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Introduction

Lafcadio Hearn, the Ghost of Islands

At the end of the nineteenth century, Lafcadio Hearn was one of America's best known writers, one of a stellar company that included Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Twain, Poe, and Stevenson have entered the established literary canon and are still read for duty and pleasure. Lafacadio Hearn has been forgotten, with two remarkable exceptions: in Louisiana and in Japan. Yet Hearn's place in the canon is significant for many reasons, not least of which is how the twentieth century came to view the nineteenth. This view, both academic and popular, reflects the triumph of a certain futuristic modernism over the mysteries of religion, folklore, and what was once called "folk wisdom." To witness this phenomenon in time-lapse, sped-up motion, one need only consider Lafcadio Hearn, the Greek-born, Irish-raised, New World immigrant who metamorphosed from a celebrated fin-de-siècle American writer into the beloved Japanese cultural icon Koizumi Yakumo in less than a decade, in roughly the same time that Japan changed from a millennia-old feudal society into a great industrial power. In other words, in the blink of an eye, in the time it takes a princess to kiss-turn a frog into a prince, or in the time it takes to burn an owl's feathers so that only the nocturnal beautiful-girl-shape of the creature might remain.

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History is a fairy tale true to its telling. Lafcadio Hearn's lives are a fairy tale true in various tellings, primarily his own, then those of his correspondents, and with greater uncertainty, those of his biographers. Hearn changed, as if magically, from one person into another, from a Greek islander into a British student, from a penniless London street ragamuffin into a respected American newspaper writer, from a journalist into a novelist, and, most astonishingly, from a stateless Western man into a loyal Japanese citizen. His sheer number of guises make him a creature of legend, by far more fabulous than a frog turning into a prince. Yet this life, as recorded both by himself and by others, grows more mysterious the more one examines it, for it is like the Japanese story of the Buddhist monk Kwashin Koji, in "Impressions of Japan," who owned a painting so detailed it flowed with life. A samurai chieftain saw it and wanted to buy it, but the monk wouldn't sell it, so the chieftain had him followed and murdered. But when the painting was brought to the chieftain and unrolled, there was nothing on it; it was blank. Hearn reported this story told to him by a Japanese monk[1] to illustrate some aspect of the Buddhist doctrine of karma, but he might as well have been speaking about himself as Koji: the more "literary" the renderings of the original story, the less fresh and vivid it becomes, until it might literally disappear, like that legendary painting.

The knowable tellings of Hearn are particular, interesting, and specific to the literary personae of Lafcadio-Koizumi, insofar as one is absorbed and lost in them. But this tremendously prolific producer of literature remains, somehow, elusive. Hearn tempts, or we could say "dares," his critics to interpret his work and his life, but, in the end, he belongs to the reader who best surrenders to his stories and his own life-reporting.

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Lafcadio Hearn was born in 1850 not far from Ithaca, on the island of Lefkada in Greece, from the union of Charles Bush Hearn, an Irish surgeon in the British army, and Rosa Kassimatis, a beautiful Greek woman born on Cythera, Aphrodite's island, about which Baudelaire wrote (in Richard Howard's memorable translation): "On Aphrodite's island all I found / was a token gallows wherein my image hung."[2] Hearn's sorrows later in life were reflected by Baudelaire, who saw in Cythera the fatal beauty that would haunt Hearn's life. Lafcadio Hearn was named after Lefkada, where he lived with his mother, while his father was deployed by the British army elsewhere. The island of Lefkada, said by Ovid in his "Ode to Love" to be the place where Sappho jumped to her death in the sea because of unrequited love, was Lafcadio's paradise, the womb-island from which he was "expelled" when his father returned and took mother and child to Dublin. On that dismal northern isle, Lafcadio was expelled a second time, this time away from his mother. While his father was abroad on yet another military assignment in the West Indies, Rosa fled Dublin with a Greek man, back to her "island of feasting hearts and secret joys,"[3] leaving Lafcadio in the custody of a pious Catholic aunt. Then a schoolyard accident in one of the British schools he resentfully attended left him blind in one eye. His father remarried, and his aunt's family became bankrupt, two unrelated yet near-simultaneous disasters. A seventeen-year-old Lafcadio wandered penniless in London among vagabonds, thieves, and prostitutes. In the spring of 1869, a relation of his father's, worried about the family's reputation, handed him a one-way boat ticket to the United States, then overland to Cincinnati, Ohio, where another relation of the Hearns lived.

His departure for the New World was Lafacadio Hearn's third exile. In Cincinnati, where he had imagined generous help, his

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relation handed him a few dollars and told him to fend for himself. A twenty-year-old Lafcadio found himself, once again, a penniless tramp. So far, with the exception of a few school exercises and some ghoulish poetry inspired by his fear of ghosts, Lafcadio Hearn had written nothing. In Cincinnati, he lived again in the underworld, until a kind angel intervened: the printer Henry Watkin allowed the young tramp to sleep on piles of old newspapers in his shop. Watkin, a utopian anarchist, encouraged the youth to read radical and fantastic literature. It was the age of socialism, anarchism, imperialism, untaxed wealth, unredeemable poverty, spiritism, snake-oil, newspapers, electricity, photography, telegraphy, telepathy, railroads, high art, and kitsch. A bounty of exotic objects and customs flowed in from the cultures of vanquished Native American tribes and recently freed African slaves. The astonished masses of immigrant Europeans, who were mostly peasants and religiously persecuted marginals, brought with them their own rich stories of folklore, customs, and beliefs. Hearn, like many new Americans, felt rightly that he was living in a time of wonder and possibility. His education took a vast leap: he underwent a kind of osmosis as if he had absorbed the spirit of nineteenth-century America from the very newspapers he slept on. He had lived variously and wanted to let the world know how cruel and wondrous life was. Clumsily, with Henry Watkin's encouragement, he started to write.

He submitted a story to the *Enquirer*, a failing yellow-press daily. His story appeared in bold type on the front page. Other stories soon followed. Young Hearn's first writings were bloodcurdling reportage steeped in gothic horror. His reports about gruesome murders and exposés of German slaughterhouses in Cincinnati are still cringe-worthy. They scandalized the readers of the *Enquirer* and lifted the newspaper from near-bankruptcy to a

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prosperous business. Hearn's ultra-realist exposés were drenched in the wounded sensibility of a writer with a merciless eye who had Greek myths and Celtic fairy tales in his blood.

Here he is, describing the murdered body of one Herman Schilling, boiled to death by two of his slaughterhouse confederates: "The brain had all but boiled away, save a small wasted lump at the base of the skull about the size of a lemon. It was crisped and still warm to the touch. On pushing the finger through the crisp, the interior felt about the consistency of banana fruit, and the yellow fibers seemed to writhe like worms in the Coroner's hands. The eyes were cooked to bubbled crisps in the blackened sockets."[4]

For all its facticity, the passage feels like the elaboration of horror in a fairy tale by a storyteller scaring children around a campfire. Young Hearn is telling a story for an audience safely snuggled in the parlor of a Victorian home, usually lit by gas lamps, but candlelit for the occasion. The vivid prose of his newspaper crime-writing was soon employed in no-less-vivid accounts of life on the other side of the tracks, in the Black Quarter, where a different life, language, and time prevailed. Hearn noted the sounds of nightlife, the slang of dockworkers, the rhythms of the street, the strength of language of an underclass whose existence was barely acknowledged or, until then, completely ignored by readers of the *Enquirer*. Hearn wrote passionately about the rough experiences and traumatic lives of his friends and acquaintances.

At the height of his Cincinnati success as a journalist, gossip about his personal life undermined his standing. His stories about the misery and magic of the city's underworld started upsetting the upstanding citizens, who had seen them, to a point, as mere fancies. A *pur sang* bohemian, Hearn lived in a world far from his bourgeois readers. He is said to have married a black woman and

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lived with her on the other side of the tracks: a scandal in the segregated city. The *Enquirer* fired him.

Spurning offers from rival newspapers, Hearn abandoned Cincinnati and departed for New Orleans, a Creole city of complex race relations, riotous living, legends, conspiracies, public secrets, and voodoo rites. New Orleans was a city in exile from mainstream America, and New Orleans loved Lafcadio Hearn at first reading. From his early columns in the local newspapers to his novel *Chita*, his literary persona took on mythic proportions. In New Orleans, he did not have to hide his commutes between the demimonde of the French Quarter and respectable Uptown. The wealthy citizenry of Uptown enjoyed many of the favors of the French Quarter. Hearn's love of the fantastic, the ghostly, and the outlandish found fertile ground. His path had been paved already by the eccentric and surrealist fiction of Baron von Reizenstein, a German radical refugee, who had transformed the city into a metropolis of the uncanny through his daily serial novel "The Mysteries of New Orleans." The form of "The Mysteries" was well known to German immigrants, who read such tales serialized in German-language newspapers in several of their cities of immigration, most notably Cleveland and New Orleans. The Baron outdid them all by inventing a speciae of journalism that was accurate enough for the daily newspaper he published himself (in German) in New Orleans; his taste for the fantastic featured thousand-year-old vampires frolicking with pedophile priests, lesbian voodoo priestesses (a first in American literature), blacks, adventurers of many shades and scams, faux-aristocrats, assassins, and sinister strangers who floated down the Mississippi River toward the Gulf of Mexico. Von Reizenstein's oeuvre was the centerpiece of an ephemeral

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literature of illustrated pamphlets about sensational crimes, newspaper exposés of corrupt politicians, "blue books" advertising the establishments in the red light district of Storyville, and spontaneous literature published during epidemics and natural disasters. At the same time, earnest scholars conducted research in Creole customs, legends, language, and the city's history. Writers holding tables in sidewalk cafes attempted to reach Romantic literary heights, their prose like overripe mangoes.

The steamy tropical embrace of New Orleans emboldened the young Hearn to heighten his own language for impressionist effects. And he made literary friendships. His new friends, the journalist Elizabeth Bisland, the novelist George Washington Cable (Mark Twain's touring companion), and Père de la Rouquette (Catholic priest, poet, scholar of Creole and Choctaw, author of the first Louisiana history), encouraged the young writer to study Creole and Cajun folklore, and to transcribe the stories and chants of the voudouins. They speculated about Eastern philosophies, occult texts, and rituals. Hearn's colorful newspaper essays about local lore, his articles about high and low New Orleans life, and his translations from the French of Gautier, Maupassant, and Loti drew many admirers. His reputation grew. While writing for the New Orleans papers, he attracted the attention of New York literati and was courted by major publishers. He started writing for *Harper's Weekly* and published his first book, *Chita, a Memory of Last Island,* with Harper and Brothers. The novella, set on Grand Isle, the favorite vacation refuge of New Orleanians fleeing the unhealthy summer of the city, remains one of the classics of Louisiana literature and has never gone out of print. The Louisiana coast, always under the threat of vanishing, found in Hearn the perfect chronicler of its vaporous tenure and its intensely emotional people.

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In Hearn's old London house of misery, like elsewhere in Europe, the social visions of Charles Fourier, Marx, and Baudelaire, and the otherworldly imaginings of gothic writers, were undermining the traditional order. In America, communities inspired by those ideas began to embody alternatives. Hearn's bohemia was a disorderly experiment, but others, like the Oneida commune in New York, founded on the idea of free love, were practical extensions of the European social and literary revolution. Hearn considered joining Oneida (inspired by his Fourierist host and mentor, Henry Watkin), but the company of handsome Anglo-Saxon specimens assembled by the community's founder, John Humphrey Noyes, had no room in it for the dwarfish, one-eyed, mixed-race Hearn. His home was in language, and his imagination made a place for him in the sea of the magical stories he discovered in New Orleans. Hearn was lost, sent into permanent exile by his genitors, an inhabitant, par excellence, of the Outside. America was itself a refuge for outsiders, and New Orleans was in many ways outside America. Having literally lived outside and fought inclement weather and hunger with a classless underworld, Hearn was a dreamer with a vengeance and a merciless observer of humans. And he was, for the moment, a literary sensation.

In 1887, Hearn departed for the West Indies on assignment for *Harper's Weekly*, unconsciously following the path of his father, the military surgeon deployed there by the British army. The younger Hearn set off for the island of Martinique, "with ports of call at St. Croix, St. Kitts, Montserrat, Barbados, Trinidad, Tobago, St. Lucia, and British Guiana."[5] He lived in Martinique for two years, fully immersed in island life, writing detailed notes on its people, its foods, its lush flora, and its vertiginous landscapes. His

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descriptions of the *porteuses*, the strong and graceful women who ran the length and width of the island's mountainous roads carrying tremendous weights of merchandise on their heads, is preserved forever in his book *Two Years in the French West Indies*, as is the capital city of St. Pierre, which was completely destroyed by the eruption of the Mount Pelée volcano in 1902.[6] In this book, published in 1889, Hearn's prose reached both its Victorian apogee and a sharpness of detail that prefigured the modern taste for precise observation. The decorative filler for the newspapers began to lose its charms for Hearn. He yearned for something simpler and sturdier, a wish for an unadorned style that he would later seek in Japan.

In his introduction to *The Selected Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*[7] (1949), the editor Malcolm Cowley was by turns critical and complimentary. He found Hearn's writing for newspapers in Cincinnati and New Orleans guilty of "a purple style." (The same can be said of Hearn's translations from the French of Theophile Gautier and Pierre Loti.) Of Hearn's New Orleans novels, *Chita* and *Youma*, Cowley said, "the atmosphere is more important than the story." Cowley's view of the young Hearn's prolific output echoes that of the subject himself, who wrote from Japan in 1893 to his friend Basil Chamberlain, who had returned to Europe: "After for years studying poetical prose, I am forced now to study simplicity. After attempting my utmost at ornamentation, I am converted by my own mistakes. The great point is to touch with simple words."[8] In the end, Cowley thought that Hearn found his subject in Japan, as well as his identity in Koizumi Yakumo, the name he adopted later in life. In other words, Hearn had completed an epic journey in search of himself, a circular odyssey in both real-time and word-time, as adventure-filled as that of Odysseus and perhaps Homer, but which was not a return to

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the island where he was born, though it had taken him from one island to another.

Commissioned by *Harper's* to write a series of reports similar to his *Two Years in the French West Indies*, Hearn arrived in Yokohama on April 2, 1890, only a few decades after the first American warship commanded by Commodore Perry arrived, under orders from President Millard Fillmore, to open Japanese ports to American trade. The American incursion caused the defeat of Tokugawa, the last anti-Western shogun, the restoration of the emperor, and the beginning of rapid industrialization in Meiji Japan. It was an era of endings and beginnings, tailor-made to Hearn's philosophical and literary questions, which coincided with the very moment that a traditional and deeply ritual-based culture was experiencing a violent break with its past and an accelerated jump into the future. No stranger to violent breaks and accelerated leaps, Hearn would find himself choosing without hesitation the mythical past—patriarchal samurai Japan.

Lafcadio's Japanese life began in typically inauspicious fashion when his few contacts promised to find him a job and didn't. The money vaguely promised by *Harper's Weekly* for his reports from Japan never showed up. One of his contacts, who would, like Elizabeth Bisland, become a lifelong friend and correspondent, Professor Basil Hall, chamberlain of Tokyo University, advised him to write down his first impressions of Japan as soon as he experienced them. It was sound advice; it allowed Hearn to communicate the overwhelming sensations of an exotic world to American readers, a world that conformed to their expectations of miniature people, paper houses, decorated streets, spectacular views of Mount Fuji, and Buddhist temples where one might conduct long philosophical

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talks with Buddhist monks. For Hearn, who would go on to write twelve major books in Japan, one of the most startling and illuminating insights came early. Wondering about the *ghostly* sensation of Japanese art, he concluded that it is due to

> the absence of shadows. What prevents you from missing them at once is the astounding skill in the recognition and use of color-values. The scene . . . is not depicted as if illumined from one side, but as if throughout suffused with light. . . . The old Japanese loved shadows made by the moon, and painted the same, but these were weird and did not interfere with color. But they had no admiration for shadows that blacken and break the charm of the world under the sun. And the inner as well as the outer world was luminous for them. Psychologically also they saw life without shadows. Then the West burst into their Buddhist peace, and saw their art and bought it all up . . . and when there was nothing more to be bought, and it seemed possible that fresh creation might reduce the market price of what had been bought already, then the West said: "Oh, come now! you mustn't go on drawing and seeing things that way, you know. It isn't Art! You must really learn to see shadows, you know—and pay me to teach you." So Japan paid to learn how to see shadows in Nature, in life, and in thought.[9]

This reflection contains Hearn's lifelong concern with shadows (one of his Japanese books is *Shadowings*, published by Little, Brown in 1900), his naïve, self-generated enthusiasm in all new places seen in the light of a return to paradise, and an important aesthetic that saw religious symbolism and art as one. The West,

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viewed in terms of greed, concupiscence, and the villainy of money, corrupted the spiritual life of people not yet converted by the "market" by introducing the shadows of death. Death and its shadows preoccupied Hearn his entire life, but they took new meaning in Japan, where death was a starkly defined world. The ghostly world, the activities of the dead, the influence of the dead on the living, the complex Buddhist teachings about death, are in almost every one of Hearn's essays, but are most present in his rendering of Japanese fairy tales, where he found the stories in the abstract Buddhist concepts. These stories were the folk translations of the Buddhist monks and scholars' explanations. They contained the charm and thrill of a mysterious world. Otherworldly mysteries as told by the common folk always interested Hearn and fascinated his readers. In the rich lore of Japanese stories, many of which were told to him by his second wife, Setsu, Hearn found the revelation that death as introduced to Japan by Western ideas was corrupting the Buddhist teachings on death and the afterlife. Hearn's early insight was later developed in the essays of Ernest Fenollosa, a historian of Japanese art and a professor of philosophy at the University of Tokyo. Ezra Pound, the founder of American modernist poetry, took Fenollosa's thought further and influenced poets throughout the twentieth century. Hearn's insight was influenced by the English philosopher Herbert Spencer, whose books were responsible for much of Hearn's "spiritual" education under Watkin's tutelage. In addition to the high-minded Spencer, Hearn was fascinated by occult experiments and was an avid reader of the prodigious and quarrelsome Madame Blavatsky, who claimed to have been taught by Buddhist masters during her trances and dreams.

Despite such insights, Hearn's early writings in Japan evinced little of the search for the "simplicity" that he confessed to

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Chamberlain. They instead conformed to the exotic expectations of American readers. What makes his early Japanese observations a cut above the era's conventional travel writings are the anecdotes he collected and transcribed from his conversations with Buddhist monks, as well as from ordinary people he met in daily life. In answers to Hearn's lofty question about life and death, one monk told him "Buddhism teaches that all sexual love must be suppressed . . . as necessity or hindrance to enlightenment"—not exactly what Hearn meant, but perhaps what he really wanted to hear. An eighty-eight-year-old Zen priest told him a story about a celibate monk who was a "comely man" of whom a girl became enamored. She grieved in secret about the impossibility of breaching her beloved's vows, until in the thrall of her passion she went to Lord Buddha himself to speak her heart, whereupon Lord Buddha cast her in a deep sleep. She dreamed that she was the happy wife of her beloved. After many years of contentment and sorrow in her dream, her husband died. She was wracked by unbearable pain, and in the midst of it she woke up and saw Buddha smile. "'You have a choice,' Buddha told her. 'You can either be a bride, or seek his Higher way.' Then she cut her hair, and became a nun, and in aftertime attained to the condition of one never to be reborn."[10] Hearn was lonely, and such edifying tales were not lost on him. He was looking for a companion.

By the gracious fortune that never failed him, Hearn eventually obtained a modest position teaching English in the city of Matsue, hundreds of miles away from Tokyo. In Matsue, old Japan was still faithful to its samurai past; its ceremonies, festivals, manners, and rigid class distinctions were scrupulously observed. Hearn felt that in this traditional and self-contained world he was no odder than any other Westerner: his modest height was only slightly more

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than that of the average Japanese man, and his odd appearance was naturally that of a foreigner. His students liked him and showed him the deference due to respected elders. An exhausted Lafcadio Hearn, worn out by late nights in the ill-famed quarters of cities, and the strain of incessantly writing with one overworked eye for the insatiable publications that earned him a meager living, found the slow ritual pace of Matsue a delight. Approached by a colleague who proposed that he marry a young Japanese woman from an impoverished but noble samurai family, he eagerly agreed. His marriage would be considered an act of compassion toward her family, which he would be obligated to support in exchange for surrendering their daughter, Setsu. Lafcadio's teacher's salary was high by local standards, and he could easily afford his married responsibilities. In January 1891, the twenty-fourth year of Meiji, he celebrated his nuptials with Setsu Koizumi with rice wine in the presence of friends. Setsu was unschooled, but she was an intelligent and attentive woman who held a treasury of old folk stories, legends, and ghost tales in her memory. She was also a traditional Japanese woman who had been trained to obey all of her husband's wishes and show him great respect. In the newlyweds' traditional house, Setsu and their servants stood to bow when he left for his job and did the same when he returned. Custom dictated that he eat first, before the others in the household, and that he remain unbothered in his occupations. Lafcadio Hearn had hit the jackpot. He put on his Japanese robe, sat on his straw mat, and applied himself to the task of becoming Japanese.

In a letter to Basil Chamberlain on October 11, 1893, he described the feeling: "at home I enter into my little smiling world of old ways and thoughts and courtesies;—where all is soft and gentle as something seen in sleep. It is so soft, so intangibly gentle and

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lovable and artless, that sometimes it seems a dream only; and then a fear comes that it might vanish away. It has become Me. When I am pleased, it laughs; when I don't feel jolly, everything is silent. I cannot imagine what I should do away from it."

Here, in a nutshell, is the fairy tale of Lafcadio Hearn's life in Japan, lit by the magic lamp of wish. But in order to make it just so, Hearn had work to do, the hardest of which was to cease being Lafcadio Hearn. Since he had at first seen himself primarily as an American writer explaining Japan to the West, he would have to teach himself to think differently, to begin achieving that "artless" art that disallowed such phrases as "soft, so intangibly gentle as something seen in sleep." The Victorian ornamentation had to go. The overwrought newspaper writing had to go. The object had to be lit only by the fact of it, which worded simply contained all that needed to be said.

It took time. Having specialized in nightmares as a writer, "intangible gentleness" would have rarely entered his sleep. Yet this intangible gentleness was the undergirding of his child-dream of the womb of Lefkada, and he was far from it yet. Still connected to New York publishers, an indefatigable writer of letters to his friends, moved by a compulsive need to compare "West" and "East," Hearn had many selves invested in getting at that elusive "intangible." His letters to his American friends are self-consciously literary and conscious also of their readers. To Elizabeth Bisland, he wrote warmly but "properly," with only hints of his shadowy adventures, despite their wild past in New Orleans. Bisland, in the two-volume biography of Hearn that she published two years after his death, defended him from his "scandalous reputation," especially since it involved her own life, which had become quite puritanical in her New York milieu. In his first letters to Chamberlain, Hearn

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sounded quite a bit more scholarly and philosophical, showing off his reading and research. Later, when they knew each other better, there is considerable ease and even a dirty joke (elegantly phrased) here and there. The correspondents also shared a growing exasperation at discovering that although the Japanese are guarded and wear many masks required by society and tradition, under these reside the same vicissitudes of human nature present everywhere. Only to his mentor and friend, the anarchist printer Henry Watkin, did Hearn reveal himself in rowdy and unfettered form, and it is in these letters (selected in most editions of *Letters from the Raven*[11]) that we see the transformation he was indeed undergoing, from gothic writer and adventurer to a traditional paterfamilias and a serious student of Japanese lore.

Setsu was a patient companion and teacher. She gave him four children, whom Lafcadio loved, especially his son Kazuo, who became a teacher of English and wrote a book about his father.[12] Setsu taught Lafcadio stories and songs and helped improve his speech as he learned Japanese. She saw to it that his unpredictable moods were understood and protected by the family that filled his life. The "bohemian by necessity," as Cowley calls him, became a man who dedicated himself to the education of children, his own and others', an assiduous student, and a fervent defender of old Japan against what he saw as the corruption of the West. In February 1896, Lafcadio Hearn became the Japanese citizen Yakumo Koizumi. Adopted by his Japanese family as a condition for citizenship, he took the family name Koizumi, meaning "little spring", and chose for his own name Yakumo, meaning "eight clouds," which was the first word of the "most ancient poem extant in the Japanese language," as well as one of the names for Izumo, "my beloved province, the place of the Issuing of the Clouds."

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Hearn set himself to the task of studying and translating haiku and tanka, forms of Japanese poetry that made brevity their virtue; his meditations on these forms and the economy they entailed echoed for Ernest Fenollosa (who was living in Japan and invited Hearn to visit, an invitation Hearn testily refused), and Ezra Pound. His insights had an even longer life through Kenneth Rexroth, who edited a collection of Hearn's Buddhist writings, and Gary Snyder, and they continued to be important to poets. Poetry for every occasion, composed spontaneously, solemn or raucous, was part of Japanese life, and a delight for all ages. Folk poetry, the recitation of epics, provided the threads that Hearn seized on when he wrote *Kwaidan*,[13] his first truly Japanese book written in his best English. It was published in 1904, the year of his death.

Everything that might delight a reader in search of Japanese legends, rituals, and beliefs, whether of Shintō or Buddhist origin—the enchantment of the Japanese imaginary, wisdom about nature (which revolves most often around the cherry tree, Japan's true axis mundi), the feminine forces that rule the universe (certainly Hearn's magical world), and the many shapes of death and afterlife through animals and spirits—can be found in *Kwaidan*. Distilled here are Hearn's efforts to find the forms best suited to his multifaceted personalities: his own masks are to be found here, discarded, haunting, or preserved. *Kwaidan* achieved what Hearn intended to find in Japanese culture: a flowing mix of folk tales, personal observations, and a marvelous series of essays on insects—it is the work of Hearn-Koizumi, a writer with a double vision, an English-language writer deeply intimate with Japan, or a Japanese storyteller consciously writing in English. I have selected most of the stories from *Kwaidan* in this anthology because this is, as most of his readers in the United States and Japan (where

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it appeared in numerous translations) believe, Hearn's most successful book. In addition, I have included other notable tales from *Shadowings* and *A Japanese Miscellany* that reflect the restrained style and strange incidents that one might think weird and yet significant in Japanese culture.

Before *Kwaidan*, Hearn experimented with many forms of stories: autobiographical sketches, wisdom-parables, travel writing. Most of his work, disseminated through numerous volumes and editions, is pro-Japanese and anti-Western. They position Hearn-Koizumi as a Japanese writer. In his lifetime, his previous writings, from Cincinnati, New Orleans, and the West Indies, were little known to his Japanese readers. At the same time, because of their intended audience and their having been written in English, his Japanese work influenced American writers well into the twentieth century.

Hearn's existential, intellectual, and literary adventures in the living world, were, in the end, a spiral, not a circular journey. He never returned to the womb of his mother's Lefkada but found himself at home in a patriarchal world where he was a Father, unlike his own genitor. The critical tools for the "enigma" of Hearn, as critics and biographers are fond of repeating, are still insufficient for the wealth of forms and content that Hearn produced. Hearn was loved by readers who were not concerned with the enigma. They consumed his writing in a manner one might call postmodern, like films or mysteries, and if they thought of it critically, they would have described him and his work as "exotic" and "strange." He was that, in the same manner that fairy tales and fantastic stories are exotic and strange. This reader's perspective is exactly right: Lafcadio Hearn lived many lives, experienced miraculous encounters, overcame numerous dragons, and triumphed

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in the end. His life resembled a fairy tale, but far from ending like some fairy tales do, with disintegration into dust due to a sudden attack of nostalgia, Hearn did not succumb to the temptation to look backward and grew into a myth for the people of Japan, his last place of wandering. His stories are always in print in new editions, illustrated by known artists. Films, Noh plays, music, and ballets were (and are) produced based on his ghost stories.

The difficulty for anthologists, including this one, was how to approach the more than one hundred volumes composed by Lafcadio Hearn, sometimes with help from his friends Chamberlain and Bisland. This difficulty is compounded by the editors of publishing houses that issued editions of Hearn's writings without his consent. There were numerous apocryphal texts, published after his death in 1904, "from the school of . . . ," possible forgeries, and bowdlerized or, conversely, sexualized editions printed by fly-by-night publishers looking for a quick buck. Then there are the volumes of letters to his friends, each of them introduced by book-length explanations. Standing separately from his journalistic stories on Japan, his renderings of fairy tales, his Buddhist studies, his philosophical and sociological essays, his lectures (faithfully transcribed by his Japanese students), there is another body of work, a sizable recasting of his life and writing by his biographers. Hearn biographies appeared shortly after his death. These began with Elizabeth Bisland's two volumes in 1906, and continued well into the present with Jonathan Cott's 1992 *Wandering Ghost: The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn*. Some biographies repeated, inaccurately, known stories; others collected ephemera, retellings, new versions of original editions, and even unpublished manuscripts. A true student of Hearn's might spend a good decade uncovering the multiple writings of this multifaceted man. Books titled *Japanese*

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Fairy Tales are often folk tales taken from longer texts about spiritual matters, linguistic research, or travel notes. Many of Hearn's "Japanese" tales were said to be literary transcriptions of Setsu's storytelling, but they show also the influence of Greek myths and that of Hans Christian Andersen. Some of the tales came from friends and acquaintances. His friends, including Chamberlain and Bisland, added their own stories to Hearn's. The differing styles and subjects reflect the times when they were published, and the tastes of their editors, including Hearn himself.

An interesting instance of this is "Green Willow," a story issuing from the same folk source, but retold by two writers, only one of whom may be Hearn. In the story that is "not Hearn," but also bearing the same title, the later "Green Willow,"[14] the young samurai Tomotada is "a courtier, and a poet, who had a sweet voice and a beautiful face, a noble form," and "was a graceful dancer, and excellent in every manly sport." He is asked by his master, Lord Noto, if he is loyal, and he confirms his loyalty. He is then asked by Lord Noto: "Do you love me?" This, too, is answered with an unhesitant yes. Thus tested, he is sent by his master to carry out a mysterious mission. He is not told what it is, but is given stern warnings of the dangers awaiting him, including that of looking "a maiden in the eyes." Tomotada overcomes many obstacles, but in a cottage in front of which stand three weeping willows, he forgets his master's last warning and falls in love with a beautiful girl, whom he marries. He lives with her in a lovely house and is happy, forgetting all about Lord Noto. After three years, she suddenly dies, with an exclamation: "'The tree,' she moaned, 'the tree. They have cut down the tree. Remember the Green Willow?'" The name of his beloved comes from one of the three weeping willows that stood in front of the cottage where he had met her. After she

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dies, Tomotada returns to the cottage, and sees that all three willows have been cut down.

It is a tale as mysterious as the unspoken mission: the young samurai is as beautiful as a girl, and he is asked by his master if he loves him. He loves a beautiful girl instead and is punished, but the punishment is not swift. He is given three happy years. Green Willow, who is but one of the three weeping willows, is a choice between three kinds of love: she is the love of women. The other two willows that were also cut down represent two other kinds of love, one of the samurai's love for his master, the other the love of the master for the samurai. Not too deeply buried in the samurai code is the understanding that complete fidelity implies a homoerotic bond. The graceful young samurai with girlish good looks and manly bravery has pledged and betrayed the love of his master. He chose the wrong love. Nonetheless, he is granted three years, which in the samurai world is tantamount to forgiveness. One deduces from this that Lord Noto loved his samurai and still hoped for his return, but after three years, when it appeared clear that Tomotada had chosen Green Willow in his stead, he kills all three weeping willows, one of which must have been his own love. All loves, already "weeping," are severed. It would then seem that Tomotada's mission was to find what he truly loves. This story reveals a gentle side of the samurai code. In all other matters, whether justice, manners, or hierarchy, there is little mercy. Love is given here a dispensation reminiscent of the European Renaissance or the courts of Provence with their troubadours and crusaders.

This story is most likely the work of one of the "others" mentioned in the collection's subtitle, possibly Basil Chamberlain. It is not a story written by Lafcadio Hearn, but is nonetheless the work of someone familiar with Japan.

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In *Kwaidan*, which is assuredly the work of Hearn, we find the same story, but in a quite different form. The young samurai Tomotada, in the service of Lord Noto, is sent on a private mission to the daimyo of Kyoto, a kinsman of his master. He asks for permission to stop briefly in his journey to pay a visit to his widowed mother. The countryside is covered in snow, and the lost and exhausted Tomotada finds himself before a cottage where willow trees are growing. Inside, an old man and a young girl are warming themselves before "a fire of bamboo splints." Tomotada seduces the girl with verses, and her family (there must have also been an unnamed old woman) gives her to him gladly, accepting no payment. Samurais could not marry without permission of their masters, but Tomotada ignores the custom. Fearing that her beauty might be noticed and reported, Tomotada keeps her hidden in Kyoto, but a servant spots her and reports the matter to the daimyo, who gives orders to have her brought immediately to his palace to enjoy her for himself. Tomotada is powerless, but he manages nonetheless to send his beloved a letter that expresses in twenty-four syllables all his misery and love for her. He is then summoned to the palace. Tomotada is certain that he will be sentenced to death for his daring, but the daimyo gives his permission instead to take the girl back. The twenty-four-syllable poem had apparently saved him, by awakening the daimyo's most delicate nature. The couple lives together happily for five years, until she confesses, when she suddenly becomes deathly ill, that she is a willow tree and that she is being cut down that very moment. Her dying form sinks down "in the strangest way," just like a cut tree.

The differences between the two versions are great. Aside from the details of the meeting, the reasons for eloping, and the number and (non)number of willow trees, this is not a delicate love story. Poetry that can seduce a girl and save her from the cruelty of a

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master is a commonplace in Japanese culture. Likewise, the law that called for the master to give a servant permission to marry was part of samurai life. Even the surreal ending, in the confession that she is a tree that must die because she is being cut down, is traditional. Human-trees and tree-humans abound in Japanese folklore: the most celebrated is the cherry tree, but many other trees participate in the fate of humans. One could easily assemble an anthology (by Hearn and others) of tree-centered Japanese fairy tales. In *Kwaidan*, where this story first appeared, it is much longer, and in Hearn's earliest Japanese style, he tries to cram in as many "credible" Japanese details as he can, for the edification of the Western reader. There is no intimacy between Lord Noto and his samurai—absolute fidelity is taken for granted. The only "crime" is not asking permission to marry, which is possibly a sly Hearnian reference to "le droit de seigneur."

The writer who produced the later version was different: a psychologist interested in Japanese eroticism, which is ubiquitous in the native folklore. Ironically, the "author" of the first story in *Kwaidan*, Lafcadio himself, had a reputation for sexualized storytelling, while a scholar, like Chamberlain, for instance, above reproach in his scholarly work, was possibly freed by Hearn to render into vernacular what he knew about samurai society. Hearn would have done his best to suppress this knowledge, as indeed he did in the *Kwaidan* version.

"Momotaro," a story loved in Japan, long attributed to Lafcadio Hearn, is not his either; it is most certainly written by someone familiar with Hans Christian Andersen, possibly familiar with Hearn, but completely unfamiliar with Japan. The traditional beginning is that of a European fairy tale, with a few painful crypto-Japanese "signs," such as something called "kimi-dango" (a kind of

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millet dumpling) and "sayonara" for "goodbye." The rest concerns a child, born from a peach, who attracts an entourage of animals with his "kimi-dango" and vanquishes some ogres whose treasure he steals.

Hearn, even at his most negligent, was consistent in his transcription; his Japanese tales are stark and do not resemble the fairy tales produced by nineteenth-century writers in Europe. Occasionally, for lack of a transition and for touching a chord in his American readers, he invented elements that were closer to the smoky djinns of the *Thousand and One Nights*, or the monsters of Greek myths, but he rarely employed the repetitions familiar to European readers; instead, he translated brief jingles or occasional poems that were traditional in Japanese stories.

The most often quoted rendering of a true Japanese fairy tale by Hearn is the story of "Urashima," which first appears in sketchy form in a letter Hearn wrote to Basil Chamberlain on July 22, 1893; it reappears in his reverie "The Dream of a Summer Day,"[15] and few anthologies of his fantastic works have ignored it. In "Urashima," the beautiful daughter of the Dragon God of the Sea takes the beautiful fisher-boy Urashima to her father's royal palace under the waters, where they live for many happy years, until Urashima is seized by the desire to see his parents one more time. Not heeding the warnings of his wife and the court, he heads back to the surface, where he grows old and disintegrates into a cloud of dust. Understandably, this is the fairy tale that would best describe Lafcadio's life, had he been able to return to Lefkada. "Urashima" is also a universal fairy tale that appears in many cultures, most memorably in the Romanian (and Balkan variants) of "Youth Without Age and Life Without Death," stories about living eternally in a kingdom of youth without end from which nostalgia expels the lucky hero

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into the arms of Death, who tells him (in the Romanian version): "I almost died myself waiting so long for you." Then Death slaps him and he turns to dust. There is no doubt that Hearn heard this story in Japan, but oddly, this is his least Japanese story. That honor belongs, in my opinion, to the blind master of the *biwa*, a four-stringed lute, in "The Story of Mimi-Nashi-Hōichi."

The blind singer Hōichi lives and is cared for by monks in a Buddhist monastery, where he is honored for his skill in the musical recitation of an epic battle, a performance that takes many days. One night the biwa-master is led by an unseen warrior to a splendid palace, where he performs the beginning of his epic before what he imagines is a great and noble audience. For many nights he is led to this court and brought back to the temple at dawn. The abbot suspects a trap and discovers the singer in a nearby cemetery, where the dead of the ancient battle are buried. The story of Hōichi is possibly Lafcadio Hearn's best "ghost story" from Japan.

A cursory reading of Japanese fairy tales, scattered throughout Hearn's books, would tempt one to call them "ghost stories." Indeed, many collections do just that, and qualify them with an adjective, such as "strange." They are indeed that, but the attention that the Japanese paid to the afterlife was detailed and absorbing. The afterlife was as populous and eventful as life, but its observation from this shore made it eerie, like the negative of an old film that was forbidden to view. This made it fascinating, of course, but it was of particular interest to Hearn because he had been tossed like a coin from one reality to another, and he made the ghost-world one of his lives. If an afterlife followed him, indeed he would have been hard put to recognize the difference. In dreams, which had always been of particular interest to him, the transition was flawless. Hearn's recollections of his dreams, and his interpretations of

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them, make him a proto-Surrealist. It is odd that he was left out of the Surrealist canon by André Breton, who included Hearn's close kin, Lewis Carroll and Rimbaud. The Surrealists did not, most likely, read his work, because it was popular. Obscurity shadows literature, a protective shield that Hearn, who was actually read in his own time, did not possess. Yet, he was obscure in the most fantastic and ghostly way. Like the famous vanishing details of the stolen painting, Hearn was absorbed by the ghost-world and put to work as its mouthpiece.

When I began this introduction, I had no idea how deeply Lafcadio Hearn had influenced Japanese culture, and recently, through the Internet, our own. Hearn is a transcultural hybrid writer, a multilingual genre-crosser: born in Greece, raised in several countries and languages, a self-taught scholar, a restless adventurer, a hyper-self-conscious translator—a bridge between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The twenty-first century may well contain a new life for this writer. What happened in Hearn's journey, from a fabled Greek island through a surging industrial America to a barely Westernized Japan, is a new kind of ghost story. Hearn contributed an auto-hagiography in letters to his literary friends and in personal essays, but he isn't to be found there. The many travails, transformations, and masks that appeared in his re-renderings in English of Japanese fairy tales are also the stories of No One, one of the names of Odysseus.

In "Mujina,"[16] an old merchant traveling at twilight comes upon a noble woman sobbing by the moat of an ancient castle. Fearing that she intends to drown herself, he attempts to console her by laying a hand "lightly" on her shoulder and asking the reason she is weeping. She turns and uncovers her face, hidden until then "behind her sleeve." The man then sees that she has no eyes or nose

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or mouth—and he screams and runs away. Desperate for human company, he runs until he sees the lantern of a noodle-seller, who inquires about his distress. After telling his story, the merchant looks for compassion in the peddler's face. "'Hé! Was it anything like THIS that she showed you?' cried the soba-man, stroking his own face—which therewith became like unto an Egg. . . . And, simultaneously, the light went out."

In that mirror, which is almost a joke, the shadow is playful, but the faceless future is painful. The Surrealists hovered in Hearn's future shadow—as did the fantasy industry of the virtual.

Notes

1. Lafcadio Hearn, *A Japanese Miscellany* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1901).
2. Charles Baudelaire, "A Voyage to Cythera," in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, trans. Richard Howard (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982).
3. Baudelaire, "A Voyage to Cythera."
4. This Hearn story, headlined "Skull Had Burst Like a Shell," appeared in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, quoted in Jonathan Cott, *Wandering Ghost: The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn* (New York: Knopf, 1992).
5. Cott, *Wandering Ghost*.
6. *Two Years in the French West Indies* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1890) is the first book by Lafcadio Hearn that I read as preparatory material for a visit to the West Indies in 1995, to interview the poet Aimé Césaire. Hearn's book was immensely helpful, a beautiful and accurate guidebook, still true in its essentials, with only the glaring physical absence of the *porteuses* and St. Pierre, that were nonetheless present in a ghostly way thanks to the vividness of Hearn's portraits of them. The only survivor of the volcanic eruption of Mount Pelée was the sole inhabitant of the city's jail, locked there for drunkenness. I can't help adding that Lafcadio Hearn, in re-creating the poetry of the city, was another witness to its existence, and doubtlessly a more

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articulate one than the celebrated drunk who traveled the world after the eruption, telling his story.

7. Lafcadio Hearn, *Kwaidan: Ghost Stories and Strange Tales of Old Japan* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1904).
8. Cited by Malcolm Cowley in his introduction to *The Selected Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, edited by Henry Goodman (New York: Citadel Press, 1949).
9. Lafcadio Hearn, *Out of the East: Reveries and Studies in New Japan* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1895).
10. Quoted and recast from Cott, *Wandering Ghost*, 294.
11. D. B. Updike, ed., *Letters from the Raven, Lafcadio Hearn* (Boston: Merrymount Press, 1907).
12. Kazuo Koizumi, *Father and I, Memories of Lafcadio Hearn* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1935).
13. Hearn, *Kwaidan*. The title page of this edition reads, "Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things; Lafcadio Hearn, Lecturer on English Literature in the Imperial University of Tokyo, Japan (1896–1903), Honorary Member of the Japan Society London." It was published in April 1904, the year of Hearn's death.
14. *Japanese Fairy Tales*, by Lafcadio Hearn and others (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918).
15. Hearn, *Out of the East*.
16. Hearn, *Kwaidan*.

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