

How to Become a Mage (or Fairy): Joséphin Péladan's Initiation for the Masses

Sasha Chaitow¹

Department of Literature, Film, and Theatre Studies
University of Essex
Wivenhoe Park, Colchester
CO4 3SQ, UK
schait@essex.ac.uk

Abstract

Immensely prolific, discredited during his lifetime, Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918) constructed a vast, complex, yet coherent oeuvre with the purpose of demonstrating the transformative power of art by manifesting the highest ideals on the material plane, in response to the social decadence he perceived in fin-de-siècle French society. Central to Péladan's vision was his conception of artists as initiates: select individuals who could bring a small part of the divine into the mundane sphere.

In his cycle of novels, *La Décadence Latine*, his characters represent archetypal ideals facing ontological and metaphysical dilemmas against a background of a dying, corrupt, Western culture. His goal was to inspire his readers to seek a more ideal existence through a form of self-initiation that he dubbed *kaloprosopia*, an art of transformation of personality through a life lived as a work of art. His theoretical esoteric works, *Comment on Devient Mage* and *Comment on Devient Fée*, respectively written for men and women, were handbooks for self-initiation representing the theory underpinning his novels. A formalized version of this process formed the basis for his Rosicrucian order. By presenting the same idea in different forms – through art, literature, and more intellectually demanding writings – Péladan's intent was to bring this call for regeneration to as wide an audience as possible, and in so doing, to spark a social renaissance.

Keywords: Aesthetics; French Occult Revival; History of Magic; Illuminism; Rosicrucianism; Self-Initiation; Symbolism.

1. Sasha Chaitow is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Literature, Film, and Theatre Studies, University of Essex, United Kingdom.

In the introduction to his now classic study of Romanticism, *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), M. H. Abrams notes that within the context of post-Enlightenment secularization, the many philosophers, poets, and writers of the early Romantic movement “represented themselves in the traditional persona of the philosopher-seer or the poet-prophet”² and undertook a process of “the assimilation and reinterpretation of religious ideas, as constitutive elements in a world view founded upon secular premises.”³ This reconstitution of culture has been posited as nothing less than a cultural revolution that touched every sphere of Western culture, reflecting the observation of anthropologist Victor Turner that in such times of social upheaval: “Where historical life itself fails to make cultural sense in terms that formerly held good, narrative and cultural drama may have the task of *poesis*, that is, of remaking cultural sense.”⁴

Within this context there emerged many visionaries, poets and self-appointed prophets who attempted to reinterpret the past in “terms acceptable to men who had undergone the experience of the Enlightenment.”⁵ In this article I will summarise one such vision of a man who inherited the weighty legacy of some two centuries of socio-political upheaval and esoteric attempts to counter it, and who took it upon himself to provide an impetus for social regeneration through his unique synthesis of esoteric and aesthetic idealism.

Immensely prolific, yet discredited during his lifetime and neglected thereafter,⁶ Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918) constructed a vast

2. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York; W.W. Norton, 1971), 12–13.

3. Tim Blanning, *The Romantic Revolution* (London: Phoenix, 2011), 1–2; Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 12.

4. Victor Turner, “Social Dramas and Stories about them,” in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 164, cited with comments in Mali, *Mythistory*, 5–6.

5. René Wellek, “The Concept of ‘Romanticism’ in Literary History,” *Comparative Literature* 1, no. 1 (1949): 171, cited in Wouter Hanegraaff, “Romanticism and the Esoteric Tradition,” *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, ed. Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 244.

6. The subtitle of the critical biography by Christophe Beauflis: “Essai sur Une Maladie du Lyrisme,” exemplifies the common approach to Péladan. Varying misconceptions about him are also repeated in the following works: *Les Péladan: Dossier H*, ed. J-P. Laurent and Victor Nguyen (Paris: L’age d’homme, 1990); *La Revue des études péladanes*, ed. J-P. Bonnerot (Paris, 1975–1978); Robert Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France, J. Péladan and the Salons de la Rose-Croix*, (New York: Garland, 1976); René-Louis Doyon, *La Douleureuse aventure de J. Péladan* (Paris: la Con-

yet coherent literary and theoretical oeuvre with the purpose of demonstrating the transformative power of art by manifesting the highest ideals on the material plane in response to the social decadence he perceived in fin-de-siècle French society. Central to his vision was his conception of artists as initiates: select individuals who could bring a small part of the divine into the mundane sphere and guide the rest of society by means of their symbolic expression of ideals in the form of art.

In his cycle of twenty-one novels, *La Décadence Latine* (1884–1925), his characters represent archetypal ideals facing ontological and metaphysical dilemmas against a background of a dying, corrupt, Western culture. Each work was designed to inspire a form of self-initiation that he dubbed *kaloprosopia*, an art of transformation of personality through a life lived as a work of art with the purpose of exteriorising one's divine nature. Two of his theoretical esoteric works, *Comment on Devient Mage* (1892, hereafter *Mage*) and *Comment on Devient Fée* (1892, hereafter *Fée*), were handbooks for self-initiation, written for men and women respectively, that elaborated on the theory underpinning his novels. A formalized version of the same process formed the basis for the Rosicrucian order he founded in Paris in his capacity of one of the last initiates of the Toulouse Rosicrucian circle,⁷ and these ideas formed the ideological core of the artistic salons he organized in Paris between 1892–1897, combining Symbolist art exhibitions, theatre, and music. By presenting the same idea in different forms—through art, literature, and more intellectually demanding writings—Péladan's intent was to bring this call for regeneration to as wide an audience as possible, and in so doing, to spark a social renaissance.

The sheer volume of his work (more than one hundred books, and several hundred pamphlets and articles) the multivalency of the influences he absorbed and re-synthesised, and the complexity of his cosmology is such that it will not be possible to offer more than a sampling of his ideas within the context of this article. In addition, despite the value and significance of placing his work within the

naissance, 1946); Ben Fisher, "From the Sphinx to Pisa: Reconciling Two Faces of Péladan," *Modern Language Review* 102, no. 1 (2007): 74–88.

7. Gérard Galtier, *Maçonnerie Egyptienne: Rose-Croix et Neo-chevalerie* (Paris: du Rocher, 1989), 240–41. In the preceding pages Galtier goes into lengthy detail in order to arrive at this conclusion, effectively ruling out other possible Rosicrucian lineages for Péladan while establishing the precise roles of each of the members of the circle.

history of Western esotericism, more specifically at the crossroads between Illuminism, Romanticism, and the French occult revival, spatial and thematic limitations oblige me to forego their analytical discussion beyond noting their influence when relevant. For the same reasons I must also forego any discussion of the influence of Richard Wagner (1813–1883), Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), and other literary figures, as well as in-depth analysis or cross-comparison of his esoteric theology beyond the absolutely relevant.

Thus, following the briefest of introductions to some of Péladan's influences and a sketch of the form his oeuvre took, I shall focus directly on four main elements of Péladan's work: his doctrine of *kaloprosopia* and his esoteric curriculum for men and women; a brief discussion of his cosmological convictions that led to his differentiating between the two genders; his use of ancient, particularly Assyrian mythology and symbolism in his work; and a brief discussion of his Luciferian beliefs. Though they do not constitute the full range of his work, these four elements are central to his teachings and constitute primary points of introduction to his oeuvre.

Péladan's Influences

This concept of the artist-initiate derives from the thought of theosophist Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), whose writings had a vast influence on Illuminism; a complex esoteric current within which Péladan's work can be firmly situated.⁸ Central elements of Illuminist thought reached Péladan by way of thinkers such as Antoine Fabre d'Olivet (1767–1824), Pierre-Simon Ballanche (1776–1847), Louis de Bonald (1754–1840) and Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821), to whose writings

8. Some authors have argued that Illuminism forms a part of the dialogue with, rather than against, rationalism, with origins in theosophical thought, roughly defined as "knowing God through wisdom," and is seen as "both an inspiration of romanticism and a parallel movement to it." The religio-philosophical basis of Illuminism has been defined as: "The tragic fate in which man is responsible for his fall, also includ[ing], by way of the system of correspondences, the entire universe. According to this symmetry, the work of reintegration must therefore have cosmic effects, and the entire chain of being is dependent on the individual effort of man." Antoine Faivre, *L'Esoterisme au XVIIIe siècle: en France et en Allemagne*, (Paris: Seghers, 1973), 59–61; Arthur McCalla, "Romanticism," *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, 1006; Nicole Jacques-Chaquin, in Michel Delon, ed., *Dictionnaire Européen des Lumières* (Paris: PUF, 1997), 570. A key sourcework is Auguste Viatte's monumental, two-volume work, *Les sources occultes du Romantisme: Illuminisme-Theosophie* (Paris, 2009 [1928]).

Péladan was exposed in his youth. His most intensive study of occult texts took place between 1880 and 1884, during which time he read widely on Neoplatonism, as well as works by Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535), Heinrich Khunrath (1560–1605), Jean-Baptiste van Helmont (1579–1644), Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1636–1689), and Eliphas Lévi (1810–1875), among many others.⁹ Fabre d'Olivet and Lévi exerted perhaps the strongest influence and their echo is evident in his work, as shall be discussed presently.

According to Emile Dantinne (1884–1969), one of his early biographers, Péladan was introduced to the *Zohar* by his brother Adrien (1844–1885), followed by his reading of Fabre d'Olivet's *Langue hébraïque restituée*. He later studied the full translation of Pico della Mirandola's Latin version of the *Zohar* by Jean de Pauly (1860–1903). Péladan neither learned, nor had any interest, in reading Hebrew, being more interested in principles and ideas than permutations of letters or exegetical techniques.¹⁰ A particularly strong Neoplatonic train of thought is also present in his work, and can be traced to his early readings. Péladan read Philo (c. 20 BCE–c. 50 CE) in depth,¹¹ but another of his main sources on Neoplatonism was the book *Histoire de Magie* by P. Christian (Jean-Baptiste Pitois, 1811–1877, librarian at the Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs), and the introduction, based mainly on the work of Porphyry (c. 234–c. 305, is quite revealing when cross-referenced with Péladan's later work:

Magic...can no longer be confused with the superstitions that slander its memory. It is the first religious, moral, and political doctrine of humanity. Its vulgar name comes from the Greek ΜΑΓΟΣ (Mage), and ΜΑΓΕΙΑ (Magic), a deterioration of the terms Mog, Megh, Magh, which in pehlvi and zend [sic], languages of the ancient Orient, signify

9. Beaufils, *Joséphine Péladan*, 32–3.

10. *La Langue hébraïque restituée et le véritable sens des mots hébreux rétabli et prouvé par leur analyse radicale ouvrage dans lequel on trouve réunis: (1) une dissertation sur l'origine de la parole; (2) une grammaire hébraïque; (3) une série de racines hébraïques; (4) un discours préliminaire; (5) une traduction en français des dix premiers chapitres du Sépher, contenant la Cosmogonie de Moïse* (Paris: Chez l'auteur; Barrois; Eberhart: 1815); Lausanne: L'Âge d'homme, 1985); Antoine Fabre d'Olivet, *The Hebrew Tongue Restored And the True Meaning of the Hebrew Words Reestablished and Proved by their Radical Analysis*, trans. Nayan Louise Redfield (New York: Putnam & Sons, 1921); Dantinne, *L'œuvre et la pensée de Péladan*, 101.

11. Dantinne notes that although Peladan's cosmology was certainly influenced by Neoplatonist thought, he neglected Pythagorean and Plotinian influences. E. Dantinne, *La Vie et la Pensée de Joséphine Péladan* (Office de la Publicité SC: Brussels, 1946), 63.

priest, sage, excellent, from whence derives the Chaldean word Maghdim, the equivalent of the highest wisdom, or the sacred philosophy. Simple etymology thus reveals that Magic was the sum of knowledge once possessed by these Mages or the philosophers of India, of Persia, of Chaldea, of Egypt, who were the priests of nature, the fathers of all science, and the creators of gigantic civilisations whose ruins still hold, unabated, the weight of sixty centuries. Considered from this point of view, Magic is the preface to universal History. As with all things that touch on the origins of societies, it presents a marvellous side, the study of which has impassioned the most noble minds of Athens and Rome, before becoming disfigured and withered by the corruption of caesarian times. Its mysteries, before which Plato, Plutarch, Cicero, Virgil, Tacitus, all bowed, and whose last hierophants bore three symbolic homages to the cradle of Jesus, cannot leave us indifferent.¹²

Drawing on all of these influences, Péladan performed a synthesis between the ideas reaching him through occult thought, notions of mythic narratives, and the creative act, in order to inspire a wider public to enter into communion with his own perception of these “universal” ideas and principles.

Of the use of esotericism in literature it has been said that: “We might call [the] transfer of esotericism...to the sphere of literature a kind of intellectualization, but in the case of...fiction writers especially it also might be called an imaginization of esotericism.” This point differentiates between the use of esotericism as a plot or atmospheric device and literary works as “vehicles of spiritual praxis,” and it is useful for understanding the character of Péladan’s literature, which falls, as I hope to demonstrate, clearly in the second category. He used the byline *éthopée* to define all of the novels in his *La Décadence Latine* cycle which comprise a perfect example of the genre, using stylized figures and venues from real life in order to highlight what he perceived as the decadence of Western civilization, while also proposing his alternative vision for society. It is this factor more than any other, that distinguishes Péladan’s novels from being seen as a simple series of literary fiction.¹³

12. P. Christian, *Histoire de la Magie du Monde Surnaturel et de la Fatalité a travers les temps et les peuples* (Paris: Furne, Jouvet, et Cie., 1870), v. In this excerpt Christian has added the following citation revealing his sources: “Porphyry, *De Abstin.*, IV, 16; Aelian., Var. Histor., II, 17; Anquetil-Duperron, *le Zend-Avesta*, II, 555; Alf. Maury, de l’Institut, *Magie et Astrologie*, ch. II, 30 (Paris 1860)”.

13. Arthur Versluis, *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 186; also *Restoring Paradise: Western Esotericism, Art, Literature and Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York, 2004), 147–8; The term *éthopée* is a figure of speech stemming from the Greek *ethologia* or *ethopoia*, lit-

Likewise, in the context of Symbolist theatre of Péladan's period, it has been noted that the discourse of performance itself was theatricalised, whereby the symbolist actor was perceived as "a depersonalised sign" before "an audience that dressed and behaved very much like fictional dramatic characters." This resulted in the performance being completed by the participation of both audience and actors, with "the theatricalisation of literary discourse...enacted in the space between the stage and the auditorium, between two groups of players... Just as the symbolist actor in his role aspired to be a sign, many in the audience...aspired to be artistic signs as well."¹⁴ This certainly applied to Péladan's plays, initiatory dramas performed at his Salons. Péladan's books, plays, and characters, were deliberately designed as both artistic and occult "signs," almost talismans imbued with esoteric meaning, drawing on several centuries of universalist esoteric thought, and the perceived power of the written word – or painted canvas – to manifest change in the material world.

Magic, Initiation, and Kaloprosopia

Péladan conceived of this change not as some miraculous revelation, but as a process of collective initiation that could be sparked through exposure to symbolic art. He believed that initiation could not occur in a vacuum; it is simultaneously a "social affair," something that had to take place on the material plane, and incorporated a profound act of inner transformation. This is borne out by his instructions for neophytes in *Mage*, in which he openly states, "If one imagines that magic teaches the secrets of omnipotence, that it offers the possibility of the transmutation of metals, the secret of making gold, talismans and charms, this is a simplistic and disastrous notion." He continues,

erally meaning study or creation of *ethos* (understood as customs or mores). As a rhetorical device it is a kind of portrait or tableau (painted or written) with a moral teaching, based on Aristotle's *Poetics*. Hence, the *éthopée* uses the enjoyment factor to communicate morality tales and commentate various aspects of ethics and social mores. See: Aristotle, *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 23, trans. W. H. Fyfe (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1932), n.p., section 1448b; For a study on the genre in the French literature contemporary to the Péladan family, see Eugenio Amato & Jacques Schamp, *Ethopoïia: La représentation de caractères entre fiction scolaire et réalité vivante à l'époque impériale et tardive*, (Salerno: Helios, 2005); also see Barbara Carnevali, "Mimesis littéraire et connaissance morale: La tradition de «L'éthopée»," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, no. 2, 291–322, 2010.

14. Frantisek Deak, "Kaloprosopia: The Art of Personality. The Theatricalization of Discourse in Avant-Garde Theatre," *Performing Arts Journal* 13, no. 2 (1991): 18.

Since 1881, Magic has been absent from French culture; I have given it light and glory, not through adventurous and dangerous treatises, but in a form of art that engages only the sacred science... I have revealed Magic, that is to say I have accommodated it for contemporary times. For those who were lost by Mérodack of *Vice suprême*, for those who have come to me asking them to complete within them the confusing work, [for those who are] born to read me, I offer this practical method of self-magification (automagification).¹⁵

This both reveals his negativity towards other varieties of contemporary practical occultism, reflects P. Christian's view of magic being a process leading to excellence and wisdom, and is a prime example of his constant cross-referencing between his theoretical and fictional writing.

In the appendices to his theoretical series of seven books: *Amphithéâtre des Sciences Mortes* (1892–1911), he included a set of tables of concordances (accompanied by a short synopsis for each book), demonstrating how his novels and theoretical works fit together.¹⁶ In the synopsis for his first novel, *Le Vice Suprême* (1884), he briefly introduces the *dramatis personae*, noting that each of them represents an (arche)type. The same characters recur throughout his cycle of novels, in different roles, but rather than normal literary characters, they are symbols, placed into different dynamics to communicate a different message each time. By forcing his reader to identify with the human situations and often painful dilemmas into which he placed his characters, he also forced them into a dialectic relationship with the esoteric attributes of his symbolic figures. In a prime example of his ability to perceive his own work both esoterically and exoterically, he says of his principal character and literary persona, the mage Mérodack: "Mérodack: the peak of conscious will, a type of absolute entity... Every novel has a Mérodack: that is to say an abstract Orphic principle facing an ideal enigma."¹⁷ Péladan was to take on the honorific name "Sâr Mérodack" during the early 1890s, and while this was often interpreted as a sign of his

15. Deak, "Kaloprosopia," 8; On initiation see Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 27–49; Péladan, *L'art idéaliste et mystique*, 58; Péladan, *Mage*, 27, xviii.

16. *Amphithéâtre des Sciences Mortes*: I. *Comment on devient Mage, éthique*; II. *Comment on devient Fée, érotique*; III. *Comment on devient Artiste (esthétique)*; IV. *Le Livre du Sceptre, politique*; V. *L'Occulte Catholique, mystique*; VI. *Traite des Antinomies, métaphysique*, (Paris: Chamuel; Chacornac, 1892–1911).

17. J. Péladan, *L'Art Idéaliste et Mystique: Doctrine de l'Ordre et du Salon Annuel des Rose-Croix* (Paris: Chamuel. 1894), 275.

arrogance and eccentricity, as will be discussed presently, this was not the case at all.

In the reference from *Mage*, Péladan is essentially addressing those who could not read between the lines of his fictional work. In *Quête du Graal* (1894), after twelve of his twenty-one novels from *La Décadence Latine* and four of his seven monographs from *Amphithéâtre* had already been published, Péladan provided a series of annotated excerpts from these books, noting with obvious exasperation in the foreword that his readers had quite failed to understand him. Since his readers had not yet grasped the message he was trying to communicate, he extracted the essence of his work in the hope that they would understand this simplified anthology. This, alongside his own statements to this effect, the schema of concordances and his own typology for his novels, affirms the systematic method and intentionality underpinning his whole oeuvre.

The essence of his teaching is the transmission of an esoteric process of self-knowledge and spiritual development, based on the cultivation of the intellect and the development of conscious individualism. Péladan reminds the reader:

Seek no other measure of magical power than that of your internal power: do not judge another being except by the light they emit. To perfect yourself by becoming luminous, and like the sun, to warm the latent ideal life around you, there is the whole mystery of the highest initiation.¹⁸

Unlike the works of his predecessors and contemporaries, this particular book is more lucidly written, without recourse to complex narrations of ontological meta-analysis and occult formulae. Using esoteric symbolism and mythic characters as narrative devices, his purpose was to effect esoteric awakening through the interaction of reader and symbolic text.

Péladan's discussion of self-cultivation is highly derivative of Lévi in places, but his originality lies firstly in his aestheticization of this process and secondly in his selective use of esoteric concepts within a narrative framework to effect mass initiation through literature. Péladan was certainly not the only one to incorporate the idea of initiation into his writing and particularly, into his theatre; Auguste Villiers de l'Isle Adam (1838–1889), Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906), and later Nikolai Roerich (1874–1947), Antonin Artaud (1896–1948), and Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) would all experiment with

18. Péladan, *Mage*, 27.

this idea.¹⁹ Péladan however, was the only one to codify the whole process across an oeuvre that counted over a hundred books, not as a literary exploration of the transformation of characters, but as a symbolic roadmap designed to provoke a transformation in the reader. A further novel feature is the coherence of both content and symbolic encoding of his entire output—not simply within specific works, but again, across his whole oeuvre, in the subdivision of his chapters, the interrelationships and constant cross-referencing between his works, and his use of specific recurrent motifs resting on carefully structured correspondences with their own esoteric significance. For the careful reader, every book was meant as a guide to the act of “self-creation, comparable to the creation of the self as art.”²⁰

Mage is divided into three parts; the first subdivided into a further seven subsections, the second into twelve, each corresponding to a Chaldean deity alongside planetary, angelic, Kabbalistic, and Catholic concordances. Entitled “How to Exit the Century,” it is designed as a path for spiritual ascension. Each step focuses on a particular virtue, behavior, task, and sacrament; each corresponds to a numerical “Arcanum,” and each is dedicated to the conscious re-evaluation of a specific aspect of human life, including sociability, love, magical power, self-teaching, and orientation. He accompanies each teaching with advice on all aspects of life, and argues forcefully in favor of conscious individualism. At the end of the septenary, Péladan states: “I must give you a definition of magic: it is the art of sublimation of man; there is no other formula.”

Péladan’s “art of sublimation of man” is a pragmatic as well as an esoteric process, through which he exhorts his reader to redefine and re-establish their relationship with society, the opposite sex, material pursuits, and to evolve a conscious mode of being in the world. Péladan displayed a considerable understanding of human nature in his work, and catered for different types of individuals depending on their intellectual abilities and spiritual sensibilities. This is also reflected in the tripartite though equal trajectories offered through his Rosicrucian order: following the initiation of neophytes, the second degree offered three directions, whereby one could select the “red and black tunic of the Rose-Croix if one believed in nothing but art and science, or the white tunic with the red cross of the Templars,

19. Deak, “Kaloprosopia,” 18.

20. Péladan, *L’Art idéalistique et mystique*, 54–59; Deak, “Kaloprosopia,” 18.

if one believed in the word of Jesus, or the blue tunic of the Grail if one worshipped the presence manifesting during the Eucharist.”²¹

He developed this idea further in his *Doctrine of the Rosicrucian Order and Annual Salon* (1894), where he identified four types of people (Men of God, Men of Ideas, Men of the State, Men of the World), described their personality traits, and explained with considerable insight how each type should be approached. *Mage* is written for the Men of Ideas, of whom he says that the ideal demeanor is to “look upon the life around him on condition that he looks at it from above, and always giving the impression that he is aiming beyond his actions, and that he is only partially in the present, among men and things.” This was not meant as an affected pose; Péladan’s rationale was simple. He cites St. Ignatius (1491–1556) to explain: “Make the acts of faith, and faith will come...I will say without fear: That which manifests the external form of an idea, will realise its internal essence...equally, the internal essence can bring forth an adequate external form.”²²

The essence of his multivalently expressed message is summarized in his doctrine of *kaloprosopia*—a term coined by Péladan to designate an “art of personality” based on his consideration of “the human being in its three elements of body, soul, and spirit.” He defines it thus: “The first of the arts of personality is kaloprosopia, (from *καλός*, beautiful, and *πρόσωπον*, person), which is to say the embellishment of the human aspect, or better, the relief, of the moral character through everyday acts.” By way of theatrical analogy, he describes the role of the actor or musician as that of an intermediary who manifests thought in matter: “If the people of the world knew themselves, they would no longer dare to pretend to celebrate sacerdotal rites, but would study so as to reproduce the plastic commandments of the work of art upon themselves. The man of leisure should consider himself the actor of his own personality.” Péladan led by example, explaining his adoption of the name Sâr Mérodack and his frequently flamboyant dress, intended to reflect that of an Oriental sage as follows: “in a time when honours are dishonoured, where function signifies incapacity, there is a kind of public virtue in proving, through wearing a costume, that one is oneself, one is free, one is outside the frame.”²³

21. Dantine, *L'œuvre et la pensée de Péladan*, 34–35.

22. Péladan, *L'art idéaliste et mystique*, 60–61.

23. Péladan, *L'art idéaliste et mystique*, 54, 59, 58.

Princesses and Fairies

Kaloprosopia was something that both men and women could achieve, but Péladan made a strict differentiation between the two sexes, earning himself a reputation of misogyny. However, it is my strong contention that this is a misreading of Péladan's purpose and intent.

Péladan's introduction to the initiatory handbook for women does read harshly; yet close reading reveals that he is really railing against the female social stereotype of his day. His purpose was to explain the notion of the Ideal Feminine to his female readers, and to exhort them to begin to manifest it. To do so however, Péladan thought that he first had to beat down the socially imposed façade foisted on the women of his time, which plainly disgusted him:

From boarding school where spontaneity is reprimanded, to the salon where again, games of wordplay and double meanings are forbidden to her, the modern woman obeys negative commandments. To wait, to refuse, to retreat and to be silent, there is the entire expected behaviour: and society which is more selfish than anyone, because it is made of general selfishness, overwrites the individualism of souls as if with a State decree.²⁴

This sentiment is reflected throughout *Fée*, where Péladan vociferates not against women *per se* but against what women had been made into by social expectations. To communicate his message to women thus conditioned, he first needed to break through the silliness, hysteria, snobbery, ignorance, or religious fervor with which their heads were filled, to "ruin the temple of Woman" and "crack her altar."²⁵ To this end he marshaled numerous rhetorical tools, by turns threatening, cajoling, disdaining, and flattering, using religious as well as commonsensical argumentation. Once again numerous cross-references from his novels and other books are present – some poetic, some pragmatic, some commanding.

Receive, my sister, this precious gift that the hierophants once gave only to young queens. If a true princess still existed in the world, which is to say, a woman who was simultaneously powerful as the sun and intelligent before God, I would have given her this book instead of publishing it. Alas! The intelligent ones are not princesses, and the princesses are no longer intelligent. I entrust this handbook of enchantment to the same hazardous current where I threw the manual of Magic...

24. Péladan, *Istar: La Décadence Latine V* (Paris: Édinguer, 1888), 284.

25. Péladan, *Fée*, xx, 2.

As for you, Miss or Mrs Everywoman, you who believe someone because the moonlight makes you dreamy, you who seek amorous impressions in art, will you understand?

Will you understand when I myself publicly explain the binary secrets?

A flying pistol, a hand of glory, the ring of Gyges, the hat of Fortunatus, the rod of Aaron, a singing mandragore, Abraxas: these are what you desire to receive from the Mage.

The devil, his pacts and possessions, the sabbath and its luxuries, sorcery and its captivation: this is the material you avidly read.

Instead of this criminal stuff, I have prepared in my work a kind of brass serpent, and those who are sickly and sensitive, those who hallucinate with passion, those who are obsessed by woman, in touching it, will feel themselves cured.

I have thrown the nets of Vulcan over the eternal couple, and I invite thinking beings to consider what this false poem, this thoroughly blasphemous religion hides; love, in the matrix of metaphysical law.

You will argue against me in vain with nonsense and perfidy: I have cracked your altar, and my intellectual brothers turn away from you in aversion.²⁶

Péladan's provocative tone is deliberate, as, after delivering a lengthy religious, then esoteric explanation of his perspective, he explains to his hypothetical female reader that it is necessitated by the social decadence that has led to men and women becoming mortal enemies, with relationships based on artifice. He dedicated his third novel, *L'initiation sentimentale* (1886) to demonstrating everyday examples of "imperfect love resulting from the general modern soul"²⁷ and revisited the issue in *Traité des Antinomies* (1892), where he attempts to resolve the metaphysical or logical contradictions apparent in his worldview: "Subjected to overwhelming organic needs, to passions, and to false ideals, we have to vanquish either our conscience or our feelings, and this fight between multiple forces causes accidents which are [the root of] evil."²⁸

However, Péladan also considered there to be a profound ontological difference between men and women, and this lies at the heart of his argument. His conviction is based on his detailed re-interpretation of Genesis, inspired by Fabre d'Olivet's own re-interpretation of both

26. Péladan, *Fée*, 2-3.

27. Péladan, *L'art idéaliste et mystique*, 276; Péladan, *L'initiation sentimentale* (Paris: Édinger, 1886).

28. Péladan, *Traité des Antinomies* (Paris: Chamuel, 1892), 186.

the Hebrew language and of Genesis, which leads to some startling conclusions.

In *La Langue hébraïque restituée*²⁹ (1815), Fabre d'Olivet argued that religious conflict between the monotheistic religions was caused by successive mistranslations of the Bible, owing to the corruption of the Hebrew language. His conclusions were replete with theological implications that would fuel a particular brand of Luciferianism³⁰ in occult circles, and were central to Péladan's work, as shall be discussed presently. In his exegesis of Genesis, Fabre d'Olivet attempted to reinterpret the question of the Fall. Adam was originally androgynous and immortal, and his female counterpart, *Isha* (or Aisha, or Aishah), represented his "will, or 'volitional faculty.'"

For Fabre d'Olivet, the man and woman of Genesis together form universal man and constitute a single androgynous individual. "The fall occurred when Adam sought to become equal to God, by taking full generative control of 'the very principle of his existence.'" "This would have set him up as a rival to God, but in not permitting him to do so, he would have been condemned to an eternity of suffering as a lesser being without full volition. Therefore, as an act of mercy,

29. Fabre d'Olivet's premise derives from the current of "hieroglyphic" and allegorical interpretations of history and linguistic theories as found in the work of Athanasius Kircher (c. 1602–1680), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), Antoine Court de Gébelin (1725–1784), Delisle de Sales (Jean-Baptiste Izouard, 1741–1816), and Pierre-Simon Ballanche (1776–1847). The scope of this paper does not allow for a full development of this current of thought, which forms a large part of the intellectual backdrop to the ideas inherited by Péladan via Fabre d'Olivet, but it should be kept in mind during any exploration of this topic.

30. Luciferianism in the present context can, to a degree, be understood according to the description proposed for "Literary," or "Romantic" Satanism: "While Christian mythology had banned Satan to Hell and blamed him for evil, Literary Satanism to a greater or lesser degree rehabilitated the fallen angel and proclaimed that he had stood in his right after all. Secondly...they resurrected him from the burial the Enlightenment had given him... In traditional Christian theology, Satan's fall had been associated with proud, unlawful insurrection against divine authority. The *philosophes* and French Revolution however, had given 'insurrection' a wholly new, positive meaning for substantial parts of Europe's intellectual elite; and this revaluation reflected on the myth of Satan as well... Satan as noble champion of political and individual freedom remained the most important theme of Literary Satanism throughout the nineteenth century." Ruben van Luijk, "Sex, Science, & Liberty: The Resurrection of Satan in 19th Century (Counter) Culture," in *The Devil's Party: Satanism in Modernity*, ed. Per Faxneld and Jesper Aa. Petersen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 44. There are further esoteric dimensions in Péladan's use of the term, but his own reception derives in part from the literary phenomenon.

“Adam was taken out of eternity where he would have remained in eternal anguish and suffering, and placed in time.” By making Adam and his descendants mortal, with lives governed by time, the suffering caused by his limited ability to control the creative principle of his existence would be diffused through time and the generations, until it eventually disappeared entirely.

This residual desire is the foundation of evil, which, according to Fabre d’Olivet, would eventually be resolved by the very passage through time, at which point time would end and “universal man will return to his former state of ‘indivisible and immortal unity.’” God is perceived in terms of a divine “tetrad” that encompasses the three principles of Providence (represented in man by intelligence), Destiny (instinct), and Will (understanding), the last of which is the point of contact between man and God. While in “universal man,” the triad is complete and in harmony, following the Fall, the three principles were divided among Adam’s three sons, with Cain representing Will, Abel as Providence, and Seth as Destiny.³¹ They became the progenitors of humanity, each giving birth to one of the human races, in a reflection of Mosaic genealogy popular at the time.³² His magnum opus, *Histoire philosophique du genre humain* (1822),³³ claimed that history should be concerned with “the universality of things” and “true principles”;³⁴ arguing that historical and mythological data should be perceived as fragments of a greater whole based on their “essence,” and not the forms that essence took.³⁵

Many elements of Fabre d’Olivet’s thought are overtly visible in Péladan’s work, but he did not adopt them piecemeal; rather, he adapted specific elements to his own beliefs. The Fall is a recurring theme in many of Péladan’s novels, but he did not follow Fabre d’Olivet’s perspective on the Fall of man and his relationship with God; rather, he reinterpreted Genesis again, from his own

31. A. J. L. Busst, “The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century,” in Ian Fletcher, ed., *Romantic Mythologies* (1967), 16–17.

32. Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, 41–57, cited and discussed in Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*, 50–1.

33. Antoine Fabre d’Olivet, *De l’état social de l’homme, ou Vues philosophiques sur l’histoire du genre humain, précédées d’une dissertation introductive sur les motifs et l’objet de cet ouvrage* (2 vols.; Paris: J. L. J. Brière, 1822); *Hermeneutic Interpretation of the Social State of Man and of the Adamic Race*, trans. Nayan Louise Redfield (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1915).

34. Antoine Fabre d’Olivet, *Hermeneutic Interpretation*, xviii–xix.

35. Fabre d’Olivet, *Social State of Man*, xiii.

perspective, concluding that the world had been created by angels, and not by God, and that Adam's sin was "to have detached the branch of Malkuth from the Sephirothic tree," leading to "the separation of the primitive androgyne," and a rupture between mankind and the Divine. As a result, the perfect androgynous being separated into man and woman, and while man came to be composed of "an element, a substance and an essence," respectively named Nephesh [sic], Ruach, and Neschamah [sic], women contained only Nephesh and Ruach, while "Neschamah, the spirit, the only immortal essence, remained entirely within Adam."³⁶

The following excerpt from *Fée* is Péladan's reinterpretation of those sections of Genesis explaining the ontological differences between men and women, thus justifying the admonitions in the rest of the handbook. Each verse is rewritten to reflect his understanding of the text, partly following Fabre d'Olivet, and is accompanied by copious footnotes and further commentary in which he expands on his theory. The text here corresponds to Genesis 2:21-2.³⁷

36. Péladan, *La Terre du Christ*, (Paris: Flammarion 1901), 270 in Dantinne, *L'œuvre et la pensée de Péladan*, 155; Péladan, *Fée*, 30, in Dantinne, *L'œuvre et la pensée de Péladan*, 49-50. Péladan's usage of this terminology also corroborates the fact that he was familiar with Zoharic ontological philosophy, as noted by Dantinne.

37. In the New King James Bible these verses read: "21. And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. 22. Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man." Gen. 2:21-22 NKJ. Nayan Louise Redfiel's 1921 translation of Fabre d'Olivet's version reads: "21. And he caused to fall, IHOAH [sic], HE-the-Gods, a-sympathetic-slumber (mysterious and deep) upon Adam (collective man) who-slept: and he broke off one of the involutions (that sheltered him) and he covered with care (he coloured) with shape and corporeal beauty the weakness (inferiority) of her.

22. And he restored (in its former state) IHOAH, HE-the-Being-of-beings, the selfsameness of the sheltering windings which he had broken, from Adam (collective man) for shaping Aishah (intellectual woman, man's faculty of volition) and he brought her to him (Adam)." The original French version by Fabre d'Olivet, including original punctuation and capitalisation: "21. Et-il-laissa-tomber IHOAH, LUI-des-Dieux, un-sommeil-sympathique (mystérieux et profond) sur Adam (l'homme universel) qui-dormit: et-il-rompit-de-l'unité une des-enveloppes-siennes (extérieures) et-il-couvrit-avec-soin (il colora) forme-et-beauté-corporelle la-faiblesse (l'infériorité)- à-elle. 22. Et-il-reconstruisit (consolida, rétablit dans son premier état) IHOAH, LUI-l'Être-des-êtres, la substance-de-l'enveloppe-extérieure, laquelle il-avait-rompue d'Adam (l'homme universel) pour- (baser) Aishah (la femme intellectuelle la faculté volitive d'Adam) et-il-amena-elle à-lui-Adam." d'Olivet, *The Hebraic Tongue Restored*, 87-89.

21. So Joah Elohim suspended Adam's consciousness and he reended his androgynous unity, and taking his passivity, or reflex, he individualised it into a form where the curve, which is beauty, dominated. 22. Then he developed the active part of Adam quantitatively, to take the place of his passive entity, Aisha, henceforth a distinct person, and he took Aisha to Adam...

Of the three elements composing Adam-Eve, only two were divisible: Nephesh, corporeality, and Ruach, the soul; as a consequence Adam was reduced to half of his corporeality, or Nephesh, and half his Ruach, or soul. Neschamah, the spirit, the only inherently immortal part, remained entirely in Adam. But because Eve was destined for the same future as Adam, the Angels who had made the curve, which is beauty, predominate in Eve's new corporeality, exalted Ruach in women to the point where, through Neschamah's reflex she participated in her immortal destiny.³⁸

As a result, Péladan explains to his hypothetical female reader, men and women acquired different faculties and attributes, meaning that they could and should not aspire to the same ambitions as men.

Though to modern eyes this may appear to be a typical sample of patriarchal rhetoric, it should not be read only in such a context. Based on further evidence from his life and the written record, Péladan was a passionate admirer of the ideals women could attain, but set himself up as the foe of what society had made women become. He considered that women could connect directly with God on account of their increased intuition, whereas men had to cultivate their intellect and follow a more conceptual path.³⁹ He considered a woman's greatest drawback to be the increased instinct (Nahash—symbolised by the serpent of Genesis) she possessed, and throughout the book he constantly admonishes his reader that if she can recognize and gain control over this dangerous and deceptive faculty, then she has the potential for great power. Péladan acknowledges powerful and successful women in history and mythology, but states that they were successful because they knew and applied the long-forgotten secrets that he is revealing in this book (hence the reference to princesses); namely, because they were able to avoid "the mirages of Nahash," instead allowing the "superior subconscious to predominate."

As with *Mage*, Péladan identifies seven different types of women, according to planetary and astrological correspondences,

38. Péladan, *Fée*, 34–6.

39. Péladan, *Fée*, 46–7, 49 *passim*. Péladan reiterates the idea throughout the book from a number of different perspectives.

cross-referencing mythological figures as well as the archetypal figures depicted by the Great Masters of the past. He then proceeds to recommend the best ways of individuation and “becoming a Fairy” for each type, explaining that he has selected the term “Fée” because “to say ‘Magesse’ would be blasphemy,” while the “Fairy” “expresses the idea of the individual... Norn”; which is to say, one of the Fates of Scandinavian lore. Péladan does in fact ascribe considerable power and significance to women, reiterates throughout this treatise the means to attaining and manifesting that power.

Chaldea

This idea is borne out by two further factors: firstly the way in which women feature in Péladan’s novels and plays—in many cases they are powerful, self-aware examples of the ideal he proposes. Secondly, by the prayer—or evocation—in the front matter of the book, addressed to “The Ancient ones” and the “Ereckian”—a reference to the Sumerian city of Uruk and its civilization:

I have manifested your glory, oh Ereckian; by virtue of my art, Latin thought has leapt at the thought of your mysterious adventure. Oh Daimons, I have proclaimed and defended your precedence, I have thought of it night and day, behold how I raise the second enclosure and the second terrace: the Amphithéâtre of Dead Sciences....I have done the work of restoration; and as I have dispersed the vain phantoms who obscured the clear star of magic, I have ruined the temple of Woman with this work—and through me several spirits will see God—so that he is forgiven by my race.

And you, sublime bull, symbol of powerful thought! Guard the threshold of this truly masculine work!⁴⁰

This reference to Uruk and the “sublime bull” reflects one of the two dominant motifs of Péladan’s opus, that of Chaldean deities and mythology (he used the word “Chaldea” to denote both Sumerian and Assyrian cultures). He was to claim a Chaldean heritage for his family name,⁴¹ the historical spuriousness of which has been successfully proven by genealogical studies—but as noted, it was never meant literally, but in the context of his doctrine of *kaloprosopia*. Chaldean names and mythology formed a significant part of a number of his novels, and he hinted at similarities between Chaldean (Kaldéen) and Celtic (keltéen or kelte) lands and peoples for

40. Péladan, *Fée*, 48, 49–50, 2–3.

41. Beaufile, *Joséphin Péladan*, 9.

whom he constructed Atlantean lineages. His salons were named for Chaldean deities and their correspondences used as points of reference and motifs, and he used the septenary of deities as an organisational device in reflecting planetary and other correspondences in *Amphithéâtre*, where each tome features “Babylonian” illustrations on the frontispiece.⁴²

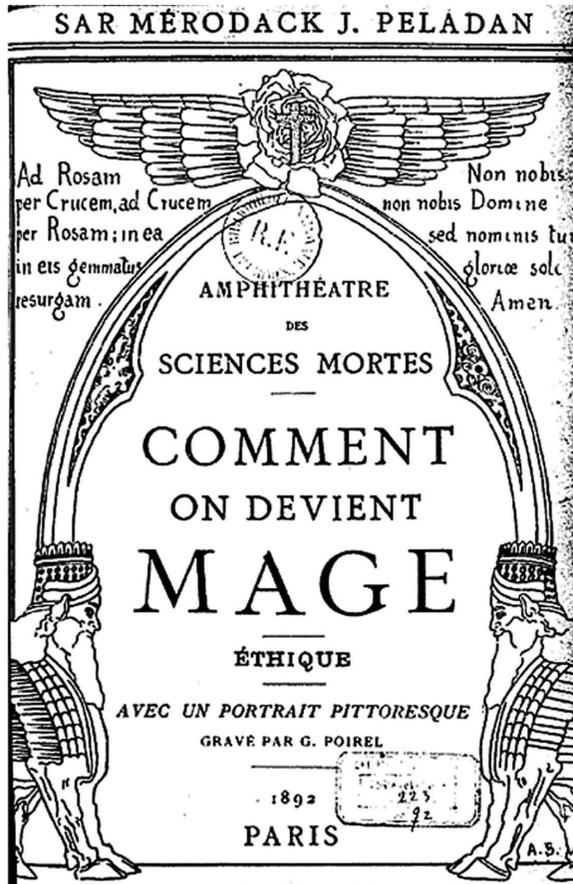


Illustration 1: The same frontispiece appears in all the other books in *Amphithéâtre des Sciences Mortes*

42. Hyacinthe Chobaut, “Les Ancêtres de Joséphin Péladan,” *Nouvelle Revue du Midi*, n. 10 (Nîmes: Chastanier, December 1924), 6 n. 1 (6–12); Dantine, *La Vie et la Pensée de Joséphin Péladan* (Office de la Publicité SC: Brussels, 1946), 9–12; Beau-fils, *Joséphin Péladan*, 148, 171; Laurence de Larmandie, *L’Entr’acte Idéal: Histoire de la Rose+Croix* (Paris: Chacornac, 1903).

The subtitle to Péladan's "handbook" for his Rosicrucian order reads: "Restitution of Chaldean Magic Adapted to Modernity, Doctrine of the Order of the Rose + Cross of the Temple and the Grail." Laid out in breath-taking detail, the "Doctrine" presents not only the rules and philosophy of the Order, but an intricate system of correspondences embracing Chaldean mythology, Kabbalistic references, and more traditional esoteric correspondences, alongside a table of concordances demonstrating how his novels and theoretical works fit together.

Péladan admired Egyptian art and civilization and had closely studied the artefacts and studies available at the time, clearly demonstrated in his *Antiquité Orientale* (1908).⁴³ However, he was less concerned with historical accuracy and far more interested in the use and meaning of the art of each of these civilizations. He did not perceive Egyptian art as a process of giving idea to form, but more of a direct representation of divine attributes that became the reality of the afterlife, something he believed to have been understood by initiates, and expressed in naturalistic imagery for the lay population. In Péladan's view, the step from Egyptian to Chaldean art was that from cat to sphinx, from bull to chimeric temple guardian, and the process of taking that step is what he considers the exaltation of mankind. He notes:

The bull with a human face, an admirable creation... A combination of the flanks and hooves of a bull with the mane of a lion, that signify the two types of courage and animal strength; this type is amplified by the mitred face and the wings signifying supernatural being. He thinks with the head, he can rise to the sky with the wings, and by the organic characteristics he can rule the earth. The sphinx is an androgynous cat, it dreams; the bull is alert and in motion.⁴⁴

This is one of the best examples of what Péladan meant by "a perfect work" – one in which the ideal was given symbolic form that could take on a life of its own in the human imagination and communicate these notions to the viewer, taking on a talismanic role within the mythology of a given civilisation. This is what he meant by the ensoulment of a work of art – from the moment that a form was created in order to represent an ideal, as far as Péladan was concerned, it represented a perfect creative act.

43. J. Péladan, *Les Idées et les Formes: Antiquité Orientale, Egypte – Kaldée – Assyrie – Chine – Phénicie – Judée – Arabie – Inde – Perse – Aryas d'Asie Mineure* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1908).

44. Péladan, *Antiquités Orientales*, 159. Cf. J. E. Reade, *Assyrian sculpture-1* (London: British Museum Press, 1998).

It is a kind of reverse theurgy: rather than invoking a deity in order to animate a statue, the statue or painting is created to demonstrate man's ability to conceive and to clothe the Idea. Hence, in Péladan's understanding Chaldean art represented a break from the direct depiction of deities and the "language of the dead" that he perceived in Egyptian civilisation, and a step in the direction of human creativity. For Péladan, Chaldean art was a process of giving material form to ideas, whereby statuary and reliefs came to take on the nature of three-dimensional hieroglyphs representing *concepts rather than entities* – and it would appear that this is the most significant differentiation; Egypt codified the ideas, Chaldea gave them form clothed by the human imagination.

According to the Chaldean creation myth, the Chaldeans were initiated into the material plane and into human potential (to become creators in their own right) by Oannes, who taught them to give form to ideas and to create symbols. Though Péladan at one point mentions that Oannes was probably "a strange man from an aboriginal race,"⁴⁵ this did not hinder him from perceiving the mythical Oannes as one of several sublime egregores or daemons, stepping in to assist with the evolution of mankind, while the actual Chaldean pantheon designated a hierarchical and emanationist cosmology and cosmogony⁴⁶ composed of deities, angels, daemons and a veritable platoon of

45. Péladan, *Antiquités Orientales*, 135. Originally named Adapa, Oannes is a Promethean figure from Babylonian mythology, variously styled as a ruler or demigod, who was offered immortality and refused it, or was fooled by the god Ea. In the version retold by Babylonian priest Berossus during the Hellenistic era, Adapa was renamed Oannes, the Greek version of the name. According to the *Etiological Myth of the Seven Sages*, Oannes belonged to a class of sages and "keepers of esoteric lore" known as the *apkallu*: "of human descent, whom the lord Ea has endowed with wisdom." According to Berossus, Oannes "emerged daily from the Erythrean Sea... to teach mankind the arts of civilisation." Later Biblical and Talmudic sources conflate Dagon with the figure of Oannes, and while any historical connection between the two myths is disputed, by the nineteenth century the two names were often used interchangeably to denote the fish-god who was the guardian and teacher of mankind. See Joscelyn Godwin, *Atlantis and the Cycles of Time: Prophecies, Traditions, and Occult Revelations* (Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2011), 302; K. van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter Willem van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2nd edn (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 73, 218; Joseph E. Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and its Origins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980 [1959]), 157; J. E. Fontenrose, "Dagon and El," *Oriens* X, 277–79; Hartmut Schmökel, *Der Gott Dagan; Ursprung, Verbreitung und Wesen seines Kultes* (Borna-Leipzig: Universitätsverlag von Robert Noske, 1928).

46. Péladan, *Antiquités Orientales*, 136.

demons.⁴⁷ Yet the Sphinx, he thought, was the culmination of human volition and creativity, and thus a profoundly magical symbol.

Péladan refers again to the Assyrian Sphinx in *Mage* as he offers the reader clear instructions for perfecting the first stages of his teaching:

Know! Before all things, cultivate your intelligence. Dare! Be firm in evidence, and constant in Will! That which the intelligence has conceived, the soul executes. Be silent! Silence is the matrix of the word and the work, four such magic words, as the Chaldeans counted them, six thousand years ago, in the form of a sacred bull. Study this symbol; the human head wears the royal crown with three rows of horns, a privilege of the gods, and signifies: initiate, no longer obey, you are a king if you think. A king does not seek to reign, the triple horns have destined you for the sole conquest of eternity. The wings show you that you must be inspired by the superior world, without ceasing to manifest light on this earth by the power of the bull's hooves.⁴⁸

The command “To Know, to Dare, to Will and to be Silent” refers to the “four powers of the Sphinx,” deriving from Eliphas Lévi’s *Transcendental Magic*. According to Lévi’s commentary, these four precepts refer to the four powers of the “initiate,” and following a lengthy exegesis which includes Pythagorean and Kabbalistic references, he concludes: “There is only one dogma in magic, and it is this: The visible is the manifestation of the invisible, or, in other terms, the perfect word.” This reflects a further axiom upon which Péladan built his aesthetic curriculum: “Making the invisible visible: that is the true purpose of art and its only reason for existence.”⁴⁹ Hence, his repeated use of Assyrian motifs in almost every aspect of his work, reflects the attempt to manifest the creative breakthrough that he perceived as being their greatest achievement as a civilisation, and a constant reminder of the teachings of Oannes—a symbol of the awakening of humanity to its divine potential.

Daimons

One element of Péladan’s invocation remains to be explored; his reference to “Daimons” in the rather curious line: “through me several

47. *Ibid.*, 141.

48. Péladan, *Mage*, 8.

49. All quotations in paragraph: Eliphas Lévi, *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* (Paris: Chacornac, 1930 [1856]), 119; Péladan, ‘*L’esthétique au salon de 1883*,’ *La décadence Esthétique: L’Art Ochlocratique, Salons de 1882 & 1883* (Paris: Dalou, 1888), 51; first published in *L’Artiste*, May 1883.

spirits will see God – so that he is forgiven by my race.” This is preceded by the following statements:

As a poet, I have spoken of the night of love when two hundred angels
fell into the ecstatic mortal bosom.

I have shone the light on you, Satan, great and guilty one. That your
heart – daimonic race, race of the tiara and the lyre, supports my effort
for it to beat faithfully.⁵⁰

A full exploration of Péladan’s quite overt Luciferianism will have to wait for another paper, as there are considerable elements to analyze, not least its place in the context of Romantic Satanism, the latter’s relationship with the zeitgeist of the post-Revolutionary era,⁵¹ and questions about Péladan’s true feelings about Catholicism. While, much like Lévi, he “had a peculiar trick of appearing to bow to orthodoxy but in fact leaving the way open for whatever opinion he wished to profess,”⁵² and dutifully reiterated his commitment to church teachings in the prefaces to many of his theoretical works, he openly professed his compassion and indeed admiration for Satan in many of his works.⁵³

Péladan’s view of Lucifer had less to do with revolutionary fervour (he decried it), and far more to do with his theology, which betrays strong Neoplatonic influences. Following Pseudo-Dionysius,⁵⁴ he believed that “absolute evil does not exist; evil is an accident of goodness.” He also believed that the world was created by angels, led by Lucifer himself prior to the fall, and that the fall resulted

50. Péladan, *Fée*, 2–3.

51. See note 36; also Max Milner, *Le Diable dans la Littérature Française: De Cizotte à Baudelaire, 1772–1861* (Paris: Corti, 2007 [1960]).

52. McIntosh, *Eliphas Lévi*, 145.

53. His theology on these points displays a curious and eclectic form of dualism that could be classified as a monarchian, pro-cosmic, pro-hylic, eschatological Gnosticism that shares some features with Valentinianism but is expressed in a way entirely particular to Péladan. Yuri Stoyanov, *The Other God: Dualist Religions from Antiquity to the Cathar Heresy* (New Haven: Yale, Nota Bene, 2000); first published as *The Hidden Tradition in Europe: The Secret History of Medieval Christian History* (London: Penguin, 1994), 4; cf. Ugo Bianchi, *Il dualismo religioso, Saggio storico et etnologico* (Rome: 1983 [1958]).

54. Péladan, like others before him, conflated Dionysius the Areopagite, an early Christian convert, with Pseudo-Dionysius of the fifth or sixth century CE. See Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary On The Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Paul Rorem and John C. Lamoreaux, “John of Scythopolis on Apollinarian Christology and the Pseudo-Areopagite’s True Identity,” *Church History* 62, no. 4 (1993): 469–82.

from the desire of some angels (those of Enoch I), to imbue material humanity with spiritual properties. In this Péladan followed Fabre d'Olivet's conception of the separation of the primordial androgyne as discussed previously, grafting on Platonic, Neoplatonic, and some Catholic elements, revealing his eclectic approach to Catholicism, belying his usual professions of faith.

The following excerpt effectively summarizes the centrality of Lucifer and the angelic Fall to Péladan's cosmology. Addressing Satan, he writes (emphasis mine):

I, a lucid Platonist and fervent Catholic, I visit you in my thoughts... and as I feel the daemonic blood palpitate within me, I try to cleanse your face of the mud that human wickedness has thrown there... Humanity is that son of Noah who turned away in derision from their father's decline; I am Shem, I respect you in your misfortune, as I admire you in the splendour of your origins.

The Bené-Oelohim were the sons of your will and I would like to believe that I am descended from them, this one here, who is seen as the confused élan of the most humble, to the grandest, and to the most unlucky of *the same race*...

Onto this serious and healthy notion of the demon [as] obscured angel, I have grafted the occult idea of involution and evolution; *there are two series of beings here below: beings who, born of the earth, attempt to rise, and others, born of the spirit, for whom earthly life is a fall and an expiation of some mysterious crime of the beyond.*

True to the Bereschit [Genesis] and to the sepher [book] of Enoch, in the genius of a Plato, of a Dante, of a Wagner, *I see a daemonic descent... [this is] the conflict of angelic nature enclosed within the human condition.*⁵⁵

This is an expansion on ideas Péladan had already hinted at in his novels: "The enchanters, the egregores of all times, of all lands, mages, saints, artists, poets, aristes, mystagogues, are all the obscured or shining offspring of angelic descent."⁵⁶ And in fact the whole novel *Istar* (1888) tells the story of the angelic Fall and what Péladan terms "the theory of human aristocracy"⁵⁷ per his own allegorical interpretation.

Istar is the tale of "a small, maverick planet, guilty of the greatest sin of all: incest."⁵⁸ The novel centers around the story of Istar and Nergal, both of them Oelohites, children of Bené-Satan, himself the son of Satan, who were given the chance to atone for their father's

55. Péladan, *Comment on Devient Artiste* (Paris: Chamuel, 1892), xi-xiii, 41.

56. Péladan, *Istar*, 41.

57. Péladan, *Fée*, 2, n1.

58. Péladan, *Istar*, 257.

sins by living out a sequence of mortal lives alongside mankind, so as to instil divine genius among brutish “terrestrials.” The punishment is made more tragic because the Oelohites are fatally attracted to one another, yet incest is the greatest sin of all.

Péladan uses this moral bind to illustrate the virtues of Platonic love, a religious kind of eroticism, which can eschew physical contact while exalting spiritual love and devotion. Istar, the Oelohite heroine, is an example of the ideal feminine who finds herself bound by social constructs and divine edict, forced to live out eternity as a human woman, despite her angelic essence. He makes good use of this dynamic to develop the narrative, demonstrating the redemptive potential of the full expression of these faculties, and using the stories of the first and second angelic fall to provide a constant tension between the ideal and imperfect reality.

Yet this story, like his other *éthopées*, is more than a simple morality tale, as demonstrated by his theoretical explanations in his non-fiction works, Péladan actually believed the metaphysical and cosmogonic dimension that formed the basis for his fiction. Teasingly, he uses Kabbalistic references and almost playfully decodes their meanings, illustrated by the protagonists themselves, while also drawing in his broad knowledge of world mythology to enrich the referential layers of his narrative. Several chapters begin with an almost ritualistic sequence of invocations that are repeated, in reverse, at the end, explaining how individual Oelohites seek redemption through communion and fleshing out specific Oelohite characters according to his system of correspondences. Péladan displays a number of different styles of expression and writing throughout, though these are well enough controlled to maintain clarity rather than cause confusion. The end result is an intriguing tragedy, held together by the overarching narrative and motifs, which draws together the diverse strands of his message.

In *Istar* and his other novels, Péladan was practising what he preached to his coterie of artists: “Artist, you are a priest: Art is the grand mystery, and when your effort results in a masterpiece, a ray of divinity descends as if upon an altar. Artist, you are a king: art is the true empire. Artist, you are a mage: Art is the grand miracle, it only proves our immortality.”⁵⁹ If art could give form to ideals, as he had done in this example, then it could communicate them directly to the hearts and minds of the masses and collectively initiate them

59. Péladan, *L'art idéaliste et mystique*, 33.

into their daimonic selves, thus, he hoped, bringing humanity closer to its divine origins, to reach out and touch “something that died in humanity seven thousand years ago.”⁶⁰

Although Péladan inevitably failed in his grand vision, he nonetheless produced a prodigious series of works and provided a powerful inspiration for the several dozen artists who worked alongside him. There are many reasons for his failure, but his originality and singularity of vision nonetheless renders his work worthy of re-evaluation in its capacity both as literature, as well as literary esotericism.

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60. Péladan, *La Gynandre* (Paris: Dentu, 1891), 319.

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