

# The PARIS REVIEW

## The Many Lives of Lafcadio Hearn

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Lafcadio Hearn. Photo courtesy of the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. Accessed via New York Public Library Digital Collections.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Lafcadio Hearn was one of America's best-known writers, one of a stellar company that included Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Twain, Poe, and Stevenson have entered the established literary canon and are still read for duty and pleasure. Lafcadio Hearn has been forgotten, with two remarkable exceptions: in Louisiana and in Japan. Yet Hearn's place in the canon is significant for many reasons, not least of which is how the twentieth century came to view the nineteenth. This view, both academic and popular, reflects the triumph of a certain futuristic Modernism over the mysteries of religion, folklore, and what was

once called “folk wisdom.” To witness this phenomenon in time-lapse, sped-up motion, one need only consider Lafcadio Hearn, the Greek-born, Irish-raised, New World immigrant who metamorphosed from a celebrated fin-de-siècle American writer into the beloved Japanese cultural icon Koizumi Yakumo in less than a decade, in roughly the same time that Japan changed from a millennia-old feudal society into a great industrial power.

History is a fairy tale true to its telling. Lafcadio Hearn’s lives are a fairy tale true in various tellings, primarily his own, then those of his correspondents, and with greater uncertainty, those of his biographers. Hearn changed, as if magically, from one person into another, from a Greek islander into a British student, from a penniless London street ragamuffin into a respected American newspaper writer, from a journalist into a novelist, and, most astonishingly, from a stateless Western man into a loyal Japanese citizen. His sheer number of guises make him a creature of legend. Yet this life, as recorded both by himself and by others, grows more mysterious the more one examines it, for it is like the Japanese story of the Buddhist monk Kwashin Koji, in “Impressions of Japan,” who owned a painting so detailed it flowed with life. A samurai chieftain saw it and wanted to buy it, but the monk wouldn’t sell it, so the chieftain had him followed and murdered. But when the painting was brought to the chieftain and unrolled, there was nothing on it; it was blank. Hearn reported this story told to him by a Japanese monk to illustrate some aspect of the Buddhist doctrine of karma, but he might as well have been speaking about himself as Koji: the more “literary” the renderings of the original story, the less fresh and vivid it becomes, until it might literally disappear, like that legendary painting.

The knowable tellings of Hearn are particular, interesting, and specific to the literary personae of Lafcadio-Koizumi, insofar as one is absorbed and lost in them. But this tremendously prolific producer of literature remains, somehow, elusive. Hearn tempts, or we could say “dares,” his critics to interpret his work and his life, but, in the end, he belongs to the reader who best surrenders to his stories and his own life-reporting.

Lafcadio Hearn was born in 1850 not far from Ithaca, on the island of Lefkada in Greece, from the union of Charles Bush Hearn, an Irish surgeon in the British army, and Rosa Kassimatis, a Greek woman born on Cythera. The island of Lefkada, said by Ovid in his “Ode to Love” to be the place where Sappho jumped to her death in the sea because of unrequited love, was Lafcadio’s paradise, the womb-island from which he was “expelled” when his father returned and took mother and child to Dublin. On that dismal northern isle, Lafcadio was expelled a second time, this time away from his mother. While his father was abroad on yet another military assignment in the West Indies, Rosa fled Dublin with a Greek man, back to her “island of feasting hearts and secret joys,” leaving Lafcadio in the custody of a pious Catholic aunt. Then a schoolyard accident in one of the British schools he resentfully attended left him blind in one eye. His father remarried, and his aunt’s family became bankrupt, two unrelated yet near-simultaneous disasters. A seventeen-year-old Lafcadio wandered penniless in London among vagabonds, thieves, and prostitutes. In the spring of 1869, a relation of his father’s, worried about the family’s reputation, handed him a one-way boat ticket to the United States, then overland to Cincinnati, Ohio, where another relation of the Hearn family lived.

His departure for the New World was Lafcadio Hearn’s third exile. In Cincinnati, where he had imagined generous help, his relation handed him a few dollars and told him to fend for himself. A twenty-year-old Lafcadio found himself, once again, a penniless tramp. So far, with the exception of a few school exercises and some ghoulish poetry inspired by his fear of ghosts, Lafcadio Hearn had written nothing. In Cincinnati, he lived again in the underworld, until a kind angel intervened: the printer Henry Watkin allowed the young tramp to sleep on piles of old newspapers in his shop. Watkin, a utopian anarchist, encouraged the youth to read radical and fantastic literature. Hearn’s education took a vast leap: he underwent a kind of osmosis as if he had absorbed the spirit of

nineteenth-century America from the very newspapers he slept on. He had lived variously and wanted to let the world know how cruel and wondrous life was. Clumsily, with Henry Watkin's encouragement, he started to write.

He submitted a story to the *Enquirer*, a failing yellow-press daily. His story appeared in bold type on the front page. Other stories soon followed. Young Hearn's first writings were blood-curdling reportage steeped in gothic horror. They scandalized the readers of the *Enquirer* and lifted the newspaper from near-bankruptcy to a prosperous business. Hearn's ultra-realist exposés were drenched in the wounded sensibility of a writer with a merciless eye who had Greek myths and Celtic fairy tales in his blood.

At the height of his Cincinnati success as a journalist, gossip about his personal life undermined his standing. His stories about the misery and magic of the city's underworld started upsetting the upstanding citizens, who had seen them, to a point, as mere fancies. A *pur sang* bohemian, Hearn lived in a world far from his bourgeois readers. He is said to have married a black woman and lived with her on the other side of the tracks: a scandal in the segregated city. The *Enquirer* fired him.

Spurning offers from rival newspapers, Hearn abandoned Cincinnati and departed for New Orleans. New Orleans was a city in exile from mainstream America, and New Orleans loved Lafcadio Hearn at first reading. From his early columns in the local newspapers to his novel *Chita*, his literary persona took on mythic proportions. Hearn's colorful newspaper essays about local lore, his articles about high and low New Orleans life, and his translations from the French of Gautier, Maupassant, and Loti drew many admirers. His reputation grew. While writing for the New Orleans papers, he attracted the attention of New York literati and was courted by major publishers. He started writing for *Harper's Weekly* and published his first book, *Chita*, with Harper and Brothers. The novella, set on Grand Isle, the favorite vacation refuge of New Orleanians fleeing the unhealthy summer of the city, remains one of the classics of Louisiana literature and has never gone out of print.

In his introduction to *The Selected Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, the editor Malcolm Cowley was by turns critical and complimentary. He found Hearn's writing for newspapers in Cincinnati and New Orleans guilty of "a purple style." Of Hearn's New Orleans novels, Cowley said, "The atmosphere is more important than the story." In the end, Cowley thought that Hearn found his subject in Japan, as well as his identity in Koizumi Yakumo, the name he adopted later in life. In other words, Hearn had completed an epic journey in search of himself, a circular odyssey in both real-time and word-time, as adventure-filled as that of Odysseus and perhaps Homer, but which was not a return to the island where he was born, though it had taken him from one island to another.

Lafcadio's Japanese life began in typically inauspicious fashion when his few contacts promised to find him a job and didn't. The money vaguely promised by *Harper's Weekly* for his reports from Japan never showed up. Death and its shadows preoccupied Hearn his entire life, but they took new meaning in Japan, where death was a starkly defined world. The ghostly world, the activities of the dead, the influence of the dead on the living, the complex Buddhist teachings about death, are in almost every one of Hearn's essays, but are most present in his rendering of Japanese fairy tales, where he found the stories in the abstract Buddhist concepts. These stories were the folk translations of the Buddhist monks and scholars' explanations. They contained the charm and thrill of a mysterious world. Otherworldly mysteries as told by the common folk always interested Hearn and fascinated his readers. In the rich lore of Japanese stories, many of which were told to him by his second wife, Setsu, Hearn found the revelation that death as introduced to Japan by Western ideas was corrupting the Buddhist teachings on death and the afterlife.

In February 1896, Lafcadio Hearn became the Japanese citizen Yakumo Koizumi. Adopted by his Japanese family as a condition for citizenship, he took the family name Koizumi, meaning “little spring,” and chose for his own name Yakumo, meaning “eight clouds,” which was the first word of the “most ancient poem extant in the Japanese language,” as well as one of the names for Izumo, “my beloved province, the place of the Issuing of the Clouds.”

Hearn set himself to the task of studying and translating haiku and tanka, forms of Japanese poetry that made brevity their virtue. Poetry for every occasion, composed spontaneously, solemn or raucous, was part of Japanese life, and a delight for all ages. Folk poetry, the recitation of epics, provided the threads that Hearn seized on when he wrote *Kwaidan*, his first truly Japanese book written in his best English. It was published in 1904, the year of his death.

Everything that might delight a reader in search of Japanese legends, rituals, and beliefs, whether of Shintō or Buddhist origin—the enchantment of the Japanese imaginary, wisdom about nature (which revolves most often around the cherry tree, Japan’s true axis mundi), the feminine forces that rule the universe (certainly Hearn’s magical world), and the many shapes of death and afterlife through animals and spirits—can be found in *Kwaidan*. Distilled here are Hearn’s efforts to find the forms best suited to his multifaceted personalities: his own masks are to be found here, discarded, haunting, or preserved. *Kwaidan* achieved what Hearn intended to find in Japanese culture: a flowing mix of folktales, personal observations, and a marvelous series of essays on insects—it is the work of Hearn-Koizumi, a writer with a double vision, an English-language writer deeply intimate with Japan, or a Japanese storyteller consciously writing in English.

Many of Hearn’s “Japanese” tales were said to be literary transcriptions of Setsu’s storytelling, but they show also the influence of Greek myths and that of Hans Christian Andersen. Some of the tales came from friends and acquaintances. His friends added their own stories to Hearn’s. The differing styles and subjects reflect the times when they were published, and the tastes of their editors, including Hearn himself.

Hearn, even at his most negligent, was consistent in his transcription; his Japanese tales are stark and do not resemble the fairy tales produced by nineteenth-century writers in Europe. Occasionally, for lack of a transition and for touching a chord in his American readers, he invented elements that were closer to the smoky djinnis of the *Thousand and One Nights*, or the monsters of Greek myths, but he rarely employed the repetitions familiar to European readers; instead, he translated brief jingles or occasional poems that were traditional in Japanese stories.

A cursory reading of Japanese fairy tales, scattered throughout Hearn’s books, would tempt one to call them “ghost stories.” Indeed, many collections do just that, and qualify them with an adjective, such as *strange*. They are indeed that, but the attention that the Japanese paid to the afterlife was detailed and absorbing. The afterlife was as populous and eventful as life, but its observation from this shore made it eerie, like the negative of an old film that was forbidden to view. This made it fascinating, of course, but it was of particular interest to Hearn because he had been tossed like a coin from one reality to another, and he made the ghost-world one of his lives. If an afterlife followed him, indeed he would have been hard put to recognize the difference. In dreams, which had always been of particular interest to him, the transition was flawless. Hearn’s recollections of his dreams, and his interpretations of them, make him a protosurrealist. It is odd that he was left out of the surrealist canon by André Breton, who included Hearn’s close kin, Lewis Carroll and Rimbaud. The surrealists did not, most likely, read his work, because it was popular. Obscurity shadows literature, a protective shield that Hearn, who was actually read in his own time, did not possess. Yet, he was obscure in the most fantastic and ghostly way. Like the famous vanishing

details of the stolen painting, Hearn was absorbed by the ghost-world and put to work as its mouthpiece.

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*Excerpted from [Japanese Tales of Lafcadio Hearn](#), edited and introduced by Andrei Codrescu. With a foreword by Jack Zipes. Copyright © 2019 by Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission.*