

Lafcadio Hearn and the City

Part II : Japan

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The periods of Lafcadio Hearn's life, both before and after arriving in Japan, have come to be designated by the names of the places he inhabited, and it has become common to see the arc of his career largely in terms of geography. Scholars of Hearn talk about the Cincinnati period, the Matsue period, each place evoking in the mind a slightly different Hearn, *where* he was defining *who* he was. Indeed, the issue of place, of where to settle down to live and work, was perhaps especially acute in him because, since the age of two, he had never really had a home country, let alone a hometown. In fact, the sense of his location, of where he was in the world and where he wanted to be, was so powerful in him that each city's Hearn seems to us to be almost a different person. In the first part of this essay, "Part I: Europe and America," I examined the relevant passages in his private letters and published essays to show how Hearn's feelings toward the various cities he had inhabited revealed or clarified certain aspects of his mind and personality. With one exception, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, he gradually developed a definite preference for small communities over large ones, for the old-fashioned over the modern, for southern over northern, for less civilized places over more civilized ones, for the provincial over the cosmopolitan, with a hot climate, abundant natural beauty, and proximity to large, swim-able bodies of water also emerging as important considerations. When he reached Japan in the spring of 1890, he was still searching for the perfect place of residence. This paper continues to analyze Hearn's attitudes toward cities and suggests that his strong feelings about all of the places he resided in Japan may well have been influenced by his experiences of urban life prior to coming to Japan. Ultimately, knowing what he wrote about the Japanese cities he inhabited — Yokohama, Matsue, Kumamoto, Kobe, and Tokyo — and some of the cities he visited — Kyoto and Osaka — can deepen our insight into his ever-changing thoughts and state of mind.

YOKOHAMA

Hearn's initial steps on Japanese soil were taken in the city of Yokohama, where he arrived by ship on April 4, 1890. As the very first place he inhabited in Japan, Yokohama was special: it gave him the freshest impressions he would ever have of Japanese culture. With no other Japanese place to compare it with, he used it in "My First Day in the Orient" as a representative specimen of all Japan and Japanese culture, treating it generically, never referring to it as a specific locale, "Yokohama," but as "the Japanese city." So far as he knew, or perhaps even cared to know, the Yokohama that he saw was typical of all Japan. Actually, it was rather atypical in that it was an open port, one of several in which foreigners were allowed to live, and by far the largest. It was built, as Peter McIvor has noted, specifically to accommodate foreigners, and it even had a special justice system to include "extra-territorials."¹ Later Hearn would express clear disdain for life in such Westernized places, even though he occasionally longed to return to Western people and ways, but in the first heady days and months of his Japanese life, the Japanese quarter of this "Anteroom to Japan," as biographer Stevenson has called it, was almost a private theme-park in its novelty and power to charm him. As the springboard from which the great cross-cultural drama of his life began, Yokohama provides a basis against which the subsequent development of Hearn's cross-cultural awareness can be measured, and what he said about it offers insight into Hearn's own mental landscape.

The city of Yokohama naturally became the stage and scenic backdrop for his debut Japanese essay, "My First Day in the Orient," providing him with fresh thoughts and sightseeing delights so numerous that it took over thirty pages for

him to describe the best of them. The reader is with him as Hearn rides jauntily in a jinrikisha through “funny little streets” whose vistas offer “an allurement of which I fancy that I could never weary” (V, 4).² But not much is actually particular to Yokohama city. The “low, light, queerly gabled wooden houses” and the “tiny shops, with their matted floors well raised above the street,” the “low, narrow, luminous streets,” the temples, the trees, the “topazine light” of the sky—all of these might have been found in nearly any sizeable town in Japan. Though he may have wondered, newbie Hearn had no way of knowing how peculiar to Yokohama any of what he saw might be.

In what has since become a cliché in writing about Japan, Hearn described the non-European parts of Yokohama as diminutive, an exotic “World of Elves” (V, 10), but as a modern port city Yokohama also bore numerous signs of Western influence in the “tiny white telegraph poles” and sewing-machine shops that dotted its by-ways. Hearn’s descriptions of the sea, sky, green hills, and views of Mt. Fuji were among his most vivid impressions of that city, but, as mentioned above, he was conscious of them only as characteristics of the larger landscape of Japan in general. It was only with his removal to Matsue that Hearn was gradually able to compare cities and gain some perspective on the particular characteristics of a given place.

Although he wrote sketches about trips to Kyoto, Osaka, and Hakata, among others, the only Japanese cities Hearn had inhabited and then wrote essays about revisiting were Yokohama and Matsue. These nostalgia trips were actually closer to personal philosophical studies, enquiries into the nature of human experience, than they were travel essays. Describing Hearn’s own mental landscape more than that of the city he was revisiting, these literary efforts signified, in Paul Auster’s words, “the act of writing as the act of memory.”³ Revisiting Yokohama five years after leaving it was a lesson in the nature of illusion: feeling the same April warmth and looking up at the same blue sky, Hearn was able to relive something of those first days; the familiar quality of light and air enabled him to imagine that nothing had changed. But as the theme of “In Yokohama” makes clear, he quickly and painfully realized that much had changed, especially within him, that his “beautiful illusion of Japan . . . had totally faded out at last” (VII, 249). For a few moments, as he gazed at Mt. Fuji against a clear blue sky, he was able to revive the dreamlike feelings of his first days there. But upon revisiting a certain temple he discovered that the old priest he had always meant to visit again had died and that, all wishes and prayers to the contrary, lost illusions never return. His essay is thus scarcely about Yokohama at all: it is rather about transience and loss and self-understanding. Yokohama simply happened to be the place where Hearn’s first impressions of Japan were born, the hometown of his Japanese imagination, the place which, when revisited, would show him how far he had come, how much he had grown, how much innocence he had lost.

This was virtually the last time Hearn wrote about Yokohama in more than a passing way. As a city, Yokohama was for Hearn much like New York had been: both were the first places he lived after a long sea voyage to a new country; both were large, port cities; both were similarly expensive: “living [in Yokohama] costs quite as much as in New York” (XIV, 105). In both, Hearn worried about making money for survival; both became steppingstones to new careers in other, smaller cities farther west; and although both fascinated him, neither ever gained his deep affection. In Japan, only Matsue had done that.

MATSUE

Why was Matsue so magical for Hearn? Perhaps one reason Hearn loved Matsue so much was that he had come to it directly from its cultural opposite—a huge open port city. Subconsciously, if not consciously, his sense of delight at arriving there might also have been influenced by his experiences in the United States: he may have felt as if he had moved directly from great, overwhelming, multi-cultural New York City to little, old-fashioned, homogeneously exotic St. Pierre, Martinique, without the sojourns in Cincinnati or New Orleans in between. Another reason might be that, for one of the first times in his life, he was arriving somewhere already in possession of a well-paying job, secure in the knowledge that survival would not be an issue for a while. And yet another part of the explanation might lie in the lovely way he first entered the city, in a small boat sailing gently up a river surrounded by mountains and wooded hills. As Stevenson has imagined Hearn’s first impressions, “Matsue was bright, contained, yet lively. Nothing of Europe or America had anything to do with shaping it.”⁴ Without the deep anxiety of how to survive and full of hope for lots of purely Japanese impressions to write about, Hearn took up a comfortable residence in this compact, isolated, and picturesque city on the water. It held, and in some ways fulfilled, the promise of being a St. Pierre of the Orient.

Matsue soon became the main theme of one of his most famous essays, "The Chief City of the Province of the Gods." One of the longest pieces in *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* and the longest continuous description he ever wrote of any city, it presents a "day in the life" of Matsue, and of Hearn too, through a collection of vignettes which verbally re-create the sounds and sights of a single, supposedly typical day from dawn to day's end. But in the course of doing that, Hearn lavishes a nearly equal amount of prose on his often "indescribable" feelings toward what he experiences, and that is an important sub-theme, if not a second main theme: the piece might even be more accurately re-titled "The Chief Emotions of the Heart of a Western Sojourner."

But what does he say about Matsue as a city? He immediately gives it animal life: an audible heartbeat and a tangible pulse. The sense of intimacy he evokes suggests a relationship akin to that of lovers: he sleeps with his head virtually on its pulsing chest; its "heartbeat" rouses him from sleep, and he silently watches as it gradually wakes up, too. He feels it and hears it and watches it, chimes with the rhythm of its unfolding day. In fact, for the first nine of the total 22 vignettes that make up the piece, Hearn is still in his bedroom, listening and looking out of the window. It is only from section x that he goes outside "to wander through the queer old city" (V, 175). The rest of the essay is a guided walking tour that lasts until he returns home to sleep in xxii.

Unlike the whirlwind ride through Yokohama described in "My First Day in the Orient," here we get a far slower, deeper, more local-specific treatment, full of informed, explanatory digressions. Instead of frantic gestures to his *kurumaya*, or *rikisha* runner, to take him anywhere at all, here Hearn is in charge, and his route is carefully mapped. He clearly presents himself as a denizen, no longer interested in narrating the superficial impressions of the mere tourist. And it is specifically Matsue, not just any Japanese city, that he wishes us to know. For example, he shares the purely local folklore with us: "And although a single spark and a high wind are sufficient in combination to obliterate a larger city in one day, great fires are unknown in Matsue, and small ones are of rare occurrence" because of certain *ofuda* charms against fire from the Oshiroyama Inari shrine (V, 176). In section xi, he takes us down the "Street of the New Timber," and the "street of the fishermen." Next is a brief view of Mt. Daisen from the great bridge, reminiscent of his view of Mt. Fuji from the Bluff of Yokohama, but now Hearn introduces it as he would an old friend: like the locals, he knows that it is really in Hoki, that it often turns white with snow in one night, and that there are many "marvelous legends" about it, including the belief that its peak is home to the Tengu (V, 178). Next is Tenjinmachi and the "Street of the Rich Merchants," and past the entertainment district to Teramachi and the "great street of the Buddhist temples" (V, 179), which allows Hearn to describe the role of temples in the daily life of Matsue's people and their pilgrimages to nearby holy places.

In section xvi, however, Hearn temporarily turns guide-bookish, giving us facts rather than impressions: he explains that the city proper is flat; it is bounded by green hills on two sides; the population is 35,000 with 10,000 houses and 33 main streets; the city is divided into three architectural sectors (merchant housing, temples, and samurai housing), etc. But then he reaches the castle, which he cannot resist describing in more vivid, impressionistic language: "Fantastically grim the thing is, and grotesquely complex in detail; looking somewhat like a huge pagoda, of which the second, third, and fourth stories have been squeezed down and telescoped into one another by their own weight" (V, 189). He then recounts an equally grim legend of a beautiful young girl who was buried alive at the construction site "as a sacrifice to some forgotten gods" (V, 190). More local folklore follows in the next chapter, mostly gruesome: "Opening the box, he saw the bleeding head of a young child. Entering his house, he found upon the floor of the guest-room the dead body of his own infant son with the head torn off" (V, 191-92). Not the sort of legend the Matsue Chamber of Commerce would like to advertise, but to Hearn these gory tales only added to Matsue's charm.

Next, we are taken over the Bridge of Tenjin to see the sun set from a certain little *soba* shop, a perfect opportunity to word-paint: "Dead rich purples cloud broadly behind and above the indigo blackness of the serrated hills—mist purples, fading upward smokily into faint vermilions and dim gold, which again melt up through ghostliest greens into blue" (V, 194). Hearn surely knew it would be difficult for most readers to get a clear mental image of this, and he did not care. He wanted primarily to enchant rather than enlighten, to fill the imagination with so much color-information that the result would be not a photo but a feeling, not a *vision* of the color but the *sensation* of it, not the seeing but the impression of having seen. The real message is his rapture.

The essay ends where it began, back in Hearn's bed. As he prepares for sleep, listening to Tokoji's bell and the

itinerant night-vendors chanting in Matsue dialect, he also hears once again the clapping of hands, this time to honor the newly appeared moon. The day comes full circle as he returns to sleep, dreaming of the children we saw at play in the temple court. He intends it to be a symbolic dream, for though these children are themselves, they also represent, in Hearn's vision, all of the innocent and lively people of Matsue, playing at what is still to him the game of Japanese life. As sleep settles over Hearn's weary brain, a deep sense of contentment settles over the entire piece.

Seven years later, in another "pilgrimage to his own past,"⁵ Hearn revisited Matsue much as he had revisited Yokohama two years before that. The resulting essay, "Notes of a Trip to Izumo," for the *Atlantic Monthly* of May 1897, was surprisingly not published in Japan. Of course, Hearn's works contain many examples of re-told tales, but this is his only re-told *sketch*, a re-presentation of "The Chief City of the Province of the Gods" now seen through the keener, wiser eyes of one who has come to know that Izumo is special. The complexity of this re-telling situation greatly interested Hearn, for it afforded him at least three interconnecting levels of possible comparison—time, place, and self: There was Matsue *then* compared to Matsue *now*, Matsue city compared to *other* Japanese cities, and Hearn *the newcomer* compared to Hearn *the experienced Japanophile*. About the re-visit, he writes that while "some of the charm returned," some did not. He found differences in both the city itself and in his memory of it. While certain sights, sounds, and odors were familiar, the alteration that had taken place in others disturbed him. "You can't go home again," wrote Thomas Wolfe in 1940, and though Hearn had felt the truth of that statement when he revisited Yokohama, he needed to re-test it in Matsue, which he knew far more intimately, in order to understand what changes Japan had been making in him. What he found was mostly an inexplicable sense of loss and, again, disillusion.

But, after all, nobody can revisit with absolute impunity a place once loved and deserted. Something had vanished, something immaterial, of which the absence made a vague sadness within me. I tried to think what it could be. Old friends had entertained me. The city had remained beautiful for me in the light of fairest summer days. The queer street vistas, the familiar shops, the quaint temples, the silent yashiki with their fairy gardens, were unchanged. The landscape looked as it used to look; the songs of birds from the holy groves, the shrilling of the cicadae, the blossom-scents of the lanes, the many-tinted beauty of wood and vale, were just the same. Was not the lost charm something that had evaporated out of my own life,—something belonging to the first irrevocable illusion of Japan?

I was not sure. But presently I found myself wondering whether most human happiness does not depend upon not seeing things as they are, upon not penetrating surfaces, upon psychological myopia, — or, in other words, upon ignorance of the sharply real.... (*The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 79, May 1897, p. 681)

The farther away he got from those five idyllic spring and summer months spent at Kitabori-machi with his new wife in their first house, the better Matsue seemed to him. But we must not forget that he had had two very serious doubts about making Matsue his permanent home. One concerned the climate: "The weather here has become something very disagreeable There is almost perpetual rain and gloom," he wrote to Chamberlain in January (XIV, 124). Rain and gloom sometimes turned into severe winds and heavy snow, pure torture to this man who loved the tropics. Furthermore, there was hardly any way to keep warm: "The houses are cold as cattle barns, and the hibachi and the kotatsu are mere shadows of heat—ghosts, illusions," he lamented. The other concerned his sometimes worrisome health, and by logical extension, his very life: "I have been severely touched where I thought myself strongest—in my lungs—and have passed some weeks in bed.... I fear a few more winters of this kind will put me underground" (XIV, 125-26). With memories of balmy New Orleans and tropical Martinique in his heart, plus the prospect of a 100% salary increase, Hearn the wanderer succumbed to the pull of the south. In November 1891, he accepted a post in Kumamoto, a place of considerably warmer weather—or so he hoped.

KUMAMOTO

Though Kumamoto did turn out to be somewhat warmer than Matsue, affording him many more sunny days and far less snowfall, Hearn was immediately disappointed with the city's appearance, and he found it generally inferior to his newly adopted standard for Japanese cities, Matsue.

Kumamoto is not nearly so pretty a city as Matsue, although it is as neat as Tenjin-machi. There are some very beautiful houses and hotels, but the common houses are not so fine as those of Matsue. Most of the old Shizoku houses were burned during the Satsuma war, so that . . . it is very hard to find a nice house [to live in]. There is, of course, no lake here, and no beautiful scenery like that of Shinji-ko; but on clear days we can see the smoke rising from the great volcano of Aso-san. (XIV, 173)

Mt. Aso must have been impressive, but the distant and virtually inaccessible volcano could not long charm this man who loved the sea. Lake Shinjiko was certainly not the ocean, but it was a viable substitute. It was large enough to be picturesque, soothing the eye and the mind with its pine-studded views of peaceful boats on gentle waters, and its central location made it an integral part of the city-scape. Kumamoto's Lake Ezuko, by contrast, was rather small, neglected, and somewhat removed from the city's center so that it was not easily visible. In nearly every letter of the first few months, Hearn compared some aspect of Kumamoto with Matsue and concluded that "Matsue is incomparably prettier and better built and in every way more interesting than Kumamoto" (XIV, 181). A few months later, he intensified the diction of his distaste in a letter to Professor Chamberlain: "The city is devilishly ugly and commonplace — an enormous, half-Europeanized garrison-town, full of soldiers" (XIV, 186). In his public writing, too, Kumamoto fared no better:

A vast, straggling, dull, unsightly town is Kumamoto: there are no quaint, pretty streets, no great temples, no wonderful gardens. Burnt to the ground in the civil war of the tenth of Meiji, the place gives you the impression of a wilderness of flimsy shelters erected in haste almost before the soil had ceased to smoke. There are no remarkable places to visit (not, at least, within city limits), no sights, no amusements. (VII, 26)

He saw no shops selling little household shrines made of hinoki-wood; the people of Kumamoto did not decorate their doorways with the *shimenawa* ropes of Shinto as the people of Matsue had done. Clearly homesick for the relatively quaint, small-town ways he had grown so fond of, he complained to Nishida of the lack of beautiful objects: "there is nothing pretty in the shape of lacquer-ware, porcelain, or bronze. There is no art, and there are no kakemonos, and no curio-shops" (XIV, 169). Of course, there were such shops and numerous artifacts of beauty, and given Kumamoto's size (about 56,000 people), perhaps there were more than in Matsue, but apparently Hearn did not find them. In fact, the only local product he unequivocally praised was the silk. And the climate was unexpectedly cold.

Why was Hearn so disappointed with Kumamoto? It is possible that he had held a vaguely romanticized image of Kumamoto simply because it was in the south, and the south was inextricably associated in his mind with fond memories of New Orleans, Martinique, and perhaps even Lefkas, though he had left his birthplace forever at the age of two. This considerable gap between his expectation and the reality surely aggravated Hearn's disillusion. How else can we explain how exaggerated and disproportionate his dislike seemed even to his most sympathetic Japanese friends, Nishida and Setsu? They believed that the fault lay not with the city or its people but with Hearn's inability to perceive the hidden good. Hearn, for his part, resented having to spell it out for them:

You wonder why I hate Kumamoto. Well, firstly, because it is *modernized*. And then I hate it because it is too big, and has no temples and priests and curious customs in it. Thirdly, I hate it because it is ugly. Fourthly I hate it because I am still a stranger in it, — and perhaps because I can't get literary material. But Setsu . . . says it is better to stay here another year or two, — that it might be much worse elsewhere. Perhaps she is right. She thinks, like you do, that the only trouble is I can't understand these people.⁶

Hearn was aware that much of the city's beauty had been destroyed in the Seinan war, but still he could not forgive it. Instead of another New Orleans or St. Pierre, or some southern version of Matsue, he had arrived at a place much more practical, like Cincinnati, only with earthquakes, which he deeply feared, and no water to swim in or look at. The great government call to service had left him stranded, he felt, far from everything he wanted to write about. Less troubled by things like a dearth of curio shops, Setsu did not want to move again so soon, and she seems to have had no objections to life in a larger, more modern city with milder winters and a sizeable salary.

In spite of his discontent, or perhaps because of it, Hearn wrote much in Kumamoto and said that he felt healthier than he had in many years. His dreamlike honeymoon with Japan had ended when he left Matsue; Kumamoto just happened to be where he was when he woke up.

KOBE

Disgusted with his treatment by the government school in Kumamoto, Hearn resigned his post and moved to the open port city of Kobe in September 1894 to become co-editor of the *Kobe Chronicle*. It was a city he had always had mixed feelings about: it had more than twice the population of Kumamoto (130,000), but he found it physically attractive enough, built on green hills overlooking a bay. Kobe's flaw, as he explained in a letter to Ellwood Hendrick, was that it had too many Western people and things for Hearn's Japanized taste. After all, he had just spent over four years living in Japan's "interior," with nary a Westerner in sight:

Kobe is a nice little place. The effect on me is not pleasant, however. I have become too accustomed to the interior. The sight of foreign women — the sound of their voices — jars upon me harshly after long living among purely natural women with soundless steps and softer speech. (I fear the foreign women here, too, are nearly all of the savagely bourgeois style — affected English and affected American ways prevail.) Carpets — dirty shoes — absurd fashions — wickedly expensive living — airs — vanities — gossip: how much sweeter the Japanese life on the soft mats — with its ever dearer courtesy and pretty, pure simplicity.) (XIV, 308-09)

Just as he was trying to achieve a plainer, less ornamental writing style, he was also becoming increasingly fond of a simpler, sparer, more "Japanese" style of daily living. In this preference, Hearn strongly differed from Chamberlain, who valued Western comforts and association with the "genuine men and women" in Japan's open ports. It was not just that Hearn had "gone native"; it was also the manifestation of a set of values that had been forming his entire life. Since his youth, he had always felt more comfortable with the unsophisticated, the un-rich, even the so-called uncivilized. "[L]ife in Yunotsu or Hino-misaki, or Oki, with only the bare means for Japanese comfort," Hearn wrote, "were better and cleaner and higher in every way than the best open ports can offer" (XIV, 310-11).

At this time Hearn was contemplating buying land and building a house for Setsu either in the Kobe area or in Kyoto. He had heard that Kobe was warmer, but Kyoto was steeped in Buddhism and traditional culture. There, if anywhere, Hearn hoped he could find new literary inspiration and a spiritual as well as geographical home. But his first visit, as he wrote to Mason from Kumamoto, had been disappointing:

First of all, I was tremendously disappointed by my inability to discover what Loti described.... And I tired after three days of temples.... Well, I was not much impressed. Doubtless because I have become too familiar with temples.... What I am not ever tired of seeing ... is the beauty of the Buddhist gardens.... There are times that I feel so hopeless about everything in Japan that I would like to leave it if I had no one else to care for. Especially when I meet insolent clerks who have learned impertinence and Christianity at the Doshisha — when I see Christian cathedrals — when I find Christian teachers among the Japanese instructors of the higher schools.... Therefore great Kyoto pleases me far less than Izumo. One little country village of the west coast delights my soul more. (XVI, 281-83)

In a second letter to Mason a few days later, Hearn recalled a better side of Kyoto: "sweet faces and voices," and "an inexpressible gentleness, refined kindness and sympathy about Kyoto women" (XVI, 289). But still he preferred his native Matsue, "where speech is ruder and ways simpler and nothing good can be had to eat — but where the ancient gods still live in hearts.... Here Pan is dying" (XVI, 289).

In October 1895, Hearn took a three-day trip to Kyoto to attend the 1100th anniversary of its founding, recounted at length in "Notes of a Trip to Kyoto" in *Gleanings in Buddha-Fields*. In that essay, however, his main focus was the festival, and he wrote little about the city itself. Later in the same volume, though, there appears an even longer essay called "In Osaka" about a visit he made there in 1896. This was his last and arguably his finest essay about any city. It

thoroughly captures Osaka's unique character in prose that perfectly balances hard facts and personal impressions. Though he never lived there, what he wrote about it may help to provide a context for his thoughts and feelings about the last city he would ever inhabit, Tokyo.

When Hearn visited Osaka in 1896 it was, then as now, the second largest metropolis in Japan, boasting a population of some 670,000 people. Despite its size and commercialism, things he generally disliked, he was so taken with the city that he placed his extensive description of it at the very center of *Gleanings in Buddha-Fields*. He was immediately impressed by both its ancientness and its economic importance: "Centuries before Europe knew of the existence of Japan, Osaka was the great financial and commercial centre of the empire; and it is that still" (VIII, 104), superior to Tokyo in finance, commerce, and industry. He called it the "energetic city." Many of its citizens seemed urbane, multi-lingual, cosmopolitan, "up to date" in their fashion and in their knowledge of the world. This alone would not have won him over, but Osaka fully satisfied one important criterion for his seal of approval: its streets were sufficiently "picturesque." Despite its size and decidedly entrepreneurial flavor, the city's appearance was surprisingly old-fashioned and Japanese:

Architecturally not less than fashionably, Osaka remains almost as Japanese as anybody could wish. Although some wide thoroughfares exist, most of the streets are very narrow, — even more narrow than those of Kyoto. There are streets of three-story houses and streets of two-story houses; but there are square miles of houses one story high. The great mass of the city is an agglomeration of low wooden buildings with tiled roofs. Nevertheless the streets are more interesting, brighter, quainter in their signs and sign-painting, than the streets of Tokyo; and the city as a whole is more picturesque than Tokyo because of its waterways. It has not inaptly been termed the Venice of Japan. (VIII, 109)

Although "more picturesque than Tokyo," which for Hearn was not saying much, Osaka was like any other Japanese city, that is, "little more than a wilderness of wooden sheds" (VIII, 133). Yet Hearn found it exceptionally charming and vibrant: the street vistas looking down its many waterways were among the most "curious" in all of Japan, and the "wooden sheds" of houses were interestingly varied and deliciously exotic:

. . . no house being exactly like another, but all having an indefinable Far-Eastern queerness, — a sort of racial character, — that gives the sensation of the very far away in place and time. They push out funny little galleries with balustrades; barred, projecting, glassless windows with elfish balconies under them, and rooflets over them like eyebrows; tiers of tiled and tilted awnings; and great eaves which, in certain hours, throw shadows down to the foundation. (VIII, 110)

He uses phrases like "indefinable Far-Eastern queerness" and "racial character" to tap into his readers' pre-conceptions of what the Orient looked like, into their Orientalism, as it were, and also to soften the technical nature of his subsequent descriptions. His masterful ability to describe buildings, a stylistic mix that is half technical and half impressionistic, results in an entertaining yet architecturally accurate portrait of a typical Japanese house: "funny little galleries with balustrades," "barred, projecting, glassless windows," "elfish balconies," and "rooflets over them like eyebrows." There is always a deft verbal touch, often humorous, that gives life and personality to otherwise inanimate structures.

What especially delighted him, however, was the apparently minimal influence of the West. Despite the city's well-ordered modernity and commercial sophistication, the number of Western-style buildings was "remarkably small," and Hearn was overjoyed to find that even the office of the worldly wise and technologically advanced *Asahi Shimbun* was "an old-time *Samurai-yashiki*, — about the most quiet and modest-looking place in the whole district where it was situated" (VIII, 114).

Here was Hearn's ideal Japan: competitive with the West yet preferring traditional Japanese ways, sophisticated and modern yet steeped in tradition. Here was world-class economic and industrial power with a smiling, serenely Japanese face. Here was hope for the future of Japan: "I must confess that all this sober and sensible conservatism delighted me. The competitive power of Japan must long depend upon her power to maintain the old simplicity of life" (VIII, 114). This

is the exact sentiment he had once voiced in a speech at the Fifth Higher School in January 1894 entitled “The Future of the Far East,” where he praised the unpretentious lifestyle of Kumamoto people as the foundation of Japan’s future greatness, but now his conviction had deepened. Old Japan must be preserved and protected against the encroachment of the so-called “progress” of (Western) “civilization.”

Perhaps even more interesting is that Hearn’s fondness for Osaka seems to parallel his fondness for a deceptively similar American city, Philadelphia. Indeed, despite their obvious, worlds-apart differences, the two cities shared several underlying characteristics: Both were second in size to significantly larger cities to the north (Hearn always supported an underdog); both were more traditional and conservative than those larger cities; both seemed more human-scaled in their use of space and in the size of their buildings and roads; in other words, they seemed to Hearn to be more “livable,” more user-friendly. Both had unique charms: Osaka had its attractive canals; Philadelphia had its enormous and beautiful Fairmount Park, compared to which, said Hearn, New York’s Central Park was merely a “cabbage patch.” As for Tokyo, Hearn had not yet actually lived in that city, but from what he had seen and heard, he was sure he would not like it. “I would rather live a month in Osaka than ten years free of rent in Tokyo,” he told Nishida (XV, 27).

His dread at the idea of someday living in Tokyo was re-enforced by his friend and long resident of Tokyo, Professor Basil Hall Chamberlain. Kumamoto was bad, but Tokyo, as Chamberlain seems to have repeatedly warned, might be worse: “I have given up all idea, for the time being, of ever living in Tokyo. Really, as you have more than once suggested, I think I should find it out of the frying pan into the fire” (XVI, 134). Despite his dislike of Kumamoto, he still considered himself to be in the “psychological tropics” of Japanese life and “unfitted to endure anything resembling conventions and unpleasant contacts,” by which he meant Tokyo life.

From Kobe, as he looked for land in Hyogo to build a house, his dread of Tokyo increased. To Nishida back in Matsue he voiced the misery he was anticipating:

Tokyo is the most horrible place in Japan, and I want to live in it just as short a time as possible. The weather is atrocious; — the earthquakes are fearsome; — the foreign element and the Japanese officialism of Tokyo must be dreadful. I want to feel and see Japan: there is no Japan in Tokyo. (XIV, 303)

If it were up to him, he would never live there. But it was no longer only up to him. He also wanted to please Setsu, and Setsu seemed to prefer Tokyo:

But in spite of all I say, Setsu thinks of Tokyo just as a French lady thinks of Paris. After she has passed a winter there, perhaps she will not like Tokyo so much. I imagine that she thinks the Tokyo — the really beautiful Tokyo — of the old picture books, and the bank-bills, still exists. Then she knows all the famous names — the names of the bridges and streets and temples — and these are associated in her mind with the dramas and the famous stories and legends of Japan. Perhaps I should love Tokyo just as much as she does, if I knew the history and the traditions of the country as well. (XVI, 303)

Could Hearn’s expression of willingness to learn to like Tokyo because of Setsu have been partly the result of a parallel experience he had had involving a woman he loved and a city he hated — namely, Elizabeth Bisland and New York? At any rate, the closer he got to Tokyo geographically, the more repulsed he seems to have felt: “horrible,” “atrocious,” “fearsome,” “dreadful,” the adjectives recall Hearn’s descriptions of London and New York. To Hearn, Tokyo symbolized all the inconvenience of metropolises and of life in Japan, without any of the consolations.

After moving to Tokyo did his feelings change? Not much. Except for cheaper-than-expected prices, even house rent, there was not much to his liking. In contrast with Osaka, he felt there was little in Tokyo to remind him that he was living in an exotic country. Moreover, Hearn liked neat towns; Tokyo was a sprawling mess. To friend Ellwood Hendrick in America, he wrote a scathing description of the city he had unsuccessfully struggled so long to avoid:

In this Tokyo, this detestable Tokyo, there are no Japanese impressions to be had except at rare intervals. To describe to you the place would be utterly impossible — more easy to describe a province. Here the quarter of

the foreign embassies, looking like a well-painted American suburb; — near by an estate with quaint Chinese gates several centuries old; a little further square miles of indescribable squalor; — then miles of military parade ground trampled into a waste of dust, and bounded by hideous barracks; — then a great park, full of really weird beauty, the shadows all black as ink; — then square miles of streets of shops, which burn down once a year; — then more squalor; — then rice-fields and bamboo groves; — then more streets. All this not flat, but hilly — a city of undulations. Immense silences — green and romantic — alternate with quarters of turmoil and factories and railroad stations. Miles of telegraph poles, looking at a distance like enormous fine-tooth combs, make a horrid impression. Miles of water-pipes — miles and miles and miles of them — interrupt the traffic of the principal streets: they have been trying to put them underground for seven years — and what with official trickery, etc., the work makes slow progress. Gigantic reservoirs are ready; but no water in them yet.... Streets melt under rain, water-pipes sink, water-pipe holes drown spreeing [sic] men and swallow up playful children; frogs sing amazing songs in the street. (XV, 64-66)

Overwhelming size reminiscent of London and New York, flooded streets and sinking infrastructure reminiscent of New Orleans, combined to form a wasteland, spiritual as well as physical, unmitigated by beauties of the natural world. It was the last in Hearn's growing list of cities that stifled creative inspiration. "To think of art or time or eternity in the dead waste and muddle of this mess is difficult. The Holy Ghost of the poets is not in Tokyo" (XV, 66). He identified with the caged insect night-singers which Tokyoites bought to create the illusion of proximity to nature "where there is only dust and mud." Hearn, however, felt he had even more in common with the day-singing cicadae, who fell silent and died when caged: "In this horrid Tokyo I feel like a cicada: — I am caged, and can't sing. Sometimes I wonder whether I shall ever be able to sing any more — except at night? — like a bell-insect which has only one note" (XV, 66-67).

As we have seen, Hearn found the sophisticated Osaka traders attractive, genuine, even admirable, but the Tokyo version somehow produced a very different impression on him: "The Tokyo affectations of culture are disgusting shams.... These men try to read the thoughts of the nineteenth century with the ideas of the eighteenth! They read words, and think they are reading thoughts."⁷ In Tokyo Hearn was torn as never before between his role as husband and provider and his own needs as a writer and a man. He continually contemplated moving, preferably back to the country, but the high salary and Setsu's happiness prevented him. Perhaps she turned a deaf ear to his complaints because, with the exception of Matsue, Hearn had griped about every city they had ever lived in. "I keep telling my wife," he confided to Hendrick, "that it would be ever so much better to leave Tokyo, and dwell in the country, at a very much smaller salary, and have peace of mind. She says that nowhere could I have any peace of mind until I become a Buddha, and that with patience we can become independent" (XV, 68). So with his dream of a life under palm trees fading but not forgotten, Hearn tried to make the best of things. Perhaps he could write something about Tokyo as he had written about Osaka.

But as Amenomori shows from his personal correspondence, Hearn could not quite manage to get inspired: "Meanwhile I keep collecting things for a book about Tokyo life, to be completed perhaps within two years; but I have no heart for the subject just now. I don't like Tokyo very much. I have no overpowering impulses to write anything about it" (514). The Buddhist concept of hell was another topic he was contemplating for an essay, but he found that topic similarly depressing. The analogy between the two topics was all too apparent to him. Ironically, the more he came to know about Tokyo, the less he wanted to write about it: "... familiarity with a place spoils all inclination to write about it, and my soul is in Hell, — at least in Tokyo, — which seems to me identical" (514).

He began to contemplate leaving Japan, perhaps for good, and he blamed Tokyo for his despairing mood: "Tokyo takes out of me all power to hope for a great Japanese future," he wrote to Ellwood Hendrick in May 1897 (XV, 53). But where to go? He increasingly longed for a life of slow-paced, easy living, a simple existence among good, simple-hearted people, surrounded by trees instead of machines — the tropics, maybe Malaysia or the Philippines:

To get out of Japan would indeed be delightful for us both, were there better conditions to reach. Such conditions exist in the tropics and especially, perhaps, in the great tropical archipelago south of us. But soon there will be no simple, happy life in all this world. Mechanical industrialism and its vices and its ugliness are invading and destroying all things." (516)

Hearn had experienced life inside the “machines” of New York City first-hand, and from that he felt he knew what Tokyo, like many other major cities, would eventually become. The forces of industrialization and mechanization, he believed, were depressingly unstoppable.

Though he often voiced a longing to return to life in the tropics, he also knew that without artistic nourishment from like-minded, intellectually stimulating individuals he would eventually be miserable. He knew that the majority of such people, at least those he could communicate with, lived in the cities of Europe and North America, but even the best of those cities demanded too much energy and struggle just to stay alive. It was a contradiction he could not resolve.

In America, in Europe also, the advantage of living means still the ability to meet sincere and earnest men,— to form unconventional fraternal circles,— to nourish the mind with literature and art. But every year, every day, every hour, the difficulty of living in London or Paris or Munich or Venice, etc., becomes more extraordinary. (516)

To Hearn, the world seemed to be relentlessly filling up with societies that encouraged the proliferation of de-humanizing machinery, and what was worse, filling up with the de-humanized people that those societies produced. He reasoned that extremes of climate alone could protect an individual against the debasing effects of such “progress”:

The most one can reasonably hope for, perhaps, is a tropical rest in the Malay region or in Equatorial South America.... Elsewhere I see no chance,— except in the Arctic or Antarctic desolation. The plague of machinery is upon the world, and is transforming the human mind. (516)

It is almost comical to imagine Hearn, who passionately detested the cold, actually trying to work and enjoy life in such remote and frigid places; but it is also sad to realize how discouraged and even desperate he still was, after so many years and different abodes, in his quest to find a satisfying place to live.

Some artists are able to work almost anywhere, but Hearn was definitely not one of them. He felt most keenly the crucial role his surroundings played in his efforts to do good work, how surroundings deeply colored the mind that produced the thoughts and the ideal expression of those thoughts. Thus, he blamed Tokyo for causing an unwelcome aberration in his writing: “My work has lately been a little horrible,” he wrote to Mitchell McDonald, “a little morbid perhaps. Everything depends upon exterior influence — inspiration; and Tokyo is the very worst place in all Japan for that” (XV, 111).

In his “Notes of a Trip to Kyoto,” Hearn had decided that the world’s largest cities, especially those in the West, were pleasant only for the rich and the strong; to the less fortunate, with whom he always identified, no matter how well-off he might be, they were hellish:

In our [Occidental] great cities, beauty is for the rich; bare walls and foul pavements and smoky skies for our poor, and the tumult of hideous machinery — a hell of eternal ugliness and joylessness invented by our civilization to punish the atrocious crime of being unfortunate, or weak, or stupid, or overconfident in the morality of one’s fellow man. (VIII, 51)

In an article for the Sunday magazine section of *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 21, 1974, William J. Speers interpreted these words as Hearn’s “dreadful conclusion about modern urban living and the prospects of beauty surviving there”⁶; and at the time Hearn wrote them, they probably did represent his latest thoughts on the matter. But as we have seen, several years later, after the disillusion of life in Tokyo, Hearn no longer distinguished between the rich and the poor. The important point to him now was that life in big cities, whether pleasant or hellish, was de-humanizing for anyone who lived there. In Tokyo, he had certainly had enough money to avoid the ugly side of city dwelling — he even had his own home in a location of his own choosing — but still he felt that, short of physically leaving, almost nothing could be done to avoid the de-humanizing effects such a life would have on him. The only recourse he had was to withdraw into a kind of private Antarctica, meeting fewer and fewer acquaintances even as he craved stimulating companionship, and he

compensated for the resulting chill in his social life by retreating ever more deeply into the tropics of his imagination and warm family life.

In this paper I have tried to show that Hearn's feelings toward the Japanese cities he lived in were sometimes strongly influenced by his feelings toward cities he had lived in before coming to Japan: His love for Matsue may have been influenced by his special fondness for Martinique, his fancy for Osaka by his happy memories of Philadelphia, and his dislike of Tokyo by his horrific experiences in London and New York. His distaste for Kumamoto, too, may have been subconsciously intensified because, contrary to his expectation, it was not a Japanese version of New Orleans. Setsu got it right when she joked that Hearn would never be truly at peace anywhere in this world, not until he died and became a Buddha, for the home he was seeking was really a spiritual one, inside himself. No city could ever satisfy him for long because in his heart of hearts he was always searching for some version of Lefkas, haunted his whole life by the memory of a place with larger moons, bluer skies, and the incomparable sunshine of a mother's love.

Notes

- 1 Peter McIvor, "Lafcadio Hearn's First Day in the Orient," in *Irish Writing on Lafcadio Hearn and Japan*, edited by Sean G. Ronan (Kent: Global Oriental, 1997) p. 220.
- 2 *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, in *The Writings of Lafcadio Hearn* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1922), Volume V, p. 4. All citations from Hearn's writings are to this edition unless noted otherwise.
- 3 Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 142.
- 4 Elizabeth Stevenson, *Lafcadio Hearn* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), p. 213.
- 5 Paul Auster, p. 141.
- 6 *Some New Letters and Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, edited by Sanki Ichikawa (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1925). Letter to Sentaro Nishida, February 19, 1893, p. 81.
- 7 Nobushige Amenomori, "Lafcadio Hearn the Man," *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 1905, p. 515.
- 8 William J. Speers, "Newsman, Poet, Sensationalist?" in *The [Cincinnati] Enquirer Magazine*, April 21, 1974, p. 38.