

“The Reconciliation”

by Lafcadio Hearn, 1900

As with George Russell, one of the two Dublin houses in which Patrick Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904) lived as a child, a Georgian residence on Leinster Square in Rathmines, is not far from my own, and I occasionally park my car outside it. A blue plaque acknowledges his former occupancy, and it would be pleasant to think that the sight of it might spur the occasional passer-by into investigating his work.

Hearn was born on the Greek island of Lefkada to an Irish father, Charles Bush Hearn, a Co. Offaly-born surgeon in the British Army, and a Greek mother, Rosa Antonia Cassimati. When Hearn’s father was reassigned to the British West Indies, he sent his wife and infant son to live with his family in Dublin, an unhappy arrangement that resulted in an annulment of the marriage and Rosa’s return to Greece, never to set eyes on her child again. Hearn became the ward of his great-aunt, Sarah Holmes Brenane, who reputedly decided to tackle her grand-nephew’s fear of the dark by the unorthodox method of locking him in a small, gloomy room at night without a lamp. In adulthood, Hearn would recall his subsequent terror thus:

Then the agony of fear would come upon me. Something in the black air would seem to gather and grow—I thought that I could hear it grow—till I had to scream. Screaming regularly brought punishment; but it also brought back the light, which more than consoled for the punishment. This fact being at last found out, orders were given to pay no further heed to the screams of the Child.¹

And in that darkness dwelt the ‘haunters’, figures capable of ‘atrocious self-distortion’², the origins of the sometimes half-formed, frequently faceless, horrors that move through Hearn’s stories, including ‘The Reconciliation’. The tale is presented as a piece of received Japanese folklore, and was adapted as ‘The Black Hair’ to form the opening segment of *Kwaidan*, Masaki Kobayashi’s 1965 anthology film based on Hearn’s writings.

Like the English master of the supernatural short story M.R. James (1862-1936), Hearn understood that much of the fear of the ghostly, the otherworldly, lies not in the sight of phantoms, but in the possibility that they might seek to make physical contact with us.

I venture to state boldly that the common fear of ghosts is *the fear of being touched by ghosts*, —or, in other words, that the imagined Supernatural is dreaded mainly because of its imagined power to touch. Only to *touch*, remember!—not to wound or to kill...And who can ever have had the sensation of being touched by ghosts? The answer is simple: —*Everybody who has been seized by phantoms in a dream.*³

During the summers, Hearn escaped Dublin to spend time with relatives in Tramore, Co. Waterford, and Cong, Co. Mayo. It was at the Cong home of his uncle and another aunt, Thomas Elwood and Catherine Hearn Elwood, that Hearn was first introduced to Irish myths and ghost stories by the family nurse, Kate Ronane. In a 1901 letter to W.B. Yeats, who was himself interested in Japanese culture, Hearn wrote that ‘I had a Connaught nurse who told

¹ Lafcadio Hearn, ‘Nightmare-Touch,’ *Shadowings* (Little Brown, 1900), 239.

² Hearn, ‘Nightmare,’ *Shadowings*, 240-241.

³Hearn, ‘Nightmare,’ *Shadowings*, 237.

me fairy tales and ghost stories. So I *ought* to love Irish Things, and I do.’⁴ (Like Yeats, Hearn believed that a country could best be understood through its folklore, and that meant seeking out tales recounted by ordinary people.) Later in life, Hearn would again attribute the inspiration for his storytelling to a woman, in this case his Japanese wife, Koizumi Setsuko: ‘I owe you everything; I have written all these books listening to your stories.’⁵

Yeats mentions Hearn only once in his published works, in the introduction to his play *The Resurrection*, which was dedicated to Satō Junzō, a Japanese admirer who had gifted the poet a sword that had been in his family for half a millennium. In the introduction, Yeats writes: ‘All ancient nations believed in the re-birth of the soul and had probably empirical evidence like that Lafcadio Hearn found among the Japanese.’⁶

Hearn would be sent by his family to the United States to make his fortune, where he began a career in journalism, first in Cincinnati, then New Orleans, and eventually the French West Indies. He is an extreme exemplar of a noble Irish literary tradition: the writer who has to leave his homeland in order to achieve recognition—in Hearn’s case, by voyaging to Japan on assignment for Harper & Brothers in 1890 and electing to settle there, where he could explore his growing fascination with Shinto and Buddhism. He married a Japanese woman, lived as Koizumi Yakumo, lectured on English literature at the Imperial University of Tokyo, and immersed himself in Japanese culture, most memorably the *kaidan*, or ghost story, becoming the first *gaijin* to popularise these tales for a Western readership. The seeds sown by his Irish nurse germinated into a unique supernatural hybrid: Japanese horrors refracted through an Irish sensibility, an arresting combination of disquieting, even appalling, imagery described with a sense of understatement bordering on the dispassionate. As the American critic Paul Elmer Moore said of Hearn, ‘He employs the power of suggestion through perfect restraint.’⁷

Between 1896 and 1902, Hearn gave a series of lectures at the University of Tokyo which were eventually published in 1920 as *Talks to Writers*. From one of them, ‘The Value of the Supernatural in Fiction’, here is Hearn on the prevalence of supernatural writing:

wherever fine literature is being produced, either in poetry or in prose, you will find that the supernatural is very much alive...let me observe that there is scarcely any great author in European literature, old or new, who has not distinguished himself in the treatment of the supernatural. In English literature, I believe there is no exception—even from the time of the Anglo-Saxon poets to Shakespeare, and from Shakespeare to our day. And this introduces us to the consideration of a general and remarkable fact, a fact I do not remember to have seen in any books, but which is of very great philosophical importance; there is something ghostly in all great art . . .⁸

⁴Letter to W.B. Yeats, September 1901, quoted in *Patrick Murray, A Fantastic Journey: The Life and Literature of Lafcadio Hearn* (Japan Library, 1993), 35.

⁵Murray, *Hearn*, xiii.

⁶W.B. Yeats, *Wheels and Butterflies* (Macmillan, 1934), 107-108.

⁷Paul Elmer Moore, ‘Lafcadio Hearn’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1903, reprinted in *Shelburne Essays*, The Knickerbocker Press, 1906, 47.

⁸Lafcadio Hearn, ‘The Value of the Supernatural in Fiction’, *Talks to Writers* (Dodd, Mead and Company, 1920), 130-131.

Hearn must have presented an odd figure to the Japanese. ‘Slightly corpulent in later years,’ as his friend Nobushige Amenomori wrote in a 1905 tribute for the *Atlantic Monthly*, ‘short in stature, hardly five feet high, of somewhat stooping gait. A little brownish in complexion, and of rather hairy skin. A thin, sharp, aquiline nose, large protruding eyes, of which the left was blind, and the right very near-sighted . . . Yet within that homely looking man there burned something pure as the vestal fire, and in that flame dwelt a mind that called forth life and poetry out of dust.’⁹

A writer could wish for worse tributes.

⁹ Nobushige Amenomori, ‘Lafcadio Hearn, The Man’, *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1905, 523-524.

The Reconciliation*

*The original story is to be found in the curious volume entitled *Konseki-Monogatari*.

There was a young Samurai of Kyoto who had been reduced to poverty by the ruin of his lord, and found himself obliged to leave his home, and to take service with the Governor of a distant province. Before quitting the capital, this Samurai divorced his wife, a good and beautiful woman, under the belief that he could better obtain promotion by another alliance. He then married the daughter of a family of some distinction, and took her with him to the district whither he had been called.

But it was in the time of the thoughtlessness of youth, and the sharp experience of want, that the Samurai could not understand the worth of the affection so lightly cast away. His second marriage did not prove a happy one; the character of his new wife was hard and selfish; and he soon found every cause to think with regret of Kyoto days. Then he discovered that he still loved his first wife, – loved her more than he could ever love the second; and he began to feel how unjust and how thankless he had been. Gradually his repentance deepened into a remorse that left him no peace of mind. Memories of the woman he had wronged—her gentle speech, her smiles, her dainty, pretty ways, her faultless patience—continually haunted him. Sometimes in dreams he saw her at her loom, weaving as when she toiled night and day to help him during the years of their distress: more often he saw her kneeling alone in the desolate little room where he had left her, veiling her tears with her poor worn sleeve. Even in the hours of official duty, his thoughts would wander back to her: then he would ask himself how she was living, what she was doing. Something in his heart assured him that she could not accept another husband, and that she never would refuse to pardon him. And he secretly resolved to seek her out as soon as he could return to Kyoto—then to beg her forgiveness, to take her back, to do everything that a man could do to make atonement. But the years went by.

At last the Governor's official term expired, and the Samurai was free. 'Now I will go back to my dear one,' he vowed to himself. 'Ah, what a cruelty, —what a folly to have divorced her!' He sent his second wife to her own people (she had given him no children); and hurrying to Kyoto, he went at once to seek his former companion, not allowing himself even the time to change his travelling-garb.

When he reached the street where she used to live, it was late in the night, the night of the tenth day of the ninth month; and the city was silent as a cemetery. But a bright moon made everything visible; and he found the house without difficulty. It had a deserted look: tall weeds were growing on the roof. He knocked at the sliding-doors, and no one answered. Then, finding that the doors had not been fastened from within, he pushed them open, and entered. The front room was matless and empty: a chilly wind was blowing through crevices in the planking; and the moon shone through a ragged break in the wall of the alcove. Other rooms presented a like forlorn condition. The house, to all seeming, was unoccupied. Nevertheless, the Samurai determined to visit one other apartment at the further end of the dwelling, a very small room that had been his wife's favourite resting-place. Approaching the sliding-screen that closed it, he was startled to perceive a glow within. He pushed the screen aside, and uttered a cry of joy; for he saw her there, sewing by the light of a paper-lamp. Her eyes at the same instant met his own; and with a happy smile she greeted him, asking only: 'When did you come back to Kyoto? How did you find your way here to me, through all those black rooms?' The years had not changed her. Still she seemed as fair and young as in

his fondest memory of her; but sweeter than any memory there came to him the music of her voice, with its trembling of pleased wonder.

Then joyfully he took his place beside her, and told her all: —how deeply he repented his selfishness, — how wretched he had been without her, —how constantly he had regretted her, —how long he had hoped and planned to make amends; —caressing her the while, and asking her forgiveness over and over again. She answered him, with loving gentleness, according to his heart's desire, —entreating him to cease all self-reproach. It was wrong, she said, that he should have allowed himself to suffer on her account: she had always felt that she was not worthy to be his wife. She knew that he had separated from her, notwithstanding, only because of poverty; and while he lived with her, he had always been kind; and she had never ceased to pray for his happiness. But even if there had been a reason for speaking of amends, this honourable visit would be ample amends; —what greater happiness than thus to see him again, though it were only for a moment?

‘Only for a moment!’ he answered, with a glad laugh, ‘say, rather, for the time of seven existences! My loved one, unless you forbid, I am coming back to live with you always—always always! Nothing shall ever separate us again. Now I have means and friends: we need not fear poverty. Tomorrow my goods will be brought here; and my servants will come to wait upon you; and we shall make this house beautiful. . . . To-night,’ he added, apologetically, ‘I came thus late—without even changing my dress—only because of the longing I had to see you, and to tell you this.’ She seemed greatly pleased by these words; and in her turn she told him about all that had happened in Kyoto since the time of his departure, —excepting her own sorrows, of which she sweetly refused to speak.

They chatted far into the night: then she conducted him to a warmer room, facing south, —a room that had been their bridal chamber in former time. ‘Have you no one in the house to help you?’ he asked, as she began to prepare the couch for him. ‘No,’ she answered, laughing cheerfully: ‘I could not afford a servant; —so I have been living all alone.’ ‘You will have plenty of servants to-morrow,’ he said, ‘—good servants, —and everything else that you need.’ They lay down to rest, —not to sleep: they had too much to tell each other; —and they talked of the past and the present and the future, until the dawn was grey. Then, involuntarily, the Samurai closed his eyes, and slept.

When he awoke, the daylight was streaming through the chinks of the sliding-shutters; and he found himself, to his utter amazement, lying upon the naked boards of a mouldering floor. . . . Had he only dreamed a dream? No: she was there; —she slept . . . He bent above her, —and looked, —and shrieked; —for the sleeper had no face! . . . Before him, wrapped in its grave-sheet only, lay the corpse of a woman, —a corpse so wasted that little remained save the bones, and the long black tangled hair.

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Slowly—as he stood shuddering and sickening in the sun—the icy horror yielded to a despair so intolerable, a pain so atrocious, that he clutched at the mocking shadow of a doubt. Feigning ignorance of the neighbourhood, he ventured to ask his way to the house in which his wife had lived.

‘There is no one in that house,’ said the person questioned. ‘It used to belong to the wife of a Samurai who left the city several years ago. He divorced her in order to marry

another woman before he went away; and she fretted a great deal, and so became sick. She had no relatives in Kyoto, and nobody to care for her; and she died in the autumn of the same year, on the tenth day of the ninth month . . .’