

Foreword

*Where got I that truth?
Out of a medium's mouth,
Out of nothing it came,
Out of the forest loam,
Out of dark night where lay
The crowns of Nineveh.*

—Yeats: “Fragments,” *The Tower*, 1928

Lafcadio Hearn was a thief of myth. Born in 1850, into a time when the British Empire reached around the globe, he raided the world's archives. Epic narratives, sacred recitals, ancestral prayers: all were fair game for his declared ambition: “I would give up anything to be a Literary Columbus.”¹ Hearn wanted to recalibrate the literary voices he knew, to create a “universal literature.” Western storytelling had ossified, he claimed. “Naturalism”—with its solid portraiture of the minutiae of daily life—was narrow and dull. His “universal literature”² would be a hybrid of Western realism and “Eastern Literary growths.”³ “Left to itself,” Hearn said, “every literature will exhaust its vitality if it is not refreshed by the contributions of a foreign one.”⁴

It is unlikely that such a grandiose plan could have been anticipated for Hearn. Unprepossessing of figure, Hearn was, if not deformed, then disfigured; blind in one eye, he walked with a pronounced limp, both injuries suffered on the unforgiving playing fields of a Victorian childhood. Nor did the circumstances of his

1 Beongcheon Yu, *An Ape of Gods: the Art and Thought of Lafcadio Hearn*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1964, p. 100.

2 Beongcheon Yu, *Ibid.*, p. 177.

3 Beongcheon Yu, *Ibid.*, p. 176.

4 Beongcheon Yu, *Ibid.*, p 174–5.

birth and childhood presage such learned ambitions. The operatic nature of his parentage, however, may have shaped his intelligence; his parents yoked the extremes of the British colonial landscape, and his childhood reads like a ballad.

His mother was a nineteenth century primitive. Rosa Antonia Kassimati was tribal, illiterate, beautiful and charismatic, born into a proud Cerigote clan on the Greek Ionian island of Cerigo. His father was Charles Bush Hearn, Anglo-Irish, a medical man from Dublin, with a chain of Protestant ministers in his lineage. He was dispatched as Surgeon on the British Army Medical Staff to Cerigo, where he met Rosa. The two fell in love and managed to carry on an affair. Learning of this injudicious insult to local mores, the men of Rosa's clan attempted to murder Charles, but Rosa nursed him to health. They were married in a ceremony (one later held inconsequential by the Church of Ireland), and the romance continued. After two years in Greece she traveled to Dublin, to live midst her middle class in-laws. She lasted another two years, and returned alone, never to see her husband or sons again. From this cataclysmic mating of two nineteenth century polarities Patrick Lafcadio Hearn was born.

His life was worthy of fiction. He was a restless fantasist who lived his life in decades, moving across the globe like a figure on an antique game board. Born in Greece, taken then to Dublin, he then journeyed across the Atlantic to middle America where he stayed for eight years, then almost a decade in New Orleans: a short move eastward to the West Indies, and finally on to Meiji Japan, where he spent the last fourteen years of his life—a span of fifty-four years. He died in 1904.

After his youth in Dublin, Hearn began the life of a writer; but he began as any good protagonist does, by being cast from his family. In his last year of public school when he was eighteen, his family suffered a catastrophic financial reversal; and from this

solidly middle class arrangement, he was dispatched to distant connections in the United States, with hardly a whisper of help from the adult realm. The Cullinan family—fellow Irishmen, now in America—gave him short shrift. Handing him a bit of money, they threw him out, forcing him to survive by his wits: “I was told to go to the devil, and take care of myself,” recalled Hearn; “I did both.”⁵ Hearn then took, perforce, his first step as the “Literary Columbus;” he became—from Greece, via Dublin—at the age of nineteen, a journalist in Cincinnati.

The year was 1869, and the docks of this new American city were bursting with steamship trade, black citizens from the war ravaged South, and the high-minded rich engineering a trading hub. Hearn found his *métier* as a writer: becoming a literary omnivore, a prodigious author of anything publishable. He was a reporter, a poet, a fiction writer, folklorist, historian, travel writer, ethnomusicologist and essayist; and the borders marking the different forms were, for him, blurred. He was the Daniel Defoe of nineteenth century letters. Likewise, for this cacophonous imagination, no subject was too foreign, too local, too arcane or too low. Hearn spent eight years in Cincinnati, then ten years in New Orleans, and landed finally in Japan in 1890. He never stopped narrating. His accounts of markets, murders and show trials, fires and dissections, aberrant rituals and famous priests, folk practice and folk stories, local cooking, dialect and music—indeed local scenes and local worthies of every cast and character—are justly famous. “I have pledged myself to the worship of the Odd, the Queer, the Strange, the Exotic, the Monstrous. . . . Enormous and lurid facts are certainly worthy of more artistic study.”⁶ He earned a living on these “Enormous” facts.

But if he was a man of lurid imaginings he was also a nine-

⁵ Paul Murray, p. 25.

⁶ W. K. McNeil, “Lafcadio Hearn, American Folklorist,” *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 91, Oct–Dec. p. 949.

teenth century intellectual. Critics have noted that he came of age in Dublin, when Yates, Sheridan and Bram Stoker revived interest in Irish mythologies.⁷ Nor were they alone in their interests. British writers—Mary Shelley, Sir Walter Scott, William Morris, and popular writers such as J.M. Barrie and later, J.R.R. Tolkien—were enthralled as well. They staked out myth in its various forms, from medieval epic and ancient ballad, to Arthurian romance, Celtic mythologies and Persian legend.⁸ It was something of a club, in fact; for as exotic as Hearn's experiments were, they were familiar to the connoisseur. Hearn himself wrote a letter to Keats concerning Keats' poem about fairy legend, "Host of the Air."⁹ And one critic compared one of the tales in this book—"The Story of Ming Yi"—to Keats's treatment of the Lamia myth.¹⁰ Hearn was part of an informal circle of Victorian writers who retrieved the mythic from outside the orthodoxies of the age.

And thus he landed in the world of this small collection of tales, *Chinese Ghost Stories* [a.k.a. *Some Chinese Ghosts*]. Like other Victorians, Hearn was dedicated to the exotic. He wished to create a "weird beauty," citing the expression of his intellectual ally, Sir Walter Scott. With this collection Hearn took an early step in his eastward explorations.¹¹ This literary landscape is clearly for him an exotic world; the tales have the feel of an experiment, bookish in style, arch in language, based on material he referred to as "curious." For unlike the reportage of New Orleans life, and the accounts of folk practice he will ultimately write in Japan, he was a world away from his subject. Two of the tales are extraordinary fusions: "The Tradition of the Tea Plant" mixes oracular meditative prayer with

7 Paul Murray, *Lafcadio Hearn: A Fantastic Journey, The Life and Literature of Lafcadio Hearn*, Japan Library, Folkstone, Kent, 1993, p. 31–33.

8 Also see Paul Murray, pp. 32–33 for discussion of contemporaneous interest in folklore and legend.

9 Paul Murray, p. 34.

10 Paul Murray, p. 82.

11 His first collection of non-European material was *Stray Leaves from Strange Literature*, published in 1884—also while he was in New Orleans.

a Gothic sexual encounter. “The Tale of the Porcelain God” blends filial piety with European notions of the madness of genius.

It is not surprising he was experimenting on the margins, however. From his outpost in New Orleans gaining knowledge of “Chinese ghosts” would have been perplexing. He had his “tolerably extensive library of exotic poetry and legend;”¹² but it could hardly have been very extensive. These were early days, when even the romanization system was not stabilized. Early Sinology tended to follow hard on the establishment of foreign trade and colonial outposts, with the Dutch and French most active. Hearn—fluent in French—could use the translations of romantic fiction and accounts of ceramic artisans by Stanislas Julien and Hervey Saint-Denis; and he located an account of the Taiping rebellion by the early Jesuit Missionary, Pere D’Entrecolles. Harper’s Bazaar supplied him with another of his sources. This popular magazine published the early work of the translator Herbert Giles, then in China, just beginning his career. Hearn in these tales is like them, hard at work: the intrepid explorer.

Hearn attempted to colonize the sounds of Chinese stories as well. Remarkably, he included in the tales transliterations of Chinese syllables: lines of poetry, lines of scripture, lists of ceramic types, song lines, multiple phases, etc. These sounds could only be read as noise, for it is only in his notes that he provides translations. But this was part of his high experiment, for his readers’ benefit, whether they liked it or not. “Why should people not be forcibly introduced to foreign words?” he retorted pedantically.¹³ He argued further that, with the sounds themselves, the reader could sense: “the whispering of words, the rustling of the procession of letters, . . . the raging and racketing and rioting of words.” Not that he was alone in this fascination. J. R. R. Tolkien found an incantatory charm in the orality of Faerie destinations. “‘The bridge to Platform 4’

12 Beongcheon Yu, p. 292.

13 Letter to Chamberlain, in Jonathan Cott, *Wandering Ghost*, p. 372.

is—to me—” said Tolkien, “less interesting than ‘Bifrøst guarded by Heimdall with the Gjallarhorn.’”¹⁴ These intellectuals sent out their literary roots into a Library of Babel.

Experiments aside, however, these tales were not just from the laboratory. Hearn loved Chinese ghosts. Four of his Chinese ghost stories detail personal sacrifice and the deep sense of pious awe for ancestors, family and emperor. Ancestral voices became increasingly of interest to Hearn. He observed later when he lived in Japan:

In this nineteenth century the Occidental family is almost disintegrated.... The Oriental family means not only parents and their blood-kindred, but grandparents and their kindred, and great-grandparents, and all the dead behind them. This idea of the family... may extend, as in Japan, to many groups and sub-groups of living families, ...to the whole nation as one great family: a feeling much deeper than what we call patriotism. As a religious emotion the feeling is infinitely extended to all the past....¹⁵

As exotic and distant as they were, these ghosts had for Hearn a personal resonance: “The mystery of the universe is now weighing upon us,” claimed Hearn,

and it is especially a ghostly mystery.... That is why I say that all great art has something ghostly in it. It touches something within us which relates to infinity.¹⁶

In 1890 Hearn landed in Japan. He married Setsu Koizumi, the daughter of an old samurai family and, per custom, he was adopted by his wife’s family. They had three sons and a daughter and all lived together, three generations under one roof. He taught English literature and dedicated the last fourteen years of his life to essays, folktale and fiction; *Kwaidan, Stories and Studies*

14 J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” *Tree and Leaf*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1965, p. 62.

15 Lafcadio Hearn, “Some Thoughts About Ancestor Worship,” *Kokoro: Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life*, p. 290.

16 Jonathan Cott, p. 345.

of Strange Things is his most famous. In these stories he shed the voice of bookish foreigner, for he was among his subjects. No longer confined to his library for sources, he had family rituals, ancestral ghosts and local demons spread out before him. His accounts became direct and simple, suggesting not the Irish intellectual, but the Irish story-teller.¹⁷ The narrator for these tales is the fresh persona of a charmed innocent, an alarmed believer, a boy.

His best source for stories was his wife, Setsu. She described her role as Hearn's informant:

When I tell him stories I always told him at first the mere skeleton of the story. If it is interesting, he puts it down in his note-book and makes me repeat and repeat several times. He instantly becomes exceedingly serious; the color of his face changes; his eyes wear the look of fearful enthusiasm. His face gradually changed pale; his eyes were fixed; I felt a sudden awe. When I finished the narrative he... asked me several questions regarding the situations, actions, etc., involved in the story.... 'What do you think of the sound of "geta" (clipping of footsteps) at that time? How was the night? I think so and so. What do you think?' etc. Thus he consulted me about various things besides the original story.... If anyone happened to see us talking from outside, he would surely think that we were mad.¹⁸

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Excerpt from *Chinese Ghost Stories*
By Lafcadio Hearn
Tuttle Publishing
www.tuttlepublishing.com

17 Sukehiro Hirakawa, "Introduction: Lafcadio Hearn: Towards an Irish Interpretation: in Paul Murray, pp. 5–8.

18 W. K. McNeil, "Lafcadio Hearn, American Folklorist," *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 91, No. 362, Oct–Dec. p 962.