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Redon, Odilon and Candice Black. *Odilon Redon: I Am the First Consciousness of Chaos: the Black Album*. Washington, D.C.: Solar Books, 2010. Pp. 208. ISBN: 978-0979984754

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“Black,” stated Odilon Redon, “is the most essential colour. Nothing prostitutes it” (20). The most recent compilation of Redon’s artwork, *I Am the First Consciousness of Chaos*, is a vivid journey through the darkest of Redon’s creations. This compilation demonstrates Redon’s artistic arc from his subtle Impressionism of the 1870s, towards the Surrealist style that would characterize his work by the fin de siècle. Compiled by Candice Black, the album spans Redon’s work from 1866 to 1896 and includes 250 of Redon’s lithographs, etchings, and charcoals (what he called his “noirs”). Unique to this collection is the choice to pair the “noirs” alongside the Symbolist texts that inspired Redon during his creative process. As Black states in her introduction, “Redon’s ‘noirs’ remain amongst the most enigmatic and esoteric in the artistic lineage that leads directly from Symbolism to Surrealism” (9) and that lineage is never more apparent than when viewed alongside the source texts that inspired them.

The book opens with a darkly evocative quote from Saint-Pol-Roux’s prose poem “Girl Charming Snakes” alongside Redon’s equally chilling “noir” depicting a nude female figure wrapped in a serpent and crowned with the coil of its tail. The juxtaposition of the quote and image is a particularly effective choice as it establishes the haunting quality that will come to characterize the album as a whole. Although Redon’s “noirs” speak for themselves, reaching out from the pages like specters emanating from the depths of the artist’s dream world, Black’s choice in juxtaposing the sketches alongside the poems that inspired them has created a truly unique collection demonstrating Redon’s deep connection to the literary texts that so profoundly influenced his work. The album itself, in including both artwork and literary texts, speaks to the integration of art forms which came to shape the Symbolist and Surrealist movements.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the album is the inclusion of Redon’s “Confessions of an Artist,” which provides readers with a unique perspective on his personal artistic vision. Opening with the statement “I have made an art according to myself,” Redon shortly affirms not only his own vision, but also his indebtedness to his fellow artists whom he reverentially refers to as “masters who led me to the worship of beauty” (11). Recounting his “Confessions” in a languid style, Redon’s memoirs unfold for the reader like a dream narrative. From watching clouds with his father in childhood, to breathing in the sea on the cliffs of Brittany, the “Confessions” allow the reader to experience the potent nostalgia which informed his artistic philosophy before culminating with a description of his artistic coming of age after first reading Baudelaire, Poe, and Flaubert. Black’s decision to preface Redon’s “noirs” with his “Confessions” is an extremely effective decision in that it allows readers to immerse themselves entirely into Redon’s world—a world in which “Art is the *supreme range*, high, salutary, and sacred” (11).

Redon’s “noirs” fully embody elements of the grotesque and the erotic—this is particularly noteworthy with the inclusion of the multiple editions Redon illustrated of Flaubert’s *La Tentation de St. Antoine*. Observing Redon’s growth from the quasi-Impressionist first series of lithographs produced in 1888 to the unquestionably Decadent second series in 1889 is particularly rewarding—especially upon viewing the third and final series of 1896 which hints at a movement towards a proto-Surrealism. Aside from *La Tentation de St. Antoine*, Black includes Redon’s illustrations

for *Les Fleurs du Mal*, *À Rebours*, and Poe's *The Raven*, in addition to various other "noirs" produced during the three decades spanned by the album.

Although *I Am the First Consciousness of Chaos* is comprised predominately by images, the collection speaks to the deeply interwoven literary and artistic traditions which led to the creation of the Surrealist movement in the early twentieth century.