

## The First Psychonaut? Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet's Experiments with Narcotics

WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF

*University of Amsterdam*

W. J. Hanegraaff@uva.nl

---

This article calls attention to the important but neglected French Mesmerist, Spiritualist, Swedenborgian, and occultist Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet (1809–1885), while concentrating on his significance as a forgotten pioneer of modern entheogenic esotericism. Like other occultist practitioners during the period prior to modern Theosophy (notably Emma Hardinge Britten and Paschal Beverley Randolph), Cahagnet was convinced about the spiritual potential of narcotics as a powerful tool for inducing transcendental vision. The article describes and contextualizes his systematic experiments with narcotic suffumigations made from plants traditionally associated with necromancy and witchcraft, as well as his spiritual visions induced by the eating of Hashisch dissolved in coffee. Cahagnet appears to stand at the origin of an underground tradition of visionary practice that would be continued and further developed by Britten, Randolph, and other esoteric practitioners since the 1860s. While most scholars have tended to play down the role of narcotics in these contexts, these may well have been crucial to how spiritual vision came to be understood in the occultist movement.

---

The “occult sciences” lost almost all their intellectual credibility and academic status during the Age of Reason, but survived remarkably well on the popular market.<sup>1</sup> After the great Revolution of 1789 and throughout the first half of

- 
1. For the general story of the Protestant and Enlightenment campaign against “esotericism” and “the occult,” see Hanegraaff 2012: ch. 2. On the “occult sciences” more specifically, see Hanegraaff 2012, 177–207; and cf. Hanegraaff 2013. On the development of the “occult marketplace” during the nineteenth century, see Hanegraaff 2012, 218–256.

---

Keywords: Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet, entheogenic esotericism

the nineteenth century, a large flood of popular literature was catering to a public curious for information about all those weird superstitions and magical practices from a less enlightened but now comfortably remote past. There is a widely shared consensus among scholars that the occult, during the first half of the nineteenth century, became the object of purely antiquarian study by specialized amateur scholars. While these gentlemen enjoyed studying arcane manuscripts and early printed books, they showed no interest whatsoever in trying to find out whether any of these magical or visionary techniques might actually work. As formulated by John Patrick Deveney:

We look in vain for solid evidence of practical magic or lived experience. Even Mesmerism, which by mid-century had incorporated elements of traditional magic and produced rather astonishing experiences, suffered almost universally from the bane of secondhand experience: the entranced seeress (for it was usually a young girl) saw visions, while the mesmerist could only look on and wonder at her descriptions. (Deveney 2011, 356)

According to Deveney, it is only with Paschal Beverley Randolph's writings published since 1860 and 1861 that this pattern began to change.<sup>2</sup> It is true that in Emma Hardinge Britten's *Ghost Land* (1876) we find some tantalizing descriptions of earlier magical practice: she portrayed the members of the "Berlin Brotherhood" and the "Orphic Circle" around mid-century as using drugs, crystals and magical mirrors to induce astral projection.<sup>3</sup> But even if we assume that these practices really took place, Deveney argues, the pattern had not changed: "...it was the entranced seeress, not the occultist/magician himself, who beheld the wonders of the universe. *His* experience was secondhand: he was reduced to hearing (or reading about) the experiences of another" (Deveney 2011, 357). In other words, even the occultists described by Britten do not qualify as practitioners who enjoyed first-hand experience of "magical" or transcendental vision.

On the following pages I will be arguing, however, that the mantle of the pioneer occultist practitioner of the nineteenth century must be taken from Randolph's shoulders. I will be handing it over to Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet (1809–1885), an obscure French author whose writings were very well known to both Britten and Randolph but have been strangely neglected by scholars. As rightly noted by Antoine Faivre, Cahagnet was in fact a key fig-

2. Deveney 2011, 356ff.; and see Deveney 1997a, with annotated bibliography of Randolph's writings on pp. 343–368.

3. Anonymus 1876b. On these practices, see Deveney 1997b. Concerning the (very questionable) reliability of *Ghost Land* as a historical source, cf. Hanegraaff forthcoming.

ure in the early stage of the occultist movement, as well as in the history of French Swedenborgianism, Magnetic Somnambulism, and Spiritualism (Faivre 2008, 194–195 with n. 9). While all these dimensions of Cahagnet’s activity deserve serious attention, this short article will be focused exclusively on one particular aspect of his work that has been ignored even more seriously than all the others mentioned so far: his remarkable and far-ranging experiments with narcotic substances.

### Narcotics in Britten and Randolph

The first thing to note—because in fact it has not been sufficiently noticed—is that *all* the crucial pioneers of early occultism mentioned above (Cahagnet, Randolph, and Britten) were convinced about the spiritual potential of narcotics as a powerful tool for inducing transcendental vision. Emma Hardinge Britten was remarkably open and explicit in this regard. In *Art Magic* (1876), the theoretical companion volume to *Ghost Land*, she claims that the ancient priesthood used “the occult virtues of drugs, minerals, plants...” (Anonymus 1876a, 133); and her books are sprinkled with references – always positive – to “Hasheesh, Napellus, Opium, the Juice of the Indian Soma, or Egyptian Lotus plant” (Anonymus 1876a, 171, cf. 179, 183, 407–408) next to occasional references to “acid fungi” (Anonymus 1876a, 184, cf. 408) and the famous witches’ ointment (Anonymus 1876a, 387, 407). Furthermore, both volumes make reference to intoxicating “fumigations” (Anonymus 1876a, 168, cf. 179, 233; Anonymus 1876b, 26, 30, 67, 246, 280), “spices, gums or aromatic herbs” (Anonymus 1876a, 179, cf. 233, 240, 285, 351, 353), the “inhalation of stimulating narcotics or aromatic vapors” (Anonymus 1876a, 170, cf. 182, 222, 285, 292, 295, 407, 411, 456), and the use of nitrous oxide or ether (Anonymus 1876a, 170, 317; Anonymus 1876b, 34).

As for Randolph, his interest in narcotics is well documented thanks to Deveney’s scholarship,<sup>4</sup> and his use of hashisch appears to have been crucial to his mature spiritual worldview. In two early interviews for the Spiritualist periodical *Banner of Light*, both published in 1860, he left no doubt about what the experience meant to him, while making a passing reference to Cahagnet as well:

It is the royal road to a kind of “mediumship,” whose magnificent revealments are as superior to those of the so-called “state,” as is the blazing sun to a common candle; and I have no doubt but that the clairvoyance it induces is as far superior to the ordinary sort, as gold is better than block tin for jewelry. ... It not only

4. Deveney 1997a, see Index under “Drugs,” “Elixirs,” “Hashisch,” “Soma,” and “Sacred sleep of Sialam.” See also Deveney 1997b, 54–55.

affects the body, but the very soul itself, and produces an ecstasy, and mental and spiritual illumination, whose unutterable glory, superlative grandeur, and awful sublimity, transcend my power of description.

By its aid Alphonse Cahagnet, myself, and others, have been enabled to pass through eternal doors, forever closed to the embodied man save by this celestial key, and passing through them, in holy calm, to explore the ineffable and serene mysteries of the human soul, and attain unto a conviction of immortality ...

(Anonymus 1860a, 5)

Randolph told the interviewer that he had experimented with hashisch five or six times over the preceding twelve years, and had “gained more light in any two of these experiments than from all the “spiritual” experiences of my entire life... Under its influence I became developed to what I am – intellectually reaching by it a certain point, from which my soul has never ebbed again” (Anonymus 1860b, 8). He continued by providing a detailed “trip report” of a hashisch-induced out-of-body experience, on 29 March 1858, which had left him perfectly convinced about the immortality of the soul.

Randolph first experienced hashisch during a journey to France in 1855 or 1856. On the recommendation of a French medical doctor practicing in New York, a Dr. Bergevin, who was associated with the *Société Magnétique* of Paris, he got introduced to the circles of Baron Dupotet and Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet (Deveney 1997a, 29, 55, 68–69). And it is here, indeed, that he appears to have encountered that exceedingly rare phenomenon at mid-century: a network of practitioners who refused to content themselves with the passive observation of entranced mediums and were in fact trying to see for themselves. We will find that not only had they discovered a means to experience transcendent realities at first hand, but they were even using it in a context of ritual magic.

#### Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet

Neither an academic nor the usual type of gentleman scholar, Cahagnet<sup>5</sup> was proud to describe himself as a simple *ouvrier*. Born on April 18, 1809, in Caen in Basse-Normandie, he and his family moved to Le Havre when he was seven years old. Here he was trained as a carpenter, working for eighteen years as a cabinet-maker and (eventually) a restorer of old furniture. As he tells us, he also enjoyed inventing new tools of his own, until his weak chest

5. The secondary literature on Cahagnet is extremely limited. See Podmore 1902 (cf. reprint Podmore 1963a), 81–91; idem 1909 (cf. reprint Podmore 1963b), 200–204; Vadé 1990, 277–278; Brach 2012, 247–250; ; see especially Siegel and Hirschman 1984 and—most important by far—the extremely useful discussion in Pierrssens 1993, 357–363.

forced him to change profession and he went on to make his living by cutting collar-shirts. Some time during the 1840s he appears to have moved to Paris, where he rented rooms at Rue St. Denis 265 until the high cost of living forced him to move to the Parisian banlieue community Argenteuil, where he died on 10 April 1885 (Cahagnet 1856, 21–22). A statue of him erected by his admirers can still be seen at the cemetery of Argenteuil.

In 1848 Cahagnet published the first volume of what would remain his best-known book: *Arcanes de la vie future dévoilés* (Cahagnet 1848, 1849, 1851). It was translated into English as *The Celestial Telegraph* (Cahagnet 1850; 1855) and counts among the major influences on Emma Hardinge Britten. Cahagnet's lengthy tomes contain protocols of numerous sessions with eight somnambules who describe their experiences in the spiritual world in meticulous detail. As noted by Podmore, these revelations were "of the usual post-Swedenborgian kind," dealing with "the constitution of the spirit spheres, the occupations of the deceased, the bliss of the after-life, and visions of angelic beings clothed in white, walking on beautiful lawns, in the light of a fairer day than ours." (Podmore 1902, 82). What sets them apart from many other such accounts is Cahagnet's high level of concern with empirical verifiability. Podmore describes him as "a man of quite unusual sincerity and teachableness" (Podmore 1902, 83) who responded positively to criticism and kept doing his utmost—as one can see for instance from the subtitle to his second volume—to improve the documentary quality of his evidence from one volume to the next: "in the whole literature of Spiritualism I know of no records of the kind which reach a higher evidential standard, nor any in which the writer's good faith and intelligence are alike so conspicuous" (Podmore 1902, 84).

But Cahagnet was not satisfied to remain just a passive recipient of somnambule messages: he wanted to see those spiritual realms for himself! Judging from a few short passages in the first volume of the *Arcanes* (1848) he wondered already at an early stage whether "the ordinary methods of narcotics" (Cahagnet 1848, xi) might be of any help in that regard. That such methods would be considered "ordinary" in the 1840s is intriguing to say the least, but more immediately relevant is the fact that Cahagnet's own somnambules were perfectly clear in their sharp *rejection* of any such methods: "Narcotics carry problems into the nervous system, they trouble the soul in its vital functions, they throw her into the world of causes while she is making extraordinary attempts to stay in the world of effects."<sup>6</sup> But whatever

---

6. Cahagnet 1848, 114. On pp. 173–174 the same opinion is attributed to the spirit of Swedenborg himself.

the spirits might say, it is clear that Cahagnet did not heed their warnings. Not only did he go ahead experimenting with narcotics anyway, but he soon started writing about his experiences openly and at considerable length. That he made no attempt to edit or suppress those early negative statements by his somnambules and their spirits—either here or in the later English translation—confirms Podmore’s judgment about his honesty and integrity.

#### The dark side

In 1850 (between the first two volumes of his *Arcanes* and the final one, published in 1851), Cahagnet published a book in dialogue form titled *Sanctuaire du spiritualisme* (Cahagnet 1850). This one, too, was quickly translated into English, as *The Sanctuary of Spiritualism* (1851), but I will be using the French original. The two interlocutors “Alfred” and “Gustave” begin by discussing God, the human soul, and the nature of matter and thought, moving on from there to other topics such as astrology and the occult sciences. It is in their seventh conversation, devoted to “numbers, time, and space,” that the discussion takes an unexpected turn when Alfred (who seems to forget the topic at hand) starts telling Gustave about his personal attempts at attaining an ecstatic state. The account that follows is clearly autobiographical, as the author soon drops any pretense that “Alfred” should be distinguished from Cahagnet himself.

Having made his first observations of the somnambulant state as a passive witness, “Alfred” states that he immediately wanted to experience such a state himself. But he was in for a disappointment: several magnetizers tried their hand at putting him into a trance, but he felt no effect at all. Then he had the idea of putting together “a narcotic mesmerist *baquet*” (Cahagnet 1850, 94). It consisted of glass phials filled with a mixture of sublimated sulphur, iron filings and sand, connected through a magnetic conductor with a concoction of herbs and plants including such powerful narcotics as belladonna, opium, poppy, and hemp. But again, he experienced nothing out of the ordinary. He now embarked on a serious study of books published “from 1784 to 1800” (unfortunately no titles are given) which, so he writes, discussed methods for augmenting the magnetic force by using the subtle fluids believed to be emitted by similar narcotic substances. But once again, he had no success. After several experiments along similar lines, he concluded that, rather than just subjecting himself to subtle fluids, he would have to actually ingest the narcotics (Cahagnet 1850, 99). However, eating or smoking opium or hemp had no other effect on him than inducing violent headaches. In considerable frustration, he now decided to try magical evocation. This move might seem

unrelated to narcotics at first sight, but its relevance to the topic will become clear from what follows.

...following Agrippa, I conjured a spirit to appear to me during my sleep. I signed this conjuration and placed it under my pillow. Now I got more lucky. Several days went by, and I was having visions – not such as I wanted, but astonishing enough to calm my passion for knowledge and make me see what to do and not to do in our contacts with spirits. I was obsessed for three years, my nerves had been too strongly affected by all those experiences, combined with other circumstances concerning a so-called magical spell, of which my clairvoyant Bruno assures me I had been the victim, and of which you have read the description in the *Arcanes*. Whether that was true or false: I saw more than I desired, and I was freed from that obsession by prayer. These visions had not given me what I was seeking, for it was a contemplative ecstasy that I desired, in order to resolve just one single question: what is man? I absolutely had to find the means to obtain such a blessed ecstasy, and I would have given the rest of my earthly existence to get there. At the time, I cared so little about my life that I feared no poison, nothing that might make me see with my eyes that which I wanted to see. I left the countryside where I was living and went to Paris, to try and discover at this center of light the lightbeam that must illuminate me. My prayers were answered: the states of somnambulism and ecstasy are easier to provoke there than in the countryside: one is more detached from the fears to which one is vulnerable in the country, nothing seems diabolical or marvelous, it is easier to have confidence in these kinds of experiences. I trained some excellent clairvoyants, following whose dictation I composed the *Arcanes of the future life revealed*. (Cahagnet 1850, 101–102)

These remarks about the countryside are interesting, as extensive experience with rural life might help explain Cahagnet's remarkable level of knowledge about the medicinal properties of herbs and plants, including those associated with peasant magic and witchcraft.<sup>7</sup> Apart from the biographical information it contains, the passage is important for our concerns in this article, because it suggests a close connection between the inhalation of perfumes or incense and the invocation of spirits. Cahagnet's account of conjuring spirits "following Agrippa" comes immediately after his description of narcotic suffumigations: "I burned incense, hemp, coriander, belladonna, anise, schellac, and acacia resin; I breathed my lungs full of this stench. They gave me violent headaches. I don't know how I managed to stand all these experiences" (Cahagnet 1850, 101). Agrippa, who is mentioned immediately after this passage, does indeed give a recipe for such magical perfumes or suffumigations in *De occulta philosophia* I, 43:

7. See especially Cahagnet 1851, which discusses "the medical properties of 150 plants."

So they say that if a fume is made of coriander, smallage, henbane and hemlock, right away daemons will congregate—hence these are called spirits’ herbs. Similarly they say that if one makes a fume of the roots of the reedy herb sagapen, with the juice of hemlock and henbane, and tapsus barbatus, red sandelwood and black poppy, it makes daemons and strange shapes appear ...

(Agrippa 1992)

Closer to Cahagnet’s own time, Karl von Eckartshausen had described his own experiments with such suffumigations. He reports that immediately after throwing the narcotic substance in a brazier, a life-size human body seemed to appear right above it, with a pale colour and an ashen face. The smoke clearly affected his state of consciousness, for he could not clearly recall his conversation with the spectre afterwards and felt numb as though awakening from a dream (Eckartshausen 1788, 111–113). When he tried it again, at a later date, he was overwhelmed by such fear that he had to leave the room. The next hours he felt very bad, and even for weeks afterwards kept feeling weak. All the while, he kept thinking that he still saw the ghostlike figure hovering in front of him. After this he never dared try again (Eckartshausen 1788, 113–114).<sup>8</sup>

As I have suggested elsewhere (Hanegraaff 2012, 222–230), such experiments with poisonous narcotic suffumigations may be of greater importance to the emergence of occultism than has previously been assumed.<sup>9</sup> There runs a significant red thread from Agrippa’s recipe in *De occulta philosophia* (next to similar recipes as given e.g. by Della Porta) to Henri Montfaucon de Villars’ famous *Comte de Gabalis* of 1670, with its crucial claim—on which the entire novel ultimately depends—that Elementals can be invoked through an undisclosed alchemical elixir described as “the very holy Medicine” or “the Catholic Cabalistic Medicine.”<sup>10</sup> The suggestion of invoking invisible beings through an alchemical elixir is taken up by Bulwer Lytton in his key novel *Zanoni*, where the sorcerer’s apprentice inhales an “ecstatic liquor”<sup>11</sup> that then causes him to see the terrible “Dweller on the Threshold” (Anony-

8. See discussion in Faivre 1969, 107.

9. See e.g. Anonymus 1885 and Kiesewetter 1886 (both articles appear in the very first issue of the respective journals *The Occult Magazine* and *Der Sphinx*, in 1885 and 1886, suggesting that such topics were rather foremost in the editors’ minds).

10. Villars 2010, 169, 189 (“la très sainte Médecine,” “la Médecine Catholique Cabalistique”).

11. Anonymus [Bulwer Lytton] 1842 (vol. 2), 24. Tilton (2012, 189) suggests that the liquor can be identified as diethyl ether; as will be seen below, Cahagnet mentions unsuccessful experiments with the same substance in his *Sanctuaire*.

mus [Bulwer Lytton] 1842 [vol. 2], 24–27), a sequence – leading from the “sorcerer’s apprentice’s” curiosity to an experience of gothic horror—that might well be modeled directly after Eckarthausen’s description as described in the passage just given. These backgrounds seem crucial, as well, to understanding George Henry Felt’s attempts at invoking elementals “through aromatic gums and herbs” in front of the members of the First Theosophical Society—an attempt at theurgy with suffumigations that, again, seems to have inspired such feelings of dread in the participants that Blavatsky had to interrupt the séance (Hanegraaff forthcoming).<sup>12</sup> In all cases, the experience produced fear, horror, and spiritual malaise—as could indeed be expected given the well-documented effects of some substances associated with the traditional witches’ ointment: Belladonna hallucinations, notably, are “typically described as threatening, dark, demonic, devilish, hellish, very frightening, and profoundly terrifying” (Rätsch 1998, 84).<sup>13</sup>

These experiments found some kind of continuation in Cahagnet’s volume *Magie magnétique* of 1858—another forgotten title that is in fact of great relevance to the emerging occultist movement and would deserve a separate discussion.<sup>14</sup> References to narcotics are sprinkled throughout the book, and clearly show that even after his discovery of hashisch (see next section), Cahagnet had not closed the book on those more troublesome substances associated with traditional witchcraft. The third chapter is devoted to magical mirrors of various kinds, including a “narcotic mirror.” While a normal “magnetic mirror” takes the form of a crystal globe filled with magnetized

12. Finally, we might consider the famous story of Eliphas Lévi’s evocation of Apollonius of Tyana. About Lévi’s personal familiarity with narcotics and his attitude towards them, see Baier (2009, 272) and Strube (2016, 553). Lévi’s two corresponding chapters on necromancy (in *Dogme* and *Rituel* respectively) are full of references to narcotics. For instance, he mentions the “horrible” substances required to “dream while being awake, that is, seeing in the astral light” at the witches’ sabbath (Lévi 2000, 116, cf. 88) and provides the recipe as well, which includes “aconite, belladonna and poisonous mushrooms” (Lévi 2000, 239). The ritual for evoking Apollonius involved the use of two fires, lighted “with the required and prepared substances,” resulting in a thick smoke that was further enhanced by “some branches and perfumes” thrown on the brazier, after which Lévi began seeing a ghostly shape very much like the one described by Eckartshausen in his own account. Afterwards he fell into a deep slumber full of dreams, of which he retained only vague and confused memories afterwards; and he advised his readers against trying such evocations themselves, emphasizing the dangers to one’s bodily and mental health (Lévi 2000, 119–120).

13. More generally on the witches’ ointment in historical contexts, see Peuckert 1960; and for the notorious story of Peuckert’s own experiments, see Hanegraaff 2009, 286.

14. For now, see only Brach 2011 and 2012.

water, this one is filled with narcotic plants (belladonna, henbane, mandragora, hemp, poppy, opium) distilled in water (Cahagnet 1858, 84–87, cf. 116, 126–127). Cahagnet emphasizes that the effect is based only on the magnetic *fluid* of the water: by drinking it, “one would experience effects that, while not being lethal, could be *considerably* disturbing” (Cahagnet 1858, 87).

#### The bright side

We have seen that Cahagnet finally had some success in his experiments with narcotic suffumigations, but they did not give him what he was hoping for: these substances, traditionally associated with witchcraft and demonism, produced feelings of horror and spiritual malaise, even making him feel he was “obsessed” for years. Nevertheless, he still longed to see for himself:

Therefore in Paris I re-started my experiments, I was told to have myself magnetized behind the ears; my clairvoyants did this in their trance for a month or more; they did not succeed. I made a new hemp extract, I smoked its dry leaves, and leaves of belladonna, I inhaled diethyl ether<sup>15</sup> for twenty-five minutes, I got nothing. (Cahagnet 1850, 103)

It must all have been very frustrating for poor Cahagnet. Perhaps similar to the case of the famous Elizabethan Magus John Dee, who had to rely on his assistant Edward Kelley to contact the angels in his black mirror, he seemed devoid of any talent for transcendental vision. But then one day a friend told him about an advertisement he had seen in a pharmacy: “Hashisch from the Orient” (Cahagnet 1850, 103). Cahagnet bought some of it, and took three grammes in a cup of black coffee. After five hours he still felt nothing. The friends that he had apparently invited had already left his house because, once again, nothing seemed to be happening. But then, all of a sudden, Cahagnet began to experience strange visual and bodily sensations. He describes them with his usual disarming honesty:

I called the attention of Adèle [Maginot: his most famous clairvoyant, who would eventually become his wife] to this vision that was so strange for me, while crying out *Isn't that funny?* I lifted my legs as though I was walking, and with each movement I felt my feet rising up in the interior of my legs, which made me think that it was my internal or spiritual leg separating itself from its material envelope ... Adèle stood in front of me, laughing at my surprise and my strange movements. Then such a bond of sympathy was established between the two of us that I was forced to copy every movement she made; my chin seemed to be one with hers, I smiled her smile, I spoke her words (Cahagnet 1850, 105).

---

15. Cf. note 11.

And so it went on. Cahagnet was experiencing a classic “trip,” of a kind such as has been described by countless subjects under the effects of hashisch, and clearly he and Adèle were having a great time. Most notably, he discovered that not only could he leave his body and get back into it at will, but he could also fully identify and “become one” with any external object in sight. Then, however, the experience suddenly moved towards a different level. Cahagnet felt an extremely violent shock, described as both painful and pleasurable, going up from his tailbone to the crown of his head (Cahagnet 1850, 107–108).<sup>16</sup> It was followed by the view of

a vast panorama in which all that I had been able to see, think or know in my life was represented by the most brilliant colours, in the form of transparent tableaux, like venetian blinds illuminated from behind by an incomparable light. This panorama unfolded all around me, turning with such vividness, presenting such an immense variety of these images, that I would need a whole book to describe what I have seen in a few hours. This state is so different from the material state that it is wholly impossible for a being who is under its influence to grasp the time that passes while these images succeed one another and the space in which they are held. Thus I am convinced that I was floating in the center and above this microscopic universe ... [T]he material universe seemed inferior to it in all respects, which is to say that the cities, monuments, public places, gardens, heavens and earth were of an incomparable beauty. ... I had found the solution that I had been searching for, I knew Man, *I was a universe in miniature*, and I understood how a clairvoyant could be in Egypt or in China without having to pass through any trajectory; how he could shake the hand of an African without moving from his place (Cahagnet 1850, 107–109).

This vision, at last, was what Cahagnet had been waiting for all those years. The experience convinced him that hashisch could “develop the spiritual state in us, in which everyone can find the solutions that respond to his affections” (Cahagnet 1850, 115). One cannot help wondering how the specific phenomenology of these experiences may be related to the specific brand of French Swedenborgianism that would develop under Cahagnet’s leadership in the following years.

Cahagnet gives no exact date for this first hashisch experience, but most probably it took place in the revolution year 1848. The description is followed by a series of fourteen detailed “trip reports” from other persons, which show how he shared his discovery with his friends and began offering them hashisch

---

16. Of course, it is impossible not to be reminded here of classic descriptions of kundalini yoga. This is all the more interesting given the fact that nothing indicates any familiarity with that tradition on Cahagnet’s part.

at his home throughout the summer of 1848. The first ten of these sessions all took place between June 4 and August 31. In line with Cahagnet's attention to independent verifiability, participants of more humble métiers are mentioned by name (a journalist Blouet, a "horloger de la marine" Lecocq, a Mr. Duteil "membre de la société magnétologique de Paris," a Mr. Blesson "magnétiseur spiritualiste," another "horloger" called Roustan, a somnambule named Mrs. Pichard, a "chapelier" Gaspart, and another journalist Mouttet) while a few individuals who might have reason to fear for their social reputation are mentioned just by their initials (a "Dr. W.," "l'Abbé A."). Generally, for all these subjects the experience seems to have been pleasurable and beautiful, often deeply emotional, and full of spiritual significance. They typically find it hard or impossible to catch into words but usually try to understand it in broadly Swedenborgian terms. Again and again, they remark how painful it is to leave the hashisch state and return to the "terrestrial" state of consciousness.

Cahagnet's book did not remain unnoticed in the American Spiritual press. An early article on Hashisch written by Emma Hardinge Britten's friend A.B. Child in the *Banner of Light* of 22 January 1859 (Child 1859) had already caused some controversy among Spiritualists. Child was clearly impressed by Fitz Hugh Ludlow's *Hasheesh Eater* published just two years earlier (Ludlow 1857), but also referenced earlier authorities such as Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours (1845) and Théophile Gautier (who had co-founded their *Club des Hashischins* in 1844 and were both introduced to an English-speaking audience by Robert Chambers in an article on Hashisch that went through several reprints in different journals: see Partridge forthcoming). Child told his readers that hashisch,

...of all known substances, is perhaps the most powerful acting upon the human organism, to open up the spiritual perception, and carry it beyond the ordinary boundaries of this life, into the world of spirits, the world of intense horrors of intense delights, to behold light, beauty and immensity yet unmeasured by the most active and powerful conceptions of man. (Child 1859)

At the end of the same year, the *Spiritual Telegraph and Fireside Preacher* published a long extract from Cahagnet's *Sanctuary* devoted to his Hashisch experience (Anonymus 1859), and we have seen that Randolph then made his coming-out about Hashisch the year after, leading some other Spiritualists to issue warnings about the dangers of drugs (e.g. Anonymus 1860c; Tuttle 1862). Against these backgrounds, it is no longer so surprising that even Helena P. Blavatsky herself is on record as an enthusiastic Hashisch user (See Wolff 1891; 1892).

### Concluding remarks

The chief objective of this modest article is to place Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet on the map of academic scholarship, while calling attention to his relevance in two different but related fields of research: the early history of nineteenth century occultism, and the role of psychoactive substances in religious or spiritual practice. The area of overlap between these two fields of inquiry may be referred to as “entheogenic esotericism” (Hanegraaff 2013)—a phenomenon that, as I have argued elsewhere, is considerably more significant to the history of spiritual practice since the nineteenth and through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries than standard historiographies would lead one to assume.<sup>17</sup> Cahagnet seems to be a pivotal figure in that context: on the one hand, he gathered a wide range of older discussions (in now largely forgotten sources) concerned with the narcotic properties of plants associated with magic and witchcraft, while on the other hand, he stands at the very beginning of the *new* tradition of using hashisch for inducing spiritual visions.

Those visions were interpreted from a broadly Swedenborgian perspective and were passed on from here into the literature of Spiritualism and, eventually, occultism. As far as we can tell from the available evidence, in all likelihood it was Cahagnet who first introduced Randolph to hashisch, in 1855 or 1856, as he had been doing with so many others since 1848. And according to his own testimony in 1860, Randolph’s hashisch visions were the most important “spiritual” experience of his entire life: they convinced him of the immortality of the soul and created the foundation for his later work. As for Emma Hardinge Britten, she worked as an actress in Paris from 1854 to 1855, before moving to the United States; and given Cahagnet’s fame as the author of the *Arcanes*, it is hard to imagine that she would not have used the opportunity to visit him at that time.<sup>18</sup> In this regard, it is important to note that while *The Celestial Telegraph* (the English translation of the *Arcanes*) is quoted frequently in *Art Magic*, it is not so clear where Emma’s many references to narcotics in that same volume come from. I suspect that the answer is very simple: probably most of them came either from personal contact with

---

17. For pioneering explorations, see Partridge 2005 (vol. 2), 82–134; and we are looking forward to Partridge (forthcoming).

18. That Britten as a 12-year old musical prodigy might already have been in contact with Cahagnet or Dupotet in 1835 seems unlikely, since Cahagnet was still living in Le Havre at the time (Demarest personal communication 27 August 2016, with reference to Demarest 2009). Interestingly, apart from one passing reference, Cahagnet is never mentioned anywhere else in the incredibly rich treasure-house of information that is Marc Demarest’s blog “Chasing Down Emma.”

Cahagnet, from *Le Sanctuaire du spiritualisme* (either in the French original or the English translation) and *La magie magnétique*, or all of these.

In a very short period of time, 1855–1856, two of the most important founding figures of anglophone occultism therefore seem to have arrived in the United States from France with very fresh memories in their minds of impressive entheogenic visions of the spiritual world experienced with Cahagnet in Paris. It is true that—at least, to the best of my knowledge—Emma Hardinge Britten never confirms explicitly that she herself had used any of the narcotics mentioned throughout *Art Magic*. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Hanegraaff forthcoming), several of the most impressive spiritual experiences described in *Ghost Land* are so evidently psychedelic in their very phenomenology that it is hard not to connect the dots. Magic was no longer just theory for these people: they had *seen* for themselves, and it had made a big impression.

Perhaps one of the most important unresolved questions is why, if this is so, they ultimately did not choose to simply advertise hashisch (not to mention other narcotics) openly and explicitly as the royal road towards spiritual vision and occultist practice. Is it that “magic” was already controversial enough, particularly if combined with “sex” (beginning with Randolph), so that throwing even “drugs” into that mix would make occultism simply unmarketable? Or did the early occultists, like Eliphas Lévi,<sup>19</sup> learn from experience that these visions (at least in the case of traditional “witchcraft recipes”) were too hard to control and might even be dangerous? Was it perhaps a simple matter of power and control? After all, magic (sexual or otherwise) must be taught from master to disciple and the candidate’s magical progress can then be controlled through an order of progressive ritual initiations. Entheogens had the effect of bypassing any such hierarchical structure because they allowed the individual user to immediately “get there” all by himself—thereby taking control away from the initiator or his organization. To answer such questions, we will need to delve deeper into the primary sources and start asking them questions that have not been asked before.

#### References

Agrippa, Cornelius.

1992. *De occulta philosophia Libri tres*. Edited by V. Perrone Compagni. Leiden: Brill.

Anonymus.

1859. “Hashish visions.” *The Spiritual Telegraph and Fireside Preacher* 8(36), 31 December, 1859, 424–425.

---

19. See note 12.

- 1860a. "Boston Spiritual Conference, Wednesday Evening, October 31," *Banner of Light* 8(7), November 10, 5.
- 1860b. "Boston Spiritual Conference, Wednesday Evening, December 12," *Banner of Light* 8(13), December 22, 8.
- 1860c. "A Word on Stimulants." *Banner of Light* 8(14), 29 December 1860, 4.
- 1876a. *Art Magic; Mundane, Sub-Mundane and Super-Mundane Spiritism. A Treatise in Three Parts and Twenty-Three Sections: Descriptive of Art Magic, Spiritism, the Different Orders of Spirits in the Universe known to be related to, or in Communication with Man; together with Directions for Invoking, Controlling, and Discharging Spirits, and the Uses and Abuses, Dangers and Possibilities of Magical Art.* New York: Published by the Author.
- 1876b. *Ghost Land; or Researches into the Mysteries of Occultism. Illustrated in a Series of Autobiographical Sketches.* Boston, MA: Published for the Author.
1885. "Occult psychological phenomena, or strange facts in nature, Part I." *The Occult Magazine* 1(1): 6–7.
1842. [= Edward Bulwer Lytton]. *Zanoni*. 3 vols. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Baier, Karl.
2009. *Meditation und Moderne: Zur Genese eines Kernbereichs moderner Spiritualität in der Wechselwirkung zwischen Westeuropa, Nordamerika und Asien*, vol. 1. Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann.
- Brach, Jean-Pierre.
2011. "Conférences de M. Jean-Pierre Brach, Directeur d'études." *Annuaire de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE), Section des sciences religieuses* 118: 283–290.
2012. "Conférences de M. Jean-Pierre Brach, Directeur d'études." *Annuaire de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE), Section des sciences religieuses* 119: 245–252.
- Cahagnet, Louis-Alphonse.
1848. *Arcanes de la vie future dévoilés, où l'existence, la forme, les occupations de l'âme après sa séparation du corps sont prouvées par plusieurs années d'expériences au moyen de huit somnambules extatiques qui ont eu quatre-vingt perceptions de trente-six personnes de diverses conditions décédées à différentes époques; leurs signalements, conversations, renseignements, preuves irrécusables de leur existence au monde spirituel*, vol. 1. Paris: Germer Baillière.
1849. *Arcanes de la vie future dévoilés, où l'existence, la forme et les occupations de l'âme séparée du corps sont prouvés par plusieurs années d'expériences au moyen de somnambules extatiques qui ont eu les perceptions de cinquante nouvelles personnes de diverses conditions décédées à différentes époques; leur signalement, conversations, renseignements, procès-verbaux de leur identité; suivis 1. d'une foule de faits surnaturels communiqués par des magnétiseurs; 2. la réfutation des objections faites sur le contenu du premier volume des Arcanes; 3. citations*

- de philosophes spiritualistes sur l'immortalité de l'âme*, vol. 2. Paris: Germer Baillière.
1850. *Sanctuaire du spiritualisme: Étude de l'âme humaine, et de ses rapports avec l'univers, d'après le somnambulisme et l'extase*. Paris: Chez l'auteur.
- 1851a. *Arcanes de la vie future dévoilés où l'existence, la forme, les occupations de l'âme après sa séparation du corps sont prouvées par plusieurs années d'expériences au moyen de somnambules extatiques qui ont eu quatre-vingt perceptions de trente-six personnes de diverses conditions décédées à différentes époques, leur signalement, conversations, renseignements, preuves irrécusables de leur existence au monde spirituel!* vol. 3. Paris: Germer Baillière.
- 1851b. *Du traitement des maladies, ou étude sur les propriétés médicinales de 150 plantes les plus connues et les plus usuelles, par l'extatique Adèle Maginot, avec une exposition des diverses méthodes de magnétisation*. Paris: Germer Baillière.
1850. *The Celestial Telegraph; or, Secrets of the Life to come revealed through Magnetism: wherein the Existence, the Form, the Occupations, of the Soul after its Separation from the Body are proved by Many Years' Experiments, by the Means of Eight Ecstatic Somnambulists, who had Eighty Perceptions of Thirty-Six Deceased Persons of Various Conditions. A Description of them, their Conversations, etc., with Proofs of their Existence in the Spiritual World*. New York: Partridge and Brittan.
1856. "Introduction." In *Révélations d'outre-tombe par les esprits Galilée, Hypocrate, Franklin, etc., sur Dieu, la préexistence des âmes, la création de la terre, l'astronomie, la météorologie, la physique, la métaphysique, la botanique, l'hermétisme, l'anatomie vivante du corps humain, la médecine, l'existence du Christ et du monde spirituel, les apparitions et les manifestations spirituelles du XIXe siècle*, 11–31. Paris: Chez l'auteur.
1858. *Magie magnétique ou traité historique et pratique de fascinations, miroirs cabalistiques, apports, suspensions, pactes, talismans, charme des vents, convulsions, possessions, envoûtements, sortilèges, magie de la parole, correspondance sympathique, nécromancie, etc.* Paris: Germer Baillière.
- Chambers, Robert.
1848. "The hashish." *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal* 9(256), 25 November, 341–344; repr. *Littell's Living Age* 20(246), 3 February 1849; repr. [Anonymous] *Vermont Watcher and State Journal* 43(29), 31 May 1849.
- Child, A. B.
1859. "Hashish." *Banner of Light* 4(17), 22 January, 3.
- Demarest, Marc.
2009. "Pierre Erard." < -- > Thomas Welsh," [ehbritten.blogspot.nl](http://ehbritten.blogspot.nl), 20 February.
- Deveney, John Patrick.
- 1997a. *Paschal Beverley Randolph: A Nineteenth-Century Black American Spiritualist, Rosicrucian, and Sex Magician*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- 1997b. *Astral Projection or Liberation of the Double and the Work of the Early Theosophical Society*. Theosophical History Occasional Papers VI. Fullerton, CA: Theosophical History.
2011. "Paschal Beverley Randolph and sexual magic." In *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism*, edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Jeffrey J. Kripal, 355–367. New York: Fordham University Press
- Eckartshausen, Karl von.
1788. *Aufschlüsse zur Magie, aus geprüften Erfahrungen über verborgene philosophische Wissenschaften und verdeckte Geheimnisse der Natur*. Brünn: Joh. Sylv. Siebler.
- Faivre, Antoine.
1969. *Eckartshausen et la théosophie chrétienne*. Paris: C. Klincksieck.
2008. "'Eloquence magique,' ou descriptions des mondes de l'au-delà explorés par le magnétisme animal: Au carrefour de la Naturphilosophie romantique et de la théosophie chrétienne (première moitié du XIXe siècle)." *Aries* 8(2): 191–228. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156798908X327339>
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J.
2009. "Will-Erich Peuckert and the Light of Nature." In *Esotericism, Religion, and Nature*, edited by Arthur Versluis, Claire Fanger, Lee Irwin and Melinda Phillips, 281–305. Michigan: North American Academic Press.
2012. *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2013a. "The notion of 'occult sciences' in the wake of the Enlightenment." In *Aufklärung und Esoterik: Wege in die Moderne*, edited by Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, Renko Geffarth and Markus Meumann, 73–95. Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110297836.73>
- 2013b. "Entheogenic Esotericism." In *Contemporary Esotericism*, edited by Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, 392–409. Sheffield: Equinox.
- forthcoming. "Western esotericism and the orient in the first theosophical society." In *Theosophy Across Boundaries*, edited by Hans-Martin Krämer and Julian Strube.
- Kiesewetter, Karl.
1886. "Magische räucherungen." *Der Sphinx* 1: 220–221.
- Lévi, Éliphas.
2000. *Secrets de la magie*. Paris: Robert Laffont.
- Ludlow, Fitz Hugh.
1857. *The Hasheesh Eater: Being Passages from the Life of a Pythagorean*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Moreau de Tours, Jacques-Joseph.
1845. *Du Hachisch et de l'aliénation mentale: Études psychologiques*, Paris: Fortin, Masson and Cie.

Partridge, Christopher.

2005. *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture*. 2 vols. London: T & T Clark.

Forthcoming. *Technologies of Transcendence: Psychedelic Esotericism in the Modern World*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Peuckert, Will-Erich.

1960. "Hexensalben." *Medizinischer Monatsspiegel* 8: 169–174.

Pierssens, Michel.

1993. "Le merveilleux psychique au XIXe siècle." *Ethnologie française*, nouvelle série 23(3): 351–366.

Podmore, Frank.

1902. *Modern Spiritualism: A History and a Criticism*. 2 vols. London: Methuen.

1909. *Mesmerism and Christian Science: A Short History of Mental Healing*. Philadelphia, PA: George W. Jacobs.

1963a. *Mediums of the 19th Century*. 2 vols. New York: University Books.

1963b. *From Mesmer to Christian Science*. New York: University Books.

Rätsch, Christian.

1998. *The Encyclopedia of Psychoactive Plants: Ethnopharmacology and its Applications*. Rochester, VT: Park Street Press.

Siegel, Ronald K. and Ada E. Hirschman.

1984. "Hashish Near-Death Experiences." *Anabiosis: The Journal for Near-Death Studies* 4(1): 69–86.

Strube, Julian.

2016. *Sozialismus, Katholizismus und Okkultismus im Frankreich des 19. Jahrhunderts: Die Genealogie der Schriften von Eliphas Lévi*. Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110478105>

Tilton, Hereward.

2012. "Alchymia archetypica: Theurgy, inner transformation and the historiography of alchemy." In *Transmutatio: La via ermetica alla felicità / The Hermetic Way to Happiness*, edited by Daniela Boccassini and Carlo Testa, 179–215. Special issue of *Quaderni di Studi Indo-Mediterranei* 5.

Tuttle, Hudson.

1862. "Hashish." *Banner of Light* 10(19), 1862, 3.

Vadé, Yves.

1990. *L'enchantement littéraire: Écriture et magie de Chateaubriand à Rimbaud*. Paris: Gallimard.

Villars, Henry Mountfaucon de.

2010. *Comte de Gabalis, ou entretiens sur les sciences secrètes* (1670), modern edition: Henri de Montfaucon de Villars, *Le Comte de Gabalis, ou Entretiens sur les*

*sciences secrètes, avec l'adaptation du Liber de Nymphis de Paracelse par Blaise de Vigenère (1583), Paris: Honoré Champion.*

Wolff, Hanna M.

1891. "Madame Blavatsky." *The Two Worlds* 4(213), 11 December, 671–672.

1892. "Madame Blavatsky." *The Religio-Philosophical Journal* (New Series), 2(32): 501–502.