

Lafcadio Hearn and “Orpheus”

—His art, literature and retold stories of old Japan—

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The name of Lafcadio Hearn, or rather Koizumi Yakumo, which is the name he adopted when he became a Japanese citizen, is best known in Japan through his re-told Japanese legends and folktales, many of which are ghost stories. The book *Kwaidan*, of which the title means weird tales, is probably the most famous of all his works. It is a collection of Japanese strange stories, re-written in English, and it was published in 1904, the year of his death. It was in fact his last book, excluding those published posthumously.

My aim here is to focus on the top story in this book, which also happens to be the best known one: “The Story of Mimi-nashi-Hōichi” (which means, Hōichi the Ear-less)

I would like to indicate how Lafcadio Hearn had projected the image of a Greek mythological figure, namely Orpheus, onto a seemingly genuine Japanese medieval character, and moreover, what meaning this story bears, for the author himself and also in relation to his place in the history of literature.

Before going into details of the story, we should first confirm what distinguishes this last book *Kwaidan*, from his other former works.

From the year 1890, when he was 40 years old, he spent the last 14 years of his life in Japan, with his Japanese family, and as a professor of English and English literature. In these 14 years, he published 13 books on Japan.

Many of his works, including the ones written in his American days,

are sketches and miscellaneous narrative essays. In these, we can see the diversity of his interest in non-Western cultures, non-Christian religions, the supernatural, the grotesque, and exotic fantasies and folklore, mingled together. His first book on Japan, the two volumed *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (1894) shows the accomplishment of his writing style, of which the main characteristic is that, within the basic outer form of a travel sketch, or a diary-like essay, he interposes interesting episodes, old legends, traditional customs and popular beliefs of the district, adding to them his own speculations. This style is not only attractive as a piece of literature, but also effective in incorporating a living image of a foreign culture.

It may be true that his writings are not systematic, and his interpretation of Japanese culture may have constantly been attacked by authoritative scholars of Japanology. But still, he was able to depict not only the nature and culture of an exotic land but the inner life of a people through his unique style. And we can see here in this method of his, the author's belief that something very essential that touches the core of a culture and depths of man's mind, lies within such small minor details as legends, customs, religious beliefs and folklore.

In *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, inserted in between the travel essays, we find the first examples of old Japanese stories, re-told by Lafcadio Hearn himself.

His fundamental stance as a writer stayed the same over his years in Japan, but we may point out one major change.

That is, year by year, he seems to have become more inclined to introducing his re-told versions of Japanese ghost stories. The numbers of such tales included in his books keep increasing, till finally we get to *Kwaidan*, his last book, which was totally dedicated to such stories.

Now, keeping this in mind, I would like to draw your attention to

“The Story of Ear-less Hôichi”.

It is a story of the strange experience of Hôichi, a blind minstrel biwa player who chants the tragedy of the Heiké clan. (the biwa is a kind of a four-stringed lute, chiefly used in musical recitative.)

This story is, as I mentioned before, the opening piece of the book. And according to his wife’s recollections, it was his favorite.

It begins like this:

“More than 700 years ago, at Dan-no-ura, in the straits of Shimonoseki, was fought the last battle of the long contest between the Heiké clan and the Genji clan. There the Heiké perished utterly, with their women and children, and their infant emperor likewise.And that sea and shore have been haunted for 700 years..... there are many strange things to be seen and heard along that coast. On dark nights thousands of ghostly fires hover about the beach, or flit above the waves. ...and whenever the winds are up, a sound of great shouting comes from that sea, like a clamour of battle.”

Dan-no-ura and the straits of Shimonoseki are located at the western end of the Inland Sea of Japan. In this beautiful quiet sea, surrounded by the mainland and the two big islands of Kyushu and Shikoku, with many small islands inbetween, many historical battles were fought, the most famous of them being the ones here cited.

As for the war between the two clans that divided medieval Japan, the dramatic battles, the heroic episodes, the romances of princes and warriors of both sides, and the tragic fall of the Heiké reign became beloved epics recited and chanted by anonymous professional minstrels, which were eventually compiled into the famous Heiké Saga.

Now, with this historical sea and the Heiké legend as the background setting, the story goes on:

Hôichi is a blind minstrel, with a wonderful skill in playing the biwa and reciting the Heiké tragedy. He lives in a Buddhist temple nearby the sea. This temple happened to be erected in order to appease the dead Heike, and memorials for them were set up within its grounds.

One summer midnight, Hôichi is alone and he is visited by a strange samurai warrior. He says his lord, hearing Hôichi's reputation, wishes to listen to his performance, and commands Hoichi to follow him. Now, Hôichi is blind. He can not see, but it seems to be a large residence of a person of high rank.

Hôichi chants the highlight scene of the tragedy, and the noble audience is extremely impressed and moved by his wonderful performance. Hôichi is required to come again to recite the rest of the Saga.

However, Hôichi's strange behaviour is to be noticed, and the priest of the temple, worried, orders men to follow him. And that night, he is discovered in the cemetery of the temple, sitting alone before the memorial tomb of the Heiké, making his Biwa resound, and loudly chanting the chant of the battle of Dan-no-ura. And all around him, and everywhere above the tombs, the fires of the dead are burning like candles.

Hôichi is taken back to the temple. The priest, in order to save him from the ghosts, traces upon the whole body of Hôichi — the chest, the back, the head, hands, feet, all over — the text of the holy sutra, and tells him to wait for the samurai ghost. The holy sutra will protect him, and make him invisible. When the ghost, not being able to find him, gives up and leaves, then Hoichi will be saved. But if he should move or cry out, he will be torn to pieces.

Night comes. He dares not move, but it happened that the priest had forgotten Hôichi's ears. The two ears, with no holy words written on them, are detected by the ghost, and are torn off violently. The pain is great, but Hôichi gives no cry. Thus he passes the danger, and since then, known by the appellation of 'Hôichi the Ear-less', his fame spreads far and wide.

This is the gist of the story. It is full of frightening elements as a ghost story. Many people find the suspense in the last scene especially effective.

However, the story of Hōichi differs from many other Japanese ghost stories by Hearn, in one aspect: the ghosts appear only to Hōichi, but he has done them no wrong to earn their anger or enmity. Furthermore, there is no predestined connection between them, either in this world or in any former state of birth.

This difference is quite important. For, one of the reasons why Hearn continued re-telling Japanese old ghost stories, besides his own personal innate attachment to the supernatural unseen world, was that the topic of ghosts was linked with the Japanese notion of death and rebirth, in other words, the notion of the inevitable relationship that binds the living and the dead, and the idea of destiny as determined by one’s past deeds (usually called “Karma” or “Ingwa” in Buddhist terms). And this is what he had a strong interest in. But, in “Ear-less Hōichi”, unlike the other weird tales, there are no such elements.

Then, why was this story his favorite as his wife said, and what was special about it that made him place it as the opening piece of the book *Kwaidan* ?

The answer to this, I believe, lies in the characterization of Hōichi, and the role he is given in the story.

Now, the story of Hōichi is a re-told version, which means there is an original Japanese text. This is found in *Gayu-Kidan*, an anthology of miscellaneous tales compiled in the 1780’s. The original piece, written in old classical Japanese, is very brief. The book itself being a forgotten minor publication of the Tokugawa Era, the tale was quite unknown, until

Hearn discovered it.

Hearn did not just collect materials as a folklorist, presenting them as they were. In most cases, he modified and improved the original tale in his more artistic English adaptation.

I cannot here go into every detail of the difference between the original text and Hearn’s version. I will just explain the major parts Hearn modified intentionally. Because through these modifications, we can see what he wished to emphasize, and what he wished to convey as a story writer.

The most conspicuous dramatization added by Hearn, is the scene in which Hôichi chants his song in front of the ghostly audience. In the original text, it is only one short sentence, stating that the audience, impressed by Hôichi’s performance, starts to weep when it comes to the part of their death. But Hearn narrates it like this:

“Then Hôichi lifted up his voice, and chanted the chant of the fight on the bitter sea — wonderfully making his Biwa to sound like the straining of oars and the rushing of ships, the whirr and and the hissing of arrows, the shouting and trampling of men, the crashing of steel upon helmets, the plunging of slain in the flood. And to left and right of him, in the pauses of his playing, he could hear voices murmuring praise: ‘How marvellous an artist!’ ‘Never in our own province was playing heard like this!’ ‘Not in all the empire is there another singer like Hôichi!’ Then fresh courage came to him, and he played and sang yet better than before; and a hush of wonder deepened about him. But when at last he came to tell the fate of the fair and helpless — the piteous perishing of the women and children — then all the listeners uttered together one long, long shuddering cry of anguish; and thereafter they wept and wailed so loudly and so wildly that the blind man was frightened by the violence of the grief that he had made.”

This scene is not only longer and more descriptive than the original; but here, Hōichi is clearly depicted, not just as a minstrel, but as an outstandingly gifted artist.

And it is solely the power of his music, the power of his art, and not anything to do with resentment or the Japanese notion of death and fate, that brings the ghosts of Heiké to him.

I believe, his role in the story becomes more evident, and his characterization can be better understood, when juxtaposed with the Greek Orpheus.

When some minutes ago, I spoke to you about the location of the Inland Sea of Japan, its historical and literal connotations, and about the Heiké Saga, some of you may have been reminded of the Aegean Sea and all the heroic epics of ancient Greece.

It is very natural to think that Hearn felt the same way too.

As is well known and repeatedly pointed out, Hearn loved his Greek mother; he had a love for Greek things, especially ancient Greek culture, throughout his life. One of his motives in coming to Japan, was that, having read *Kojiki*, the book of Japanese mythology translated by B.S. Chamberlain, he associated the ancient world of Japanese gods with that of Greece. So, in his travel sketches of Izumo, the province of ancient mythology, and in the description of the oldest Shinto shrine there, he uses attributes mentioning the similarity to the Greek world. Later on, at Tokyo University, he lectured to the students that the only two peoples that have poetry dealing with the music of insects, are the Greeks and the Japanese. Ancestor-worship was another common feature Hearn fondly pointed out between Japan and ancient Greece.

A man of such mentality, and whose favorite book as a boy had been Charles Kingsley's *The Heroes, or Greek Fairy Tales for my Children* (1856), was sure to detect, in the story of Hōichi, certain elements very similar to that of Orpheus.

For example, we see the legendary sea in the background of both stories. Both Hōichi and Orpheus are especially gifted musicians. They sing, and play the lute and the lyre miraculously. And their music has the mystic power to move the hearts of supernatural beings, such as the ghosts of Heiké in Hōichi’s case, and in Orpheus, stormy winds and waves, the witch Siren, the guards of Hell, and Pluto, the king of the underworld. When Hōichi tried to escape from singing for the Heiké, his ears were ripped off, and when Orpheus didn’t feel like singing anymore after he lost his wife, he was torn to pieces by the women of Thrace. Both of them were attacked by their angry former audience because they attempted to quit their roles as musicians.

Orpheus, needless to say, is a symbolical figure of an artist in the literary tradition of the West. When Lafcadio Hearn, a half-Greek, half-Irish writer, got to know the original story of Hōichi, his imagination must have been stimulated and the figure of Orpheus aroused, thus projecting the image onto Hōichi’s character.

We have read, in the climactic scene where Hōichi chants in front of the Heike, how the ghostly audience repeats words of highest praise.

“How marvellous an artist!” This is the key phrase, that Hearn inserted. And we here perceive that Hōichi is made to represent the figure of a true artist who is gifted with a special power.

Then, what exactly is true about his art, what is the power of his music?

Is it that his songs are so beautiful that the audience are moved to tears? No, not just that.

Then, is it the mystic power to communicate with the supernatural just like Orpheus?

We may see in Orpheus an archetype of an artist. He sings to the winds and trees, the animals, and the gods and goblins and brings reconciliation between man and the universe. If this is the archetype, then what

about the art of Hôichi?

We now must go back and take a closer look at the scene of Hôichi’s performance.

When Hôichi starts to chant the battle on the sea, he makes his biwa actually sound like “the straining of the oars, and rushing of the ships, the hissing of he arrows” and so on. Here, he reproduces and visualizes the whole battle, with a power that fascinates the listeners.

Hôichi does not yet know at this point of time, that the audience are the ghosts of Heiké. He does not doubt that he is in a nobleman’s residence, and that is because the ghosts make the blind man imagine so, through the many sounds they let Hôichi hear, such as their soft, noble voices, the rustling of silk robes, the opening of the gate and the doors, screens sliding, feet hurrying, etc. In other words, they are visualized, and they revived themselves in Hôichi’s imagination, as if responding to his music.

And of course, it is the power of Hôichi’s art that enables them to revive. Hôichi does not sing just any song. He chants their story, their story of the past, that would have faded away, if not for him.

In the beginning of the tale, it is explained why the temple Amidaji was erected: in order to appease the spirits of the dead. Here Hearn adds an account of his own: that “in former years, the Heiké were much more restless than they now are. They would rise about ships passing in the night, and try to sink them; and at all times they would watch for swimmers, to pull them down.” But, “After the temple had been built” and “Buddhist services were regularly performed there, on behalf of the spirits”, “the Heiké gave less trouble than before.” Which nevertheless means that, their existence as ghosts has weakened and that they are losing power.

But, when Hôichi chanted their story, you remember, “all the listeners uttered together one long, long shuddering cry of anguish; and thereafter

they wept and wailed so loudly and so wildly that the blind man was frightened by the violence of the grief that he had made.”

Now, the traditional role of the medieval biwa minstrels, who had their heads shaven and wore robes like Buddhist priests, was to appease the spirits of the dead, to help them quietly rest in peace. But Hôichi, instead of doing that, stirs up once-forgotten violent passions. By reproducing the original battle scene, he evokes the half-asleep spirits, revitalizes them, gives them visual shape, and installs into them renewed life.

Thus, Hôichi and the spirits, that is, the artist and the audience, the present and the past, this world and the other world, are here not only in tune with each other, but respond to each other, creating together an intimate world.

I suppose you all may have noticed, now, that when Hôichi reproduces the original battle scene, he is, in fact, re-telling the original story.

It is this re-telling act of Hôichi, this revitalizing effect of his art, that is rewarded with the words of praise.

And here, we can perceive the self-confidence of Lafcadio Hearn himself as an artist engaged in re-telling old legends and folktales.

Therefore, the placing of this story at the beginning of *Kwaidan*, must have been significant. It was meant to be a sort of a manifesto of re-told literature, which was in fact the genre Hearn intentionally chose as the final goal of his literary career.

In the 19th Century, and perhaps even now, the value of a piece of literature depended solely on its originality, the creativity and genius of the author. It was the age of the individual, and Western culture itself esteemed the inventive capacity of the person.

As mentioned at the beginning of this speech, Hearn left us miscellaneous writings, including travel sketches, studies of Japanese culture,

works of folklore and retold legends. But he did not write poetry, novels or plays, which were and still are considered the mainstream of literature. (though he did attempt two novels.) This makes him difficult to accommodate within the context of literary history, and is, one of the several causes of the constant ambiguity of his evaluation and fluctation in his reputation throughout the years up to now.

However, the story of Hôichi suggests, that Hearn had been well aware of the situation of literature, and his place in it, and that he believed in and stood for the intrinsic values of retold literature; that is, by constantly re-telling and therefore reviving the spirits of the past, thus he could build bridges for them to the future. These are values of a completely different nature from that of modern Western literature, which prizes creativity.

And I believe that it was his attachment to his image of ancient Greece on the one hand, and his understanding of Japanese culture on the other hand, that enabled him to be free from the views of 19th century Europe.

“The story of Mimi-nashi-Hôichi”, seemingly an old Japanese ghost story, but in fact a recreation of Lafcadio Hearn, has spread widely and deeply into the imagination of the Japanese people. Even children who do not know the name of Hearn, know the story. This itself is an amazing fact.

Today, I have tried to explain the elements I believe to constitute the charm and power of this story.

Primarily, the picturesque quality of the highlight scene of Hôichi’s performance, which I have quoted.

There is the dark midnight sea, with demon-fires fluttering like innumerable candle-lights. Over this sea, there is the ancient tragic drama of the battles fought. And we see the noblemen of the court, all clad in mag-

nificent medieval garment. These two visionary scenes are superimposed over the dark sea like fantastic tapestry hanging in the night sky. And in the midst of all this, we have the figure of the artist.

Secondly, in retelling the original story, Hearn has secretly added a Greek touch, mingling it with the Orpheus myth. The story of Hôichi can be read as Hearn’s version of Orpheus, as his ‘self-portrait of the artist’.

And finally, what this story conveys: the confidence and self-awareness of Lafcadio Hearn as a literary artist, whose re-told literature may have more significance now at the end of the 20th century, when established values and concepts of literature are being more or less questioned.

Notes:

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“The Story of Mimi-Nashi-Hôichi”, cited from *Lafcadio Hearn: Japan’s Great Interpreter — a new anthology of his writings: 1894-1904*, ed. by Louis Allen, Japan Library, London, 1992