

Lafcadio Hearn and Haiku

by
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Lafcadio Hearn was born on the Greek island of Santa Maura, originally called Leucadia, in 1850, to an Irish surgeon in the British army and a woman of Maltese ancestry. He and his mother moved to Dublin in 1852 to be with his Irish relatives. His mother went back to Greece two years later leaving Lafcadio in Ireland with a great aunt who sent him to a Catholic school in France in 1862 and the following year to one in England. While there he had a schoolyard accident that left him blind in one eye. His aunt took him out of school in 1867 when she could no longer afford it. He was given enough money to sail to America. When he arrived in Cincinnati in 1869, he found himself on his own. His aunt had led him to expect help from some people there, but it failed to materialize. While working at odd jobs he learned to set type, which led to work as assistant editor of a trade journal and as a proofreader. He started doing freelance work for newspapers and became a fulltime reporter for the *Cincinnati Enquirer* in 1874, earning a reputation for writing about crimes featuring elements of gore and horror. All his life he was interested in the odd and grotesque and translated many ghost stories and tales of the unusual. He also coedited a literary magazine while in Cincinnati.

He went to New Orleans to live in 1877 and stayed for ten years. He found newspaper work there, wrote essays he called “fantastics,” did translations of French authors, and published his first book in 1882: *One of Cleopatra's Nights and Other Fantastic Romances*. In 1884 he published *Stray Leaves from Strange Literature*, an anthology of tales from various lands, and in 1887 *Some Chinese Ghosts*. However, he is best known for his books about Japan, all of which he wrote after going there in 1890. Hearn was one of the first Westerners to read and appreciate haiku. Even in works he wrote before he went to Japan and discovered haiku one finds sections that reveal he already possessed, to some degree, the haiku spirit. His close awareness of nature and the world around him, combined with a love and facility for language, led him to write a number of descriptive passages that show the sensitive perceptions of a haiku poet. There are several in his first novel, *Chita*, written in the 1880s when he was living in New Orleans and working on various writing projects for *Harper's* and other magazines and newspapers. He sold it to *Harper's Monthly* in 1887. It is a story about a great storm among the islands off the coast of Louisiana in the Gulf of Mexico. Some of the descriptions of the Gulf sea and sky show how sensorially intimate Hearn was in his relationship with nature. The visual and aural aspects of these scenes are deeply felt and skillfully expressed. As an avid and expert swimmer, he was able to experience being in the midst of the sea far from shore and he conveys the tactile impressions he felt there in vivid and tangible prose:

Perhaps, if a bold swimmer, you may venture out a long way—once! Not twice!—even in company. As the water deepens beneath you, and you feel those ascending wavecurrents of coldness arising which bespeak profundity, you will also begin to feel innumerable touches, as of groping fingers—touches of the bodies of fish, innumerable fish, fleeing toward shore. The farther you advance, the more thickly you will feel them come; and above you and around you, to right and left, others will leap and fall so swiftly as to daze the sight, like intercrossing fountainjets of fluid silver. The gulls fly lower about you, circling with

sinister squeaking cries;—perhaps for an instant your feet touch in the deep something heavy, swift, lithe, that rushes past with a swirling shock. Then the fear of the Abyss, the vast and voiceless Nightmare of the Sea, will come upon you; the silent panic of all those opaline millions that flee glimmering by will enter into you also.

This is too subjective and florid for haiku, but I think the haiku's way of making palpable in words a sense of immediacy and direct contact with the forces of nature comes through in this passage. Though the description of the swimmer's situation has to struggle in some waves of sensationalism, carried over from Hearn's newspaper writing, it does create a scene of remarkable clarity. Shortly after publishing this short novel (he wrote only one other), Hearn spent two years living in the West Indies, and then, after brief stays in New York and Philadelphia in 1899, he, went on his fateful journey to Japan. The purpose of the trip was to write a book for *Harper's* about the culture of the Japanese and their way of life. He was at once charmed and fascinated with the country, its customs, and its people. He became a citizen of Japan, taking both a Japanese wife and a Japanese name. He taught English literature in various schools both public and private and published the books on which his modest fame rests: books in English on Japan, its culture, art, and literature. The books often included translations of Japanese works of both prose and poetry. At the same time Hearn continued to write articles for American magazines and newspapers. He was to remain in Japan until his death in 1904.

He may have been the first to write in English about haiku as an important literary form and to translate them with respect and understanding. His friend Basil Chamberlain, another early translator, referred to them slightly as epigrams. Yet even Hearn could at times be puzzled by the simplicity of Japanese haiku and be troubled with a feeling that they failed to live up to the literary expectations of Western readers. His writings on the subject vacillate from apologies for their not giving us the kinds of philosophical speculation about the natural world found in Western literature to words of praise for haiku's unique way of creating a direct awareness of nature. He put this appreciation in more emotional terms, however, often using the word "delight" to describe the Japanese haiku poet's reaction to nature. He did not use the term "haiku" either, since Masaoka Shiki had only recently begun to popularize the term at the time Hearn was writing his books on the subject. To Hearn, they were still hokku.

In *A Japanese Miscellany* (1901), he says of the twentyeight dragonfly haiku he has just translated:

Of course these compositions make but slight appeal to aesthetic sentiment: they are merely curious for the most part. But they help us to understand something of the soul of the elder Japan. The people who could find delight, century after century, in watching the ways of insects, and in making such verses about them, must have comprehended, better than we, the simple pleasure of existence. They could not, indeed, describe the magic of nature as our great Western poets have done; but they could feel the beauty of the world without its sorrow, and rejoice in the beauty, much after the manner of inquisitive and happy children.

Here, Hearn gives praise with one hand and takes it away with the other.

A more positive and consistently expressed insight into the value of haiku is the following passage from an essay "Bits of Poetry" that appeared in Hearn's *In Ghostly Japan* (1899):

The common artprinciple of the class of poems under present consideration is identical with the common principle of Japanese pictorial illustration. By the use of a few chosen words the composer of a short poem endeavors to do exactly what the painter endeavors to do with a few strokes of the brush—to evoke an image or a mood—to revive a sensation or emotion. And the accomplishment of this purpose—by poet or by picturemaker—depends altogether upon capacity to suggest, and only to suggest. A Japanese artist would be

condemned for attempting elaboration of detail in a sketch intended to recreate the memory of some landscape seen through the blue haze of a spring morning, or under the great blond light of an autumn afternoon. Not only would he be false to the traditions of his art: he would necessarily defeat his own end thereby. In the same way a poet would be condemned for attempting any completeness of utterance in a very short poem: his object should be only to stir the imagination without satisfying it. So the term *ittakkiri*—meaning “all gone,” or “entirely vanished,” in the sense of “all told”—is contemptuously applied to verses in which the verse-maker has uttered his whole thought;—praise being reserved for compositions that leave in the mind the thrilling of a something unsaid. Like the single stroke of a temple-bell, the perfect short poem should set murmuring and undulating, in the mind of the hearer, many a ghostly aftertone of long duration” (pp. 313-14).

In spite of his seeming acceptance of this principle, Hearn in his translations is not willing to trust readers of English to have the insight or awareness to appreciate this suggestiveness of haiku. An awareness that he and the Japanese reader apparently have when they read the originals. So in most of his translations he tries to explain or describe with added words what he believes is suggested by the Japanese.

Arthur E. Kunst in his valuable book, *Lafcadio Hearn* (1969), shows by an incisive and thorough analysis of Hearn’s translations of haiku where and how the translator failed to fulfill his own standards. However, Kunst’s choice of the word “wit” to describe the literary values inherent in haiku is lamentably inappropriate. It recalls Chamberlain’s insensitive characterization of them as epigrams and demonstrates how inadequate our own history of literary criticism has been, until very recently, in providing terms and intellectual theories with which we can discuss and appreciate the aesthetic values to be found in works so simple and direct—and short—as haiku. Kunst also describes haiku as presenting “ideas,” when it would be more accurate to say a haiku presents sensory objects or images. After praising a prose piece by Hearn about climbing Mount Fuji, Kunst writes:

Such artfulness with the literature of travel makes all the more puzzling Hearn’s apparent inability to respond to the wit in Japanese poetry. During the course of most of the final eight volumes of his literary career . . . Hearn was a collector of insects and poetry, usually in the same piece since one was the excuse for the other . . . what is curious is that he never found a means for conveying in an English statement the peculiar, artful combination of sensation and wit so characteristic of the short Japanese poem. For a man so aware of the potentialities of the order of impressions in a story to be so indifferent to the order of brief ideas in a poem is incredible; and yet his translations (or, since he was always publicly modest, even distressed, about his “equivalents,” his prose transcriptions) almost inevitably lose the thrill which he himself analyzes deftly in his notes. None of these anthologies of poems and insects have more than a mild and pleasant taste to them; they are catchalls for a kind of mania for small objects and for Hearn’s contemplation of them. (page 102).

Kunst then quotes part of the passage by Hearn on suggestiveness that I quoted above; remarking that

[Hearn] insists vividly upon the necessity of the poet’s leaving the matter incomplete in his poem . . . Yet most of his versions in the same work are one or two flat, completed sentences.” He then quotes two examples, including “Happy Poverty” (Hearn sometimes adds his own interpretive titles, which frustrate the suggestiveness of the originals even more): “Wafted into my room, the scent of the flowers of the plum tree/Changes my broken

window into a source of delight.

Kunst continues:

The more literal and fragmentary [Hearn] becomes (and this happens only occasionally), the more highly suggestive is his English version. For example, we have this famous poem from “Frogs”: “Old pond—frogs jumping in—sound of water.” The implications of Bashô’s contrast between the still, ancient water and momentary, lively animals is particularly resilient in Hearn’s brief resurrection because he chooses the option of making frogs plural and then of reverting to the singular for the delicate balance in the last line . . . Or there is this “mere thumbnail sketch” from “Bits of Poetry:”

*Furu-dera ya:
Kané mono iwazu;
Sakura chiru.*

Old temple: bell voiceless; cherry-flowers fall

There are the reverberating strokes upon a canvas which Hearn describes in the originals—not the bland, finished English water-colors he ordinarily gives us.

In the above quotation from Kunst I have corrected a mistake in the translation of the frog poem. In Kunst it is “frogs jumped in,” but Hearn actually translated it correctly, using the present participle to put the image in the present, now, where most haiku occur. The original, in the essay “Frogs” from *Exotics and Retrospectives* (1898), has parentheses around the translation as well as quotation marks. (As in the case of the templebell haiku above, Hearn does not always give the name of the poet.) Kunst also faults Hearn for reversing the order of the imagery in a number of his translations: “The form of the short poem is often like a joke: it has the unexpected twist which is revealed as perfectly just. If the punchline comes first, how is one to be startled into thoughtfulness?”

The ways Hearn arranged the originals of the haiku and his translations on the page are important for they were to have an effect on subsequent translators and, ultimately, though indirectly, on the way poets writing in English would arrange the lines of their haiku. His usual habit was first to quote the original haiku in three lines of rōmaji arranged with the first and third lines indented and then the translation immediately under it. The translation was usually in one or two lines of prose, but quite often he would write it in two lines of verse, rough hexameters, mixing iambic and anapestic feet, as he does in the following example from his essay “Semi” in *Shadowings* (1900):

Sémi no tatsu,
Ato suzushisa yo!
Matsu no koë.

—Baijaku.

When the sémi cease their storm, oh, how refreshing the stillness!
Gratefully then resounds the musical speech of the pines.

These verse translations, signaled by the initial caps in both lines, are probably his worst attempts, for he pads out the original to get the six feet of his chosen verse form as well as following his usual practice of adding words to “explain” the poem. A more literal translation might read:

when the cicadas cease
what coolness!

the voice of the pines

Hearn feels he has to add to the original to make sure his readers realize the contrast, already suggested, between the loudness of the cicadas and the refreshing stillness of their silence, implied in the Japanese by the word “coolness.” The stillness lets us hear the sound of the breeze in the pines. The breeze is also suggested by “coolness” and by “voice(s).” (Like the word haiku, which is its own plural, Japanese nouns can often be read as either singular or plural.) Though the original uses only voice(s), Hearn elaborates with “musical speech.” He drags in “Gratefully then resounds” out of nowhere to make his translation seem more poetic. Of course, the addition only gets in the way of the original image, blurring it, (Unnecessarily, he also uses “oh” for emphasis to match “yo” in the original. The “yo” acts as a verbal exclamation point, and he uses a regular one in his translation as well. One of a group of particles called *kireji* or cutting words, used in haiku to give emphasis, to mark a mood, act as a possessive, indicate a pause, etc., such “words” do not usually function as words with a literal meaning, but as a kind of punctuation. The exclamation point Hearn has put after “yo” in the Japanese *rômaj*i is, of course, not in the original.)

Here is another example:

Kagéroishi
Kumo mata satté
Sémi no koë.

—Kitô.

Gone the shadowing clouds—again the shrilling of sémi
Rises and slowly swells,—ever increasing the heat!

Heat is not even mentioned in the original, only suggested. How much better if he had pared it down to something closer to the Japanese, such as:

Taking the shade
the clouds have gone
cicadas’ voices

Though Hearn’s beginnings with haiku were helpful to later scholars and intrigued a number of poets early in the 20th century they did not reveal the depth and awareness of the originals and as a result the birth of American haiku had to wait for the great translations and interpretations of R. H. Blyth and Harold Henderson that came after the mid20th century. As Kunst says:

[Hearn’s haiku translations] do not any longer redeem themselves as poetic intermediaries. If they did once, for the dissatisfied young poets of the turn of the century, we can only remark that most of these transcriptions, those from the sophisticated tradition, lacked the poetic heart of the originals and their intricate structural wit. From all those hundreds, we would want to rescue only one or two . . . (page 107).

Hearn must have been an influence on the great British translator of haiku, R. H. Blyth, whose four-volume *Haiku*, published from 1949 to 1952, was a seminal work in starting the American haiku movement. Blyth was able to fulfill in his translations the ideals of suggestiveness that Hearn praised in the originals; ideals Hearn himself was rarely able to achieve in his own renderings. Hearn’s three-line arrangement for the *rômaj*i of the original Japanese poems was adopted by Blyth for his English

translations. Above the translation, Blyth put the *rômaj*i in a single line, two or three character spaces separating each of the three parts. A couple of examples will show how Blyth improved on Hearn's translations. They also, along with many more I've come across, would seem to indicate that Blyth had at times Hearn's translations in mind, or in front of him, when he worked out his own. Words and phrases, as in the first of the following, seem too close to be accidental. I will not repeat the *rômaj*i. The Blyth translation follows the Hearn:

Té no hira wo
Hau ashi miyuru
Hotaru kana!

Oh, this firefly!—as it crawls on the palm of my
hand, its legs are visible [by its own light]!

The fire-fly;
As it crawls on my palm,
Its legs are visible.

—Banko

Akénuréba,
Kusa no ha nomi zo
Hotaru-kago.

With the coming of dawn, indeed, there is nothing
visible but grass in the cage of the firefly.

When dawn comes,
Only grass
In the fire-fly cage.

—Onchô

The brackets in the first haiku are Hearn's. In the second Hearn example, I've corrected a few printer's errors in the *rômaj*i. Both examples from Hearn are from *Kottô* (1902), both of Blyth's are from *Haiku*, Vol. 3, pages 218 and 219, I've come across only two translations of haiku by Hearn that are in three lines. They are both in *Shadowings* and are on cicadas. Here is one of them (Hearn does not give the author, but it seems to be a takeoff on a famous haiku by Bashô, which is about the voice of a cicada sinking into a rock):

Into the wood of the pine-tree
Seems to soak
The voice of the sémi.

It is interesting that he has the lines all flush left, the most common form used today for English-language haiku. Blyth's indented form has not been popular. Blyth when translating *senryu* (a kind of haiku about human nature rather than nature itself) reversed his indenting. He indented the second line of his three-line translations. Jack Kerouac when writing his original English-language haiku adopted this kind of lineation, almost certainly taking it from the Blyth precedent. For a long time a staggered indentation (line 2 indented then line 3 indented from that) was popular with American haiku poets. O. Southard always wrote in this form and Nick Virgilio started writing his haiku that way, continuing to do so for some years before changing to the flush-left form. When Virgilio published his *Selected Haiku* in 1988, he followed a suggestion by his editor and recast the line arrangement of all his earlier

haiku to match his later work.

At least one of Hearn's translations ends with no punctuation, the temple-bell haiku quoted above. I've not found any others. It is presented this way perhaps because it is so fragmentary, though it is possible a period was left out due to a printer's error. This open-endedness is employed by almost all writers of English-language haiku today. In trying to define haiku, Hearn writes in *Japanese Miscellany* (page 97) that "Almost the only rule about hokku—not at all a rigid one,—is that the poem shall be a little word-picture,—that it shall revive the memory of something seen or felt,—that it shall appeal to some experience of sense." It is only after stumbling over the patronizing sentiments of "little word-picture" and "reviv[ing] memor[ies]" that he gets to the essence of haiku: an "experience of sense." He says something similar in his "Frogs" essay: "The triumph of this extremely brief form of verse—(three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables respectively)—is to create one complete sensation-picture; and Bashô's original accomplishes the feat,—difficult, if not impossible, to repeat in English." He then quotes Bashô's "old pond" and gives his own translation. (See above in the passage from Kunst.)

When Hearn trusts his reader and keeps his translation short and simple, he can capture the elusive magic of the original, as he does (in seventeen syllables!) in the following from *A Japanese Miscellany* (page 108—poet not cited):

Hiatari no
Doté ya hinémosu
Tombô tobu.

Over the sunlit bank, all day long,
the dragonflies flit to and fro.