

The Creole Japan of Lafcadio Hearn

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If I have been able to do nothing else in my life, I have been able to help a little . . .
in opposing the growth of what is called society and what is called civilization.
—Lafcadio Hearn

JUDGING BY THE RESPONSE OF WESTERN VISITORS TO JAPAN, Winston Churchill's famous quip about Russia—that it is a “riddle wrapped in an enigma”—should have been applied instead to that island country. What tourist does not come away thoroughly puzzled over something encountered there? How many experts have “solved” the puzzle of Japanese society by analyzing its religion, history, or child-rearing, only to be followed by other experts and other explanations?

Western efforts to decipher Japan and the Japanese are nothing new. The moment Perry's “black ships” sailed into Tokyo Bay in 1853 a whole industry was born. Most of the Western travelers who built this tradition of inquiry were not academic specialists but ordinary people seeking answers to a problem that Japan itself threw in their face. What, they asked, is the relationship between tradition and modernity in Japan, between East and West, and what are the sources of Japan's distinctive approach to just about everything? Among the nineteenth-century pioneers of such writing was the Portuguese diplomat Wenceslau de Moraes (1854–1929), who abandoned a promising career in order to settle in Tokyo and unburden himself of five books. Another was Basil Hall Chamberlain, a Britisher who spent forty years in Japan and took up pen and ink to argue that the West utterly misunderstood Japan's true essence. Americans participated as well. Among the earliest was the astronomer Percival Lowell (1855–1916), who, after discovering Pluto and arguing that Mars had once been populated by wondrous beings, proceeded to “discover” Japan. His picture of the Japanese (“as the happiest people in the world”) was the mirror image of what he thought of his own dour fellow Bostonians.

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After World War II such philosophizing by generalists gave way to specialized research by a generation of scholars like the late Edwin O. Reischauer of Harvard or Princeton's Marius Jansen. Yet the older tradition of generalists seeking to define and solve the "riddle" of Japan's distinctiveness continues, as a glance at books by Ezra Vogel (*Japan as Number One*, 1979), Karel van Wolferen, (*The Enigma of Japanese Power*, 1987), Chalmers Johnson (*MITI and the Japanese Miracle*, 1989), Harry Harootunian (*Overcome by Modernity: History Culture and Community in Interwar Japan*, 2002), or John Nathan (*Japan Unbound: A Volatile Nation's Quest for Pride and Purpose*, 2004) will confirm.

Arguably the greatest writer in this genre was also one of the first and arguably the least likely. Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904) showed up at Yokohama in April, 1890, on assignment from *Harper's Weekly*. Without formal schooling beyond the secondary level, he spoke no Japanese at the time of his arrival, knew little of Japanese history, was totally disinterested in its economy, and cared not a whit about the country's politics. If he knew little about Japan, however, he knew a lot about America, or at least the Mississippi basin and Louisiana. Hearn's professional resume consisted mainly of twelve years (1878–1891) as a journalist and freelancer in New Orleans and the West Indies, and eight years before that in Cincinnati as a cub reporter for the *Enquirer*. Considering the stark differences between Hearn's America and Japan, one might have thought this was no preparation at all. But this did not deter Hearn. His plan was to continue exploring Japan for as long as he could on *Harper's* money. Realizing that he had no contract, however, he bombarded his editor with requests for further projects and money. Rebuffed, he grew vindictive, sending off letters of such extravagant nastiness that *Harper's* cut him off without a penny, leaving him stranded in Japan.

Hearn's response to this self-inflicted blow was to go native. He settled into the first job he could find—teaching English at a secondary school in the ancient and picturesque town of Matsue on the western coast of Honshu. When a Japanese colleague suggested that a Japanese wife might keep him warm and well-fed, he dutifully married the daughter of an impoverished local samurai. In order to register the marriage he was required to adopt a Japanese name, which he did, by combining the geographical name, Yakumo, with his wife's family name of Koizumi. His wife eventually bore him four children. Knowing that they could not inherit his property unless he adopted Japanese citizenship, Hearn did so. He also adopted Japanese dress. His eldest son, Kazuo, recalled the surprise of a Japanese guest who, clad in suit and tie for a meeting with the former Englishman, found himself received by Yakumo Koizumi wearing a traditional kimono and *haori*.

All this may have reflected Hearn's belief that a writer must get close to his subject, that "one must be Egyptian to write of Egypt," as he once put it.¹ Yet he was always critical of "Japanesy" Westerners and preferred to gain his insights less from pseudo-native role-playing than from intense, meticulous observation.

Meeting him, one might have concluded that Hearn was in essence an organ for observation housed in a small and rather fragile body. His left eye was grotesquely enlarged from a childhood accident, so that when meeting for the first time he would cover it with his hand and move close in order to peer at the person all the more intently with his myopic right eye. Examining a person or place, he moved around his object like a beagle on the scout, or a bee exploring a bed of flowers.

Yet observe he did, and with uncanny skill. He brought to his task the eye of an anthropologist and folklorist, the ears of a linguist and musicologist, and the mind of a philosopher. The insights gained during a decade and a half in Japan eventually filled thirteen fat volumes of writings on the people and customs of his various places of residence. For half a century Lafcadio Hearn's depiction of Japan defined that country for most American, British, and Western European readers. The influence of his views is still felt today.

Amazingly, Japanese readers recognized themselves in Hearn's writings, which they translated and issued in large editions. Even today most educated Japanese are familiar with Yakumo Koizumi, the Westerner who fell in love with their country while seeking to delve into its enigmas and solve its riddles. Hearn's books are still to be found in the curriculum of Japanese schools. Bibliographies list more than eight hundred monographs and articles on him in Japanese. His house in Matsue stands today as a museum and shrine to the memory of the man who, as a Tokyo contemporary put it, was "the most eloquent and truthful interpreter of the Japanese mind."²

What was Lafcadio Hearn's conception of Japan? A self-described "impressionist," he loathed the tidy schematizing favored by contemporary social scientists. But underlying the myriad impressions he so masterfully gathered and conveyed to readers of his numerous works of fiction and nonfiction is a surprisingly clear notion about what constitutes Japan's essential features. This conception consists of four main elements.

First, the notion of authenticity. Like Darwin, Marx, and most other nineteenth-century Europeans, Hearn was preoccupied with the problem of change. But to a far greater degree than most of his contemporaries, Hearn's first concern was not the process by which traditional societies are modernized but the bedrock social institutions and cultural norms that form the point of departure for that transformation.

In Hearn's view all societies are not born equal: some, like those of ancient Greece, China, Persia, or Japan, attained what Hegel called "world historical" significance thanks to the richness and texture of their traditional culture. Nearly all of these cultures decayed over time. Japan's distinction was to have retained the vitality of its authentic culture—what today we would call its "Asian values"—right down to the opening of the country in the nineteenth century, thanks to its long self-imposed isolation during the Tokugawa era (1600–1853). Hearn's good fortune was to have landed a first job not in Tokyo, where the old values

had nearly vanished, but in old-fashioned Matsue, where many of the customs of yore were still observed.

Hearn idealized the antique habits and values of Matsue as the very essence of authentic Japan. Like the eighteenth-century German theologian and philosopher Johann Gottlieb Herder, who was the first European to celebrate ethnic distinctiveness as a good in itself, Hearn lauded everything that made life in old Matsue different. Observing his in-laws and neighbors, he reveled in their “benevolence, sense of duty, simplicity, unselfish sobriety, contentment, and communal restraint.”³

Such qualities were particularly evident in the “delicate classes” but could also be discerned in the youthful *jinrikisha* driver who refused to pass a slower elder on the road out of respect for the latter’s age. This authentic Japan lacked the moral freedom that comes with Western-style individualism but in most other respects it was so fresh and bright a civilization that its artists had not even thought of depicting shadows.

Second, Hearn saw this idyllic life as being under total assault. Railroads, telegraphs, factories, and modern education were destroying all that had made Japan admirable. The old gentle morality would soon be replaced by selfishness, individualism, and greed. Japan would be dragged down to the level of Europe and America, even to the point that its artists and thinkers would learn how to discern and depict shadows “in nature, in life, and in thought.”⁴

Hearn was an early proponent of the victimology that is so common today. He was certain that authentic Japan was being persecuted⁵ and that its tormentor was the West, with its amoral civilization based on “one great wolfish struggle.”⁶ In Hearn’s eyes, Japan’s moral and aesthetic stature rose in direct proportion to the degree of its persecution; indeed, it is all but impossible to separate his passionate defense of all things Japanese from his conviction that it was the victim par excellence of the West’s cruel greed.

It has often been said that the most forceful critics of imperialism were Westerners themselves, and that their arguments were then taken up by subject peoples in their struggle against the Occident. A Westerner himself, Hearn was a deep-dyed hater of the West and what he disdainfully termed “civilization”. He spoke of civilization as a “fraud and abomination” that will choke off all art and lead to the “social depravity” and the “depths of degradations.”⁷ “I have come to the conclusion,” he announced, “that [Western] civilization is a cold and vapid humbug.”⁸

Third, Hearn believed that this non-civilization of the Occident would succeed in its effort to subvert and destroy authentic Japan. Again, he looked to his beloved Matsue. The authentic values still surviving there had been “moulded by etiquette, classical culture and home-law.”⁹ Those who were the bearers of this culture “are too fine and too frail for the brutal civilization that is going to crush them all out—every one of them, and prove to the future that sweetness is *à la* Nietzsche.”¹⁰ All the Matsues of Japan were doomed, as he confirmed dur-

ing residences in the rapidly modernizing towns of Kumamoto and Kobe. Japan's new urban archetype would be the monster-city of Tokyo, "detestable Tokyo," with its unprecedented forms of misery, more squalid even than what exists in the West.¹¹

Fourth, the new Japan may have been loathsome in Hearn's eyes, yet over time he came to believe it capable of standing up to the West. The entire world saw this when a rapidly industrializing Japan soundly trounced Russia on both land and sea in 1904–1905, the first instance in modern times of an Asian force triumphing over European arms. But this achievement had a dark side, for it marked the final end of authentic Japan. Even if the new sternness and ferocity had its roots in the samurai past, as Hearn acknowledged, its values were antithetical to the gentler aspects of the traditional culture he so loved. This culture of "fairy Japan" was doomed and would henceforth exist only in dreams.

Had it ever really existed? By the time he moved to Tokyo in 1895 Hearn rejected his own early depictions of Japanese life as the effusions of first love and "illusion."¹² Indeed, he concluded that the primordial culture with which he had fallen in love was already dead or dying at the time he arrived in Japan. "What is there, after all, to love in Japan except what is passing away?" he rued. "Remember," he cautioned foreigners captivated by the arts and rituals of old Japan, "that here all is enchantment, that you have fallen under the spell of the dead...."¹³

Whence came such insights? How was it that Hearn, more than anyone before him, recognized and appreciated the authentic values of Tokugawa Japan, sensed the danger to them posed by the modern West, predicted their demise at the hands of industrialization and individualism, yet appreciated the possibility that a modernized and Westernized Japan could compete successfully with the West on the West's own terms? And finally, whence came his startling and seemingly contradictory assertion that authentic Japan as he had known and loved it had already been dead at the time he first encountered it, and his love for it an illusion?

Yakumo Koizumi's gifts as an observer are undeniable. Yet they account neither for the sharpness and sweep of his views on Japanese life nor for the sheer passion with which he developed them and presented them to his readers.

Hearn traveled light. A contemporary sketch of him as he departed New York for Yokohama shows him trudging along with a small satchel, no overcoat, and a single suitcase. His possessions were few and each time he moved he would leave with friends a bundle of letters and manuscripts and then start over, like a gypsy. Yet if he traveled light in a material sense, he arrived in Japan with a veritable steamer trunk full of ideas. These notions about the world had been formed above all during his years in Louisiana and the West Indies. Far from jettisoning these views as he struggled to make sense of his experiences in Matsue and elsewhere, he reverted to them again and again. Both the questions he

asked and the answers he reached arose not so much from the circumstances of his new Japanese life but from his prior experiences in New Orleans and Martinique. So thoroughly was his conception of Japan shaped by his sojourn in Louisiana and the Caribbean that it is no exaggeration to speak of Lafacadio Hearn's "Creole Japan."

Most of his friends would have been astonished by this claim. It seemed to them that his stay in the Crescent City had been notable mainly for his single-minded devotion to debauchery. An aura of sexual extravagance hung over him, causing many to consider his New Orleans life to have been "base and gross."¹⁴ Accordingly, it has been customary to assume that the only bearing Louisiana and the West Indies had on Hearn's conceptions of Japan was to serve as a foil, the negative antipode against which everything positive about Japan came more clearly into focus. Louisiana and Martinique, according to this view, provided the specific reasons for which Hearn sought and embraced the Orient as an alternative to the life he had been living.

A closer examination of his Louisiana and Caribbean years reveals the opposite to be more nearly true. Hearn's conception of Japan was formed as much in these American tropics as in Matsue or Tokyo. Louisiana, not Japan, was the laboratory in which he worked his understanding of the interaction of tradition and modernity. The conclusions he reached in New Orleans had only to be transferred to Matsue and elaborated. In short, continuity, not contrast, marks Lafacadio Hearn's transition to Yakumo Koizumi. To understand Hearn's picture of Japan, which to some extent still influences our own views today, it is therefore necessary to explore his perspective on Louisiana and Martinique.

Hearn had sought out Louisiana as a relief from the cold bustle and money-grubbing he encountered in Cincinnati. The Queen City had only recently lost to Chicago the honor of being the biggest metropolis west of the Alleghenies. During Hearn's stay there Cincinnati was a cauldron of stockyards, meat packing houses, tanneries, and soap makers. As a cub reporter for the *Enquirer*, he specialized in depicting the most violent and macabre aspects of this world, including the gruesome tanning yard murders, the account of which established his reputation as a sensationalist.

But Hearn hated all this, and in 1878 escaped to what he hoped would be the more serene and gentle environment of New Orleans. After seven months spent walking the streets he found stable employment as assistant editor of the *Item* and then, after three years, as assistant editor of the *Times-Democrat*. Having learned French at the same Catholic boarding school in Rouen attended by Guy de Maupassant, he was able to launch his new life by translating news stories and *belles-lettres* from the Parisian papers. He also found time to freelance for *Harper's* and other national periodicals.

For the *Item* he penned daily pieces on local life drawing on impressions gained from his endless prowling through the byways of the Crescent City. These New Orleans *feuilletons* have the same specificity and detail as his later

writings on Japan. Moving further afield, he explored the Lake Borgne area of Louisiana in 1883 for *Harper's*, roamed the Bayou Teche country on assignment for the *Times-Democrat*, and traveled to Florida in 1887 in search of further tropical exotica to describe. Most important, in 1884 he spent a vacation on remote Grand Isle in the Mississippi Delta, a sojourn that was to have important consequences for his views on Louisiana and, by extension, on Japan.

Hearn's antipathy to polite society was notorious. A self-described "demophobe,"¹⁵ he was distrustful of successful men and believed that his bad eye made him disagreeable to women. This caused him to flee the drawing rooms of more genteel New Orleans to the more accepting lower ranks of society. He caroused with an Irish gangster, hung around the levee with black stevedores, and patronized prostitutes of every color. All this gave him direct access to local folklore, and even the world of voodoo, about which he wrote in convincing detail, just as he was later to write on Chinese ghosts and the exotic folk beliefs of Japan.

In spite of his demophobia, Hearn formed ties with several members of the New Orleans intelligentsia. A few of these, like the editor of the *Times-Democrat*, Page Baker, or reporter Elizabeth Bisland, later Hearn's biographer, were Anglo-Saxons. Most were Creoles. Among the circle of Hearn's intimates were the great historian of French and Spanish Louisiana, Charles Gayarre; the novelist and priest to the Choctaws, P re Adrien Emmanuel Rouquette; and young Leona Queyrouze, the only woman member of the Athenee-Louisianais. Along with such francophone Creoles was the Cuban-born medical pioneer Dr. Rudolph Matas, whom Hearn pumped for details of Spanish colonial life.

All these men and women were deeply imbued with the life and culture of the waning Latin Creole population of Louisiana, as opposed to the people of English, Irish, or German stock who constituted the majority and already dominated the political and economic life of New Orleans. It is revealing that Hearn's closest ally among the Anglo intelligentsia was Mark Twain's friend George Washington Cable, who shared Hearn's attraction to the life of the old Creole elite and expressed that fascination in several novels on Creole New Orleans published during Hearn's residency in the city. One of these, *The Grandissimes*, can be read as a precursor to Hearn's own writings about the samurai elite of Matsue. For several years Hearn and Cable were quite close, and eventually collaborated with other friends to write the first comprehensive guide to New Orleans.

Whatever the extent of Hearn's debauchery during his New Orleans years, it did not prevent him from participating actively in a local literary life that was pre-occupied with the fate of the old Creole city. At the same time Hearn also reached out to explore the larger world. Under the influence of his old Cincinnati friend Charles D. Krehbiel, later renowned as a music critic, Hearn took an inter-

est in all the world's great cultures. He studied the Sanskrit and Finnish epics and read in both Chinese and Japanese folklore to produce a volume entitled *Stray Leaves from Strange Literatures* (1884). When the Japanese government sent a large exhibition to the Cotton Centennial Exposition held in New Orleans in 1885, he covered it in detail.

Hearn's goal in coming to Louisiana had been to lose himself in a world that appeared to be the antithesis of the hard-driving and cynical business life of Cincinnati. After a decade in New Orleans, however, the city's veneer of romance had worn off for him, exposing the same money-grubbing that he had fled from in the North. Once more he searched the world for a place that represented an alternative to modern industrial culture. Hearn had long since fallen under the spell of the beguiling music of the New Orleans-born composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk. Following Gottschalk's lead, he set out in 1888 for the old city of St. Pierre on the island of Martinique. Here he found "an idealized tropicalized glorified old New Orleans," more authentically Creole than the Crescent City itself and, as an island, sheltered somewhat from the incursions of modern industrial culture. Curiously, artist Paul Gauguin arrived there at nearly the same time in search of the same qualities. Two years later Hearn departed for another island presumed to be even more out of reach of modern business culture, Japan.

What were Hearn's main impressions of Louisiana and Martinique and how did he account for what he observed there? When he arrived in New Orleans he was a journalist and translator whose interests ran more to the bizarre and sensational than to ruminations about the fate of societies. But the city challenged him to think more deeply. It was there that he first encountered what was so conspicuously absent in the fluid commercial whirl of Cincinnati, namely a rooted local life that was as attractive to him as it was authentic. This authentic world was focused in the faubourgs downtown from Canal Street where prosperous whites shared with middle- and lower-class blacks a common French or Spanish language, Catholic faith, and Afro-Caribbean-influenced culture. Isolation from the broader American society had preserved this old world into modern times. Authentic culture survived especially among the poor blacks, who maintained even the Caribbean patois that combined French, Spanish, and African elements in colorful ways, and the voodoo practices they had brought from Sainte-Domingue (Haiti) after the bloody slave revolts there during the French Revolution.

Hearn immersed himself in the world of both the white and black Creoles. Members of the white Creole elite he depicted as inward-looking, delicate in their sensibilities, and devoted in their curious way to their multi-generational, patriarchal families. What they lacked in mastery of commerce they more than made up for in the refinement of their aesthetic sense. A Creole mansion in the Vieux Carre epitomized these qualities:

An atmosphere of tranquility and quiet happiness seemed to envelop the old house. Without, roared the Iron Age, the angry waves of American traffic;

within one heard only the murmur of the layered fountain, the sound of deeply musical voices conversing in the language of Paris and Madrid, the playful chatter of dark-haired children lisping in sweet and many-voweled Creole, and through it all, the soft caressing coo of doves. Without it was the year 1879; within it was the epoch of the Spanish Domination. A guitar lay upon the rustic bench near the fountain, where it had evidently been forgotten, and a silk fan beside it.¹⁶

Even when Hearn poked fun at certain Creole practices he did so on the basis of genuine admiration and affection. Thus, he shared a hearty laugh with his readers over the utter lack of privacy in the thin-walled double houses common throughout the city, but at the same time praised the Creoles' strong communal sense and the lack of selfish egoism that enabled them to survive in such dwellings. When he vacationed on Grande Isle, he was especially impressed by the "absolutely ancient purity of morals among the Creoles at that remote locale."¹⁷ Similarly, Hearn launched occasional barbs at the Catholic Church in which he had been reared, but he was quick to acknowledge that in the Creole's Catholic world there existed a feeling of love and sense of art that was nonexistent among the Protestant Anglo-Saxons uptown from Canal Street.

Surveying Hearn's Louisiana from the vantage point of his later writings on Japan, one recognizes at once the strong parallels between them. The white Creoles are presented in almost exactly the same terms he later used to describe the old samurai families of Matsue. In spite of their hot-blooded southern temperament, they displayed the same "benevolence, sense of duty, simplicity, unselfish sobriety, contentment, and communal restraint" Hearn later discovered in traditional Japan. Isolation had preserved pre-industrial values among the Creoles as it had in Matsue, imparting to the culture a degree of continuity that was in sharp contrast to everything Hearn had known in mercantile England and America—the "West" of his later writings on Japan. Similarly, Hearn's account of the intricate folklore of the poorest Creoles of color anticipates his depiction of the popular mythology of Japan, even down to its ancestor worship, its "ghosts," and its expressive, timeless language.

All this Creole life, both white and black, Hearn found to be under assault, not by a generalized Occident as was the case in Japan but by the specific Yankee businessmen and entrepreneurs, both Anglo-Saxon and German, who inhabited the "uptown" sections of New Orleans. Considering them to be individualistic, calculating, and heartless, Hearn thought they epitomized the modern West in its most depraved form. Creole life embodied a rich continuum of culture extending back to France, Spain, Africa, and the Caribbean. By contrast, the world of these Yankees embodied nothing more noble than the power of money and commerce.

It was in New Orleans that Hearn first developed his philosophy of victimhood. "The Northern Thor is already threatening the picturesque town with an iconoclastic hammer," he wrote in words he would later transpose from the

banks of the Mississippi to Matsue.¹⁸ He renewed his assault on the rapacious West from his later residence in the Caribbean. In a typically dolorous letter from Martinique he told how modern European musical instruments were consigning the traditional drums and flutes to oblivion.¹⁹ The raw power of modernity was attacking authentic folkways where they still existed.

Because the forces of change had both money and demography on their side, it was only a matter of time before they would extinguish completely the Creoles and their ancient culture. This conviction filled all his writings on Louisiana and the West Indies with a hovering mood of death. In fact, everything he wrote about the death of “fairy Japan” he had written earlier in describing the doomed Creole worlds of Louisiana and the West Indies.

It is revealing that this preoccupation with Creole Louisiana as a dying civilization began even before he had observed it at first hand. Indeed, at the moment Hearn’s train from Cincinnati crossed into Louisiana, his conclusions on this point were already fully formed in his mind:

I never beheld anything so beautiful and sad. When I saw it first—sunrise over Louisiana—the tears sprang to my eyes. It was like young death.²⁰

Later, as he was about to depart the “quaint and ruinous” city²¹ of New Orleans, he rued that:

The city of my dreams, bathed in the gold of eternal summer, and perfumed with the amorous odors of orange flowers, has vanished like one of those phantom cities of Spanish America, swallowed up centuries ago by earthquakes, but reappearing at long intervals to delude travelers. What remains is something horrible, like the tombs here.²²

Hearn’s terror in the face of modernity was so great that he often depicted it as a savage force of nature. While on Grande Isle, he heard of a beautiful neighboring island, l’Isle Derniere (actually, one of a group by that name), that had been swept away in a hurricane thirty years earlier. One of his finest stories, *Chita*, describes the dying moments of this once bright and peaceful little Creole world. Similarly, even though Hearn’s beloved town of St. Pierre was built on solid rock, every page of *Two Years in the West Indies* exudes the author’s sense of foreboding. This proved to be prescient, for thirteen years after Hearn left Martinique a volcanic eruption buried St. Pierre, turning it into a kind of tropical Pompeii. Reacting to this news from Japan, he mourned that “Never again will sun or moon shine upon the streets of that city . . . never again [will] its gardens blossom . . . except in dreams.”²³

New Orleans, l’Isle Derniere, St. Pierre, Japan—in each case the sweet old world dies, leaving behind only a romantic dream of its former existence. Hearn did not live to hear that only twenty years after his visit to Grand Isle that idyllic realm, too, with its “absolutely ancient purity of morals,” would be ravaged by a hurricane that left hundreds dead. This would not have surprised him.

For all the anticipations of his later account of Japan in his writings on

Louisiana, Hearn acknowledged the vast cultural gulf separating the two worlds. Some of the differences between them were of degree, as, for example, the greater hold of the supernatural in the religious life of Louisiana and the stronger emphasis on the family in Japan. Others reflected more basic splits. The unexpected element of sternness and ferocity Hearn discovered in the Japanese character had no counterpart among the more passive and resigned Creoles. Thanks to this asset, Japan as a nation could expect to thrive in the modern world, whatever the fate of its traditional values.

An even sharper juxtaposition, to which Hearn returned again and again in his writings, was between the chaste Japanese and the more erotic culture of the Creoles. The real contrast, of course, was between Japan and the West, and in this one area he found it convenient to blend Louisiana and the Caribbean into a generalized West inhabited by "a race of sexually starved beings, frantic with nymphomania and all forms of erotomania."²⁴ Whether or not this was an accurate characterization of Louisiana, the West Indies, the West, or solely of Hearn himself, it bore directly on the important difference of temperament he found between the Caribbean and Japanese worlds. Observing that "There isn't any fire here," Hearn described Japan as "all soft, dreamy, quiet, pale, faint, gentle, hazy vaporous." By contrast, the languid yet fiery Caribbean world never lost its hold on him. "Ah, the tropics," he exclaimed, "they still pull at my heart strings. Goodness! My real field was there."²⁵

However noteworthy these differences, they pale before the striking parallels between the way Hearn depicts the fate of Creole Louisianans and of the bearers of old values in Japan. He saw both as playing out the nineteenth century's great drama of a paradise of beauty and mutual sharing under assault from a materialistic world of aggressive egoism. As a true romantic, Hearn sided squarely with the losers. In book after book he presented every facet of the vanishing civilizations of Creole Louisiana and samurai Japan. A pessimist's pessimist, he did not invite his readers to rise up in defense of these victims of Western hubris, but merely to regret their passing the way we might now pine over the extinction of a remote tribe in Amazonia or of a delicate tundra flower in the Arctic. Down to his last years, Hearn did not conceive the possibility of intervening against this process of destruction, and in this respect his romantic heart had a decidedly Darwinian core. Lacking a way out, his posture was resignedly poetical rather than political. The best outcome Hearn could imagine was to retard somewhat the inevitable spread of amorality, violence, and social decay from the West.

And to preserve an image of each dying world of beauty in his own writings. This is how Hearn conceived his mission as a writer. In each case the beloved reality was vanishing. But thanks solely to Hearn and his pen, future readers could gain some conception of the world they had lost. Hearn is thus a kind of Audubon of cultures, who arrives on the scene just as some noble specimen is about to become extinct and, through his art, gives it a semblance of immortal-

ity. Hearn's texts thus recall and replace the reality that no longer exists. They are both epitaphs and tombstones.

To say the least, it is strange that such very different societies as Louisiana, the West Indies, and Japan should all have led Lafcadio Hearn to the same conclusions about the larger social forces at work in his day. One wonders if he could have summoned the same lyricism, the same passionate descriptions, and the same overall views on his times had *Harper's* assigned him not to Japan but to Baghdad, Algiers, Isfahan, Benares, Samarkand, or Ninh-Binh, all places he dreamed of being sent to as a correspondent or consul.²⁶ It cannot be denied that the "chemistry" between Hearn and traditional Japan was exceptionally favorable, and that the less florid prose style he was honing at the time of his arrival in Yokohama was perfectly suited to capture the fragile moods of gentle Matsue. Yet in the end [comma deleted] there remains the strong suspicion that Hearn might have painted the same picture had he gone not to Japan but to any of the other ancient non-Western centers he dreamed of visiting.

Albert Mordell, an early editor of Hearn's writings, once declared flatly that "Japan gave him nothing. He himself, not Japan, is the interesting subject in his writings on Japan."²⁷ The same must be also said of his writings on Louisiana and the West Indies. There, as in Japan, Hearn invented a new way of looking at an old society that had often come under the scrutiny of literary visitors. There, too, he had an enduring impact on how others perceive the local society and how the locals view themselves. But in New Orleans and St. Pierre his observations parallel his later writings on Japan so strikingly as to raise the question of whether in these places, too, he was concerned less with documenting the objective world than with elaborating something deep within himself. Everywhere Hearn traveled he used his good right eye to gain the most acute sense of external reality. Yet in the end it was what he perceived by peering into himself—perhaps with the misshapen left eye that he never revealed to the camera—that accounts for his peculiar vision of the world.

What is it that Hearn was straining to perceive and understand throughout the course of his life? On this he leaves us in no doubt. Lafcadio Hearn's most enduring preoccupation as both traveler and writer was his parents, their relations with each other, and to him. This, rather than the various societies through which he passed in the course of his travels, is what he struggled to grasp.

Hearn's father, Charles Hearn, was a British army surgeon who was stationed briefly on the Greek island of Levkas, or Lefkada. During his brief tour there he fell in love with an illiterate local beauty, Rosa Cassimati, and married her. After spending only a few months with his bride he departed for the West Indies and sent his wife and son Lafcadio back to his family in Dublin. Rosa Cassimati Hearn felt abandoned in what to her was a soulless world. Leaving her son with Charles Hearn's spinster sister-in-law, she fled to her homeland, where in due course she remarried, raised another family, and died in an insane asylum. Lafcadio never saw his beloved mother again and his few subsequent encounters with his father left him cold and bitterly resentful.

Here were all the elements of Lafcadio's lifelong quest. Born in a bright and beautiful land to a mother descended from an ancient and aesthetic people, Lafcadio—named for his native island—traced all life's joys and all his own better instincts to his Greek mother. "It is the mother who makes us," he declared in a letter to his younger brother.²⁸ By extension, he held also that all culture and beauty trace to the female and maternal element. By contrast, his father appeared to Lafcadio as that cold northern Europe, a force that tore his mother from her fair world and eventually destroyed her, leaving the boy an orphan in a hostile and forbidding environment. No wonder Hearn's psychological world was defined by a profound sense of deprivation and loss, and of victimhood.

Lafcadio spent his entire life looking for his mother. From the depths of infant memories he recalled her dark skin and black eyes, and found this same warm beauty in Creole eyes that were "large, luminous, liquidly black, deeply fringed and their darkness strangely augmented by the uncommon depth of the orbit."²⁹ After Hearn's death his Japanese wife recalled him saying, "I remember my Mama's face. She was of a little stature, with black hair and black eyes, like a Japanese woman."³⁰ Thus he rediscovered his lost mother first among the Creoles and then among the Japanese.

In hard-driving Cincinnati, Hearn immersed himself in his father's world of violence and ceaseless change, the world of ego that had led to his mother's tragic end. His sole refuge was the black cook at his boarding house, a former slave named Alethea Foley, whom he married and promptly abandoned, replaying his father's brief marriage to the dark-skinned Rosa Cassimati. It was then that he fled to Creole Louisiana, which, in a typical Hearn transposition, became the new Greece, his mother's Lefkada. Sensitized by his mother's tragedy, Lafcadio was quick to perceive the mortal danger to this authentic culture posed by Yankees and the "uptown" businessmen of New Orleans, whom he invariably describes with the same set of adjectives—rigid, efficient, grim, unpoetic, etc.—which he applied to his British father.

The identification of blacks with his mother was explicit in Hearn's New Orleans writings. His mother had a "dark race-soul" so it was natural for Hearn to declare that "I think white skin is the least beautiful."³¹ Black Creoles were the bearers of an ancient culture, like the Greeks, and their rich *patois* the "offspring of linguistic miscegenation,"³² as was Hearn himself. In a striking passage in a letter to Krehbiel, Hearn goes so far as to suggest that the panpipes played by poor black Creoles in New Orleans may be the musical descendants, via Africa, of the *syrix* of ancient Greece.³³ Thus were black Creoles linked with his mother.

By such means Hearn cast every social group in Louisiana into roles representing members of his own family and then predicted for each protagonist the same fate as his mother or father. It is no wonder that Hearn could paint his dualistic world of Creoles and Yankees with such conviction. Hearn was really writing about himself.

No sooner did he reach Matsue than he indulged his passion for autobiographical and cultural transposition anew. Inevitably he cast traditional Japan as Greece, and the entire West—northern Europe and America—in the avenging role of his father. Just as ancient Greece represented the pure childhood of civilization and Levkas embodied his own roots in that world, Hearn now concluded that “the charm of Japanese life is largely the charm of childhood,” a childhood “as simple as early Greeks.”³⁴ Against this background, his adoption of the place name “Yakumo” (actually a town on Hokaido) as his own first name appears as a deliberate attempt to transpose his earlier Greek place-name (Lafcadio) into the realm of authentic Japan. In writing about Japan Hearn reenacted the sad drama of his own family and projected it onto the screen of human affairs as a whole.

Playing out his transposed drama to the end, Hearn predicted the inevitable doom of both Creole Louisiana and the ancient culture of authentic Japan. In Louisiana, he asserted, “. . . it seems not unlikely that the Latin race will be squeezed out of existence in the future pressure of civilization.”³⁵ In Japan, “the most beautiful of race childhoods is passing into an adolescence which threatens to prove repulsive.”³⁶ At times, as in these passages, Hearn presented the death of timeless childhood in both cultures as an evolutionary process, quite independent of human agency. More often, however, he personalized it, identifying the ego and will of modern European males as the force of destruction.

At this point Hearn steps directly into the *mise en scene*, replaying his own father’s role both as he actually lived it and, in the end, as he should have. Lafcadio’s first replay of Charles Hearn’s life occurred in Cincinnati, where he abandoned his dark-skinned wife and departed for a remote tropical world. In Louisiana he again lived out his father’s actions by treating black-eyed beauties and members of the “dark race” as sex objects towards whom he acknowledged no obligations. Only in Matsue did Hearn relive his father’s role as it should have been played, by settling in Japan/Lefkada, integrating himself into his wife’s family and culture, and devoting himself to the upbringing of his children, especially his eldest son, Kazuo. By exercising his will in this way, Hearn not only overcame the psychological burden of his father’s flight but he separated himself and his private world from the larger forces of destruction assailing authentic Japan from without and from within.

Back in Louisiana Lafcadio Hearn had accepted evolution—specifically, the philosophy of Herbert Spencer—as a way of achieving some kind of reconciliation with the inevitable. Old cultures die, he believed, because they have a set life span that is part of the natural order of things. Then he intervened in this process by marrying into the world of authentic Japan and committing himself to his children’s welfare. This act of will on his part opened Hearn to the possibility that at least some elements of the old culture might live on into the new. With delight he reported that his Japanese students were “modest and knightly in manner, notwithstanding their modern knowledge, nor the less reverentially

devoted to their dear old fathers and mothers whose ideas were shaped in the era of feudalism.”³⁷ He observed this particularly with his son, Kazuo, whom he educated in the modern sciences, yet who was deeply imbued with the ancient values of Matsue and the Koizumi family.

Thanks to his commitment to his own family, Hearn discovered the possibility that the future need not negate the past and that a few of the ancient Japanese virtues might endure at least in his own family and others like it. This was to be the story of Japan itself, where the broader society would be Westernized, modernized, and hardened beyond recognition, yet where many of the gentler attitudes and relationships of the past would be carried forward within the family.

The story of Lafcadio Hearn did not end with this happy reconciliation. Unlike his father in Lefkada, Lafcadio committed himself to the world into which he married. By age fifty he had become Yakumo Koizumi the Anglo-Greek samurai, a citizen of Japan, and the brilliant expounder of the virtues of authentic Japanese life. But the avenging West still worked its evil ways, and in 1903 assaulted him with a personal crisis from which he did not recover.

Tokyo University, the seedbed of Japan’s modernity, had honored Koizumi with an appointment as Professor of English Literature. Even though he despised Tokyo, Hearn moved his family there in 1895 and used his lectures to impart the most humane aspects of Western letters to the future leaders of his adopted country. But in the process of their country’s rapid development, many educated Japanese had adopted the kind of fierce nationalism common in the industrializing West at the time. Aggressive toward foreign enemies and intolerant of diversity in their midst, Japan’s new nationalists backed up their tough words with a powerful army and a well-armed navy.

This new chauvinism made headway in Tokyo University even before it penetrated the society at large. When the university’s president decided to purge his faculty of foreigners, Hearn’s name was at the head of the list. Hearn had assumed that his Japanese family, his painfully acquired knowledge of the Japanese language, and his Japanese citizenship would enable him to blend somewhat with his surroundings. “I am Japanese only among Japanese,” he once boasted.³⁸ Instead, they caused him to stand out as a particularly threatening manifestation of Japan’s eroding identity. Using the Machiavellian pretext that Hearn’s citizenship foreclosed his right to a foreigner’s high salary, the president fired him. And then, in a stroke of administrative caprice worthy of the most cynical university in the West, the president denied Professor Koizumi the sabbatical leave that he had earned through eight years of service. Hearn, in short, was purged as an outsider.

In the course of nearly a decade and a half in Japan Hearn had tried to appreciate the authentic life of that country from within. He had used insights derived from his own childhood and from his long sojourn in Louisiana and the West Indies to elucidate Japan in a manner that Japanese themselves found illuminating. And in the face of Japan’s growing economic and military power, he had

championed the image of that country as a gentle victim of Western imperialism. "I love Japan better than any born Japanese," he confessed.³⁹

Far from eliciting gratitude, these achievements all but guaranteed that he would fall victim to those Japanese who had assimilated Charles Hearn's world, the industrial West and its form of modernity. Student protests in Koizumi's behalf were to no avail. At age fifty-three Koizumi for all practical purposes was once more Lafcadio Hearn, an outsider, pursued by the avenging spirit of the modern West and of his own hated father. Only this time there was no Louisiana or Japan to which Hearn could flee. Eighteen months later, on September 19, 1904, Lafcadio Hearn died quietly at his Japanese-style home in the heart of booming, Europeanized Tokyo.

Notes

¹ Hearn to H. E. Krehbiel, 1881, *Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn*, Elizabeth Bisland, ed., 4 vols., Boston, 1906–1923, I, p. 217.

² Quoted by Edward Thomas, *Lafcadio Hearn*, Boston, 1912, pp. 90–91.

³ Hearn, *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation*, Rutland (Vt.), and Tokyo, n.d., p. 459.

⁴ Hearn, "The Stone Buddha," *Out of the East: Reveries and Studies in New Japan*, Boston, 1895, p. 162.

⁵ Hearn to Ellwood Hendrick, December 1895, *Life and Letters*, II, p. 281.

⁶ Hearn, "A Conservative," *Kokoro: Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life*, Boston, 1896, p. 155.

⁷ Hearn to Hendrick, February 1893, *Life and Letters*, II, p. 215; "A Conservative," pp. 151–54.

⁸ Hearn to Rudolph Matas, "Newly Discovered Letters from Lafcadio Hearn to Dr. Rudolph Matas," Ichiro Nishizaki, ed., *Studies in Arts and Cultures*, Ochanomizu University, Japan, VIII (March 1956), p. 92.

⁹ Hearn to Hendrick, May 1897, *Life and Letters*, III, p. 55.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹¹ Hearn to Hendrick, August 1897, *Life and Letters*, III, p. 64; Hearn, *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation*, p. 446.

¹² Hearn to Basil Hall Chamberlain, May 1894, *Life and Letters*, III, p. 381.

¹³ Hearn to Chamberlain, 16 February 1894, *The Japanese Letters of Lafcadio Hearn*, Elizabeth Bisland, ed., Boston, 1910, p. 126; Hearn, *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretations*, p. 15.

¹⁴ Hearn, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 271.

¹⁵ Hearn to Krehbiel, 1887, *Life and Letters*, II, p. 29.

¹⁶ Hearn, "A Creole Courtyard," *New Orleans Item*, 11 November 1879.

¹⁷ Hearn to Page Baker, 1884, *Life and Letters*, III, p. 82.

¹⁸ Hearn, *Leaves from the Diary of an Impressionist, Creole Sketches, and Some Chinese Ghosts*, Boston and New York, 1923, p. 52.

¹⁹ Hearn to Krehbiel, 1887, *Life and Letters*, II, p. 35.

²⁰ Hearn, "Memphis to New Orleans," *Cincinnati Commercial*, 23 November 1877.

²¹ Hearn to Krehbiel, 1879, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 199.

- ²² Hearn to Krehbiel, February 1881, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 224.
- ²³ Hearn, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 95.
- ²⁴ Hearn to Hedrick, April 1893, *Life and Letters*, II, p. 220.
- ²⁵ Hearn, *Life and Letters*, III, p. 99.
- ²⁶ Hearn to Krehbiel, December 1883, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 289.
- ²⁷ Hearn, *Occidental Gleamings: Sketches and Essays Now First Collected*, 2 vols., Albert Mordell, ed., NY, 1925, I, p. 1xxvi.
- ²⁸ E. C. Beck, "Letters of Lafcadio Hearn to His Brother," *The English Journal*, Vol. 20, 1931, pp. 287–92.
- ²⁹ Hearn, *Leaves from the Diary of an Impressionist*, p. 50.
- ³⁰ Hearn, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 8, fn. 1.
- ³¹ Hearn, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 10; Hearn to Chamberlain, 6 March 1894, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 143.
- ³² Hearn, "The Creole Patois," *Harper's Weekly*, 10 January 1885, p. 17.
- ³³ Hearn to Krehbiel, February 1884, *Life and Letters*, I, pp. 291–92.
- ³⁴ Quoted in Jonathan Cott, *Wandering Ghost: The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn*, 1992, p. 329; Hearn, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 100.
- ³⁵ Hearn to Hendrick, May 1896, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 30.
- ³⁶ Quoted in Cott, p. 329.
- ³⁷ Hearn, "With Kyushu Students," *Out of the East*, pp. 29–70.
- ³⁸ Hearn to Baker, March 1896, *Life and Letters*, III, p. 113.
- ³⁹ Hearn, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 140.