“Un mets nouveau”: Hashish and Hashish Narratives in Nineteenth-Century Paris

The introduction of hashish into nineteenth-century France finds literary expression in the “hashish narrative” in the works of Dumas, Nerval, Balzac, Flaubert, Gautier, and Baudelaire, among others. Rather than taking the form of an objective experiment, this narrative innovation draws on characteristics of extant genres, especially theatrical conventions.

La découverte d’un mets nouveau fait plus pour le genre humain que la découverte d’une étoile.

Brillat-Savarin, *Physiologie du goût*
Aphorisme IX

Readers of *La Presse*, July 10, 1843, after two rather meager reviews of a melodrama and a vaudeville, found the following statement:

Manquant de spectacles, nous avons résolu de nous en donner un à nous-même sans sortir de notre chambre et dans le coin de notre sopha. (Baudelaire 1988: 241, note 2)

The accompanying text, Théophile Gautier’s *Le Hachich*, then presented to the general public one of the first European literary accounts of a
hashish trip narrated in the first person. To be sure, this public was not as uninformed about the effects of the drug in question as many would suspect, as indicated by the very next sentence:

Depuis longtemps nous entendions parler, sans trop y croire, des merveilleux effets produits par le hachich.

The then-recent publication of the memoirs of certain orientalists undoubtedly contributed to this hearsay. Although Marco Polo’s travel narratives first described the practice of hashish consumption in non-European cultures, other works confirmed and elaborated on his observations, in particular Chardin’s *Voyage en Perse*, published in 1811; Silvestre de Sacy’s “Mémoire sur la dynastie des Assassins et sur l’origine de leur nom,” published in 1818; and Josef von Hammer’s *Histoire de l’Ordre des Assassins*, translated from the German and published in 1833. More importantly for our purposes, other travelers included the French physicians Louis Aubert-Roche (1808-1878) and Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours (1804-1884). In 1840, the former was the first (and probably the last) to advocate the use of hashish in treating the plague; the latter, hailed by some as the founder of psycho-pharmacology, published his classic *Du hachisch et de l’aliénation mentale. Etudes psychologiques* in 1845. This marvelous book, whose translation in 1973 was proclaimed “a veritable untapped mine of experimental data” resulting from experiments which “could never have been performed under present legal restrictions,” is the most important contribution made to the development of what we will call the hashish narrative; in fact, it even contains a reprint of Gautier’s story mentioned above, prefaced by the Doctor’s avowal that he had supplied the substance in question to the writer. Indeed, it is thanks in large part to the efforts of this Timothy Leary of the nineteenth-century that the hashish narrative arose in the works of, among others, Dumas, Nerval, Balzac, Flaubert, Gautier, and of course Baudelaire.

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1 A more complete list of early orientalist writings about hashish can be found in Claude Pichois’s commentary on *Les Paradis artificiels* (Baudelaire 1975 and 1988) and in his “Baudelaire et le haschisch.” Translated excerpts from some of these early texts can be found in Kimmens.