

Lafcadio Hearn's Turbulent Childhood

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In the Waller Barrett Collection of the University of Virginia¹, there is a short memo written by Lafcadio Hearn just before his departure for his new position in Kumamoto. According to Mr. Barret, Lafcadio Hearn prepared an autobiographical essay for publication in the alumni journal of the Shimane Prefecture Common Middle School and Normal School of Matsue. He prepared this brief statement for his pupil, Masanobu Otani², in Matsue who would later become his student assistant at Tokyo Imperial University. It was published in the "Doso Gakkwai Zasshi" of March 28, 1893. This brief, but illuminating self-portrait done in Hearn's own hand could be a useful source to any study of Lafcadio Hearn. Most important is its description of how Hearn viewed his own origins. While lacking many details of later biographers, its significance is how he fit his own origins into his ultimate scheme or worldview, a world gradually falling under the influence of the cultural domination of the west.

I was born in the town of Lencadia (sic) in Santa Maura, which is one of the Ionian Islands, in 1850. My mother was a Greek woman of the neighboring island of Cerigo. My father was an army doctor attached to the 76th English Regiment of the Line. The Ionian Islands

were at the time under British protection, because the Turks had been killing all the Greeks there. My parents took me to England when I was only five or six years old. I spoke Romaic which is modern Greek and Italian; but no English. My father went to Russia some years after, and then to India. Myself and brother were brought up by rich relatives and educated at home. My father and his wife died in India of fever. When I was 15 years of age, I was sent to France to learn French, and spent several years there. I was 18 years of age when my friends lost all their property; and I was obliged to earn my own living. I went to America in '69 and learned the printing business. After some three years more, I gave up printing to become a newspaper reporter. I reported for several large papers in Ohio for 8 years. Then I went South to become a literary editor of the chief paper of New Orleans, and I remained there for 10 years. In the meantime, I had begun to publish some books, novels, translations and literary sketches (sic) for newspapers, and I went to the French West Indies and to South America to write a book about the tropics, returned to America 2 years later, and after publishing my books, resolved to go to Japan. And then I became a teacher. (Waller Barrett Collection, University of Virginia)

In 1921, another student of Hearn and classmate of Masanobu Otani, Ryuji Tanabe, wrote that "His vague memories of his mother were always tender and full of yearning affection and they caused him to love everything Oriental in after-life, as according to him he happened "to be an Oriental by birth and half by blood" (Tanabe 2). Hearn's

emphasis to his students on his oriental origins is important in that he would always feel apart from the west. Psychologically he always maintained a strong connection to his mother³ that he never met after she returned to Greece in 1854. In 1890 Lafcadio Hearn regained contact with his brother just before his departure to Japan. Amazingly, his brother was living in Ohio when he was a reporter in Cincinnati. Unfortunately they would never meet but their letters reveal not only biographical data, but also Lafcadio Hearn's obsession with his non-western, oriental blood. Most Hearn scholars relate this to his feelings of alienation as he traveled from place to place never really settling down. Having been orphaned at such a young age, Hearn constantly thought about his mother and her origins.

While thinking about you, I always said to myself: 'Her blood will bear him through everything, if he can keep his strength.' For I thought of you always as my double: a highly complex nervous organization, with her vital force. Now I would imagine you stronger than I, for you have done much beyond my power to attempt. And you do not remember that dark and beautiful face, with large brown eyes like a wild deer's, that used to bend above your cradle? You do not remember the voice which told you each night to cross your fingers after the old Greek orthodox fashion and utter the words - 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost!' She made, or had made, three little wounds upon you when a baby, to place you according to her childish faith under the protection of those three powers, but especially that of Him for whom alone

the nineteenth century still feels some reverence, the Lord and Giver of Life. And you know nothing about her? It is very strange. Perhaps there is much I do not know, But I know that mother was a Cerigote, belonging to one of the best families of the island Cerigo - the antique Cythera. English regiments were stationed there including the 76th about '57 - '58. My father was attacked by mother's brother, terribly stabbed, and left for dead. He recovered, and eloped with mother when the regiment was ordered away. You were born in Cephalonia; I and another brother in Santa Maura - where the other was buried, I think. We were all very dark as children, very passionate, very odd-looking, and wore gold rings in our ears. (Zenimoto 121-122)

Hearn's feelings of being a hybrid of east and west and his quest for his mother's origins would greatly shape his childhood. In a famous autobiographical segment, from one of her many letters quoted at length in volume one of Elizabeth Bisland's⁴ *Life and Letters*, Hearn tells her of a great discovery in his youth,

And at last one day I discovered, in one unexplored corner of our library, several beautiful books about art, -- great folio books containing figures of gods and of demigods, athletes and heroes, nymphs and fauns and nereids, and all the charming monsters -- half-man, half-animal -- of Greek mythology.

How my heart leaped and fluttered on that happy day! Breathless I gazed; and the longer that I gazed the more unspeakably lovely

those faces and forms appeared. Figure after figure dazzled, astounded, bewitched me. And this new delight was in itself a wonder, -- also a fear. Something seemed to be thrilling out of those pictured pages, -- something invisible that made me afraid. I remembered stories of the infernal magic that informed the work of the pagan statuary. But this superstitious fear presently yielded to a conviction, or rather intuition -- which I could not possibly have explained -- that the gods had been believed because they were beautiful. . . . (Blindly and gropingly I had touched a truth, -- the ugly truth that beauty of the highest order, whether mental, or moral, or physical, must ever be hated by the many and loved only by the few!). . . . And these had been called devils! I adored them! -- I loved them! -- I promised to detest forever all who refused them reverence! . . . Oh! the contrast between that immortal loveliness and the squalor of the saints and the patriarchs and the prophets of my religious pictures! -- a contrast indeed as of heaven and hell. . . . In that hour the medieval creed seemed to me the very religion of ugliness and of hate. And as it had been taught to me, in the weakness of my sickly childhood, it certainly was. And even today, in spite of larger knowledge, the words "heathen" and "pagan" -- however ignorantly used in scorn -- revive within me old sensations of light and beauty, of freedom and joy. (Life and Letters 27-28)

Hearn's affection for his mother was greatly intensified by the betrayal of his father. In the same letter to his brother James he describes his father as a "wicked" man who left their mother for another woman.

Hearn's father, a British naval officer, is the epitome of western culture. He took advantage of a technicality of colonial rule and tossed Hearn's mother aside at his own convenience.

Later on, when I was told by my aunt, or grand aunt, that my father was very wicked, that she had disinherited him because he had got a divorce from my mother without just cause, and that she had forced him to pay back all the money she had advanced him, she said that he had got his divorce through a technicality, which decided for him that the marriage, though legal abroad in the Orient, was not legal according to English law. She told me that my mother had married the lawyer who took her part and who spoke Romain, and went to Smyrna. I can remember seeing father only four times - no, five. He never caressed me; I always felt afraid of him, He was rather taciturn, I think. The one kind act I remember on his part was a long letter written to me from India, - all about serpents and tigers and elephants, - printed in Roman letters with a pen, so that I could read it easily. (Zenimoto 122)

Even though he did meet his father on a few occasions he felt no strong connection with him. His mother was the victim of western aggression. She was taken advantage of and Hearn would never forgive his father. Hearn's bad experiences in a strict Catholic boarding school also made the exotic Greek pantheon of his mother's home more and more attractive. In an 1894 letter to Basil Hall Chamberlain Hearn

tells his friend that he is not a Christian. Bisland and Hearn's student Ryuji Tanabe publish this letter but Bisland cuts the first portion, in which Hearn says he is "agnostic, atheist",

Surely, as you say it were better for Japan to have any civilized religion than none, --and the danger is that of having none. You can't imagine how many compositions I get containing such words as "Is there a God? I don't know"? which, strange as it may seem to you, doesn't rejoice me at all. I am agnostic, atheist, anything theologians like to call me; but what a loss to the young mind of eighteen or twenty years must be the absence of all that sense of reverence and tenderness which the mystery of the infinite gives. Religion has been very much to me, and I am still profoundly religious in a vague way. It will be a very ugly world when the religious sense is dead in all children. (Tanabe 363)

Hearn is not anti-religious, but at this point in his life he rejects the organized Christian religion. He feels much more at home with the pantheon of gods. After writing this letter in Japan explaining his view that religion is important yet he feels no obligation to any specific faith, in his *Exotics and Retrospectives* (1898) he recalls his boyhood obsession with pantheism. A root of Hearn's rebellious tendencies against western institutions most likely goes back to the abandonment by his western father.

I remember when a boy lying on my back in the grass, grazing

into the summer blue above me, and wishing that I could melt into it, - become part of it. For these fancies I believe that a religious tutor was innocently responsible: he had tried to explain to me, because of certain dreamy questions what he termed 'the folly and the wickedness of pantheism', -with the result that I immediately became a pantheist, at the tender age of fifteen. And my imaginings presently led me not only to want the sky for a playground, but also to become the sky! (Exotics and Retrospectives 177)

One dimension of Hearn's affinity for pantheism can be attributed partly to his upbringing in Ireland. Paul Murray, author of *A Fantastic Journey: The Life and Literature of Lafcadio Hearn* (1993) has unearthed Lafcadio Hearn's correspondence with Yeats that shows his strong connection to Irish tradition. During a lecture of November 9, 1995 at Shimane University of Matsue, Murray strongly emphasized the impact of Hearn's Irish heritage in his later works. Murray says that:

We know from his correspondence with Yeats that, as a little boy in Dublin he had had a Connaught nurse who told him Irish fairy-tales and ghost-stories. Thus began a life-long interest in folk material . . . In fact, the fairy stories common to much of the pre-industrial world, including Ireland, constitute of netherworld, living parallel to, and sometimes interacting with, the living, similar in some respects to the ancient Japanese religion of Shinto which Hearn would later make central to his analysis of Japan (Murray, Matsue

1995).

To Hearn, according to Murray, “Celtic belief in fairies resulted in an imagination that was “romantic, poetic and also terrible.” His view of peasant life in Ireland was, in turn, remarkably similar to the Shinto-based ethos of pre-Meiji Japan (Murray 1995). Thus, it was natural for Hearn to recognize the good qualities of the Japanese by experiencing Japanese life through a medium that he knew so well because of his Irish blood. Because of his Irish-Celtic affinity for such beliefs, he could see that there was something of high quality, even superior in nature to the westernized layers of Meiji Japan that others like Chamberlain could not value because of their Eurocentric, scientific outlook.

In his “Dream of a Summer Day” that appears in *Out of the East* (1885), Hearn would create a synthesis of Irish fables and the memory of his mother.

I have memory of a place and a magical time, in which the sun and the moon were larger and brighter than now. Whether it was of this life or of some life before, I cannot tell, but I know the sky was very much more blue, and nearer to the world -- almost as it seems to become above the masts of a steamer steaming into equatorial summer. . . . The sea was alive and used to talk -- and the Wind made me cry out for joy when it touched me. Once or twice during other years, in divine days lived among the peaks, I have dreamed for a moment the same wind was blowing -- but it was only a remembrance When day was done, and there

fell the great hush of light before moonrise, she would tell me stories that made me tingle from head to foot with pleasure. I have never heard any other stories half so beautiful. And when the pleasure became too great, she would sing a weird little song which always brought sleep. At last there came a parting day; and she wept and told me of a charm she had given that I must never, never lose, because it would keep me young, and give me power to return. But I never returned. And the years went; and one day I knew that I had lost the charm, and had become ridiculously old. (Out of the East 13-14)

Once Hearn goes to the United States, he would become a prolific writer, but the only detailed records we have of his boyhood days are letters that he wrote in adulthood to family members such as his brother James and his half-sister Minnie Atkinson. In the numerous biographies of Hearn, he is described as a mischievous youth at Ushaw College until the age of seventeen. Most scholars note that he always had good marks in composition. From 1863 until 1864, he was almost always at the top of his English classes. Of course, before the age of seventeen, there were three traumatic events in his life. First, he lost sight in his left eye, which warped his appearance⁵, his father dies overseas and his great aunt Sarah completely loses her fortune forcing Lafcadio out of school. He ends up in London living with his great aunt's former maid and working class husband. Before Hearn's arrival in Cincinnati, he had always been provided for and had the opportunity to attend academic institutions. A letter to Hearn's half-sister Minnie Atkinson

clearly shows this period as a brutal awakening for Hearn who found himself without anyone to turn to and penniless. These letters are essential in that they show how Hearn's uprooting from his life in Ireland became the catalyst for his outlook towards a brutal world that had little respect for non-western cultures and beliefs. Hearn writes to his sister that he was "dropped" into the "enormous machinery of life" of which he knew nothing (Ronan 261).

He writes that he took on a number of odd jobs such as a telegraph messenger-boy. He failed miserably and found himself on the street. He tells his sister that, "I was touchy then, - went off without waiting for my wages. Enraged friends refused to do anything further for me. Boarding-houses turned me out of doors. At last became a boarding-house servant, lighted fires, shoveled coal, etc. in exchange for food and privilege of sleeping on the floor of a smoking-room" (Ronan 261). Hearn luckily found lodging with Henry Watkin who would give him meals and a place to stay in exchange for working at his printing shop. Hearn continues in his letters that he was quite bitter at the fact of his Great Aunt's bankruptcy that forced him to leave Ireland and go to Cincinnati. As an abandoned youth in Cincinnati, his father represents everything bad about the west and his mother's uprooted oriental heritage represents all that is good and just. He is caught between these two worlds, as he becomes a young reporter. Hearn's feelings for the victims of unsympathetic modern civilization would blossom from these circumstances.

Notes

1. The Clifton Waller Barrett Collection is the product of successful businessman and book collector Mr. W.B. Barrett's quest for manuscripts of America's greatest authors from 1776 to the present. Now preserved at the University of Virginia Special Collections, scholars from around the world can read original manuscripts by authors such as Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Poe, Longfellow, Emerson, Henry James, Hemingway, and Faulkner. The Hearn collection contains several original manuscripts, unpublished essays, notebooks, more than 450 letters and other priceless materials.

2. Masanobu Otani was a pupil of Hearn in Matsue that later became his student assistant at Tokyo Imperial University. When he assisted Bisland in her collection of Hearn's works for publication he wrote her the following note:

"Here I want not to forget to add that I had received from him 12 yen (6 dollars) for my work each month. It was too kind of him that a poor monthly work of mine was paid with the money above mentioned. To speak frankly, however, it was not very easy for me to pass each month with the money through the three years of my university course. . . . I need hardly say that it was by his extraordinary favour that I could finish my study in the university. I shall never forget his extreme kindness forever and ever."

Many of Otani's compositions in Matsue can now be seen with Hearn's remarks in the recently rediscovered collection of student essays at the Kumamoto Prefectural Library. Otani writes of topics such as his summer break, owls, and frogs. These essays supplied the "meat" for several of his essays on Japan.

3. Lafcadio Hearn was born on June 27, 1850 on the Greek island of Leucadia. On August 1, Lafcadio and his mother Rosa arrived at the Hearn household in Dublin, Ireland. In 1854, Hearn's father Charles Hearn returns to Dublin on leave to find Rosa is suffering from psychological illness resulting from cultural isolation. They move to the home of Charles's aunt, Sarah Holmes Brenane. Unfortunately Rosa does not recover. In 1854 Charles Hearn ships out to a new assignment and his wife returns to Cerigo, Greece pregnant with their third child. James Hearn is born on the way. Lafcadio is left to live with his great aunt. James is sent back to Ireland and neither Lacadio or James ever see their mother again.

4. Elizabeth Bisland was a fellow journalist at the Times-Democrat in New Orleans. She wrote about women's issues and eventually became the literary editor of the Times-Democrat in 1887 before moving to New York for bigger opportunities. Hearn admired her from afar but they were never romantically involved. He confided in her and wrote her numerous letters throughout his life until his death in Japan. It was not surprising that she would have a plethora of autobiographical material from his letters. She, however, chose to cut certain sections

that she did not feel suitable for publication. Many cut sections reveal attitudes and outlooks of Hearn that many never knew until the works of recent scholars who unearthed original manuscripts.

5. An address by Dr. Rudolph Matas, physician and friend of Hearn in New Orleans, and later Published in *The Tulanian*, Alumni Magazine of Tulane University on April 1941 is one of the best descriptions of Hearn's condition. According to Dr. Matas,

Hearn's blindness in one eye was caused by the blow of a wooden handle at the end of a rope while playing "Giant's Stride" at the age of sixteen, while at St. Cuthbert's College, Ushaw, Durham, England. The injury, followed by lack of attention, caused him to lose the sight of the left eye, by completely transforming the cornea into a white scar. His right uninjured eye was so terribly myopic that, even with lenses, he could scarcely see clearly beyond six inches from his nose. In addition to blindness in one eye, as I have said, he was so nearsighted in the other that when he read it looked as though he were rubbing his nose on the page of the book. A most hazy blur of colors was all he perceived of objects beyond a foot or two away. There was left for him the memory of a world of forms as seen in his childhood; but that throws into relief the fact that it was a memory. . . . He supplemented the deficiencies of vision with vivid imagination, a perfect memory, and a perfection of touch which gave some sense of solidity and content, by hearing, that echo-like emphasized unreality; but his world was essentially

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a two-dimensional one. . . . As he had but one eye (and that highly defective) he had no stereoscopic vision. . . . Practically the world beyond a few feet was not a three-dimensional one; it was colored it is true, and bewilderingly so, but it was formless and flat, without much thickness or solidity, and almost without perspective.

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