result of near mass hysteria over its advance, both Pasteur and his German rival Robert Koch sent teams to try to identify the cholera bacillus and thus to stem its tide. It was Koch who isolated the comma-shaped bacillus.7 The clock in

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6 Pasteurian outposts were set up in Saigon in 1891, Constantinople in 1892, Tunis in 1893, and Algiers in 1894 (see Marcovich 1988, 103–19).

7 Pasteur’s team failed because the Pasteurian method was to reproduce the disease in animals and then isolate the organism, while Koch worked directly on sick patients. Cholera only affects humans.
Redon’s image which is about to strike midnight and thus the hour of doom would have sounded a familiar note to the French population, making preparations for the advance of cholera in that year (fig. 5). Despite disinfectants poured into city sewers and pressurized water devices put into place, cholera made its way to France through the port cities of Marseilles and Toulon in 1884. The other epidemic that may have inspired Masque of Red Death was a typhoid outbreak that began in France in 1881 and lasted until 1886. While the cholera threat carried with it greater publicity and
campaigns for mass mobilization, the typhoid epidemic eventually claimed the lives of Redon's brother Léo, a medical doctor, late in 1884, and his only sister and favorite sibling several months later.\textsuperscript{8}

Typhoid had been associated with impure water for a number of years and its rod-shaped bacillus had been isolated by the German bacteriologist Carl Eberth in 1880. However, it was only in 1886, when the secretary of the French Academy of Sciences lost three daughters to the illness, that the connection with urban drinking water was firmly validated and the urgency of new filtration systems to protect the public in urban centers was recognized. Pressurized water, used past mid-century, increased circulation but did not remove microbes. In 1886, Paul Brouardel, professor at the Faculty of Medicine in Paris and Pasteurian activist, confirmed the location of the bacillus in public water (Brouardel and Chantemesse 1887).

Epidemics inspired the revived theme of plagues in the Symbolist work of Redon's contemporaries. Arnold Böcklin, Félicien Rops, and Max Klinger all created works on the theme of plague. Only Alfred Kubin, a follower of Redon, would also depict individual pathogenic microorganisms, however. By the 1890s, young, socially engaged Symbolist writers such as Emile Verhaeren, with whom Redon was associated, began to incorporate in their writings the image of the modern, suffocating, claustrophobic city where death stalks the streets.

Along with epidemic disease, infant mortality was a grave problem in France. The preoccupation with infant mortality in this decade is reflected in Jean Schmitt's discussion of Redon's lost drawing \textit{Mort} from the 1894 exhibition, "Death carries with it from the living world paralyzed by fear, young infants" (Schmitt 1894). Infant death was a prominent Decadent and Naturalist theme. In Emile Zola's \textit{The Masterpiece} of 1886 the protagonist's child, healthy and growing in the country, becomes despondent and dies in Paris. Redon's own son was among the spiraling statistics in the last decades of the century. Born at the country estate of Peyrelebade as a healthy robust infant in the spring of 1886, Jean Redon died four months later in Paris. The child who is healthy in the country and succumbs to illness in the city was a typical theme and experience of the period. Redon's son probably died of one of the ailments typical of infant death at this time – diphtheria, bronchopneumonia, or diarrhea. In one intensive study, conducted between 1892 and 1897, 18.4 per cent of newborns were found to die in French cities before their first birthday (Balestre 1901, 2-7, 17-27).

Redon continued to be haunted by infant death and fearful for his second son, born in 1889. In the spring of 1892, when his wife Camille wrote to Mellerio, "For our health and that of our baby we are leaving Paris next Tuesday," she was probably referring to the Redons' response to the last cholera outbreak that would reach France (Camille to Mellerio, May 1892, in Mellerio Archives, Art Institute of Chicago). In July of 1892, Redon, after reading Mellerio's book \textit{La Vie sterile} which itself takes up

\textsuperscript{8} These deaths have been attributed to tuberculosis, but Mellerio noted them as typhoid (Mellerio Archives, Chicago Art Institute). On this epidemic, see Durand-Claye 1882.
the subject of medicine and illness, wrote to thank him and confirmed Camille’s report of their sudden departure from the city: “We left Paris abruptly six weeks ago” (Redon to Mellerio, July 1892, in Mellerio Archives, Art Institute of Chicago). In *La Vie sterile* Mellerio’s fictitious Dr. Painly would say of the current urban generation, “Almost all of them had deplorable health and their blood was neither abundant nor rich enough to establish their equilibrium. With modern existence in the great urban centers, an atmosphere of feverish miasma condensed, enveloping and penetrating everyone” (Mellerio 1892, 17). The importance of fresh air and the countryside to health and the idea of thin, sluggish blood in the city, with attendant notions on susceptibility to disease, pervades Redon’s correspondence of the period. In 1895 we find him sick in Paris, but healthy now that he is in the country and his blood is circulating once again (Redon to Bonger, 7 August 1895, in Leblond 1923, 23). In 1896, when he heard that the Symbolist artist Émile Bernard’s infant son had been born in Cairo, Redon wrote to the collector André Bonger: “My God. I don’t want his son to be ill. That’s hell. The artist passes his life sharpening his sensibility, refining his eyes and hearing, then when he becomes a father he suffers more. We see illness coming in the voice itself, in a mark on the skin that is almost imperceptible, and in the pallor of the face well before any doctor’s science can be prescribed” (Redon to Bonger, 5 August 1896, in Lévy 1987, 56–57). Even when his son reached the age of twelve, Redon remained vigilant. Worried about his son’s bronchitis in 1901 and departing for the country he wrote, “There in Paris one can’t be distracted from the worries of life when illness is in the home” (Redon to Bonger, 1901, Bonger Archives, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

While Redon explored national anxieties over invisible biological dangers, Pasteur held out the promise of health and the country’s recovery. The Pasteurian Revolution represented the hope of mastery over invisible, natural forces and, subsequently, the possibility of the revitalization of the French race. That microbes could and would ultimately be destroyed by the power of man drew on the Darwinian notion of the survival of the fittest (fig. 6).

Despite the rapid international spread of bacteriology, Pasteur himself linked his work with the regeneration of the country, a concept he would use in emphasizing to government officials the importance to the recovery of the nation of instituting policies that focused on the physical health of France. Almost all of Pasteur’s work was directed towards the industries and health of France. Pasteur presented himself first and foremost as a patriot and asserted, “I have lived only for science and the thought of France which supported my courage during the difficult hours.... I associated her greatness with the greatness of science” (quoted in Dubos 1950, 84). Pasteur’s work was thought of as directed towards the reconstitution of human life in France and the cure of the “Prussian canker” (Latour 1990, 16).

Health was an ongoing central issue to a nation concerned with physical inferiority and the survival of the French race. Biological problems were a major focus in French politics during the Third Republic with a deepening bond developing between
medicine and legislators (Ellis 1990; Salomon Bayet 1986; Nye 1984). New medical knowledge regarding the transmission of illness, coupled with the importance placed on a recovering, regenerating France, gave doctors considerable clout during the early part of the Third Republic, and many of them entered politics. Redon would have been aware of the huge impact of Pasteur on politics of the period. As Theodore Zeldin has noted, the power of the French medical corps was the most striking feature of politics after 1870 (Zeldin 1973, 571–604). Jack Ellis has demonstrated that between 1876 and 1914, 10–12 per cent of all legislators were doctors and 13 doctors were cabinet ministers (Ellis 1990, 4). By stressing a nation in decline and the rhetoric of degeneration, doctors who doubled as legislators promoted a medical model for society; medicine increasingly became a social science. Medical men were on nearly every municipal council, and many were mayors (ibid., 3).

As early as 1879, the Council on Hygiene of the Department of the Seine was organized (presided over by Pasteur) and made its recommendations to the government. From 1879 to 1898 municipal bureaus of hygiene were instituted in twenty cities in the

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Fig. 6. "Modern Hercules: Destroyer of Evil Microbes." From *Science illustrée*, 1893.
provinces, including Redon’s native Bordeaux (Chalot 1906). Doctors in government promoted the modernization and expansion of the system of hygienic administration; they were behind laws on purification of water and contaminated food. In 1888 the French national public health committee, the Comité consultatif d’hygiène publique, was transferred from the Ministry of Agriculture to the Ministry of the Interior where it had greater power.

The last two decades of the century witnessed a revitalized campaign for public health. By popularizing the horrific dimensions of the microbe and invoking the fear of degeneration, Pasteurian hygienists were able to begin to win over the public to the cause of personal hygiene and communal concern. In 1884 a law was instituted giving municipal police power to inspect homes for the common good. After 1886, sanitary police began inspecting schools and public buildings.

A horror of dust also arose during this period. The Pasteurian activist Dr. Victor Cornil discovered that dust carried with it tuberculosis, smallpox, diphtheria, measles, and scarlatina (Ellis 1990, 204). The home as well as public facilities were now known to be potentially lethal to personal health. Tuberculosis was one of the most common and deadly diseases of the period. Previously thought to be hereditary in nature, Robert Koch isolated its bacillus in 1882. Redon’s “On the backdrop of our Nights God with His knowing finger traces a multiform implacable nightmare” from the series Les Fleurs du Mal of 1890 suggests both the potential horrors of dust as one sleeps and the dangers of domestic life in general (fig. 7).

The attention paid to public health at the 1889 universal exposition in Paris exemplifies the expanding example of hygiene and its accessibility to Redon. In the display Hygiène de l’habitation, two houses were constructed side by side, the “insalubrious” and the “salubrious” house. This comparison was designed to alert the viewer to domestic hazards. The insalubrious house had no balconies, its windows were blocked, and it was generally dusty throughout. In another area of the exposition devoted to hygiene, various heating devices for liquids, vaporizers, sterilizers, and filters were on view.

By the late 1890s certain diseases such as smallpox, typhoid, and cholera began to abate with general improvements in personal cleanliness, sanitary engineering, and public health laws (Rosen 1958, 336–43). Laboratory diagnosis of water and food improved alimentary conditions. But other diseases like syphilis and tuberculosis, which would find no certain cure until the advent of antibiotics in the 1940s, continued to proliferate. Certain diseases were linked to immoral behavior. Syphilis, tied to prostitution, was viewed as the greatest of all threats to the moral and physical integrity of the race (Corbin 1991, 142). Even the progress in Pasteurian hygiene after the mid-1880s did little to lift the fears of the French over syphilis as statistics of infection mounted.9

9The spirochete of syphilis was not discovered until 1905. On syphilis and prostitution, see Corbin 1982 and 1991. On the idea that syphilis had a hereditary component, see, for example, Fournier 1883 and Julien 1901.
Redon's interest in creating lithographic prints based on Flaubert's *Temptation of St. Anthony* (1874) in the late 1880s, a theme that calls up sexual temptation and the seriousness of its consequences, corresponds to the rising anxiety over syphilis. The third-century ascetic Saint Anthony, was said to have been repeatedly plagued by demons representing all the vices known to man; however, the one that most captured the imagination of the nineteenth century was the torment lust. By the medieval period St. Anthony had been medicalized as a saint associated with diseases that affected the skin, including syphilis. The "temptation of St. Anthony" was the only example of a subject that so captivated Redon that he based three separate sets of lithographs on it. It was Huysmans, himself obsessed with syphilis, a major theme in *A Rebours* — who
encouraged Redon to work on the *Temptation of St. Anthony.* In 1887 he had arranged for the publication of a deluxe edition of Flaubert’s book and requested illustrations by Redon, but this plan was never carried through. Nevertheless, Redon proceeded with the lithographs, which were published the following year.

In reference to the print entitled “And all sorts of frightful creatures arise” from the first Saint Anthony series of 1888, Huysmans wrote in his essay “Le monstre” that the “imperceptible world enlarged and made visible” in Redon’s work was “more terrifying than the fantastic beasts of old masters” (Huysmans 1889, 334–35) (fig. 8). He described the image in terms of “deadly bacilli and protoplasm in a gelatinous environment” (ibid., 335). Redon’s interpretation of the organic menace that threatens to overwhelm the saint was that of the macabre rapidly-breeding microbe.

In his choosing to illustrate passages from the *Temptation of St. Anthony* that treat sex and death, such as “Death: It is I who make you serious; let us embrace” from the third set of St. Anthony lithographs of 1896, Redon was responding to the Symbolist preoccupation with the femme fatale (fig. 9). Yet interest in the venal female venting her predatory, animalistic nature was also stimulated by societal anxiety about contracting a venereal disease at the fin de siècle.

By the 1890s, with the revival of occultism in France, the satanic moral and physical dimensions of the destructive microbe were also linked to the invisible spirit world by some Symbolists. Huysmans, for example, declared in his satanic novel *La-bas* of 1891, “The world is crawling with microbes. Is it any more surprising that it is teeming with spirits and demonic larvae? Water and vinegar pulse with tiny organisms. Why shouldn’t the air, inaccessible to sight, be thick with ripe embryos?” (Huysmans 1891, 213).

In 1896 Redon produced a series of lithographs to illustrate the story *The Haunted House* by William Bulwer Lytton, including “Larvae so bloodless, so hideous” (fig. 10). In this hair-raising ghost story an evil phantom invades the premises. The protagonist of *The Haunted House* reports of his experience of an apparition: “Larvae so bloodless, so hideous that I can in no way describe them except to remind the viewer 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, never beheld before with the naked eye. They came round me thicker, faster and swifter, swimming over my head, crawling over my arm which was outstretched in involuntary command against evil things” (Lytton 1880). Demonic larvae as extensions of evil thought and possession, often invoked by those interested in the occult, is a device uniting the invisible biological menace uncovered by modern science with the satanic world. It suggests the ultimate powerlessness of man against the diabolical forces of l’infiniment petit.

“Microbomania” and “syphilophobia,” both public aspects of the Pasteurian revolution, provided Redon with suggestive subject matter for his biologically oriented *noirs,* which effectively embody contemporary Decadent and even occult themes as well. While today we associate germ theory with many advances that have enhanced health and longevity, at the time Pasteur’s discoveries were made public it was the
threatening potential of invisible microorganisms that gripped the imaginations of artists, writers and the public in general. Redon's enigmatic and fantastic works are a powerful testament to the fears that haunted his generation in light of Pasteur's work.
Fig. 9. “Death: It is I who make you serious—let us embrace.” Plate 19 from The Temptation of St. Anthony, 1896, lithograph. Photo: Art Institute of Chicago.
Fig. 10. Odilon Redon, “Larvae so bloodless, so hideous.” From Edward Bulwer Lytton, La Maison hantée, 1896, lithograph. Photo: Art Institute of Chicago.

References


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