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"Fabrication of Accidents": Factura and Chance in Nineteenth-Century Art

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“Fabrication of accidents”

Factura and chance in nineteenth-century art

DARIO GAMBONI

Every chance object, every accidental, individual object, can become our universal organ. A face, a star, a landscape, an old tree, etc., can begin an era in one's interior life. This is the great realism of fetishism.

Novalis¹

The importance of chance in twentieth-century art has long been recognized, both in practice and in theory, by artists, aestheticians, and art historians alike.² Jean Arp, in retrospect, saw chance (*Zufall*) as nothing

less than “the father of the Muses.”³ Its role is particularly central in Dada, Surrealism, and the movements that further developed some of their premises, such as Abstract Expressionism for “automatism” and Fluxus for the use of random combinations. Antecedents of this tendency have been mainly identified in the tradition of the “image made by chance,” that is, the perception as image and the artistic elaboration of visual configurations (such as clouds, rocks, flames, colored stones, stained walls, or blots) not meant to be an image.⁴ A genealogy was thus built up with ancestors like Alberti, Mantegna, Leonardo, Alexander Cozens and, for the nineteenth century, Justinus Kerner and Victor Hugo. Although there are great names in it, this “tradition” appears, at best, marginal in the history of Western art. Typically, Kerner and Hugo are cases of *Doppelbegabung*, of writers who were also draughtsmen, rather than professional artists.

I want to argue that “chance” has a larger relevance for nineteenth-century art, and that the nineteenth century possesses a decisive importance for the conception and the use of chance in art at large. It seems to me that the growing recourse to chance during this period can be understood as part and symptom of broader transformations in the practice and the theory of art, related to contemporary developments in the other arts, the humanities, and the sciences. These

1. “Tout objet de hasard, tout objet accidentel, individuel, peut devenir notre organe universel. Un visage, une étoile, un paysage, un vieil arbre, etc., peut faire époque dans notre vie intérieure. C'est le grand réalisme du fétichisme.” Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), *Fragments*, quoted after *Les Disciples à Sais et les Fragments de Novalis*, trans. and with an introduction by Maurice Maeterlinck (Brussels: Lacomblez, 1895), pp. 154–155. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

2. See, among other titles, Anton Ehrenzweig, “The Modern Artist and the Creative Accident,” *The Listener* (London), 12 January 1956, pp. 53–54; Rudolph Arnheim, “Accident and the Necessity of Art,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 16, no. 1 (September 1957):18–22; A. Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967 and 1976), pp. 47–63; Hans Holländer, “Ars inveniendi et ars investigandi: Zur surrealistischen Methode,” *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 32 (1970):193–232; Robert Pincus-Witten, “Against Order: Poetical Sources of Chance Art,” in *Against Order: Chance and Art*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1970); Etienne Souriau, “Art et hasard,” *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 18 (1973):154–161; Philippe Junod, *Transparence et opacité. Réflexions autour de l'esthétique de Konrad Fiedler* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1976), pp. 246–249; Toeval, exh. cat. (Utrecht: Utrecht University, Studium Generale, 1972); Walter Bass, “Art and the Unintended,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 29, no. 2 (1989):147–153; Beate Bender, *Freisetzung von Kreativität durch psychische Automatismen. Eine Untersuchung am Beispiel der surrealistischen Avantgarde der zwanziger Jahre* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1989); George L. McKenna, *Art by Chance: Fortuitous Impressions* (Kansas City, Kans.: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 1989); Claude Faure, “Hasard et arts plastiques,” in *Le hasard aujourd'hui*, ed. Emile Noël (Paris: Seuil, 1991), pp. 67–79; Bernhard Holeczek and Linda von Mendgen, *Zufall als Prinzip: Spielwelt, Methode und System in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, exh. cat., Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen (Heidelberg: Braus, 1992); Christian Janecke, “Die Bedeutung des Zufalls in der bildenden Kunst” (Ph.D. diss. Universität des Saarlandes, 1993); id., *Kunst und Zufall*:

Analyse und Bedeutung (Nürnberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 1995); Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 55–76; Joseph Leo Koerner, “Bosch's Contingency,” in *Kontingenz*, ed. Gerhart von Graevenitz and Odo Marquard, Poetik und Hermeneutik 17 (Munich: Fink, 1998), pp. 245–284.

3. Jean Arp, “Die Musen und der Zufall,” *Du* 236 (October 1960):14–17.

4. See, in particular, Horst W. Janson, “The ‘Image Made by Chance’ in Renaissance Thought,” in *De Artibus Opuscula XL. Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Millard Meiss (New York: New York University Press, 1961), vol. 1, pp. 254–266, vol. 2, pp. 87–88; id., “Chance Images,” in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), vol. 1, pp. 340–353; Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, *L'art de la tache. Introduction à la “Nouvelle méthode” d'Alexander Cozens* (Paris: Editions du Limon, 1990).

transformations regard, in particular, the relationship between “conception” and “execution”—*idea* and *factura*—between mental constructions, materials, bodies, and gestures, as well as between author, artwork, and viewer.

But first, a look at lexicology and etymology will be useful. It would take too long to discuss the fascinating ways in which a series of related terms became variously distributed in the European languages to refer to chance as a positive, neutral, and negative agent—one need only think of the pair of Franco-English *faux amis* *chance* and *hasard/hazard*. Significantly, these two words and a few others (for example, *caso*, *Zufall*, or *aléatoire*) originally refer to a fall, to the falling of a thing that thereby escapes control but may also be used for this unpredictability. *Hasard* derives from a play of dice, and *chance* (*cadentia*), from the way in which the dice fall.⁵ The connecting metaphor is made explicit by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “chance” designates “the falling out or happening of events”; on a more abstract level, it means “absence of design or assignable causes, fortuity” and is “often itself spoken of as the cause or determiner of events, which appear to happen without the intervention of law, ordinary causation, or providence.”⁶

It is easy to see why the notion of chance and its interpretation have been central to conceptions and debates about the origin and the governance or working of the universe. To make a long story short, chance could only be a lexical man of straw for the tenants of a divine or natural causality. In this sense, Emile Littré quoted Sévigné (“What is for man chance is for God design”) and Voltaire (“What we call chance is only and can only be the unknown cause of a known effect”), and the *OED* quoted Wollaston (“Chance seems to be only a term, by which we express our ignorance of the cause of any thing”).⁷ The fiercely secular Pierre Larousse revealingly developed the entry for *hasard* in his *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle* into a repudiation of any positive use of the word, in the name

of progress and scientific thought.⁸ A positive conception of chance had notoriously been introduced in antiquity by the atomist Epicurius (to some extent) and more explicitly by his disciple Lucretius with the notion of *clinamen*, the “gentle swerve,” modifying in unpredictable ways the vertical fall of atoms and thereby permitting the formation of matter, on the one hand, the existence of human free will, on the other hand.⁹ This long-discredited notion attracted a renewed interest in the late nineteenth century, at a time when the mechanistic determinism of modern science and its application to the understanding of the physical and mental nature of man were questioned from various sides, including by writers and artists. The word *chance* was not always used in this connection, neither was a verbal formulation always involved. For the purpose of this study, I will therefore resort to a inclusive—and in its way also negative—working definition of chance, as that which escapes or resists deliberation or planning (in the future), control (in the present), repetition, and explanation (in the past).

In *A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscapes*, published in 1785, the English artist and pedagogue Alexander Cozens used the word *chance*. It stood, in fact, at the core of his method, which consisted in making blots (fig. 1) that would then be interpreted as landscapes, yielding compositions after which sketches and finally drawings could be made. Cozens discussed the “blot” as follows: “An artificial blot is a production of chance, with a small degree of design. . . . All the shapes are rude and unmeaning, as they are formed with the swiftest hand. . . . The blot is not a drawing, but an assemblage of accidental shapes, from which a drawing can be made.”¹⁰ He was aware of Leonardo’s example, and while claiming that he had discovered it only “in the course of prosecuting this scheme,” he quoted the famous passage on “a new method of assisting the invention” from the *Treatise on Painting*: “If

5. *Trésor de la langue française* (Paris: C.N.R.S., 1981), vol. 9, pp. 698–701. See also Maurice Kendall, “Chance,” in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973), vol. 1, pp. 335–340.

6. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), vol. 3, p. 10.

7. E. Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, 1863–1872 (Paris: Gallimard Hachette, 1971), vol. 2, p. 428; *The Oxford English Dictionary* (see note 6).

8. P. Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*, 1864–1876 (Paris: Larousse, n.d.), vol. 9, pp. 96–97.

9. Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 2.216–293. See Jean-Pierre Faye, “Épicure et la première déclinaison,” in *Epicure, Doctrines et maximes*, trans. with notes and a preface by Maurice Solovine (Paris: Hermann, 1965), pp. 7–29; Michel Serres, *La naissance de la physique dans le texte de Lucrèce. Fleuves et turbulences* (Paris: Minuit, 1977).

10. A. Cozens, *A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscapes* (London: Dixwell, 1785), reprinted in Lebensztejn (see note 4), p. 471.

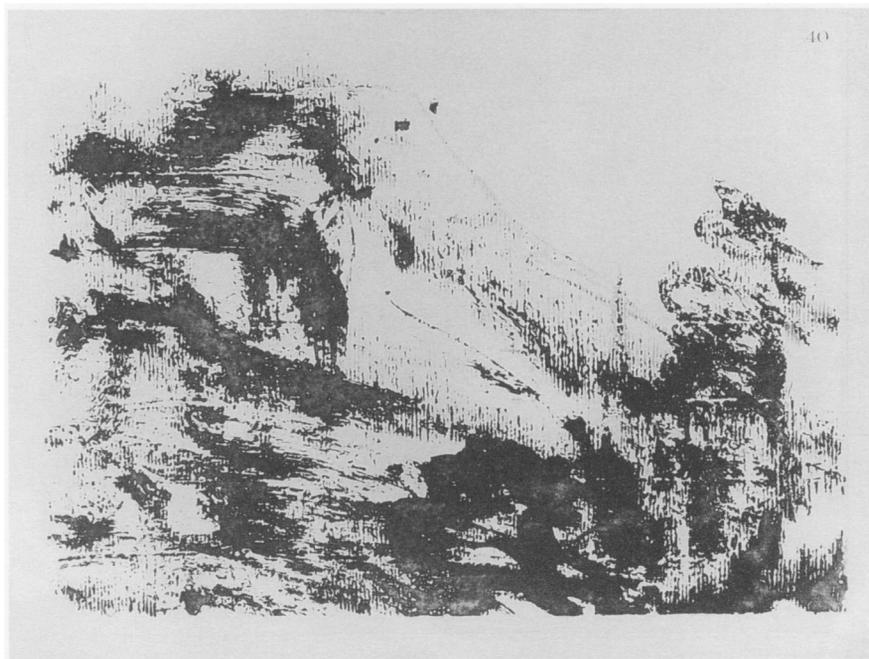


Figure 1. Alexander Cozens, blot, pl. 40 from *A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscapes* (London, 1785). Aquatint, 24 x 31.5 cm. New Haven, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

you look upon an old wall covered with dirt, or the odd appearance of some streaked stones, you may discover several things like landscapes, battles, clouds, uncommon attitudes, humorous faces, draperies, etc. Out of this confused mass of objects, the mind will be furnished with abundance of designs and subjects perfectly new."¹¹

It can be argued that whatever the causal relationship between Leonardo's and Cozens's "methods," they both refer to the anthropological basis for the "image made by chance" phenomenon, namely the active, imaginative, or projective dimension of visual perception, a fact amply documented in the most diverse times and cultures.¹² But the uses, functions, and meanings (including the artistic ones) associated with this phenomenon have varied greatly and call for

distinctions. Cozens saw his contribution as an improvement upon Leonardo's precept, because instead of having to be sought after, his chance images were "made at will" and thus "artificial" or, to put it differently, intentionally accidental.¹³ He was aware of the potential contradiction involved in this oxymoron, since "in making blots it frequently happens, that the

4); D. Gamboni, "Images potentielles et 'soupçons d'aspect': la contribution d'Odilon Redon à l'histoire de l'ambiguïté visuelle," in *Odilon Redon. La nature de l'invisible/Odilon Redon. La natura dell'invisibile*, exh. cat., Lugano, Museo Cantonale d'Arte (Milan: Skira, 1996), pp. 94–127.

13. Lebensztejn (see note 4), p. 471. As Janson noted, Cozens failed to mention another passage in which Leonardo quoted Botticelli saying that "by merely throwing a sponge full of divers colors at a wall, it left a stain on that wall, where a fine landscape was seen," which, besides reminding of the Protogenes anecdote told by Pliny (*Hist. nat.* 35, 10) anticipated much more closely his own method ("Image Made by Chance" [see note 4], p. 265). See Chaké Matossian, "L'éponge, au hasard: sur tuchê et automaton," *Part de l'œil* 9 (1993):151–159 and, on Leonardo's own version of "blotting," which he called *componimento inculto*, E. H. Gombrich, "Conseils de Léonard sur les esquisses de tableaux," *Etudes d'art* 8–10 (1953–1954):177–197.

11. Ibid.

12. See Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), pp. 93–115, 181–202; Janson, "Image Made by Chance" (see note 4); Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 43–100; Lebensztejn (see note

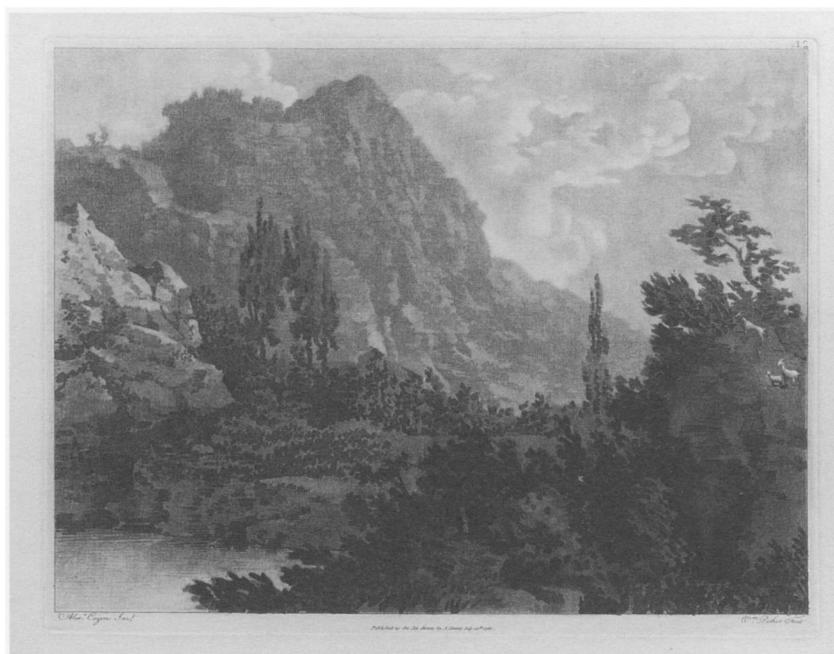


Figure 2. Alexander Cozens, finished drawing after the blot reproduced in fig. 1, pl. 42 from *A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscapes* (London, 1785). Aquatint and mezzotint, engraved by William Pether, 24 x 31.5 cm. New Haven, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

person blotting is inclined to direct his thoughts to the objects, or particular parts, which constitute the scene or subject, as well as to the general disposition of the whole," but this only shortened the way from the blot to the landscape. However, ambiguity was essential, and he saw it as "a singular advantage peculiar to this method" that "one artificial blot will suggest different ideas to different persons."¹⁴ It can be seen as a further "improvement" of the artistic use of chance that in the course of the nineteenth century, the suggestive quality of the blot tended to be retained in the final work of art and thus made available to the viewer, instead of being restricted to the preliminary stage of "invention" as it was with Cozens, whose finished works (fig. 2) do not share the visual appeal of the blots reproduced in his treatise.

An overt recourse to chance could hardly have been legitimized beyond such a restriction in the eighteenth century, despite the contemporary emphasis on the role of the imagination and on the viewer's response to the work of art; according to Oppé, Cozens's treatise gained

him the nickname "blot-master to the town" and "the obloquy which was for long almost his only memorial."¹⁵ This remained true during the first part of the nineteenth century, and the genres and authors that favored the use of chance, such as the sketch, the study sheet, and the nonprofessional artist, shared a more or less private nature and audience.

In a little-known essay devoted to Nicolas Charlet, the Romantic writer and journalist Jules Janin explicitly opposed the *esquisse*, "the sketch," to the "formal painting, the licked, pretty, polished, varnished, trimmed painting exhibited in public with all the humiliations that art must endure when it wants to please the crowd."¹⁶ He defined chance as the artist's "blind god" and advised Charlet to surrender to it: "Once more, ride the horse of your mind with a loose rein, go as you like;

15. A. P. Oppé, *Alexander and John Robert Cozens* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), pp. 41, 156–162.

16. J. Janin, *Les Catacombes. Romans—contes—nouvelles* (Paris: Werdet, 1839), p. 234: "le tableau d'apparat, léché, joli, poli, vernis, paré, exposé en public avec toutes ces humiliations que l'art doit subir quand il veut plaire à la foule."

14. Lebensztejn (see note 4), p. 473.



Figure 3. Eugène Delacroix, study for *The Death of Sardanapalus*, before 1827. Pen, brown and black inks, watercolor on paper. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques.

throw shape on your way, throw it with both hands, here and there, in the corner of your sheet, in the middle, in the sky, below the ground. Pray, what do logic and perspective matter? Caprice will be your god, chance will be your guide. The happy mentor! It is so easy to obey this chief gentleman of the imagination and of the mind, chance, always ready to approve, to praise, to reward you for your work, whatever it is!"¹⁷

Better than most drawings by Charlet, one of Delacroix's studies for *The Death of Sardanapalus* (fig. 3) is an example of Janin's "well confused, well deformed dream." Representing the tyrant's bed, one of the sacrificed women on the right, and an accumulation of objects in the foreground, it displays a chaos of arabesques charged with physical and emotional energy,

17. Ibid., pp. 236–237: "Encore une fois donc, mets la bride sur le cou de ta pensée, marche à ta guise; jette la forme sur ton chemin, jette-la à pleines mains, çà et là, dans le coin de ta planche, au milieu, dans le ciel, plus bas que terre. Qu'importe, je te prie, la logique et la perspective? Le caprice sera ton dieu, le hasard sera ton guide. Heureux mentor! Il est si facile de lui obéir à ce premier gentilhomme de l'imagination et de la pensée, le hasard, toujours prêt à approuver, à louer, à vous récompenser de votre ouvrage, quel qu'il soit!"

out of which the image emerges, captured *in statu nascendi*. Another form of drawing indebted to chance was consistently explored by Rodolphe Töpffer (fig. 4), who is reported to have extracted a pen drawing out of an ink-stained sheet of paper and who wrote that "the graphic stroke, because of its rapid convenience, of its rich indications, of its happy and unexpected accidents, is admirably fertilizing for the invention."¹⁸ Janin again seems to have described precisely this sort of visual association of ideas when he wrote that "the sketch is the artist's dream; it is his thought running, diffuse, scintillating, capricious, sentimental, merry, wanton, passing from portrait to caricature, from joy to tears, from aristocratic to bourgeois."¹⁹

18. Daniel Magetti, ed., *Töpffer* (Geneva: Skira, 1996), pp. 28–29, 273–274: "le trait graphique, à cause de sa rapide commodité, de ses riches indications, de ses hasards heureux et imprévus, est admirablement fécondant pour l'invention." On Töpffer's (poor) opinion of Cozens's method, see p. 274.

19. Janin (see note 16), p. 235: "Le croquis c'est le rêve de l'artiste; c'est sa pensée qui court, diffuse, scintillante, capricieuse, sentimentale, rieuse, folle, qui passe du portrait à la caricature, de la joie aux larmes, du grand seigneur au bourgeois."



Figure 4. Rodolphe Töpffer, *A Test of the Reed Pen for Drawing and for Writing*, 22 February 1834. Pen and ink, 8 x 17.7 cm. Geneva, Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire, coll. Suzannet.

The Romantic defense of the fragmented, the unfinished, the naïve, and the irrational obviously favored a recourse to chance, particularly in drawing. However, its intervention can also be traced in works by artists affiliated to the Academic tradition, for example in Ingres's drawn and painted studies (fig. 5). To my knowledge, the peculiar aesthetics of the study sheet have not been explored. They are of great interest in our context, because to the explicit instrumental logic of an accumulation of compositionally disconnected units, they add de facto a visual unity that can be so strong as to completely subvert the former. Since the planning of an overall composition lies outside the goals of a study sheet, it tends to be unintentional, probably unconscious, and owes much of its effect to this haphazard origin. Nevertheless, a combination of "chance" and "design" cannot be excluded: at closer examination, the details from Ingres's *The Apotheosis of Homer* appear not to have been originally painted on the same canvas but to have been carefully pasted together at some later stage, in order to produce a both centrifugal and centripetal knot of eloquent hands, which seems to respond to Géricault's tragic studies of severed limbs.

Otto Stelzer has shown how much twentieth-century art—which, writing in the early 1960s, he still subsumed under the term "abstraction"—was prefigured and

prepared by writers, whose status allowed them to experiment freely without appearing to jeopardize the seriousness of high art.²⁰ In a time when writing was performed with a quill or a metallic pen dipped into ink, it stood much closer to drawing (fig. 4) than does writing with a typewriter or a computer. The accidental origin that the German physician and poet Justinus Kerner ascribed to his practice of blotting was based on this very proximity: because of his increasing blindness, he would often inadvertently let ink fall on his sheet of paper; having folded the sheet to throw it away, he then discovered symmetrical drawings of "arabesques, animal and human figures," which he decided to "bring to a somewhat greater completion through exercise."²¹ Although his *Kleksographien* (fig. 6)—from the German *Klecks*, "blot"—reveal a great deal of conscious, and indeed inventive, manipulation, ranging from the addition of penstrokes to the collage of several folded blots, Kerner never tired of insisting that what he called images of Hades and of Hell were not created because

20. O. Stelzer, *Die Vorgeschichte der abstrakten Kunst. Denkmodelle und Vor-Bilder* (Munich: Piper, 1964).

21. J. Kerner, *Kleksographien*, mit Illustrationen nach den Vorlagen des Verfassers (Stuttgart, Leipzig, Berlin, Vienna: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt [1890]); V. Kerner's introduction is dated 1857, but the book was only published posthumously.

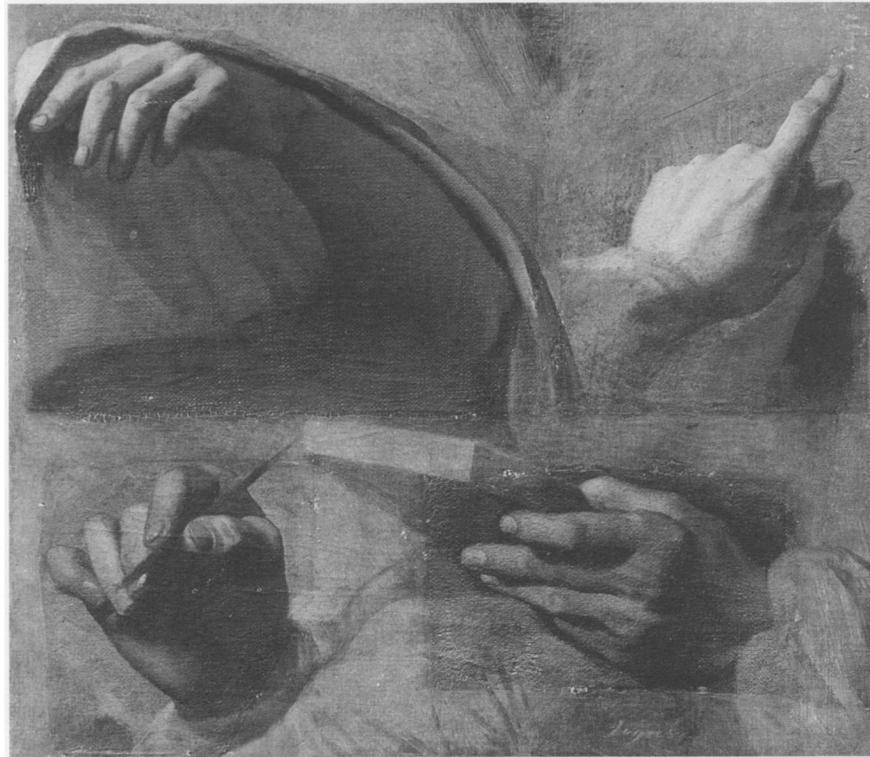


Figure 5. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Study of Hands (for The Apotheosis of Homer)*, circa 1826–1827(?). Oil on canvas pasted on wood, 33 x 36.8 cm. Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon.

of his “will and capacity” but had instead “depicted themselves”: “The hand of man did not make this picture, / Which like the other ones came by its own means / Unexpectedly out of the ink night.”²² Kerner was a disciple and biographer of the physicist Franz Anton Mesmer, and he associated these graphic experiments with Mesmer’s belief in magnetism and in the possibility of communicating with spirits.²³ Interestingly, Kerner mentioned the use of coffee instead of ink, thus linking his art with a traditional tool of divination, and connected it both with his own “earliest childhood” and with “the childhood of ancient peoples,”

22. *Ibid.*, vol. 7, pp. 12, 58: “Menschenhand hat nicht dies Bild gemacht, / Gleich den andern kam’s durch eig’ne Macht / Ungeahnet aus der Tinte Nacht.”

23. See Karl-Ludwig Hofmann and Christmut Praeger, “Bilder aus Klecksen: Zu den Klecksographien von Justinus Kerner,” in *Justinus Kerner: Nur wenn man von Geistern spricht*, ed. Andrea Berger-Fix (Stuttgart: Erdmann, 1986), pp. 124–152.

noting the resemblance of some of his blots with “idols, urns, mummies etc.”²⁴

Victor Hugo, the other major (and artistically far superior) adept of chance among nineteenth-century writers-draughtsmen, was also an adept of spiritism during the 1850s, and his oeuvre includes drawings attributed to the turning table.²⁵ But these are exceptions, and he generally took responsibility for his graphic experiments, in which he liked to conceal or display his own name (fig. 7). On the other hand, Hugo not only welcomed but actually courted chance in every

24. Kerner (see note 21), p. vi.

25. See *Chez Victor Hugo. Les tables tournantes de Jersey. Procès-verbaux des séances*, présentés et commentés par Gustave Simon (Paris: Louis Conard, 1923); *Soleil d’encre. Manuscrits et dessins de Victor Hugo*, exh. cat., Paris, Musée du Petit Palais (Paris: Paris Musées, 1986), p. 134; Mark Gisbourne, “Le spiritisme chez Victor Hugo, Justinus Kerner et quelques autres,” in *L’âme au corps: arts et sciences 1793–1993*, ed. Jean Clair, exh. cat., Paris, Grand Palais (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1993), pp. 488–499.

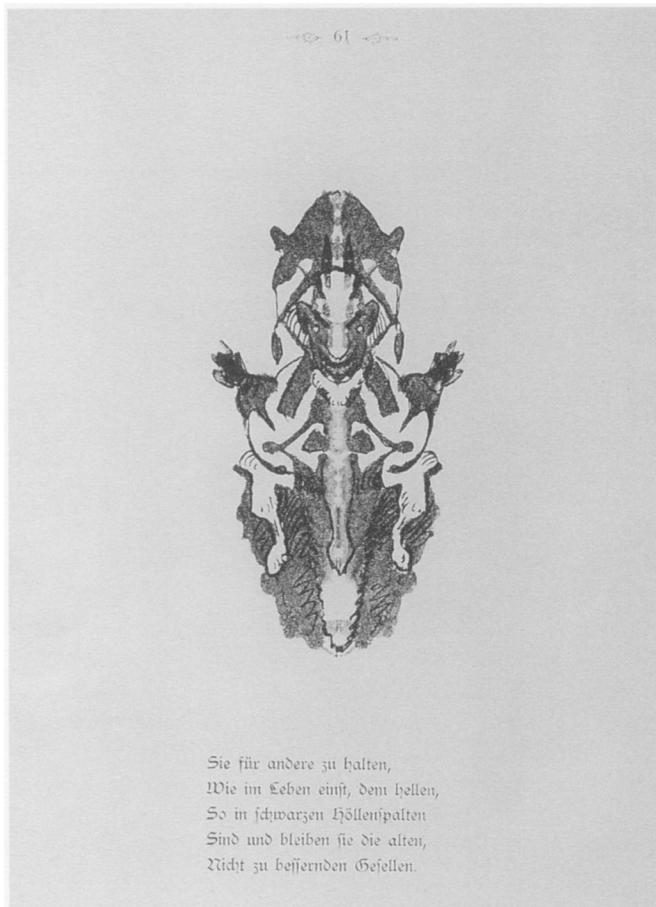


Figure 6. Justinus Kerner, inkblot, before 1857. From *Kleksographien* (Stuttgart etc., 1890), p. 61. Photo: National Gallery of Art, Washington.

possible way, resorting to the most unusual materials and instruments and devising the conditions of a process in which he was only a partner and the outcome of which was unpredictable. Henri Focillon has beautifully evoked how, "without any preliminary sketch, Hugo would largely pour ink and coffee and work in this moving night which he divided as he liked, turning to account the accidents of the catastrophe."²⁶ Hugo admired Lucretius, and he mimicked or reenacted in his art the

26. H. Focillon, "Les dessins de Victor Hugo" (1914), reprinted in *Victor Hugo, dessins* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 204: "Sur le dessin, commencé par un détail infime, sans préparation d'ensemble, sans ébauche préliminaire, Hugo versait largement l'encre et le café et travaillait dans cette nuit mouvante qu'il répartissait à son gré, en tirant parti des hasards de la catastrophe."



Figure 7. Victor Hugo, *The Orientals*, 1855–1856. Pen, brush, black and brown inks, wash, watercolor and gouache, lace imprint on paper, 17.8 x 11 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

chaos in which in 1854 he saw "the placenta of the universe."²⁷ In his preface to the *Album Chenay* in 1863, which reproduced Hugo's drawings for the first time and introduced them to a larger circle, Théophile Gautier related them to the poet's "visionary eye" for which "the life hidden underneath the forms reveals itself . . . in its

27. V. Hugo, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Le Club Français du Livre, 1969), vol. 10, p. 1163; see Jean-François Marquet, "Victor Hugo et l'infiniment petit," *Poésie* 31 (1984–1985):59–77.

mysterious activity."²⁸ As for the drawings proper, he mentioned "the fortuitous caprices of the unconscious hand" and "the transformation of an ink or a coffee blot," while Hugo spoke of "some sorts of attempts at drawing made by me during hours of almost unconscious reverie, with what ink was left in my pen."²⁹

The latter statement is typical of Hugo's ambivalent attitude toward his artistic endeavors, which he feared could compete with, or be used against, his verse and his novels.³⁰ But he was well aware of their importance and quality. Indeed, while Kerner's dependence on symmetry and limited range of means make him primarily interesting as a direct ancestor of Hermann Rorschach's psychological test, Hugo's drawings antecede and often surpass the Surrealist techniques of "automatism." A more general reason for the ambiguity surrounding works indebted to chance and for the mid-century preeminence of amateur draughtsmen in this field is the fact that premeditation, mastery, and accountability were required of artists as much—if in different ways—as of other professionals. Mentioned by adverse critics, an alleged recourse to chance generally amounted to an accusation of incompetence and fraud, and this remained true for all the arts well until the end of the century (and later among "philistines"). To name two examples from the year 1891, the Parnassian poet Leconte de Lisle, then seventy-three years old, accused the Symbolists of throwing types in the air and expecting them to fall on the paper as verse; while an unnamed Belgian art critic wrote: "Nothing is easier than to make a work by Odilon Redon: it is the process extolled by Leonardo, chance in the confusion of lines, applied to the spots of light and shade; in one word, it is chance which produces a picture, a whole."³¹

This does not mean that chance could not play an acknowledged role in the genesis of a painting, as the

example of Delacroix can show again, but it was bound to be a subordinate role, restrained either to the preliminary stages—and therefore to the "sketch"—or to the realization as distinct from the conception.³² On 25 January 1824, Delacroix noted in his diary that he had received the visit of three painters and relatives while he was only beginning to paint the woman dragged by a horse for his *Massacre of Scio*: "Imagine how they treated *my poor creation*, which they saw in the most chaotic state [*dans le moment du tripotage*], when I alone can guess how it is going to turn out."³³ On 27 January 1847, comparing the painter's art with the actor's art, he wrote the following concluding lines: "Execution, in painting, should always have about it something of improvisation, and therein lies the capital difference between it and the execution of the actor. That of the painter will be fine only if he has saved himself for a certain abandon later on, for discoveries made as the works advances, etc."³⁴ One may venture to see an example of this painterly serendipity in the large study for *The Assassination of the Bishop of Liege* of 1827 (fig. 8), in which the golden coruscation of the bishop's garments, created with the tripotage of a thick impasto, blends the glory of the ecclesiastical pomp with the horror of a carnage, evoking Rembrandt's *Flayed Ox*.

In the 1880s and 1890s, however, this situation changed, and the artistic use of chance was extended and made more explicit both in practice and in theory.³⁵

32. The two are connected in Delacroix's search for a "painting which would eventually resume the strength of the sketch" (peinture qui renouerait en fin de parcours avec la force de l'esquisse). Hubert Damisch, *Traité du trait. Tractatus tractus* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1995), p. 155.

33. *The Journal of Eugène Delacroix*, trans. Walter Pach (New York: Covici and Friede, 1937), p. 60; E. Delacroix, *Journal 1822–1863* (Paris: Plon, 1980), p. 49: "Jugez comme ils ont traité *mon pauvre ouvrage*, qu'ils ont vu justement dans le moment du tripotage, où moi seul je peux augurer quelque chose."

34. Pach (see note 33) p. 138; Delacroix (see note 33), p. 124: "L'exécution, dans la peinture, doit toujours tenir de l'improvisation, et c'est en ceci qu'est la différence capitale avec le comédien. L'exécution du peintre ne sera belle qu'à condition qu'il se sera réservé de s'abandonner un peu, de trouver en faisant, etc."

35. In his *Théorie de l'invention* (Paris: Hachette, 1881), the aesthetician Paul Souriau saw chance as the "prime principle of invention." He later qualified this claim but still considered the "works improvised pencil in hand, where the draughtsman searches for his idea as he executes it, in the very accidents of the execution" (les œuvres improvisées le crayon en main, où le dessinateur cherche son idée à mesure qu'il l'exécute, et dans les hasards même de l'exécution) (*La suggestion dans l'art* [Paris: Alcan, 1893], p. 100).

28. *Dessins de Victor Hugo, gravés par Paul Chenay, texte par Théophile Gautier* (Paris: Castel, 1863), p. 9: "la vie cachée sous les formes se révèle . . . dans son activité mystérieuse."

29. *Ibid.*, p. 7, letter of 5 October 1862.

30. See Pierre Georget, "Histoire d'un 'peintre malgré lui': Victor Hugo, ses dessins et les autres," in V. Hugo, *Œuvres complètes*. Vol. 2, *Œuvre graphique* (Paris: Le Club Français du Livre, 1969), pp. 13–80.

31. Jules Huret, *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire* (Paris: Charpentier, 1891), p. 279; *Revue Belge*, quoted in anonymous, "Petite chronique," *L'Art Moderne* 43 (25 October 1891):345: "Rien n'est plus facile que de faire de l'Odilon Redon: c'est le procédé préconisé par le Vinci, le hasard dans l'enchevêtrement des lignes, qui est appliqué aux taches de clarté et d'ombre; en un mot, c'est le hasard qui produit un tableau, un ensemble."



Figure 8. Eugène Delacroix, detail of the study for *The Assassination of the Bishop of Liege*, 1827. Oil on canvas, 60 x 72.5 cm. Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon.

I will take again two examples, in the graphic arts and in painting, those of Odilon Redon and of August Strindberg. Although we have seen that Redon was accused of abandoning his art to “chance,” he did not use this word himself. But he recalled how his father and later his master Rodolphe Bresdin had initiated him into the world of imagination and of art, by making him see accidental images.³⁶ Redon’s improvement upon Leonardo’s method, which he was familiar with—while there is no trace of his being familiar with Cozens’s—consisted in keeping his final product true to its perceptive origin and in waiving the distinction

36. O. Redon, *A soi-même. Journal (1867–1915). Notes sur la vie, l’art et les artistes* (Paris: Corti, 1961), pp. 10, 132.

between conception and execution in favor of an open-ended process. He wrote in 1902 that his forms would exist “according to the beholder’s state of mind,” and responded in 1898 to André Mellerio’s insistent questions on his “preliminary concept” that it was often “like a starting enterprise, which one abandoned on the way to follow the charming and unexpected paths of fancy, this sovereign, which suddenly opens for us magnificent, surprising allurements, and which subdues us.”³⁷ Accumulating the layers of this associative genesis, his drawings (fig. 9) became palimpsests, which confront the viewer with a plurality of perceptive as well as interpretative possibilities. In the case of prints, various states sometimes document these successive stages and show how Redon could welcome accidents and use his own works as suggestive “blots.” In 1891 he thus reworked a composition from a broken lithographic stone after turning it upside-down, and late in his life, he completely transformed etchings executed more than forty years earlier, literally extracting the image of a nude woman’s hair out of the lines originally depicting a cloud.³⁸ It is fitting that printmaking should appear at this stage, because by breaking up the production of an image into a series of discrete units, it introduces possibilities of redirection, manipulation, and combination, which lend themselves to the intervention of chance (one may only think, for other examples, of Degas’s monotypes or, closer to us, of Jasper Johns’s prints).³⁹

Strindberg is more than a writer-draughtsman in that he thought of living on his paintings in the early 1890s. As Harry Carlson has pointed out, it is in large measure

37. *Ibid.*, p. 100: “selon l’état d’esprit du regardeur”; O. Redon, *Lettres d’Odilon Redon 1878–1916* (Paris and Brussels: Librairie nationale d’art et d’histoire and G. van Oest, 1923), p. 33: “comme une entreprise de départ que l’on abandonna au cours du chemin pour suivre les sentiers charmants et imprévus de la fantaisie, cette souveraine, qui nous ouvre soudain des séductions magnifiques, surprenantes, et qui nous subjugué.”

38. See Suzanne Folds McCullagh and Inge Christine Swenson, “A New ‘Parsifal’ by Odilon Redon,” *Print Collector’s Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (October 1976):108–109.

39. Degas also recycled some of his images, transforming, in his case, a nude into a landscape; see Richard Kendall, “A Little Mystery, Some Vagueness, Some Fantasy . . . : Degas’ Anthropomorphic Landscapes,” *Apollo* 139 (February 1994):39–45. Johns said, for instance, that “printmaking encourages ideas because of the lapse of time involved. . . . The medium itself suggests things changed or left out” (quoted in Joseph E. Young, “Jasper Johns: An Appraisal,” *Art International* 13 [September 1969]:50–56).



Figure 9. Odilon Redon, *Head of Saint John the Baptist after Andrea Solario*, circa 1868. Graphite and black conté crayon on paper, 34 x 28.8 cm. New York, The Woodner Family Collections.

via his paintings and his essay "The New Arts! or The Role of Chance in Artistic Creation" that the renewal of his art as a dramatist was effected.⁴⁰ This essay, published in French in 1894, made one of the most radical claims to date for the artistic use of chance.⁴¹ Strindberg suggested basing a new aesthetics, a "theory of automatic art," on the phenomenon of accidental images, comparing the perception of "modernist paintings," in which the viewer "assists at the birth of the picture," to the "oscillation of impressions" caused by an ambiguous natural spectacle.⁴² He explained that

40. H. G. Carlson, *Out of Inferno: Strindberg's Reawakening as an Artist* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1996). See also Michael Robinson, *New Arts, New Worlds!: Strindberg and Painting* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1994).

41. A. Strindberg, "Du hasard dans la production artistique," *Revue des revues* 11 (15 November 1894):265–270, reprinted as A. Strindberg, *Du hasard dans la production artistique* (Caen: L'Échoppe, 1990), translated by M. Robinson in *Selected Essays by August Strindberg* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 103–107.

42. *Ibid.* Robinson translates "oscillation des impressions" as "rapidly changing impressions" (p. 105).

he based his own paintings on "palette scrapings" and described or advocated analogous methods in sculpture and music. He actually discussed with his friend the composer Leopold Littmansson the advantages of "fortuitous music," which he defined as the "teleology of chance," and imagined founding with Littmansson a "Strindberg Chat Noir or Procopé" (after the names of famous cabarets), an idea that connects his endeavors with the contemporary artistic counterculture of Montmartre.⁴³ Strindberg's contemporary experiments with photography and in particular his *Celestographs* (fig. 10), photographic plates immersed in developing fluid and directly exposed to the night sky in order to capture an immediate image of the stars, show that despite the deeply subjective and even idiosyncratic character of his art, he was trying to reduce his own intervention as much as possible.

43. Torsten Eklund, ed., *August Strindbergs Brev* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1968), vol. 10, pp. 215, 296 ("slumpens teleologi"). See Phillip Dennis Cate and Mary Shaw, eds., *The Spirit of Montmartre: Cabarets, Humor, and the Avant-Garde, 1875–1905* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 1996).



Figure 10. August Strindberg, *Celestograph*, 1893–1894. Stockholm, Royal Library.

This elimination of personality was also pursued by Mallarmé, who had proclaimed on 14 May 1867 to his friend Cazalis: "That will let you know that I am now impersonal and no longer the Stéphane that you knew—but a capacity possessed by the spiritual Universe to see itself and develop itself, through what was once me."⁴⁴ In 1876 he saw the painting of Manet and the Impressionists in the same light, writing that "At that critical hour for the human race when nature desires to work for herself, she requires certain lovers of hers . . . to loose the restraint of education, to let hand and eye do what they will, and thus through them, reveal herself."⁴⁵ This ideal resulted in a twofold attitude toward chance: Mallarmé, on the one hand, tended to reject contingency, defining poetry as "chance vanquished word by word," while, on the other hand, he based the exponential dimensions of his utopian project, the "Book," on systematic combination and probabilities.⁴⁶ He evoked, as a model of this multiplied reading, the wind's casual turning over of the pages of a publication: "Seated on a garden bench where a recent book is lying, I like to watch a passing gulf half open it and breathe life into many of its outer aspects, which are so obvious that no one in the history of literature has ever thought about them."⁴⁷ One remembers that Leconte de Lisle, Mallarmé's former mentor, accused the Symbolists in 1891 of composing their poems by letting types fall like dice on the

paper.⁴⁸ In a paradigmatic expression of avant-gardist iconoclasm, Mallarmé's dissident disciple Alfred Jarry imagined in his 1898 *Deeds and Opinions of Dr Faustroll, Pataphysician* to have the canvases of Academic artists recycled by a painting machine entrusted to the Douanier Rousseau.⁴⁹ An explicit homage to Lucretius, this "mechanical monster"—which, after covering them "with the calm uniform of chaos," ejaculated its own pictures on the walls of the Palais des Machines—was named *Clinamen*.

Returning to the visual arts proper, the use of chance was not restricted to two-dimensionality. In fact, one of its most consistent practitioners was Auguste Rodin. According to Albert Elsen, Rodin was "the first sculptor in history to take seriously the partial figure as a complete work of art and to accept, court and even welcome chance and accident in the making or subsequent history of his sculptures."⁵⁰ Rodin indeed revered the fragment and vehemently opposed restorations, writing in *The Cathedrals of France*: "It is repairs which produce disorder. A break is always due to chance, and chance is a great artist."⁵¹ In a manner analogous to Cozens's intentional blots, he produced intentional ruins and developed a prodigious activity of assemblage and combination, using his original plasters as well as casts and photographs to extract ever newer compositions out of his previous creations (fig. 11).⁵² The so-called decorative arts were touched by the same tendency, partly owing to the intervention of painters such as Gauguin, partly because of the arrival of

44. *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*, ed. and trans. Rosemary Lloyd (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 74; S. Mallarmé, *Correspondance complète 1862–1871, suivi de Lettres sur la poésie 1872–1898*, ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 343: "Je suis maintenant impersonnel, et non plus Stéphane que tu as connu—mais une aptitude qu'a l'Univers Spirituel à se voir et à se développer, à travers ce qui fut moi."

45. S. Mallarmé, "The Impressionists and Edouard Manet," *Art Monthly Review* (London), September 1876, reprinted in *Documents Stéphane Mallarmé*, vol. 1, ed. Carl Paul Barbier (Paris: Nizet, 1968), p. 84.

46. S. Mallarmé, "Le Mystère dans les Lettres," *Revue Blanche*, 1 September 1896, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 387; Jacques Scherer, *Le "Livre" de Mallarmé*, rev. ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1977).

47. S. Mallarmé, *Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters*, trans. and with an introduction by Bradford Cook (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), p. 25; "Le Livre, instrument spirituel," *Revue Blanche*, 1 July 1895, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 378: "Sur un banc de jardin, où telle publication neuve, je me réjouis si l'air, en passant, entr'ouvre et, au hasard, anime, d'aspects, l'extérieur du livre: plusieurs—à quoi, tant l'aperçu jaillit, personne depuis qu'on lut, peut-être n'a pensé."

48. Huret (see note 31); in the same series of interviews, published first in the newspaper *L'Echo de Paris*, Mallarmé reproached, in his turn, the Parnassians with showing things instead of suggesting them, thus depriving the readers' minds of "the delicious joy of believing that they create" (*ibid.*, p. 60).

49. *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1911), in A. Jarry, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, ed. Michel Arrivé (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp. 710–712.

50. Letter of 18 June 1971 to Sherman Lee, quoted in Bruce Christman, "Twenty Years after the Bomb: Maintaining Cleveland's *The Thinker*," *Journal of the American Institute of Conservation* 37 (1998):179; see A. E. Elsen, *The Partial Figure in Modern Sculpture: From Rodin to 1969* (Baltimore, Md.: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 1969), pp. 16–28.

51. A. Rodin, *Les cathédrales de France* (Paris: Colin, 1914), p. 66: "Ce sont les réparations qui produisent le désordre. Une cassure est toujours le fait du hasard; or, le hasard est très artiste."

52. Nicole Barbier, "Assemblages de Rodin," in *Le corps en morceaux*, exh. cat. (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1990), pp. 241–251.



Figure 11. Auguste Rodin, *Assemblage: Torso of the Woman Centaur and Minotaur*, circa 1910. Plaster, 33.6 x 32.8 x 20.6 cm. Meudon, Musée Rodin. Photo: Adam Rzepka. © 1999 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

Japanese raku ceramics, which Jean Carriès and others attempted to emulate (fig. 12). Emile Gallé acknowledged that “the very accidents of a fabrication in which the fire is a violent and brutal collaborator, sometimes [served him] happily,” and he compared his “fabrication of accidents” with the phenomenon of projective imagination.⁵³ The reception of Far Eastern

53. E. Gallé, *Ecrits pour l'art. Floriculture—Art décoratif—Notices d'exposition (1884–1889)* (Paris: Laurens, 1908; reprint, Marseille: Laffitte Reprints, 1998), pp. 350–351: “les hasards même d'une fabrication où le feu est un collaborateur violent et brutal, me servent quelquefois heureusement.”

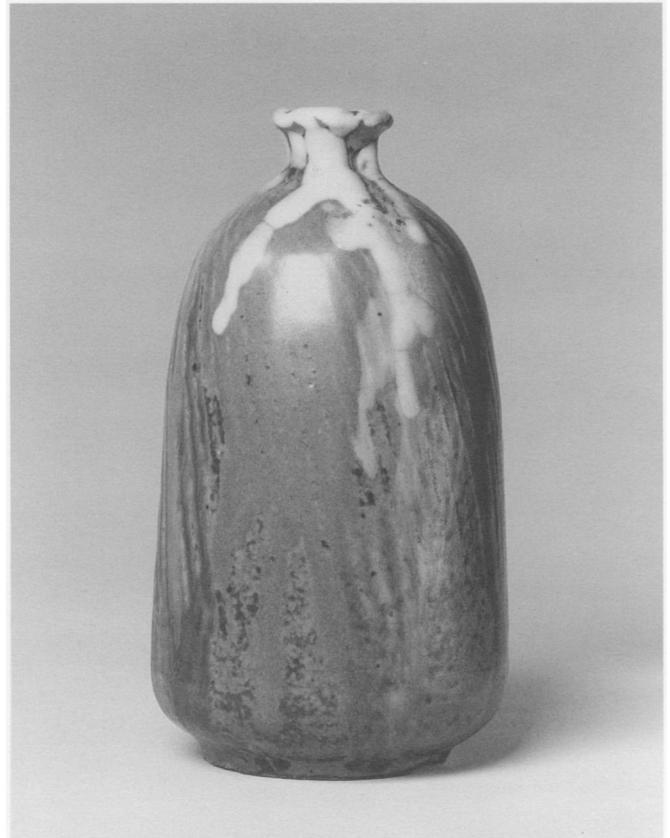


Figure 12. Jean Carriès, *Vase*, circa 1890. Stoneware, H.: 14.1 cm, Diam.: 7.8 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Henry Hawley.

models was primarily based on visual encounter, but it involved, in the long run, a confrontation with the philosophical attitudes underlying the cultivation of the “happy accident,” as Louis Gonse made clear when he wrote in a 1898 essay on Japanese art and its influence over European taste that “for the Japanese, ceramics must be raised to the rank of a natural chemistry, whose chief agent is fire, and which must create objects which will compete in splendor, beauty and sumptuousness with the works of Nature itself.”⁵⁴

54. Louis Gonse, “L'art japonais et son influence sur le goût européen,” *Revue des Arts décoratifs*, April 1898:112–115, reproduced in *Le Japonisme*, exh. cat. (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1998), pp. 138–139: “aux yeux des Japonais, la céramique doit s'élever au rang d'une chimie naturelle, dont l'agent principal est le feu et qui doit créer des objets dont l'éclat, la beauté et la somptuosité rivaliseront avec les œuvres de la nature elle-même.”

The use of chance not only infiltrated the decorative arts but became essential in redefining their relationship to the "fine arts." James Trilling has convincingly made this point, thereby emphasizing the central position obtained by chance—under the guise of "unpredictability," one of its attributes in my working definition—in the theory of art as a whole.⁵⁵ He noted that "since the first decade of our century, the stylistic features of art most revealing of process, whether technical process or creative process, have been isolated, magnified, and shaped into a new ornamental style." Referring to the modernist distinction between art and craft made by R. G. Collingwood, in which "the measure of the superiority of art is its unpredictability," because "unlike the craftsman, the artist never knows in advance what the finished work will be like, because imagination and experience act upon the creative process in ways not under the artist's conscious control," he concluded that "unpredictability was not just a decorative mode but an iconographic shorthand for inspiration."⁵⁶ It is telling that in photography, the numerous accidents that had accompanied all early stages of the technique (as with every other aspect of scientific and technical history) were later emulated for their aesthetic appeal. Julia Margaret Cameron, self-taught and fond of experimentation, tended to let the flaws and imperfections in her negatives appear in the prints (fig. 13) and wrote in 1874 on this subject: "Lastly as to spots they must I think remain. I could have them touched out but am the only photographer who always issues untouched photographs and artists for this reason amongst others value my photographs. So Mr Watts and Mr Rossetti and Mr Du Maurier write me above all others."⁵⁷ In the 1890s, technical archaism as practiced by Strindberg (fig. 10) was also fostered by the will to transcend the limitations of human sight and thus make the invisible visible, a goal common to new scientific uses of photography, such as chronophotography, astrophotography and radiography, to spiritism, and to "symbolism" in art and literature.⁵⁸

55. James Trilling, "Modernism and the Rejection of Ornament: The Revolution That Never Happened," *Common Knowledge* 32 (Fall 1994):79–110.

56. *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87; see R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938).

57. Letter of 6 December 1874 to sir Edward Ryan, quoted in Helmut Gernsheim, *Julia Margaret Cameron: Her Life and Photographic Work* (Millerton, N.Y.: Aperture, 1975), p. 47.

58. See, for example, Clément Chéroux, *L'expérience photographique d'August Strindberg. Du naturalisme au surnaturalisme*

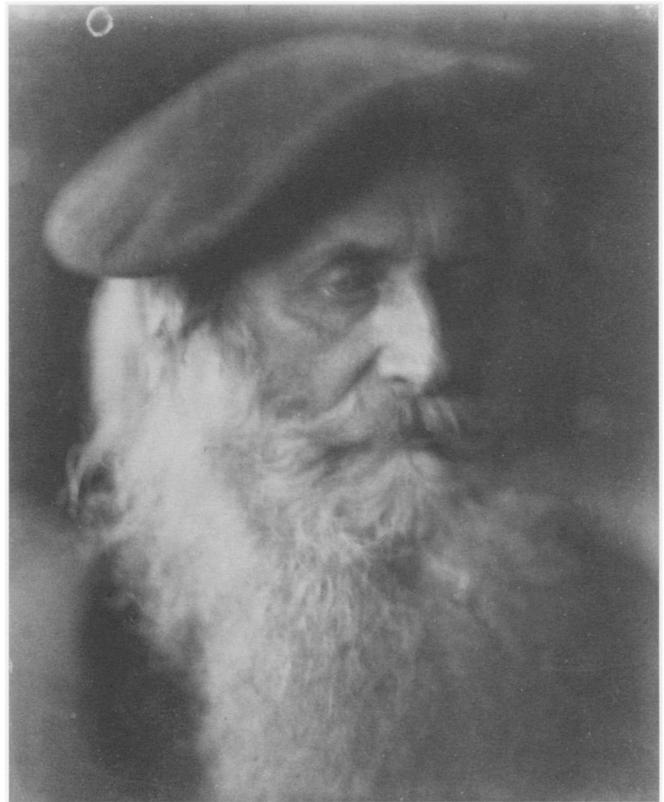


Figure 13. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Study of Prospero*, May 1875. Photograph, 27.3 x 21.9 cm. Bath, England, The Royal Photographic Society Collection.

The meanings attributed to "chance" and to its intervention varied greatly. One is tempted to distinguish between transcendent interpretations, on the one hand, for which chance allows man to communicate with some higher realm and to discover a secret order, and immanent readings, on the other hand, in which the supra-human is relocated within the psyche, generally identified with the "unconscious." A general evolution seems to lead from Romantic idealism to Surrealist (or more precisely to André Breton's) monism. Novalis, for example, listed the "singular conjunctures of chance" together with all kinds of suggestive visual appearances building up

(Arles: Actes Sud, 1994); Monique Sicard, *L'année 1895: L'image écartelée entre voir et savoir* (Paris: Synthélabo, 1994); Bettyann H. Kevles, *Naked to the Bone: Medical Imaging in the Twentieth Century* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

Nature's "great secret writing."⁵⁹ It is in the same sense that Balzac defined chance as "the greatest poet" in his Swedenborgian *Mystical Book*.⁶⁰ As for Breton, he saw in the phenomenon of projective imagination evoked by Leonardo nothing less than a way to resolve the problem of the passage from subjectivity to objectivity.⁶¹ In *L'amour fou*, he mentioned his extensive discussion with fellow Surrealists of the philosophical evolution of the concept of chance, and he defined its outcome as the view of the "modern materialists, according to which chance would be the form of manifestation of the exterior necessity, opening itself a way into the human unconscious (if one may boldly attempt to interpret and reconcile Engels and Freud on this point)."⁶² But individual positions tended to be more complex, within Symbolism in particular, and could easily be ambivalent or contradictory. A case in point is Strindberg, whose 1894 apology of chance apparently dealt only with aesthetic creation and enjoyment, but whose following autobiographical novel *Inferno* depicts a man plagued by a proliferation of accidental images interpreted as signs of a universal conspiracy; according to Michael Robinson, "beginning with chance he . . . paradoxically discovered design."⁶³

On the level of art theory, the use of chance is tightly connected with a major transformation observed by Günter Bandmann in the later nineteenth century: the reevaluation of materials, elevated from the status of inert matter to that of agents in the creative process.⁶⁴ In the

letter in which he questioned the notion of "preliminary concept," Redon wrote that "suggestive art owes much to the incitations of matter itself on the artist."⁶⁵ The "disappearance" of the author could be, at best, an ideal; what really and frequently happened was the establishment of a collaboration (to use Gallé's word) between the artist and the various materials, techniques and—in printmaking, for instance—persons involved, with an alternation of relatively active and relatively passive phases. Another important theoretical transformation linked to the issue of chance was the rejection (or better, *Aufhebung*) of the hierarchic distinction between "conception" and "execution." We have seen that Delacroix still located self-abandon and serendipity on the level of "execution"—in theory at least, for his initial *tripotage* did not fit well into this categorization. The practice of a Redon, a Strindberg, or a Rodin blatantly dismissed such a restriction, and their theoretical statements matched their practice.⁶⁶ With the phenomenon of the "image made by chance" as a model, form could precede meaning rather than derive from it, and *factura* tended to replace *idea*, or to become one with it.

Strindberg concluded his 1894 plea for a generalized use of chance with the following justification: "The formula for the art of the future (which will pass away, like everything else) is to imitate nature approximately and, above all, to imitate nature's way of creating!"⁶⁷ This conception, with roots in German Romanticism, ultimately derived from the

59. Novalis, *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais* (1798–1799), in *Gedichte. Die Lehrlinge zu Sais*, ed. Johannes Mahr (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984), p. 61. On the theme of the secret writing at the end of the century, see Natasha Staller, "Babel: Hermetic Languages, Universal Languages, and Anti-Languages in Fin de Siècle Parisian Culture," *Art Bulletin* 76, no. 2 (1994):331–354.

60. Honoré de Balzac, *Le livre mystique*. Vol. 2, *Séraphitus/Seraphita* (Bruxelles: Hauman, 1836), p. 207.

61. A. Breton, *L'amour fou* (Paris: Gallimard, 1937), pp. 125–126.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 31: "celle [l'idée] des matérialistes modernes, selon laquelle le hasard serait la forme de manifestation de la nécessité extérieure qui se fraie un chemin dans l'inconscient humain (pour tenter hardiment d'interpréter et de concilier sur ce point Engels et Freud)."

63. A. Strindberg, *Inferno* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1898); Robinson (see note 40), p. 20; see also Carlson (see note 40). Strindberg's rediscovery of Swedenborg through Balzac played a role in this conversion.

64. G. Bandmann, "Der Wandel der Materialbewertung in der Kunsttheorie des 19. Jahrhunderts," in *Beiträge zur Theorie der Künste im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Helmut Koopman and J. Adolf Schmoll gen. Eisenwerth (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1971), vol. 1, pp. 129–157.

65. Redon (see note 36), p. 33: "l'art suggestif tient beaucoup des incitations de la matière elle-même sur l'artiste."

66. See also Souriau's theoretical approach quoted in note 35. A major antecedent of this position is discussed by Thomas Puttfarcken in his essay on "The Dispute about *Disegno* and *Colorito* in Venice: Paolo Pino, Lodovico Dolce and Titian," in *Kunst und Kunsttheorie 1400–1900*, ed. Peter Ganz et al., Wolfenbütteler Forschungen 48 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1991), pp. 75–99. Puttfarcken shows that Pino's familiarity with the Venetian practice of painting made it impossible for him "to break the procedures of that practice down into the neat separations and compartments provided by traditional theory" and that in his 1548 *Dialogo della Pittura*, "this ravishing effect of execution, of brushwork and *colorito*, would itself have been part of the painter's invention or conception" (pp. 87, 90).

67. Strindberg (see note 41), p. 29: "La formule de l'art à venir (et comme tout le reste, à s'en aller!): c'est d'imiter la nature à peu près: et surtout d'imiter la manière dont crée la nature."; M. Robinson wrongly translates "imitate nature closely" (see note 41, p. 107). Strindberg expressed the same idea more densely in a letter of 13 August 1894 to Littmansson in Eklund (see note 43), vol. 10, p. 215: "Arbeta som naturen, icke efter naturen" (work like nature, not after nature).

Renaissance appraisal of the artist as *altro iddio*, "another god." The aesthetic implications of this traditional parallel between artistic and divine "creation" were bound to depend on the current understanding of the origin and working of the universe, which went through dramatic and highly controversial transformations in the course of the nineteenth century. In his 1894 article, Strindberg seemed to have given up any notion of providence, as he commented upon a painting based on "palette scrapings": "This is natural art, where the artist works in the same capricious way as nature, without a specific aim."⁶⁸ The strongest assault on the belief in a divine creation and plan had been made at mid-century by Charles Darwin, for whom the evolution of species resulted from a combination of chance (the spontaneous genetic variations) and determinism (the mechanism of natural selection). Redon seems to have struggled, as did his intellectual mentor the botanist Armand Clavaud, to reconcile Darwin with some sort of spiritualism.⁶⁹ It is telling that in his lithographic interpretation of Flaubert's 1874 *Temptation of Saint Anthony*, a text that combined Spinozism with Transformism, he selected among other passages the one in which the hermit, transported by the Devil amidst the cosmos, questions him about the *telos* of the universe and receives the answer: "There is no aim!" (fig. 14).⁷⁰

The most influential nineteenth-century definition of chance was arguably given in 1843 by the mathematician, economist, and philosopher Antoine Cournot in his *Exposition de la théorie des chances et des probabilités* (Exposition of the Theory of Chances and Probabilities).⁷¹ According to this theory, chance resulted from the meeting of two or more independent series of causes and could thus be reconciled with

causation. In aesthetics, an echo of this view could be found ten years later in Karl Rosenkranz's *Aesthetics of Ugliness*, which praised the poetical capacities of chance in the following terms: "It gathers in a surprisingly close proximity things which stay normally wide apart and would be regarded as desecrated when brought together."⁷² By means of Lautréamont, Jarry, and Raymond Roussel (among others), it would eventually lead to the Surrealist definition of the poetic image, which, as Breton insisted, had to be unpremeditated: "It is out of the (in some degree) fortuitous joining of the two terms that a peculiar light has burst, *the image's light*, to which we are infinitely sensitive."⁷³

The question of the historical nature of such connections between science, philosophy, literature, and the visual arts is a delicate one, as any position is bound to be influenced by preconceptions about the mutual relationships of cultural fields and, ultimately, by one's notions of causation—and of chance. Let it suffice to mention here that the active role attributed by artists to their materials anteceded the kind of scientific justification employed by the painter Jean Charlot in 1937: "The world, as modern science conceives it, is again full of mystery. Its laws are relative, submitted to a kind of free will on the part of matter. These unforeseen qualities, this dynamism, must be built into any picture that is to reproduce the scientific reality."⁷⁴ In the nineteenth century, the general tendency of science had been, on the contrary, to extend determinism from the realm of matter to those of life and of the mind. Claude Bernard thus assimilated "vital

68. Strindberg (see note 41), p. 18: "C'est là de l'art naturel, car l'artiste travaille comme la nature capricieuse, sans but déterminé," translated by Robinson (see note 41), p. 103.

69. See Sven Sandström, *Le monde imaginaire d'Odilon Redon. Etude iconologique* (Lund: Berlingska Boktryckertiet, 1955), pp. 62–92; Jerome Viola, "Redon, Darwin and the Ascent of Man," *Marsyas* 11 (1962–1964):42–57.

70. Gustave Flaubert, *La Tentation de saint Antoine* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1967), pp. 220–221. See Claudia Müller-Ebeling, *Die "Versuchung des heiligen Antonius" als "Mikrobenepos": Eine motivgeschichtliche Studie zu den drei Lithographiefolgen Odilon Redons zu Gustave Flauberts Roman* (Berlin: VWB, 1997).

71. See André Darbon, *Le concept du hasard dans la philosophie de Cournot: étude critique* (Bordeaux: Cadoret, 1910).

72. K. Rosenkranz, *Ästhetik des Hässlichen* (Koenigsberg: Bornträger, 1853), pp. 79–80: "Dinge, die sonst weit auseinander liegen und die durch die Gemeinschaft mit einander für profanirt erachten würden, finden sich durch ihn in überraschende Nähe gerückt."

73. A. Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924; reprint, Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 51: "C'est du rapprochement en quelque sorte fortuit des deux termes qu'a jailli une lumière particulière, *lumière de l'image*, à laquelle nous nous montrons infiniment sensibles."

Cournot's definition of chance is mentioned in Breton's *L'Amour fou* (see note 61, p. 31) as an "event brought about by the combination or the meeting of phenomena belonging to series which are independent in the order of causality" (événement amené par la combinaison ou la rencontre de phénomènes qui appartiennent à des séries indépendantes dans l'ordre de la causalité).

74. J. Charlot, "The Critic, the Artist and Problems of Representation," *American Scholar*, Spring 1937, reprinted in J. Charlot, *Art from the Mayans to Disney* (New York and London: Sheed and Ward, 1939), pp. 124–125.

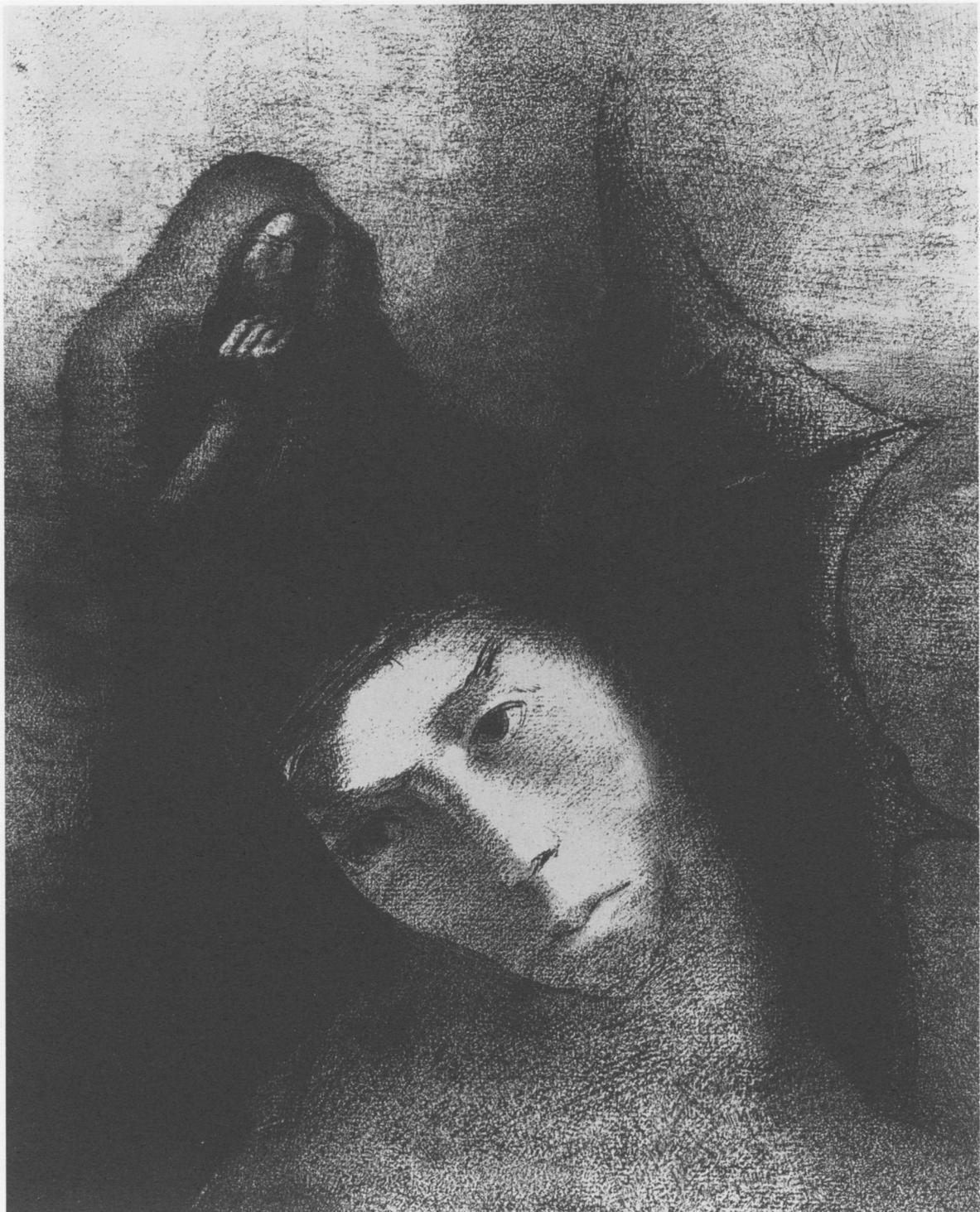


Figure 14. Odilon Redon, *Anthony: What is the Aim of All This? The Devil: There is No Aim!*, 1896. Plate XVIII of the album *Temptation of Saint Anthony*, third series. Lithograph, 31.1 x 25 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

phenomena" to "physico-chemical phenomena" by defining biological organisms as "living machines," and he considered that "man's intellectual conquest consists in diminishing and driving back indeterminism in proportion as he gains ground on determinism thanks to the experimental method."⁷⁵ And in 1881, the German physiologist Emil Du Bois-Reymond did not hesitate to affirm: "The state of the whole world, including that of any brain, is at each moment the absolute mechanical result of its preceding state and the absolute mechanical cause of its following state. There is only one way in which the cerebral molecules can be arranged, just like the dice can fall in only one way once they are out of the dice-box."⁷⁶

Mallarmé's poem *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*, which punned on the etymology of *hasard*, rejected such a claim.⁷⁷ It seems to me that more generally, the late-nineteenth-century artistic use of chance took sides with Bergson's refutation of determinism.⁷⁸ According to the philosopher, the existence of time proved "that there is indeterminism in things," and the "law of causality" was broken by "the incommensurability of each psychological state with those preceding it."⁷⁹ The irrepeatability characterizing

psychological life defied calculation and prevision, and allowed human freedom, invention, and creation. Bergson's idea that between any sensation and its apparent repetition there is "a slight difference due to the fact that it has been repeated" found a remarkable echo in Marcel Duchamp's notion that "2 forms cast in the same mold (?) differ from each other by an infra thin separative amount" and that "All 'identicals' as identical as they may be, (and the more identical they are) move toward this infra thin separative difference."⁸⁰ Duchamp's "Readymades" made precisely this statement about industrial production, a world particularly submitted to predictability, control, and repetition.

In 1919 Duchamp sent instructions from Buenos Aires for an *Unhappy Readymade* to be executed by his sister Suzanne and her husband, Jean Crotti, in Paris: a geometry book was to be hung out on the balcony of their apartment and "the wind had to go through the book, choose its own problems, turn and tear out the pages."⁸¹ This sounds like a realization of the idea expressed by Mallarmé in 1895.⁸² Among twentieth-century artistic innovators, Duchamp was particularly rooted in the avant-garde culture of the late nineteenth century, and I will conclude this inquiry with his paradigmatic use of chance, the *Three Standard Stoppages* of 1913–1914 (fig. 15). A note pointedly headed "The Idea of the Fabrication" in the *Box of 1914* explained: "If a straight horizontal thread one meter long falls from a height of one meter onto a horizontal plane distorting itself *as it pleases* and creates a new shape of the measure of length"; this was repeated three times "under approximately similar conditions" because

75. Claude Bernard, *Introduction à la médecine expérimentale* (1865; reprint, Paris: Delagrave, 1920), p. 223: "la conquête intellectuelle de l'homme consiste à faire diminuer et à refouler l'indéterminisme à mesure qu'à l'aide de la méthode expérimentale il gagne du terrain sur le déterminisme." Bernard equated science with determinism: "To admit a fact without a cause, i.e. indeterminate in its conditions of existence, amounts to nothing less than negating science" (*ibid.*, p. 88).

76. E. Du Bois-Reymond, *Les sept énigmes du monde* (1881), quoted in Henri Bergson, *Cours II* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992), pp. 244–245: "L'état du monde entier, y compris celui d'un cerveau quelconque, est à chaque instant le résultat mécanique absolu de son état précédent et la cause mécanique absolue de son état suivant. Les molécules cérébrales ne peuvent se disposer que d'une manière, comme les dés ne peuvent tomber que d'une manière quand ils sont sortis du cornet."

77. S. Mallarmé, "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard," *Cosmopolis*, May 1897, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), pp. 457–477.

78. See Bergson (see note 76), p. 251: "The refutation of determinism must be asked of psychology" (La réfutation du déterminisme doit être demandée à la psychologie) ("Leçons de morale, psychologie et métaphysique au lycée Henri-IV," 1892–1893, 9th lecture).

79. H. Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant. Essais et conférences* (1938; reprint, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), p. 102; *id.* (see note 76), p. 256.

80. Bergson (see note 76), p. 255; M. Duchamp, *Notes*, ed. and trans. Paul Matisse (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1980), no. 35, dated "Copenhague / 29 juillet 37": "2 formes embouties dans le même moule (?) différent entre elles d'une valeur séparative infra mince"; "tous les 'identiques' aussi identiques qu'ils soient, (et plus ils sont identiques) se rapprochent de cette différence séparative infra mince."

81. Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, eds., *Marcel Duchamp* (Munich: Prestel, 1989), p. 288; Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (New York: Viking, 1971), p. 61.

82. See note 47. Duchamp's publication of unbound and unnumbered facsimile notes in the *Box of 1914*, the 1934 "Green Box," and the 1967 "White Box" (d'Harnoncourt and McShine, see note 81, pp. 271, 303, 316) also presents analogies with the material presentation envisioned by Mallarmé for his "Book" (Scherer, see note 46).

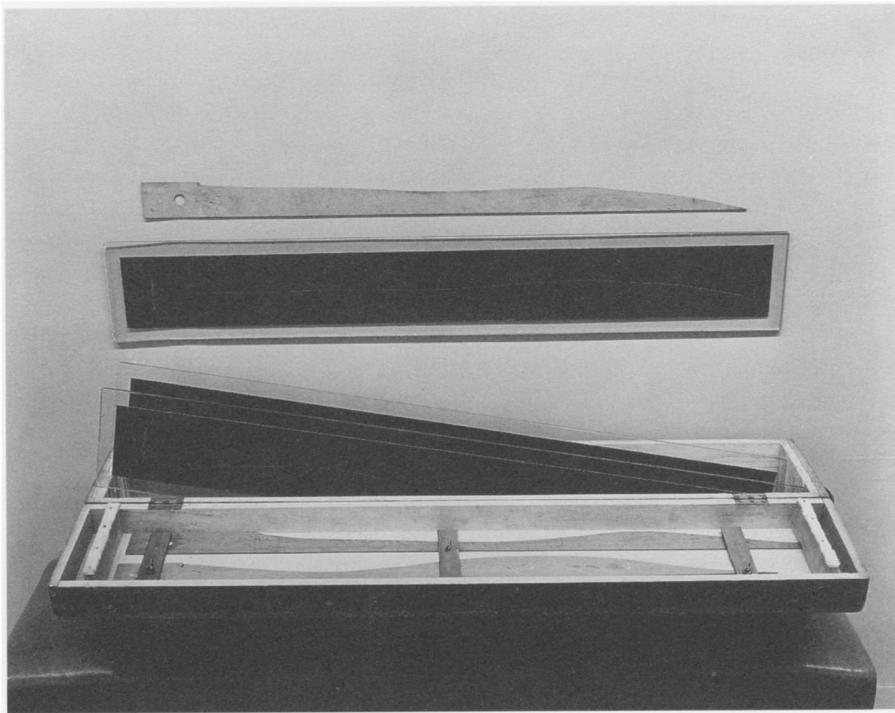


Figure 15. Marcel Duchamp, *Three Standard Stoppages*, 1913–1914. Assemblage: three threads glued to three canvas strips, each 13.3 x 120 cm, each mounted on a glass panel; three wood slats shaped along one edge to match the curves of the threads; the whole fitted in a wooden box. New York, The Museum of Modern Art, Katherine S. Dreier Bequest. Photo: © The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

“one is unity, two is double, duality, and three is the rest. When you’ve come to the word three, you have three million—it’s the same thing as three.”⁸³ Duchamp thus ironically put Claude Bernard’s experimental method in the service of indeterminism, demonstrating the freedom (“as it pleases”) of falling matter and the incommensurability of a standard submitted to time. Among the many sources of this fabrication of “canned chance,” Linda Dalrymple Henderson mentions the philosophical problem of Buridan’s Ass, contemporary discussions of chance by Pierre-Camille Revel and Henri

Poincaré, as well as Max Stirner’s *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (The Ego and His Own), justly concluding upon a “declaration of free will and individualism versus determinism.”⁸⁴

One may wonder what *factura* becomes with an object in which, following Strindberg and Mallarmé’s direction, the artist carefully refrained from having a hand. Given Duchamp’s antimaterial polemic, one might interpret this stance as an idealistic or intellectualistic assertion of the superiority of the spirit or the mind over matter. Yet the *Three Standard Stoppages* dismisses such a dualism, and Duchamp was no simple adept of *idea*. He later stated that “in the

83. *Salt Seller: The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. M. Sanouillet and E. Peterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 22; M. Duchamp, *Duchamp du signe. Ecrits*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (Paris: Flammarion, 1991), p. 36: “Si un fil droit horizontal d’un mètre de longueur tombe d’un mètre de hauteur sur un plan horizontal en se déformant à son gré et donne une figure nouvelle de l’unité de longueur”; Cabanne (see note 81), p. 47.

84. L. D. Henderson, *Duchamp in Context: Science and Technology in the Large Glass and Related Works* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 65; Cabanne (see note 81), p. 46; M. Duchamp, *Ingénieur du temps perdu. Entretiens avec Pierre Cabanne* (Paris: Belfond, 1967), p. 78: “du hasard en conserve.”

creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions" and called "art coefficient" the resulting difference, "an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed."⁸⁵ And commenting upon a series of slides of his works in 1964, he stated that "this experiment was made in 1913 to imprison and preserve forms obtained through chance, through my chance."⁸⁶

The double phrase "chance, my chance" effectively waives the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity or, to put it differently, between realism and constructivism. In a recent reflection on belief, objects, and science, Bruno Latour saw the foundation of what he called the "modern anti-fetishism" in this opposition between the *fait* (fabricated), as man-made and therefore unreal, and the *fait* (fact), as real and therefore not made by man.⁸⁷ He claimed that the "science studies" or anthropology of sciences can be a *clinamen* that breaks this "invisible symmetry." I hope to have suggested that the historical study of artistic practice and theory can also contribute to a comparable anthropology of art.

85. Sanouillet and Peterson (see note 83), p. 139.

86. M. Duchamp, "Apropos of Myself," quoted in d'Harnoncourt and McShine (see note 81), p. 273.

87. B. Latour, *Petite réflexion sur le culte moderne des dieux faitiches* (Paris: Synthélabo, 1996).