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Hearn and Spencer's Advice to Japan

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No one influenced Hearn's intellectual development more than Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). English sociologist and philosopher, it was he, not Darwin, who coined the phrase "survival of the fittest" and who published his own theory of evolution before Darwin's *Origin of Species*. After reading him for the first time in 1884, Hearn was never the same. He became a devotee, and for the rest of his life he never wavered in his faith. In this paper I wish first to give a brief introduction to the life and writings of Spencer, then trace the curve of Hearn's enthusiasm toward his philosophy, and finally focus on Hearn's publication and endorsement of "Herbert Spencer's Advice to Japan" in the Appendix to *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation*.

Spencer was one of the few modern philosophers to achieve an influential, comprehensive synthesis of all knowledge that he called the *System of Synthetic Philosophy*. This was his *magnum opus*, announced in 1860 and finally completed in 1896. It comprised *First Principles* (1862), *Principles of Biology* (2 vols., 1864, 1867), *Principles of Sociology* (3 vols., 1876, 1882, 1896), *Data of Ethics* (1879), and *Principles of Ethics* (2 vols., 1892, 1893). He also authored a leading textbook called *Education* (1861), *The Man Versus the State* (1884), three volumes of essays, and an *Autobiography* (1904).

Although his father was a schoolmaster, Spencer never attended university, and he declined his clergyman uncle's offer to send him to Cambridge. Instead, he educated himself by reading extensively, mostly in the natural sciences. Before turning to philosophical writing full-time, he had worked as a schoolteacher (for a few months), as a civil engineer for a railway (1837-1841), and as a sub-editor of *The Economist* (1848-1853).

Spencer was one of the most audacious, argumentative, and discussed British thinkers of his time. He believed that philosophy was fundamentally a synthesis of the basic principles of the sciences and that social phenomena must be examined scientifically. The evolution of biological species and the nature of animal organisms, he felt, were essential considerations for comprehending the progress and nature of human societies. In Spencer's view, the key to understanding all development, both cosmic and biological, was the law of the persistence of force. This law states that nothing homogeneous can remain that way if it is acted upon, because any external force must affect some part of it differently from other parts and thus cause difference and variety to result. Accordingly, he viewed human societies as evolving from undifferentiated masses into complex civilizations, moving away from uniformity and mass to individuation and specialization. He believed that both science and philosophy supported the ideas of human progress and the importance of the individual over the state.¹⁾

Hearn was introduced to the writings of Spencer around 1884 by a young U.S. Army lieutenant named Crosby, to whom Hearn was eternally grateful. He describes this mental turning point in his life as a sudden revelation, the stunning discovery of a new window in his mind. He seemed to see it as a kind of intellectual *satori*:

I suddenly discovered what a waste of time all my Oriental metaphysics had been. I also discovered for the first time how to apply the little general knowledge I possessed. I also found unspeakable comfort in the sudden, and for me eternal reopening of the Great Doubt, which teaches a new reverence for all forms of faith. In short, from the day when I finished the "First Principles," a totally new intellectual life opened for me; and I hope during the next few years to devour the rest of this oceanic philosophy. (XIII, 371)²⁾

He described himself as a believer in the ideas of Evolutionism, and "as thorough a disciple of Spencer as it is possible to be" (XIV, 17), claiming that "when one has read Spencer, one has digested the most nutritious portion of all human knowledge" (XIV, 15). With the zeal of a new convert, he soon began to proselytize his friends, recommending Spencer to all who might listen. He sent a copy of *First Principles* to Leona Barel, and when she responded favorably, Hearn was as delighted as a missionary:

I am so glad you like Spencer in the new shape;— I would like you to learn to love him, as the mightiest and noblest expression of the human mind;— one who speaks as if by Revelation;— the writer of the New Bible, the Prophet of the New Religion, the Teacher of the Eternal Truth, the Apostle of the Future Gospel, inspired by the Spirit of the Universe, as in another Pentecost of Fire.³⁾

This enthusiasm and respect never waned. For Hearn, Spencer was always a "colossal intellect" (XVI, 304) whom he only half-facetiously called "God the Father" (XIV, 64). Reading him, Hearn implied, had acted like a mind-opening drug, for Spencer's thought had enlarged Hearn's capacity to understand life and had raised his ability to apprehend higher truths. Hearn found in Spencer a mind which expanded his own to give him "the greatest conception of Divinity I can yet expand to receive" (XIV, 56). Hearn's idolatry, his unabashed admiration and almost childlike reverence may further be seen in this excerpt from a letter to George M. Gould (1889). After lamenting his current state of mild depression, Hearn promptly announced the best therapy to cure it: "I find my only Salvation in a return to the study of the Oceanic Majesty and Power and Greatness and Holiness and Omniscience of the mind of Herbert Spencer" (XIV, 85).

In Japan, Hearn continued to read Spencer and was delighted to find a mention of Japan, albeit a critical one, in the philosopher's recent "Inductions of Ethics: Individual Life" from *Principles of Morality, Volume I*. Hearn eagerly informed his friend Mason in Tokyo that Spencer had recently criticized their mutual friend Walter Denning, author of *Japan in Days of Yore* and *The Life of Miyamoto Musashi*, and the Japanese Education Ministry (Mombusho) for advocating revenge as a noble response to injury or insult. Spencer's brief mention of Japan was only in passing, one of many examples of societies which value the revenge impulse, but Hearn took real pride in it, informing Mason that "it is rather a compliment even to get a little hell from Spencer."⁴⁾

He defended Spencer before all doubters, as this remonstrative reply to Chamberlain suggests: "You are not quite correct in saying that Spencer could not obtain a hearing before Darwin. Before Darwin, Spencer had already been recognized by Lewes as the mightiest of all English thinkers, with the

remarkable observation that he was too large and near to be justly estimated even in his lifetime" (XIV, 347; Kobe 4/1895). To Hearn, Spencer's writings were "that tremendous system which has abolished all pre-existing philosophy and transformed all science and education" (XIV, 348). It was this devotion to Spencer that later caused irreparable cracks in many of Hearn's intellectually-based friendships. After Hearn died, Chamberlain lamented that Hearn had transformed Spencer's scientific notions into a sort of mysticism, which then became a religion for him. Any objection to the dogma was interpreted as sacrilege, making it impossible to continue certain friendships.⁵⁾ Among the casualties was the long and close friendship with Chamberlain himself.

Hearn's devotion to Spencer was so deep that he chose to cap his definitive work, *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation*, with a disturbingly plain-spoken letter from the master in an Appendix entitled "Herbert Spencer's Advice to Japan." Dated August 26, 1892, the letter was addressed to Baron Kaneko Kentaro in reply to the Baron's privately asked questions on what Japan's policy toward foreigners should be. Fearing the animosity of his countrymen, and rightly so, Spencer had requested that the letter not be made public during his lifetime. In accordance with this request, it was first published posthumously in the *London Times* on January 18, 1904, and was, as Spencer had anticipated, vociferously condemned by many Western thinkers.

In the letter, Spencer strongly advised Japan to adopt a policy of "*keeping Americans and Europeans as much as possible at arm's length*" (Spencer's emphasis). Japan, he claimed, would be overwhelmed by any serious opening to Westerners, whom he repeatedly referred to as "the more powerful races." Letting them in was to expose Japanese society to a fatal social disease: "In the presence of the more powerful races your position is one of chronic danger, and you should take every precaution to give as little foothold as possible to foreigners" (XII, 459-60). Using the example of India, he warned of the eventual "subjugation of the Japanese Empire" if foreigners were allowed to own or lease land, work in the government-owned mines, or engage in "the coasting trade." Allowing foreigners in, he warned, would eventually lead to quarrels and consequential acts of aggression against the Japanese hosts.

Although Hearn himself had come into Japan as a Westerner, he also firmly opposed opening Japan to foreigners, labeling it "wickedness" and "suicidal." To borrow a term from biology, Hearn wanted a Japan that was axenic, that is, a "pure culture" uncontaminated by the presence of other organisms—in this case, other foreigners. Though he may have agreed with Spencer that the Western races were physically and industrially more powerful at that time, he had previously shared with Chamberlain his "audacious" idea that the East would eventually defeat the West:

. . . the larger brained and nervously more complex races of the West must give way at last to the races of the East. . . . The argument must be based first of all upon the enormous cost of individuation to the West, compared with the future cost of equally efficient (for sociological purposes) individuation to—say the Chinese. Vast races of highly complex creatures have already disappeared from the world because of the enormous costliness of their structures. (XV, 413-14)

By their ability to "underlive" Westerners—i.e., to work as hard and produce just as much for a mere fraction of the cost in food and housing—the Eastern races would eventually emerge victorious in a future

race competition.⁶⁾ Using Spencer's own language, Hearn expressed his doubts about Western racial superiority: "Of course the question of the survival of the races is that of the survival of the fittest. But are we, as you suggest askingly, are we the fittest?" (XV, 414). It was a complex question. Even Japan's recent decisive military victories over the so-called "more powerful races" did not persuade Hearn, who argued that "military efficiency is a very different thing from industrial power" (XV, 464).

Also in his letter, Spencer had firmly advised Japan against allowing international marriages—not so much for social reasons as for biological ones. This was a much-debated issue among Japan's thinkers at the time, but Spencer's advice was unequivocal:

There is abundant proof, alike furnished by the intermarriages of human races and by the interbreeding of animals, that when the varieties mingled diverge beyond a certain slight degree *the result is inevitably a bad one* in the long run. . . . —there arise an incalculable mixture of traits, and what may be called a chaotic constitution. (XII, 461)

As the hybrid offspring of Irish and Greek blood himself and as the father of racially mixed children, what did Hearn think of this? Did he really agree that his own children were likely to be genetically inferior humans with "chaotic constitutions"? We know from his life and letters and published writings that Hearn had always admired the results of racial mixing: he had been so attracted by the physical charms of Althea "Mattie" Foley, the mixed offspring of black and white parents, that he married her despite the illegality and the social stigma he knew would follow. About the half-breed offspring he encountered in New Orleans, he wrote to Mr. Watkin that "You would be astonished at the pretty color the children have here;—the most delicious flesh tints I ever saw,—clear, soft, rich brown,—even when the hair is blond as wheat" (8/14/1874).⁷⁾ In *Two Years in the West Indies*, his writings from Martinique, he lavished praise on the bodily strength, gentle natures, and physical beauty of the quadroon and octoroon women there. Despite Dr. Matas's advice to remain chaste to avoid infection, Hearn's private letters from Martinique confirm how attractive he found "the bronze beauty of the tropical half-breed women": a girl he saw at a brothel was "the tallest and most generally appetizing possible to conceive,—a Martinique octoroon."⁸⁾ Their appeal to him was not only sensual, however; it was also emphatically aesthetic. He called theirs a "splendid beauty," a "magnificent girlhood which makes desire seem almost sacrilegious."⁹⁾

And what about the offspring of such interracial mixing? At the birth of Kazuo, he wrote to Ellwood Hendrick that if the parents are healthy, the racial mix produces a stronger child.

Last night my child was born—a very strong boy, with large black eyes; he looks more like a Japanese, however, than like a foreign boy. He has my nose, but his mother's features in some other respects, curiously blended with mine. There is no fault with him; and the physicians say, from the form of his little bones, that he promises to become very tall. *A cross between European and Japanese is nearly always an improvement when both parents are in good condition;* and happily the old military caste to which my wife belongs is a strong one. (My emphasis. XIV, 257-58)

Several years later, in the conclusion to a now relatively unread essay called "China and the Western

World" (*Atlantic Monthly*, April 1896), Hearn even predicted, through widespread intermarriage, the eventual blending of the races of the world. He imagined the earth one day peopled by a new world race, different from and superior to any previous race. It would be an ideal combination of the energy of the West with the patience of the East, the vigor of the North with the sensibility of the South. He even went so far as to remind racial "purists," those to whom the idea of racial mixing was repulsive, of their own genetic impurity:

To many the mere thought of a fusion of races will be repellent, because of ancient and powerful prejudices once essential to national self-preservation. But as a scientific fact we know that none of the present higher races is really a pure race, but represents the blending, in prehistoric times, of races that have individually disappeared from the earth. All our prejudices of nationality and race and creed have doubtless had their usefulness, . . . but the way to the highest progress can be reached only through the final extinction of all prejudice,—through the annihilation of every form of selfishness, whether individual or national or racial, that opposes itself to the evolution of the feeling of universal brotherhood.¹⁰⁾

In light of this, how was it that Hearn could fail to consider Spencer's advice against intermarriage as anything but racial prejudice? Had Hearn somehow undergone a complete change of heart, or had he, in his awe of Spencer, simply suppressed his true feelings? No doubt out of profound loyalty to his intellectual mentor, Hearn turned a blind eye to some of the logical conclusions of Spencer's advice. Far from disagreeing with any part of it, Hearn endorsed it wholeheartedly, concluding that "it is much to be regretted, in my humble opinion, that the advice could not have been followed more closely" (XII, 464).

As we know, Hearn had broken off a long and intimate friendship with Chamberlain over the latter's indifference to Spencer. He also seemed ready to contemplate doing the same with Japan:

I cannot resist the conviction that, when Japan yields to foreign industry the right to purchase land, she is beyond hope. . . . But she has been fully warned; and if she chooses hereafter to invite her own ruin, it will not have been for lack of counsel—since she had the wisest man in the world to advise her [Herbert Spencer]. (XII, 444)

Indeed, during his writing of *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation*, Hearn's enthrallment with his mentor had probably reached its peak. In that volume alone he had quoted or referred to Spencer more than 25 times, far more than to any other writer. Fortunately, while Hearn was alive, Japan's policy toward foreign influence remained, as Spencer had advised, stubbornly conservative. But if Spencer's counsel had been ignored, it is possible that Hearn might have actually considered breaking off his long friendship, if not love relationship, with Japan.

Elizabeth Bisland, in her Introduction to Hearn's letters, calls Spencer "the Arch-Mystic of science" and attributes Hearn's devotion to him to their common mysticality. "Because of this," she writes, "Spencer's theories remained always to him the ultimate revelation of truth, and he resented any doubts of the philosopher's postulates."¹¹⁾ Certainly Hearn had gained a great many valuable insights from the master, but it is regrettable that the relationship was purely one-way: Would that the master had had a

chance to learn something of racial tolerance and cross-cultural understanding from his loyal disciple, Lafcadio Hearn.

Notes

- 1) *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th Edition (1974-1986), Volume 11, *Micropaedia*, pp. 83-84.
- 2) All Hearn citations are from *The Writings of Lafcadio Hearn, in Sixteen Volumes* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company) 1922. Hereafter referred to as *Writings*.
- 3) Letter from Hearn to Mrs. Barel, March 27, 1887. Reprinted in *The Idyl: My Personal Reminiscences of Lafcadio Hearn*, by Leona Querouze Barel, Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1933, p.33.
- 4) Unpublished letter to Mason dated September 22, 1893. C. Waller Barrett Collection at the University of Virginia, Item 76. See also *Writings*, XIV, 211 where the same information appears in a letter to Nishida dated January 1893.
- 5) "For no man living, except himself, idolized Herbert Spencer in his peculiar way; turning Spencer's scientific speculations into a kind of mysticism. The mysticism became a religion to him. The slightest cavil raised against it was resented by him as a sacrilege. Thus it was hardly possible to retain old ties of friendship" (*Writings*, XIII, 53).
- 6) This point is made especially clear in Hearn's speech, "The Future of the Far East," delivered at the Fifth High School, Kumamoto, January 1894, and in a lengthy essay, "China and the Western World," which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1896. Hearn derived much of this idea from Dr. Karl Pearson's "National Life and Character."
- 7) Sekita Kaoru, editor. *Veiled Letters from Lafcadio Hearn (Shirarezaru Haan Eiri Shokan)*, (Tokyo: Yushodo Press, 1991), p.141.
- 8) Nishizaka Ichiro, "Newly Discovered Letters from Lafcadio Hearn to Dr. Rudolph Matas, Letter 5."
- 9) *Ibid.*, Letter 4.
- 10) "China and the Western World," reprinted in *Karma by Lafcadio Hearn*, Ed. by Albert Mordell. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918, pp. 162-63.
- 11) *Writings*, X, 316.