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Hidden in Plain Sight

Joséphin Péladan's Religion of Art

Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918) is one of the forgotten names of Western esotericism. When not entirely consigned to oblivion, he is most often remembered in a vague footnote on Symbolist art. His name conjures the image of an eccentric, purple-garbed oddity of little import. 'No literary figure of the late nineteenth century had been more ridiculed, lampooned and caricatured,' writes one biographer. 'A constant naïve clumsiness was always present in Joséphin's home,' notes another.[1] Guillaume Apollinaire's 'hack's obituary', by turns sympathetic and ironic, made him out to be a tragicomic, 'slightly ridiculous' figure.[2] Dozens of contemporary newspaper articles ridiculing Péladan and reproducing caricatures from the French press appeared as far afield as New York and even Australia.

With a few notable exceptions, most scholarly studies also paint Péladan as an attention-seeking, misguided charlatan who left nothing of worth to the worlds of literature, art or esotericism. Even his most sympathetic biographers (and there are not many) sooner or later concede that this quixotic, earnest figure is infuriatingly obscure and quite impossible to make sense of.

Today Péladan's name is barely known outside specific esoteric circles. Other than that, he is usually afforded a few pages at best in scholarly studies of Rosicrucianism or the French occult revival. Péladan certainly contributed to the situation through his outrageous appearance, bombastic proclamations and extremely sharp pen. Yet none of these factors eclipse his admirable singularity of purpose, the originality and cohesiveness of his work, and the sheer audaciousness of his endeavours.

Enormously prolific, Péladan published over a hundred articles, books, plays and pamphlets. He was committed to his belief that creating art was a supremely sacred act that could redeem the fall of both the angels and mankind. He left modern-day Rosicrucianism a rich legacy and was a key player in the inception and development of the crossover between Symbolist art and occultism in the French *fin de siècle*. Overall, his work lies at the nexus between Illuminist, perennialist and esoteric Christian currents. Vastly well read, he drew on influences ranging from Platonic metaphysics and Kabbalistic cosmology to the new archaeological discoveries in Egypt and ancient Assyria.

Péladan collaborated with two of the greatest figures in the modern esoteric canon, Papus (Gérard Encausse) and Stanislas de Guaïta. His first novel, *Le Vice suprême* (1884), was the catalyst for de Guaïta's discovery of occultism. De Guaïta became his faithful disciple, but

fig. 1. Alexandre Séon, *Portrait of Péladan*, Oil on Canvas, 132.5x80 cm. 1891. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon. © Lyon MBA . Photo Alain Basset.

following bitter disagreements over doctrinal and philosophical matters Péladan broke away in 1891 from the Kabbalistic Order of the Rose-Croix that he had established in 1888 together with Papus and de Guaïta. A very public quarrel (1890–93) ensued, dubbed the War of the Roses, resulting in permanent damage to Péladan's reputation. From this point on he was openly ridiculed in popular and literary journals, as well as in the worldwide press. As one newspaper put it:

> The two parties, going back to the occult practices of the middle ages, have boo-booed each other by making little wax dolls, which they pierced with a needle in the region of the heart while pronouncing mystic words. This practice, not having produced the desired results, they introduced themselves in disguise into their different meetings for the purpose of disturbing the ceremonies. Several wigs and false beards were torn away in rows that were extremely comical.[3]

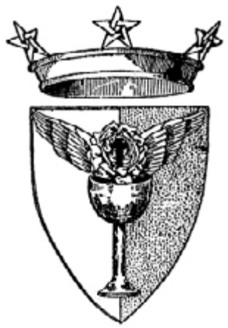

fig. 2. Emblem of the Order of the Rose-Croix of the Temple and the Grail.

The claim of wax dolls was dreamed up by his rivals and perpetuated in the press. However, false beards and wigs were indeed worn by members of the rival factions so as to gain access to each other's meetings, to spy and cause trouble. While the war of words raged on in the papers, Péladan went on in 1891 to establish his *Ordre de la Rose-Croix catholique et esthétique du Temple et du Graal.* The order was strongly focused on his aesthetic-esoteric vision and his self-imposed mission to reinstate the *philosophia perennis* of Renaissance philosophers through the ritualisation of art. This, he dreamed, would function as the manifestation of the divine in matter. He went to extraordinary lengths to share his grand vision with the world, deliberately shunning secrecy, in stark contrast to most esoteric thinkers and traditions.

In *fin-de-siècle* Paris, esoteric secrets suddenly became front-page news and could be found in the mass-market paperbacks of the day. Péladan took it upon himself to effect the collective initiation of society at large through exposing them to symbolic esoterica in every form he could think of. Rather than concealing occult secrets to protect them from 'profane' eyes, Péladan chose to do the opposite. It was profane eyes that he wanted to open: not through secret rituals behind hermetically sealed doors, but through nothing less than an artistic revolution. He used the mass media of the day, as well as literature, theatre, monographs and public exhibitions to bombard the public with his one deceptively simple message. Spiritual evolution was available to all, and it was the sacred duty of mankind to turn their very lives into works of art, allowing true will to guide them towards their divine origin. As he said to the American journalist Raymond Daly in an 1893 interview:

> 'Men may be divided into three classes, the consummate fools, the *animiques*, sensible to questions of sentiment and to the beauties of art, and the intellectuals, capable of contemplating an idea in its splendid nudity, and without aesthetic translation . . . I have not sufficient genius,' said my interlocutor, modestly, 'to be the dazzling prism of truths; I content myself with bringing the love of art upon the *animique* ground, to translate ideas into aesthetic forms accessible to those who form the second class, of which I have just spoken, the *animiques*, the artists and lovers of art.'[4]

Thus Péladan hoped that he could guide each man and woman on a path to self-initiation. This collective initiation of mankind through Beauty would redeem not only the fall of Adam but that of Lucifer himself. As he put it:

> 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 to contemporary times. [For those] born to read me, I offer this practical method of automagification.[5]

Amazingly, even Péladan's most mystical texts do not include a single ritual, nor a single magical formula. He was quite emphatic in his conviction that occult rituals were both unnecessary and counterproductive. This was based on his belief that true magical work was a deeply social affair to be conducted within the mundane sphere. He held the unshakeable conviction that '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.' Magic is 'the art of sublimation of man; there is no other formula'.[6]

This 'art' was a pragmatic as well as an esoteric process. It was to be achieved through redefining and re-establishing one's perspective and behaviour in all levels of social interaction, in a constant process of mindful living and self-cultivation. However, this process was not simply a precursor to the kind of self-improvement techniques popular today. It is firmly rooted in principles drawing on the full breadth of esoteric thought, from Plato (whom Péladan unreservedly admired) to the Zohar, to the work of Eliphas Lévi (1810–75). These principles are echoed in Péladan's treatises on magic and self-initiation. He rewrote the book of Genesis to explain the problem of evil, following the Romantic Luciferian literary tradition begun by Blake, Shelley and Byron and picked up by revolutionary poets across the Channel.[7] The result was a vast, yet surprisingly coherent and well-rounded *legendarium* based on his Luciferian cosmology. The methods he selected to deploy his philosophy used familiar esoteric languages of symbolic expression, drawing on what he considered to be archetypal forms gleaned from world mythology.

In Péladan's speculative rewriting of the creation story, Lucifer and his progeny are cast as tragic, Promethean figures. Their sole purpose – and crime – was to have attempted to bestow free will and creativity upon mankind. Banished to earth for this transgression against 'natural law', their only hope for redemption depended on guiding mankind towards self-actualisation. The aim was to redeem the fall of both the angels and mankind, a work that Péladan saw as mankind's sacred duty. This would bring mankind to a direct understanding of divine thought, and thus assist in the collective evolution of humanity and ultimately its reintegration with the divine.

Flamboyantly eschewing secrecy based on his premise that all individuals could and must embark on this self-actualising process, Péladan used four main channels to communicate his philosophy. These were the periodical press, religious rhetoric directed both at the Church and the faithful in his books and in monographs, his Ordre de la Rose-Croix catholique et esthétique du Temple et du Graal, and the arts, including his novels, plays, his

esoteric-aesthetic curriculum for artists, and his Salons de la Rose+Croix. Acknowledging that people of differing temperaments or at different stages of intellectual and spiritual development required different approaches, these four channels corresponded with the four 'types' of personality that he identified: 'Men of God, Men of Ideas, Men of the State, Men of the World'. Each mode of communication spoke to one type's particular sensibilities. He then proposed three different ways for these types to embark on the self-actualisation process, depending on their individual temperament: 'Science, which seeks God through reality. Art, which seeks God through Beauty. Theodicy, which seeks God through Thought', and went on to write guides to each of these ways, using different language depending on his target reader.[8]

Strikingly, all of Péladan's different types of writing – fictional (novels and plays) and theoretical – complement each other in an almost palindromic fashion. The hidden meanings within his novels are revealed by reading his theoretical works. These in turn spring to life in his novels and plays. To gain a complete understanding of his philosophy both forms need to be read, and Péladan appears to have engineered this deliberately. He quotes heavily from his novels at key points in his theoretical works, and vice versa, going so far as to produce an anthology of annotated excerpts from his own fiction. In *La Queste du Graal* (1894) he noted quite petulantly that his readers had failed to understand the symbolic message of his novels. The anthology presented a more accessible distillation of his philosophy. To further aid the reader, many of his books featured an appendix explaining the concordances among his various works, noting their astrological and mythological correspondences accompanied by brief explanations of the archetypes represented by the characters.

Péladan arranged his works (including those in planning) in septenaries. The twenty-one novels of his *Décadence Latine* cycle and the seven theoretical books of the *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes* reflect planetary correspondences, as do some of the chapter arrangements. His 'self-initiation handbook' for men (he wrote a separate one for women) entitled *Comment on devient mage* (1894) is divided into three parts, the first subdivided into seven, the second into twelve subsections named for Assyrian deities. These are then connected with planetary, angelic, Kabbalistic and Catholic correspondences. Entitled 'How to exit the century', the structure of his initiatory system reflects seven stages of spiritual enlightenment. Each stage deals with a specific virtue, behaviour, duty and mystery, with careful directions regarding the conscious reassessment and desired change to be enacted in a specific aspect of worldly life.

The first of the seven stages is that of the Neophyte, where Péladan sought to empower the reader to seek and express their individualism according to their own true will. The second, simply entitled 'Society', calls on the initiate to forswear all societal strictures and façades. The third, 'Rules of Socialisation', stresses the need for compassion and intellectual cultivation. The fourth, 'Orientation', deals with letting go of regrets and errors of the past. The fifth, 'Of Magical Power', deals with forgiveness and merciful justice towards others as well as the self. The sixth, 'Of Love', is aimed at the initiate who has successfully developed the foregoing aspects of his character and is fit to join in love with an equally evolved woman. The last, 'Self-teaching', considers the initiate to be in a state of sufficient self-knowledge whereby with wisdom and compassion they may express their individuality in the world and share the idea with others.

fig. 3. Jean Delville, *Satan's Treasures*, 1895. Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.

Péladan designed this process as one to be undertaken alone, without the guidance or support of higher initiates or peers as is normally the case in esoteric orders. Odd though this appears, it reflects his own tradition into which he had been initiated by his brother Adrien.

The Péladan brothers belonged to the Toulouse Rosicrucian circle founded by the physician, alchemist and erstwhile diplomat Viscount Edouard de Lapasse (1792–1867) in 1850. Lapasse had spent time in aristocratic esoteric circles in Germany and is thought to have been initiated by the Prince Balbiani of Palermo, himself a follower of Cagliostro.[9] Lapasse's Rosicrucian order never took on the character of a well-populated and strictly regimented organisation such as the para-Masonic or Martinist orders of the day. His greatest interest was practical alchemy, and his publications (most notably *Essai sur la conservation de la vie*, 1860) expressed mainly practical applications of alchemy and sought 'a synthesis between traditional knowledge and modern science'.[10] There is little information

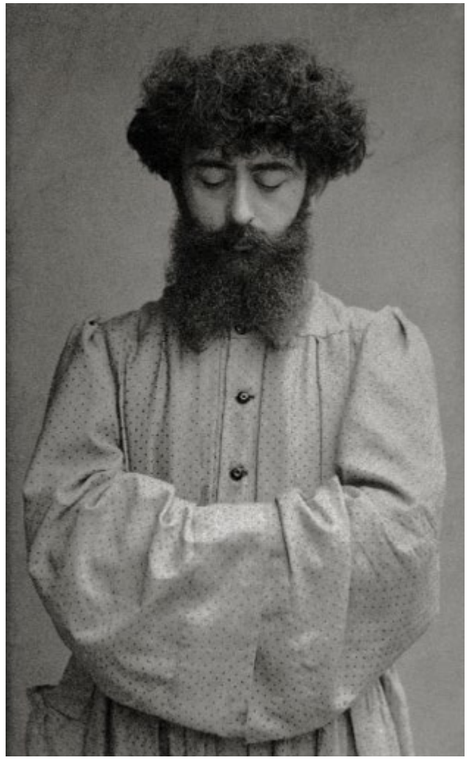

fig. 4. Nussard Péladan, *Portrait du Sâr Péladan*, 1895. Paris, Musée d'Orsay. © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay). ARR.

on Lapasse's Rosicrucian activities due to his desire for discretion. Nonetheless, a key element of his legacy was the lack of organised initiatory work, replaced instead by the work of the individual out in society:

> . . . [work that was] not 'symbolic' but indeed real, consisting of the free practising of medicine (for the viscount de Lapasse or Adrien Péladan) or the organisation of artistic salons (for Joséphin Péladan). [The members] were all independent personalities in pursuit of an individual path, far from social conformity and any kind of regimentation . . . Their communal affiliation to the Order of the Rose-Croix simply meant that they had received the initiation which would permit the realisation of their inner being . . . but not that they were engaged in submitting to the commandments of some kind of para-religious hierarchy.[11]

This approach to esoteric work stands in startling contrast with those of the esoteric schools of the day. It reflects a number of the rules laid out in the Fama Fraternitatis of 1614, which Péladan is known to have taken literally. Esotericism was intertwined with the notion of service within the world, to be carried out by Rosicrucian initiates without specific reference to their affiliation. Indeed, Rosicrucianism is not mentioned within Péladan's initiatory handbooks: he seems to have wanted to distance his system for mindful living from overt esoteric terminology. The path each member chose had to reflect their own personal talents and tastes, and represented a kind of 'lived alchemy'. By doing good in the world, they would themselves develop spiritually. According to Péladan, it was vital that initiates tear down and disdain social conformity if it hindered the expression of their free will. This perspective partially explains his own penchant for eccentricity. Péladan stressed the need for individual self-realisation as follows:

> Do not search for another measure of magical power beyond that of your internal power, nor any method of judging another being beyond the light they shed. 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.[12]

He summarised the duties of the neophyte thus:

> 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 magical words as the Chaldeans counted 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, [you must] 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 hoofs.[13]

Péladan was indeed inspired by aspects of Eliphas Lévi's work, as is evident in this adaptation of Lévi's 'Four Powers of the Sphinx'.[14] Although Péladan also focused on the Egyptian sphinx, the male Babylonian sphinx (or lamassu) was equally important to him, and this is the 'sacred bull' to which he refers above. The 'triple horns' refer to the mitre worn by the Babylonian sphinx, which according to Péladan reflected the fish-headdress worn by Oannes, one of the elect teachers of mankind in Assyrian theogony.

The winged bull-sphinx is a quite typical example of the way Péladan used and interpreted symbolism. Rather than something that should lead to ever more obscure mysteries, he saw it as an allegorical teaching tool that encapsulated an ideal to which the initiate – or even the curious reader – could relate and aspire. Thus they could attempt to manifest or awaken its inner meaning in their own lives and consciousness. This was the role that Péladan envisaged for art: that of vehicle and communication tool, based on his Platonic premise that Beauty alone could encapsulate Ideal notions. These in turn, came as close as possible to the ineffable *nous* of God, offering a road map to each viewer. By contemplatively engaging with the images and internalising their inner Ideals, they could then begin to manifest these Ideals in their everyday existence: 'Idealist Art is that which reunites within a work all the perfections that the spirit can conceive on a given theme . . . The Beauty of a work is made from sublimated reality.'

In his treatise on *Ideal and Mystical Art*, Péladan laid out a detailed set of rules – along with their philosophical and esoteric principles – for artists to follow in order to place their work at the service of society and the regeneration of mankind. He proclaimed Art to be a religion in the sense of 'that which mediates between the physical and the metaphysical . . . [that which] connects the creature to the Creator'.[15] Art as a religion needed both a dogma and a temple, and Péladan proclaimed his treatise to be that dogma. Designating artists as born initiates and hierophants, he issued a call to arms to all artists to build the temple of the Art-god:

> All-powerful Art, the Art God, I adore you on my knees, you, the final reflection from on High over our putrescence . . . All is rotten, all is finished, decadence has cracked and shaken the Western edifice . . . Pitiful moderns, your course into nothingness is fatal; fall, then, under the weight of your worthlessness: your blasphemies will never erase the faith of works of art, you sterile ones! You may one day close the Church, but [what about] the Museum? If Notre-Dame is profaned, the Louvre will officiate . . . Humanity, O citizens, will always go to mass, when the priest will be Bach, Beethoven, Palestrina: one cannot make the sublime organ an atheist! Brothers in all the arts,

> I am sounding a battle cry: let us form a holy militia for the salvation of idealism. We are a few against many, but the angels are ours. We have no leaders, but the old masters, up there in Paradise, guide us towards Montsalvat . . . This precious Church, the last august thing in this world, banished the Rose and believes its perfume to be dangerous. Next to it, then, we will build the Temple of Beauty; we will work to the echoes of prayers, followers, not rivals, different, not divergent, for the artist is a priest, a king, a mage, for art is a mystery, the only true empire, the great miracle.[16]

In Péladan's 'Religion of Art', Reality, Beauty and Truth form the Holy Trinity, respectively expressed as 'Intensity, Subtlety, Harmony'. These are not just abstract notions; he is referring to hard, mundane reality as the equivalent of God the Father. When reflected and expressed artistically through 'Beauty, life, or the Son', this leads to 'Truth or the unification of Reality and Beauty'. His rationale rests on Platonic and Neoplatonic thought and by way of further explanation he quotes Maximus of Tyre (second century CE):

> Ineffable beauty . . . exists in the sky and in the planets. There, it remains unadulterated. But in coming to earth, it is obscured by degrees . . . He who maintains the essential notion of Beauty in his soul will recognise it when he sees it . . . A majestic river, a beautiful flower, a fiery horse certainly offer some snippets of Beauty, but they are very crude. If Beauty descends, to some degree, into matter, where would we see it if not in man, whose soul follows the same principle as Beauty?[17]

Péladan cast artists as the born guides of humanity, select initiates who could use their talents to materialise ineffable beauty in symbolic form. In his world-view this was not based on some highbrow or paternalistic elitism, but on a cosmic accident.

In Péladan's retelling of the story of Genesis, humanity is the creation of angels, who shaped them by first drawing around the silhouette of their own shadows. The result was an exquisitely sublime androgynous being, with whom the angels promptly fell in love – 'these artists of creation were seduced by their own handiwork'.[18] Impassioned by their fondness for this creature, the angels, led by Lucifer, wanted to share the celestial mysteries and principles with it in order for it to attain self-awareness and free will. In Péladan's account, however, this was forbidden by Universal Law, for the primordial androgyne was made of the stuff of angelic shadows. Because this was denser than the subtle ethereality of angelic forms, its substance and place in the hierarchy of being could not accommodate the divine mysteries.

The angels persisted, and the androgyne became curious as to its origins – but in its existing form, self-knowledge would have broken the natural order and destroyed it in the process. To prevent this, since the damage had already been done, the being Péladan designates as the Demiurge, Ioah Elohim, rent the androgyne into the two sexes, Adam and Aischa (Eve), made them mortal, and gave them free will. This came at a high price, as each gender received different characteristics and proportions and neither could ever be complete without the other:

> 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.[19]

This meant that man acquired higher proportions of intellect, while woman was given instinct and volition; and neither would be able to fully express the characteristics of the other. The only way to recapture their wholeness would be if they were both united and fully self-aware – which is to say, through their reflection in each other's existence. The only way for them to achieve this within their mortal state was through the slow and arduous cultivation of those attributes that they did possess, to the highest possible level of refinement. This would then culminate in spiritual and erotic union with an equally refined member of the opposite sex. Péladan repeatedly stressed that eroticism could only manifest if preceded by true spiritual union in the Platonic sense, otherwise it would be nothing more than lustful illusion.

Following the Fall, these new, imperfect mortals were cast into time and material space with no knowledge of their origins or faculties. Thus the Demiurge decreed that the creator angels who had caused the disaster should join humanity on earth, as intermediary daemons in human form, in order to guide them along the evolutionary spiral. The irony of this punishment is unmistakable: the angels had sought to bestow free will and self-awareness on their creation out of love, and were granted their desire, on condition of the eternal deprivation of their own free will. In contrast to the narratives of Genesis and 1 Enoch, Péladan suggests that not only did humans and angels interbreed, but their progeny survived in human form. Thus the seed of creativity was sown, and this alone would permit humanity to gradually evolve and reawaken to divine potential by their own means, through the alignment of intellect, spirit and will. This blossoming of spirit could only be driven by human effort at self-realisation and self-redemption, and the fallen angels (Péladan names them 'Oelohites') could only be redeemed if mankind achieved this.

Hence Péladan's efforts were tuned not only to the awakening of his fellow men, but to the redemption of what he saw as his spiritual daemonic kin. He invoked their names frequently, in many often enigmatic prefaces to his books, and gave them roles in his novels and plays in an attempt to demonstrate their constant presence in human history. In the following revealing excerpt, Péladan is addressing Lucifer, to whom he has dedicated several deeply compassionate though puzzling passages:

> The Bene-Oelohim were the sons of your will and I would like to believe that I am descended from them . . . 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.
> I believe, along with Pythagoras and Plato, that the genius is never a man, but a d[a]emon, that is to say, an intermediary being between the spiritual and the earthly hierarchy: and it would take a papal bull, *ex cathedra*, to change my opinion.

fig. 5 Alexandre Séon. Cover of *L'Androgyne*, Paris, E. Dentu Editeur, 1891.

fig. 6. Fernand Khnopff, *Un Ange,* 1889. Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.

'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.'[20]

In Péladan's compassionate narrative, the daemon – or angel – who began it all did so out of mercy and not out of overarching pride. Likewise, Péladan's religion of art was motivated not by delusions of grandeur but by a Promethean urge to seek and share the path to self-redemption. As is clear from the preceding excerpt, Péladan was convinced that the artist-initiates upon whom he called to help regenerate humanity were none other than the descendants of the creator angels, who were anything but malevolent.

He openly stated his sources, and Péladan's cosmology is a curiously cohesive synthesis of Platonic allegory, Neoplatonist theology, Orphic cosmology, Promethean drama and Gnostic legend. Yet the extremely well-read Péladan was also a fine, if amateur, historian who was very well aware of the differences between factual history and mythic history in its capacity as a motive force for esoteric and cultural traditions. The sheer vehemence of his language suggests that he truly believed in the *legendarium* he had woven. Nonetheless, his more sober writings indicate that he was well aware of the need to ground his more fantastical notions in earthly reality. He achieved this through the vehicle of art and his argumentation for a form of art that performed a social function.

Péladan suggested that the seeds of human potential and the teaching bequeathed by the angelic guardians and mystagogues of humanity were most clearly expressed in the art and symbolic forms of ancient civilisations. These clothed the primordial (Platonic) Ideas that could reveal the thought of God to humanity, and thus our own divine origins. To this end, certain recurrent symbols and symbolic complexes appear in his work and in the work of those artists who followed his lead. Their purpose was to invoke the purest possible essence of the Ideals and principles towards which humanity needs to strive. Among these are the myths of Orpheus and Prometheus, many elements of Assyrian mythology, and the hybrid symbol of the 'Androgynosphinx', of which he says (emphasis mine):

> The head of a man, the throat of a woman, and the body of a colossal feline or cat . . . There is a complexity of elements that aesthetics cannot justify and the artist certainly would have meant to say something more than statuary permits. The Sphinx is not just a 'good beast', a benevolent monster. To begin with, is it a monster? Head of a man, breasts of a woman, body of a lion. This can be read as thought, passion and instinct. The head thinks, the chest creates the desire that gives birth to passion and results in reproduction, and the animal nature rests in the form of man. One could attribute the leonine body to artistic invention, but to cover the breasts below with a figurative beard implies a doctrinal concept alongside a decorative intent. Designating it as an Androsphinx is literally false, it should be called an Androgynosphinx. This most ancient monument to form represents the androgyne. *In this distant, timeless period, ideas had not been divided up and individualised as they are today; works of art were not aimed at amateurs, they presented a perceptible message to everyone, and a further one that was imperceptible to the uninitiated. Myths did not simply serve as illuminations of elaborate fantasy invented by the sacerdotal class to amuse fools: they are written poems 'within and without' whose often coarse shape corresponded rigorously to the subtle concept.* The Androgynosphinx represents humanity confident in the resurrection that manifests at every break of day. Esoterically, it represents the initial state of man that is identical to his final state. It teaches the principle of evolution and the secret of happiness . . . The Sphinx incarnates a complete theology with the solution to [the question of] origins . . . The Sphinx smiles at its limitless future; it has reconstituted its sexual unity, being both male and female it knows it will one day reconstitute its original unity, because it is both man and god, at the same point of involution and evolution.[21]

This passage largely summarises Péladan's understanding of myth and symbol as vehicles for the communication of otherwise ineffable and sublime notions. It also reflects his approach to his own mythic narratives. His mention of 'the uninitiated' is not an allusion to some kind of privileged inner circle; this is confirmed by his many detailed writings on how any reader could become an initiate in their own right. Rather, it highlights the idea that the very act of reading, or mindful engagement with a piece of Ideal art (in any form, be it painting, sculpture, poetry, music or drama), *is in itself an act of occult praxis* – a subtle process of deliberate and mindful contemplation that incorporates both the intellectual and spiritual faculties. The desired result is a form of lived philosophy that leads to a tangible change in the perspective and behaviour of the individual. As far as Péladan was concerned, no elaborate ritual or techniques are necessary beyond a constant mindfulness and the refinement of one's discernment. He saw it as a form of occult work open to everyone, as long as they are prepared to engage with the process of self-actualisation as outlined in his handbooks for spiritual development.

It is this element that prevents Péladan's essential message of 'know thyself' from being reduced to any kind of self-help, feel-good formula. The act of engaging with 'sublime, perfect' ideals in their material form (or indeed the act of creating these forms) is actually the initiation itself. The process of engaging with and internalising the intermediary – the art form – leads to the 'flash of awareness' that Péladan hoped would be engendered in all who came into contact with it in the right frame of mind. If successful, the moment of gnosis would lead to a realisation that mankind could reach for – and touch – the stars within

the mortal lifespan. Each individual could cultivate their own special gifts and awareness in order to commune with this world of daemons, angels and mystagogues, and touch the mind of God. A momentous occult secret, hidden in plain sight.

Although Péladan's language was indeed deliberately turgid at times, and his appearance provocatively eccentric, this does not fully explain why he should have been almost completely erased from the canon of esoteric thought. One possibility supported by my research strongly indicates that aspects of his work were alternately appropriated, lambasted or consigned to oblivion by a number of 'occult celebrities' of his day. Aspects of his work on true will and a modified version of the emblem of his order reappear, adapted, in some surprising places, while any references to Péladan himself have been meticulously erased.

From the perspective of esoteric thought and history, Péladan's work makes a significant and distinctive case study. His focus on individual self-realisation and the esoteric dimensions of the unfettered expression of free will appeared some decades before Jung or Crowley's writings on the subject. These ideas clearly reflect philosophical enquiries of his time, and are certainly not unique to Péladan. What sets his work apart is his synthesis of esoteric and aesthetic practices, his defiant insistence on sharing teachings that had hitherto lain behind closed doors, and his creation of a cohesive mythology comparable to that of Blake, with the additional purpose of teaching within the world. In addition, his Rosicrucian lineage deriving from the Toulouse circle did not die with him. It, and his message, survived via his successor Émile Dantinne (known as Sar Hieronymus, 1884–1969) and Edouard Bertholet (Sar Alkmaion, 1883–1965).[22]

From the standpoint of literary history, despite his relative obscurity today, Péladan's literary influence appears quite startlingly among a number of distinguished Modernist thinkers. August Strindberg was partially responsible for Péladan becoming more widely known outside France, and considered him one of the greatest writers of his day, exclaiming: 'Who dominates world literature? Péladan, Gorky, Maeterlinck, Kipling!'[23] Péladan appears to have been responsible for inspiring Ezra Pound's 'pagan Dante'.[24] The Modernist architect Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret), whose work was deeply influenced by esoteric and Gnostic thought, met Péladan in Paris in 1915, thought highly of him and studied his work in some depth.[25] Finally, Salvador Dalí is known to have owned a 'well-thumbed copy' of Péladan's translation of Leonardo da Vinci's *Trattato della pittura* (*Traité de la peinture*). It has also been suggested that Péladan's theory of self-actualisation (which he named *kaloprosopia*) may have influenced aspects of Dalí's career.[26] Péladan's work travelled as far afield as South America during his lifetime, and was to strongly influence the 'panorama of all Hispanic literature'. This is particularly evident in the work of the pioneering modernist poets Rubén Dario (1867–1916) of Nicaragua and José Asunción Silva (1867–96) of Colombia.[27]

Péladan's greatest legacy survives in the works of art inspired both directly and indirectly by his teachings. The six Salons de la Rose+Croix held between 1892 and 1897 remain the most tangible manifestation of his vision. They have immortalised his dream of a spiritual revolution with beauty as the supreme weapon and art as the *coup de grâce* against the 'disenchantment of the world' so prevalent as first the scientific world-view and then the industrial revolution completed their conquest of the Western mind, in an age he regarded as characterised by rampant materialism and futile decadence. Over the six years of their activity, the Salons featured the work of 170 artists, sculptors and architects, the music of

diverse composers, and left their mark on Parisian culture by way of their diversity and sheer bravado. They continued in Belgium under the direction of Jean Delville's (1867–1953) Salon d'Art Idéaliste, founded in 1896 with Péladan's blessing.

The Symbolist movement remains something of an enigma even to modern researchers still unable to fully agree on definitions, taxonomies, or differentiations between Symbolists, Decadents and Impressionists. But Péladan's Symbolists, especially those who worked most closely alongside him – Carlos Schwabe (1866–1926), Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921), Félicien Rops (1833–98), Alexandre Séon (1855–1917) and Jean Delville among many lesser-known artists – left a body of work that – quite fittingly, considering his devotion to the arts – captures the spirit of his message better than words ever can. It is there that the exhortations of his manifesto and the entreaties and dictates of his handbooks for self-initiation become tangible. It is in pondering those images that one inadvertently engages in the contemplative praxis he so meticulously described. Whether intentionally or not, the act of engagement with symbolic art, with the inevitable attempts to decipher the 'symbolic language' that is its hallmark, leads the viewer to a new perspective, and it is there that despite the odds, Péladan's vision works its magic on art-lover, esotericist, aficionado and critic alike. It is there, hidden in plain sight.

fig. 7. Jan Toorop, *The Sphinx*, 1897. Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag.

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Notes

1 Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, p. 2; Emont, 'Vie de Joséphin Péladan', p. 24.

2 Signed G.A., *Mercure de France*, 16 July 1918, pp. 372–3, in Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, p. 1.

3 Daly, 'Mysticism in Art', p. 13.

4 Daly, 'Mysticism in Art', p. 13.

5 Péladan, *Comment on devient mage*, p. xviii. This and all translations from the French are mine unless otherwise indicated.

6 Péladan, *Comment on devient mage*, p. 27.

7 Van Luijk, 'Sex, Science, and Liberty'; Schock, *Romantic Satanism*.

8 Péladan, *L'Art Idéaliste et Mystique*, p. 33.

9 Galtier, 'Les Rose-Croix de Toulouse', pp. 46–7.

10 Galtier, 'Les Rose-Croix de Toulouse', p. 47; Galtier, *Maçonnerie Égyptienne*, pp. 223–4.

11 Galtier, *Maçonnerie Égyptienne*, pp. 224–5.

12 Péladan, *Comment on devient mage*, p. 27.

13 Péladan, *Comment on devient mage*, p. 8.

14 Lévi, *Dogme et Rituel*, pp. 119.

15 Péladan, *L'Art Idéaliste et Mystique*, pp. 37–9.

16 Péladan, *L'Art Idéaliste et Mystique*, pp. 18–22.

17 Péladan, *L'Art Idéaliste et Mystique*, pp. 39–40.

18 Péladan, *Comment on devient artiste*, p. 22.

19 Péladan, *Comment on devient fée*, pp. 34–6.

20 Péladan, 'Arcanum of Lucifer, or of Birth', *Comment on devient artiste*, pp. xiii, 41, citing *Istar*, p. 41. The word 'ariste' comes from the Greek for 'excellent' and Péladan uses it to refer to those individuals who have succeeded in living by the codes and standards that he advocated.

21 Péladan, *De l'Androgyne*, pp. 16–19.

22 Dantinne, 'Complément à *la Pensée*'; Danis, *Toulouse: Capitale mystique*, p. 252.

23 Breton, *Le mage*, p. 7; cf. Manuscript SgNM (3: 21, 33): 'Mes prix Nobel : Péladan, Maeterlinck, Kipling, Gorki', Strindberg Collection, Royal Nordic Museum.

24 Surette, '"Dantescan Light"', pp. 329–31; Surette, *A Light from Eleusis*, pp. 34–7.

25 Birksted, *Le Corbusier and the Occult*, pp. 30, 211, 247.

26 Lomas, 'Painting is Dead', pp. 180–4; Aragon, 'Preface', pp. 31, 35; Mourier-Casile, *De la chimère*, p. 54.

27 Schiavetta and Schiavetta, 'Péladan et Silva'; Marini-Palmieri, 'Rubén Dario et Joséphin Péladan'; Villanueva-Collado, 'José Asunción Silva'.

Sasha Chaitow

Bené-Satan

Graphite on paper, 35 × 25 cm, 2013.
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

An illustration of Lucifer as he is described in Péladan's novel *Istar* (1888).