Foreword by Joscelyn Godwin for
Seeking Josephin Peladan: A Babylonian Mage in 19th Century Paris
(Daidaleos: Salonica, 2013; Alloste: Athens, 2016)
by Sasha Chaitow

It is high time that someone did justice to Péladan. Could any figure be more unfashionable in an era when Beauty and Art, according to official dogma, have nothing whatsoever to do with one another?

The Sâr is easy to mock for his Assyrian beard, the violet nightgown in which he let himself be painted, and for spectacularly backing the wrong horse in the art-historical stakes. No Manet barmaids or Cézanne apples for him! Instead there were Jean Delville, Charles Filiger, Alexandre Séon, Fernand Knopff, Carlos Schwabe. . . names hardly known, their paintings stowed in museum basements. Thanks to a few precious monographs (notably Robert L. Delevoy's *Symbolists and Symbolism,* a Skira folio of 1978), those with tastes outside the modernist canon could still discover them, and through them their aesthetic spokesman. Others came to Péladan by way of Erik Satie, the lovable if prickly composer who wrote the music for the Salons of the Rose+Croix (1892-97). A third coterie, very small outside France, knew of his role in the French occultist movement, which was debatable since Péladan was not himself an occultist but a sort of aesthetic theologian.

Péladan had at least two well-developed theories, one about the meaning and purpose of Art, and the other about the nature of God and the origin of Evil. As this book shows, both theories were firmly rooted in traditional if not orthodox doctrines, particularly Platonism for the first, Gnosticism for the second. As such they belonged within a French esoteric tradition carried into the nineteenth century by the disciples of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin and by Fabre d'Olivet, and slanted towards occultism by Eliphas Lévi. Perhaps a common origin among the Protestants of the Cévennes attracted Péladan to Fabre, whose theogony he somehow adapted to a pretentiously Catholic and legitimist milieu.

At least in his provocative choice of words, Péladan was part of the "Luciferic" movement of the later nineteeth century. One side of this was the revolt against conventional morality begun by Byron, taken up by poets such as Baudelaire, Swinburne, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Wilde, and D'Annunzio, and brought to a crashing conclusion in the poetry and life of Aleister Crowley. Péladan seems straight, in every sense, by comparison to these, his sexual morality closer to that of the women's rights movement. Another side of Luciferism surfaced in Theosophy, of which no *fin-de-siècle* figure could be ignorant. Madame Blavatsky and, after her death, Annie Besant published a journal of esoteric studies titled *Lucifer* (1889-97), Rudolf Steiner one called *Lucifer-Gnosis* (1903-08), and in 1922 Alice A. Bailey founded the "Lucifer Publishing Company" (soon re-christened "Lucis")—all this for good metaphysical reasons. Here

again, Péladan stood apart, for he claimed no clairvoyance, no hot-line to the Mahatmas who oversee human evolution. What then was his brand of Luciferism? Readers will discover that here.

Péladan's theory of art belongs more solidly within his time and place, where the Romantic concept of art as a channel for spiritual influences and, conversely, a path to the experience of the divine was reaching its apogee in the paradoxical movement of *Wagnerisme:* paradoxical, because so contrary to the logical, analytic spirit for which the French are celebrated, and because of their defeat by the Prussians in 1871, over which Wagner himself had gloated. By the 1890s, all was forgiven. Wagner was the apostle of a new synthesis of the arts, a new movement promising salvation to the soul of Western man threatened by industrialism, materialism, and, yes, "decadence." Like other synesthetic experiments around the turn of the century, Péladan's Salons were a feast for the senses, their ritual atmosphere like something out of *Parsifal,* and an invitation for the higher intellect to penetrate the inner sanctum of Symbolist imagery. But was it all so serious? The music was by the least Wagnerian composer imaginable, later to become one of music's great humorists. Theater puts on the mask of solemnity, but offstage, the actors are human beings like ourselves. So, it appears, was Péladan.

He probably thought that his best claim on immortality was the 21 novels of his *Décadence Latine,* his answer to Balzac's all-too-human comedies. I confess to finding literary allegory very tiresome, once I have got the point. But Sasha Chaitow has read these novels, as a scholar must; and one service of scholars is to save us the trouble, distilling whatever in them is most colorful, fascinating, and worthwhile. In so doing, she has rescued Péladan from the constrictions of his period and the expectations of a more leisured generation, and presented him as the genial thinker and friend we always suspected him to be.