

Hearn's Imaginative Use of Dreams

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(Received September 1, 1999)

At various times throughout his life, Hearn expressed in his writing a keen interest in the workings of the human mind, and no aspect of that subject fascinated him more than dreaming. More than just a fascination, he used dreams as important components of such well-known essays as "My First Day in the Orient," "By the Japanese Sea" and "In a Japanese Garden," and in stories such as "The Dream of a Summer Day," "Story of a Pheasant," "The Eater of Dreams," "Oshidori," and "The Dream of Akinosuke." Since dreams were an essential part of Hearn's literary arsenal, understanding what he knew and thought about them can provide us with further insights into his art. Accordingly, the first part of this paper treats Hearn's thinking about dreams, while the second part treats his use of dreams as tools of his creative imagination.

Part I

Hearn recognized that dream narratives, like literature, were capable of affecting human emotions in a variety of ways. They could be amusing or cheering, but they could also distress. We know that as a child in Ireland he suffered from terribly vivid nightmares, the memory of which never left him. Even in Japan, he recalled them. Dreams, he wrote to Basil Hall Chamberlain, could inspire feelings of fear that waking experience could not equal:

Have you not noticed how utterly the psychologists have failed to explain the Fear that comes in dreams? The suspension of will-power is given as an explanation; but that will not do—because there is frequently loss of will-power in dreams unaccompanied by the *real* fear of nightmare. The real fear of nightmare is greater than any fear possible to experience in waking moments; it is the highest possible form of mental suffering; it is so powerful that were it to last more than a few instants it would cause death; and it is so intimately linked to feelings of which we know nothing in waking hours—feelings not belonging to life at all—that we cannot describe it. . . .

Well, when I was a child, bad dreams took for me real form and visibility. In my waking hours I saw them. They walked about noiselessly and made hideous faces at me. . . . It is only in dreams now that the old fear ever comes back.¹⁾

Though experienced "only in a dream," the fear, Hearn emphasized, was nonetheless perfectly real in every way. If anything, it was even more so. This convinced him that dreams must never be dismissed as mere fantasy, even though their connection with so-called reality might not be understood.

He also often pondered the creative imagination—how stories and literary ideas were thought up, fashioned, and made memorable. Ever the careful observer of his own thought processes, he was naturally interested in the inchoate science of psychology, especially in the phenomenon of how the mind combined and recombined images and events to make new works of art. He read

numerous papers on dreams and their significance, and sometimes discussed the topic with prominent doctors such as Rudolph Matas and George Gould. Even from Martinique he wrote to Dr. Gould to respond to his rather scientific article on dreams, reminding the author of the creative, literary side of dreaming:

Dear Gould, —I read your pamphlets with intense pleasure: that on the effect of reflex neurosis, of course, impressed me only as a curious research; but your paper on dreams, full of truth and suggestive beauty, had much more than a scientific interest for me. There is a world of poetical ideas and romantic psychology evoked by its perusal. I wonder only that you did not dwell more upon the softness, sweetness, impalpable goodness of this dream-world in which everything—even what we usually think wrong—seems to be right. Doubtless, all man's dreams of paradise, of a golden past age, or a perfect future, were born of the thin light vanishing sensations of dream.²⁾

For Gould, however, unlike Hearn, dreams were interesting mostly in so far as they helped diagnose disease. This was squarely in the tradition of Hippocrates, who first proposed the idea of dreams as diagnostic indicators. How, we might wonder, would Hearn have responded to the following technical, medical analysis of dreaming penned by Gould:

Dreams, nightmare, and night terrors form too extensive a subject and one too well known to be discussed at length here, but it might be well to mention that sometimes dreams are said to be pathognomonic or prodromal of approaching disease. Cerebral hemorrhage has often been preceded by dreams of frightful calamities, and intermittent fever is often announced by persistent and terrifying dreams. Hammond has collected a large number of these prodromic dreams, seeming to indicate that before the recognizable symptoms of disease present themselves a variety of morbid dreams may occur. According to Dana, Albers says: "Frightful dreams are signs of cerebral congestion. Dreams about fire are, in women, signs of impending hemorrhage. Dreams about blood and red objects are signs of inflammatory conditions. Dreams of distorted forms are frequently a sign of abdominal obstruction and diseases of the liver."³⁾

Though such medical studies were not without interest to Hearn, his real concern was with the more creative, poetic, and romantic aspects of dreaming—not so much with *oneirology* (dream study) but with *oneiropoiesis* (dream creation).

Many years later, speaking to students of literature at Tokyo University, Hearn would return to the idea of dreams as the great source of inspiration for literary creation. His ideas were surprisingly modern, for as Anthony Stevens warns today's overly scientific readers in *Private Myths: Dreams and Dreaming*: "it is vital that we do not forget that the dreaming brain is more than an electro-chemical system responsible for 'information processing', and that, if it is a machine, then it is . . . a *poetry* machine."⁴⁾ It is, after all, a small linguistic step from *oneiropoiesis* to *poiesis* itself—the making of poetry, and by extension, literature. A similar notion was held by eighteenth-century German novelist Jean Paul Richter, who said, "The dream is an involuntary kind of poetry." What is meant by "poetry" here is, of course, open to question, but Hearn seemed to become increasingly convinced that dreams were at the source of the great fountain of literary creation. Near the end of his life, he was absolutely certain of it:

Whether you believe in ghosts or not, all the artistic elements of ghostly literature exist in your dreams, and form a veritable treasury of literary material for the man that knows how to use them.

All the great effects obtained by poets and story writer, and even by religious teachers, in the treatment of supernatural fear or mystery, have been obtained, directly or indirectly, through dreams.⁵⁾

As Stevenson points out, "He believed that for a writer dreams were indispensable." The above-cited lecture at Tokyo University, in which Hearn discussed the deep connection between dreaming and literature, is arguably one of his best. His concluding advice to would-be writers reveals that he attributed his own power as a supernatural writer to the same personal dream-life:

... when, as men of letters, you have to deal with any form of supernatural subject—whether terrible, or tender, or pathetic, or splendid—you will do well, if you have a good imagination, not to trust to books for your inspiration. Trust to your own dream-life; study it carefully, and draw your inspiration from that. For dreams are the primary source of almost everything that is beautiful in literature which treats of what lies beyond mere daily experience.

As Stevenson further notes, the stories which thrilled him—whether Celtic or Japanese or Chinese or French or Arabian—were almost always "those which had some correspondence to his own dream life."⁶⁾

For Hearn, dreams were also a meeting place where the outer and inner person could mingle freely. It was always the intersection of mental states that intrigued Hearn, the places in the mind where reality and fantasy began to merge, where things imagined and things experienced intermingled, where sleeping and waking yielded to each other to create a new, fertile, middle ground. For Hearn, this was where the chemistry took place that made powerful literature possible, the crucible of creation. Indeed, he uses the idea itself to turn the real Matsue into a dream right before the reader's eyes:

A land where sky and earth so strangely intermingle that what is reality may not be distinguished from what is illusion—that all seems a mirage, about to vanish. For me, alas! it is about to vanish forever.⁷⁾

Mingling and disappearing were phenomena Hearn loved to contemplate. That dreams faded, often vanishing without a trace, was one of the things he enjoyed most about them. Like Yuki in "Yuki Onna," like the mists from Urashima Taro's box, they were deliciously fleeting and volatile, a characteristic which added greatly to their preciousness.

In his ethnologist mode, Hearn collected superstitions about dreams. On the subject of how to remember a dream, he draws on Irish folk-lore, using a metaphor reminiscent of Urashima Taro to illustrate it:

There is an Irish folk-saying that any dream may be remembered if the dreamer, after awakening, forbear to scratch his head in the effort to recall it. But should he forget this precaution, never can the dream be brought back to memory; as well try to reform the curlings

of a smoke-wreath blown away.⁸⁾

Most dreams, Hearn felt, were “hopelessly evaporative.” But a very few, “which come when fancy has been strangely impressed by unfamiliar experiences,—dreams particularly apt to occur in time of travel,” he believed stayed clearly and sharply in one’s memory. The dream of his mother’s return at O-bon, dreamt while on a trip along the Japan Sea coast, was such an example.

Another item of folk-lore Hearn mentioned is that dreams sometimes mean the opposite of what they seem, that is, “go by contraries”:⁹⁾

. . . I had such a queer dream last night. A great, warm garden Krehbiel was there—he told me he was going to Europe never to come back. And you [Bisland] were there, too, all in black silk—sheathed in it; you were also going away somewhere; and I was packing for you, getting things ready. Everybody was saying nice things: one did not seem to hear—really one never hears voices in dreams—but one feels the words, tones and all, as if they passed unspoken—just the soul or will of them—out of one brain into another. I can’t remember what anybody said precisely: what I recollect best was the sensation that everybody was going, and that I was to stay all alone in the place, or anywhere I pleased; and it was getting dark. Then I woke up and said, “Well, I really must see her.” *I suppose dreams mean nothing: but interpreted by the contrary, as is a custom, it would mean the reverse—that I am going away somewhere—which I don’t yet know.*¹⁰⁾(my italics)

Within a year he would be in Japan.

Hearn was also interested in what Japanese folk-lore had to say about dreams. Writing about Japanese gardens, he mentions the belief that if you whisper an unlucky dream to the *nanten* (*nandina domestica*) plant early in the morning, the dream will not come true. Of course, similar superstitions about when to tell or not to tell a dream exist in many cultures.¹¹⁾ But having thus broached the subject of dream superstition, he cannot resist telling what he knows about Japan, even though the essay is nominally about gardens. Accordingly, he appends an unusually long footnote summarizing all the dream-related superstitions he has gleaned from his Izumo friends.

The most lucky of all dreams, they say in Izumo, is a dream of Fuji, the Sacred Mountain. Next in order of good omen is dreaming of a falcon (*taka*). The third best subject for a dream is the eggplant (*nasubi*). To dream of the sun or of the moon is very lucky; but it is still more so to dream of stars. For a young wife it is most fortunate to dream of *swallowing a star*: this signifies that she will become the mother of a beautiful child. To dream of a cow is a good omen; to dream of a horse is lucky, but it signifies traveling. To dream of rain or fire is good. Some dreams are held in Japan, as in the West, “to go by contraries.” Therefore to dream of having one’s house burned up, or of funerals, or of being dead, or of talking to the ghost of a dead person, is good. Some dreams which are good for women mean the reverse when dreamed by men; for example, it is good for a woman to dream that her nose bleeds, but for a man this is very bad. To dream of much money is a sign of loss to come. To dream of the *koi*, or of any fresh-water fish, is the most unlucky of all. This is curious, for in other parts of Japan the *koi* is a symbol of good fortune.¹²⁾

Interestingly, part of this footnote is quoted verbatim in the *Encyclopaedia of Superstition and*

*Folklore*¹³⁾ to explain Japanese superstitions regarding dreams, and Hearn is cited as the authoritative source of the information.

One of the most revealing accounts of Hearn's understanding of dreams comes in a letter he wrote to his Tokyo friend, William B. Mason, regarding an article Mason had recently published in *The Japan Weekly Mail* of Nov. 19, 1892. It was entitled, "The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of," and it centered around the author's analysis of a recent personal dream that had found him in church, which he rarely attends, with a Mr. Sim, an athlete from Kobe whom he had never met. As a preface to the analysis, he playfully introduces author Robert Louis Stevenson's idea of "brownies," which he explains as those "good-natured elves of Scottish legend, who hover round the bedside of the sleeper" and act as play directors. He then goes on to deconstruct his dream, showing how these brownies had put together his dream from a hodgepodge of memories, personages, and recent experiences in the sleeper's life, including the noise of something banging in real time.

In the article, Mason claimed that dreams were fundamentally silent, and that only certain quiet noises could both penetrate into the dream world while allowing the dreamer to remain asleep:

Another interesting feature in dreams is the absence of noise which accompanies all natural phenomena, such as the collapse of houses in an earthquake, collisions at sea, etc. It could not well be otherwise, of course, for the simple reason that external noise of any kind would awaken the dreamer. It is the mental eye, so to speak, which alone acts in the mystic land of dreams. I have no doubt that when the midday gun sounded in my dream, there was some external familiar noise—not sufficient to awake me—like the sudden clanging of a door or shutter, which assisted the brownies in the working out of their comedietta.¹⁴⁾

Although Hearn admired Stevenson's fiction, he preferred a more "scientific" approach to dreams. After reading Mason's analysis, he replied in a letter emphasizing where he thought his friend in error: in the mechanics of external influences.

Do you remember the curious instances on record of the *instantaneity* of dreams? For example, the case of the gentleman who dreamt he was living under the reign of Terror, was denounced to the revolutionary tribunal, was tried and condemned, was sent to prison, was conducted in a tumbrel through the streets, was put upon the scaffold, and felt the guillotine fall upon his neck. Whereat he woke up to find this dream of hours had lasted scarcely a second, and had been caused by the falling of a curtain rod across his neck.

Noises *are* heard in dreams; but when this is the case, the dream is affected by them. If this noise awakens the sleeper, still as a rule, it causes a dream *between the reception of the sound and the moment of waking*. Perfumes have a similar effect. I know a Spanish doctor [Matas] who has been experimenting for years upon sleepers with perfumes, and the results of his researches are very interesting.¹⁵⁾

Of course, as a pre-Freudian, pre-Jungian observer of human psychology, Hearn did not have a clear concept of the effects of the unconscious, though he did believe strongly in the notion of inherited memory. He was more interested in the way that phenomena in the external, physical world could influence the sleeper's dreams. He held that the content of a dream was often largely dependent upon real-time sensory input, upon stimulation to the senses of hearing, smell, and touch

from the real world. The idea of “brownies” may have amused him, but he did not take it very seriously.

The “gentleman” Hearn refers to was Alfred Maury, a nineteenth-century French physician who had published a study of thousands of recollected dreams. Maury concluded, and Hearn believed, that dreams arose largely because of external sensory stimuli acting instantaneously on the sleeper, the whole dream taking place in the brief moments between the action of the stimulus and the resultant waking up.¹⁶⁾ An example of a literary work using this phenomenon in a dramatically stunning way is “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” by Hearn’s contemporary, Ambrose Bierce, in which the entire story of a man’s escape from hanging is revealed to have been a dream lasting but a split second.

Hearn went on in the letter to explain how, in his own dream experience, one sound had inspired the plot of an entire dream story:

When I was living in America, there was a wicked old man in the same street, who had married a young girl three weeks after his wife’s death. It was proposed to give him a “charivari.” Soon after I heard this, I had a queer dream. I thought I saw an immense procession coming with tin cans and pans down the street to “Shivaree” the old man. I heard the noise. I woke up and found that the dream had all been caused by the clang of an empty oyster-can thrown out of a neighboring window.

The touch of a curtain rod on the sleeper’s neck, the sound of a rolling tin can, the smell of perfume—Hearn considered these and other sensory stimuli responsible for instantaneously creating and shaping the dramatic elements of a dream. He even ended “By the Japanese Sea” with a similar example of this phenomenon. In that dream, a personal one that concludes the piece, he watches the hair of a vaguely familiar Japanese woman turn into ripples of water; the reason for the sea image, we learn, is because he is sleeping within earshot of the Sea of Japan. The external noise has virtually determined the nature of the dream’s imagery. Moreover, the strange woman of the dream turns into what seems to be his dead mother; this is because it is O-Bon and she is returning to him along with the “tide” of Japanese dead.¹⁷⁾

Hearn’s use of external stimuli in this dream is rather complex: the external water noise manifests itself visually, in a supernatural image of wavelets of hair turning into wavelets of water. (It is an image he seemed to like, for he had once sketched Elizabeth Bisland swimming in the sea, with her blowing hair merging into the ripples of the waves.) Later this image widens into a mental picture of the sea itself. The dream’s sea exists because he is asleep within earshot of the real sea; but on another level, the sound of the real sea tonight is actually an enormous chorus of ghostly voices heading toward shore. “And awakening, I heard in the night the muttering of the real sea,—the vast husky speech of the Hotoke-Umi,—*the Tide of the Returning Ghosts.*” Waking world and dream world, present life and past life, the living and the ghostly dead, all move back and forth and turn into one another in the great sea of the mind.

Part II

Now that we have some background on Hearn’s ideas about dreams and their significance, we are ready to examine in more detail the places in his writings where he uses dreams imaginatively.

These occur in six works written in Japan: "My First Day in the Orient" (*Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*), "The Dream of a Summer Day" (*Out of the East*), "Story of a Pheasant" and "The Eater of Dreams" (*Kotto*), and finally "Oshidori" and "The Dream of Akinosuke" (*Kaidan*).

"My First Day in the Orient"

As the opening sketch of *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, and thus of all the Japan books, "My First Day in the Orient" invites particular attention since it sets the key for the entire volume. It describes the narrator's day-long rickshaw ride around Yokohama, supposedly on his first day in Japan, a ride that had left him exhausted but exhilarated. The dream appears at the very end, as he falls asleep, both concluding the day's intoxicating encounters with things Japanese and opening the way for the twenty-six sketches that follow. There is no story or allegory here. Hearn intends the dream simply to convey the sensation of a traveler's brain feverishly trying to process a multitude of newly gathered impressions at the end of a long day of sightseeing:

I lie down to sleep, and I dream. I see Chinese texts—multitudinous, weird, mysterious—fleeing by me, all in one direction; ideographs white and dark, upon sign-boards, upon paper screens, upon backs of sandaled men. They seem to live, these ideographs, with conscious life; they are moving their parts, moving with a movement as of insects, monstrously, like *phasmidae*. I am rolling always through low, narrow, luminous streets in a phantom jinrikisha, whose wheels make no sound. And always, always, I see the huge white mushroom-shaped hat of Cha dancing up and down before me as he runs.

The latent paranoia of a first encounter with an unknown culture is nicely captured in the vaguely nightmarish imagery. First, he emphasizes the sheer number and alien quality of the Chinese symbols to arouse a mild sense of anxiety. They are "weird" and fly and are all over: on signs, walls, people's backs. Then, to increase the sense of dream-like menace, they are likened to living, crawling insects that move "monstrously," the effect of the accumulated imagery suggesting something like a swarm of locusts. Here, as in the dream in "By the Japanese Sea," normally unanimated things (a woman's hair, Chinese ideographs) suddenly begin to move as if alive. The slightly unreal feeling of "low, narrow, luminous" streets and the ghostly rickshaw, which true to dream experience makes no sound, complete the eerie scene. But to counter these apprehensions there is, after all, the warm reminder of human kindness and generosity in the ever present Cha with his amusing hat and reassuring dance, a comforting symbol promising future glimpses of Japanese delights.

"The Dream of a Summer Day"

Although the title of this opening work to *Out of the East* invites us to expect a conventional dream, one that appears during a warm afternoon's sleep, there is in fact no such dream at all in this piece; all the "dreams" are either daydreams or remembered fictions, experienced while the narrator is fully awake. Through the narrator, Hearn weaves a complex tapestry of natural and supernatural threads by taking elements from his waking dreams and stories and blending them with the elements of his immediate surroundings. He opens with a description that is not a dream but rather dream-like—of a hotel that "*seemed*. . . a paradise" (my italics) with maids that seemed "celestial beings." It is a dream only in the sense of being something that was imagined by free

association. The hotel mistress, with her tinkling voice, is portrayed as an enchantress, who bewitches the narrator just as a similarly enchanting mistress of a similarly paradisiacal palace bewitched Urashima Taro.

After relating the story of Urashima Taro in Part II, the narrator returns to the present in Part III, now mixing elements of the Urashima story with the details of his check-out from the inn: The bell boy is now a "sea-creature with Chinese characters upon his back." Hearn repeats this device of intermingling fiction and reality in various guises, establishing it as one of the story's themes. As he rides in the rickshaw, sea and sky seem one: "Glowing blue sea met hollow blue sky in a brightness of electric fusion." And soon afterwards, thinking of the clouds as being the mists from Urashima's box, his imagination blends past and present, fiction and fact, to create a delightfully illogical new daydream:

The gnat of the soul of me flitted out into that dream of blue, 'twixt sea and sun—hummed back to the shore of Suminoye through the luminous ghosts of fourteen hundred summers. Vaguely I felt the beneath me the drifting of a keel. It was the time of the Mikado Yuriaku. And the Daughter of the Dragon King said tinklingly, "Now we will go to my father's palace where it is always blue." "Why always blue?" I asked. "Because," she said, "I put all the clouds into the Box." "But I must go home," I answered resolutely. "Then," she said, "you will pay the kurumaya only seventy-five sen."

When he awakes from this reverie, the pattern of its little question and answer session is deliberately imitated in his conversation with the rickshaw runner, who answers him that the reason for the beating of drums is to pray for rain. Thus do imagination and reality intertwine.

In Part IV, he philosophizes on the meaning of the Urashima legend, which leads him to the memory of a personal Urashima Taro-like experience from his early childhood. Deliberately blurring the lines of demarcation between memory and dream, creating a reverie that is half-real and half-fictionalized, Hearn ends this part with a symbolic account of his early life with and separation from his mother. Perhaps, he implies, the true meaning of the Urashima tale is that we all inevitably become "ridiculously old" and lose forever the power to return to the best days of our lives.

In Part V, Hearn introduces the story of an old woman that drank too greedily from the fountain of youth and turned herself back into an infant. This is a kind of Urashima Taro in reverse, the protagonist leaving not a palace but a poor mountain hut, and failing to return not because she could not find what she was looking for but because she did find it, turning not ridiculously old but ridiculously young. Like the husband who eventually finds his wife, now a speechless infant, Hearn too expresses puzzlement at the unclear moral of the dream-like story.

He concludes the piece with a return to the reality of his rickshaw ride, but he is now so influenced by the Urashima legend that he insists upon paying the runner exactly according to the instructions of the mistress of the inn, even though the runner asks for less. On one level, he is simply amusing, a man half in and half out of his dreamworld. On another level, however, Hearn has demonstrated his belief in the "reality" of the world of imagination, effectively merging the mistress and the Daughter of the Dragon King into "gods" whom he dare not disobey—no matter how unreasonable it may seem. He has learned the lesson of Urashima Taro perhaps too well. In the final sentence he turns from both past and present toward the future, and heads out of memory toward hope, symbolized by the sound of the great drums beseeching rain. The final image is one

of him leaving behind the “dream” of the summer day, virtually waking up from that extended reverie into the harsh “blaze” of daylight and moving off toward the din of daily activity suggested by the great drums.

“Story of a Pheasant”

In retelling this old Japanese story of a farmer and his wife, Hearn uses a simple dream, told in only three sentences, as the seed from which the action and moral of the story emerge.

One night the wife dreamed that her father-in-law, who had died some years before, came to her and said, “*Tomorrow I shall be in great danger: try to save me if you can!*” In the morning she told this to her husband; and they talked about the dream. Both imagined that the dead man wanted something; but neither could imagine what the words of the vision signified.

The next day, she saves a pheasant that is being hunted by a magistrate and his hunting party, hiding it in the rice pot, where it tamely sits. The hunters search the house but don't find it. Later she shows it to her husband, who holds it and remarks how it is blind in the right eye as her father was and it looks at them just as her father used to do. The husband concludes that her father must have been thinking: “*Now that I am a bird, better give my body to my children for food than to let the hunters have it.*” Then, with an evil smile, he breaks its neck! Outraged at his cruelty, the wife runs to the hunter-magistrate and tells all; whereupon he arrests the husband as a person of evil heart, banishes him on pain of death, donates land to the woman, and finds her a good husband.

As a type, this is a message dream, a classical format in which a messenger from another world, often the world of the dead, visits the dreamer and predicts the future or prescribes future actions. Traditionally, the messenger is a god or an angel or another respected figure. The voice of the family patriarch in Hearn's dream story roughly fits the type, and it is the husband's unwillingness to take the message seriously that leads to his undoing.

The moral impact of the story rests entirely on the husband's willfully perverse dream interpretation. The apparition in a dream of a deceased loved one is common enough in the annals of dream psychology, and so is prediction of the future. What is interesting about this story is that dream interpretation constitutes a quasi-legal test of human character and moral rectitude, with social and legal consequences as severe and binding as any violation of civil or religious law. Hearn wants to show that in Japanese society reincarnation is not just an abstract theory but a vital facet of everyday life. Readers who may think the husband has simply killed a chicken will be surprised by the severity of the magistrate's sentence: permanent exile, death upon return. The husband's crime, according to the magistrate, is his blatant lack of filial piety; but it is also his failure to take seriously the dream's message and the idea of reincarnation. To ignore Buddhist teaching for the sake of a pheasant dinner is also part of the moral turpitude.

“The Eater of Dreams”

In this essay, Hearn introduces Western readers to the legendary Chinese/Japanese creature known as the Baku, or Eater of Dreams. In Japanese superstition, however, it is only evil dreams, or nightmares, which the Baku is supposed to eat. To get the Baku to devour your bad dream, the

narrator explains, you must quickly repeat the phrase, “Devour, O Baku! Devour my evil dream!” three times upon awakening. Then the Baku will not only eat the bad dream but also change it into good luck.

The heart of the piece is the dream itself, whose telling forms the major part of a dialogue between the Baku and the Japanese narrator. Having just awoken from a nightmare, the narrator relates it in gory detail to the Baku so that he can devour it. In the dream, the narrator is standing in a room, viewing with trepidation his own corpse. After the other watchers leave, he approaches the corpse. An eyelid seems to quiver, the face seems to elongate, and the dreamer becomes terrified of the possibility that the eyes might open. Then, in a perfect imitation of Poe, Hearn renders the horrible climax:

They OPENED! —horribly they opened! —and that thing sprang—sprang from the bed at me, and fastened upon me—moaning, and gnawing, and rending! Oh! with what madness of terror did I strive against it! But the eyes of it, and the moans of it, and the touch of it, sickened; and all my being seemed about to burst asunder in frenzy of loathing, when—I knew not how—I found in my hand an axe. And I struck with the axe; —I clove, I crushed, I brayed the Moaner—until there lay before me only a shapeless, hideous, reeking mass—the abominable ruin of Myself...

The horror of the normal nightmare situation, where you are chased by a loathsome creature and cannot escape, is complicated by the fact that here that creature is yourself. You are a zombie come back to devour your living self. It is cannibalism with the horror intensified by being self-cannibalism. To make matters worse, it is not the “living” that eat the corpse (similar to “Jikininki”); it is the corpse that eats the living. The climax comes when the Baku refuses to eat the dream and reveals that it is actually a very fortunate one:

The axe—yes! The Axe of the Excellent Law, by which the monster of Self is utterly destroyed! . . . The best kind of a dream!” My friend, *I* believe in the teaching of the Buddha.

As in “Story of a Pheasant,” here too the entire plot turns on the morally correct interpretation of a dream. But this time we get an enlightened interpretation, one that reveals not the baseness of the interpreter but rather his moral and philosophical superiority to the dreamer. The Baku explains the narrator’s nightmare in terms of a religious allegory; to him it is a kind of Buddhist *Pilgrim’s Progress*, succinctly illustrating the path to the goals of selflessness and spiritual enlightenment. According to Yu Beong-cheon in *An Ape of Gods*, the dream “signifies the annihilation of our last illusion, the Phantom Ego, as a promise of spiritual salvation.”¹⁸⁾ Hearn was, at this period in his life, extremely interested in Buddhism, and he no doubt took delight in emphasizing the somewhat humorous notion that even a Baku believes in Buddhist teachings.

Hearn’s other purpose, however, transcends religion: it is to show how, through cultural differences, what clearly seems a perfect nightmare to most Westerners may be seen as “the best kind of dream,” a lucky dream, by different standards. Dream interpretation, he implies, is deeply rooted in culture, and one man’s greatest fear may be another man’s greatest hope.

As we have seen, ever since he was a child Hearn was fascinated by nightmares—especially by the degree of their power to frighten. He had read some psychologists but felt that their explanations were inadequate, that the terror of nightmare must be due to deeper, inherited aspects of the

mind. Several years before writing "The Eater of Dreams," he voiced his ideas on this topic in a letter to Basil Hall Chamberlain:

Now I have long fancied that this form of fear also is explainable only by the inheritance of ancestral memories. . . . The memories themselves are indeed gone—only the sensations of them remain, stir into life at vague moments of sleep, and especially in the sleep of sickness, when the experiences of real life grow faintest in recollection.¹⁹⁾

For Hearn, dreams contained subconscious links with the world of the dead, with our unknown ancestors, and with our ancient selves. They, of all our thoughts, penetrated most deeply into the wiring of the human brain that has been evolving over eons of time and contains a kind of palimpsest of human experience. Dreams thus offered glimpses of long ago and far away, like a powerful telescope looking back into the far reaches of inner space.

"Oshidori"

"Oshidori," the second story in *Kaidan*, shows several interesting similarities with "Story of a Pheasant." Both involve an unenlightened man who wrongfully kills a bird for food; in both stories a dream warns of an event that will occur on the following day; both men are made to feel the true heinousness of their crime according to Buddhist precepts of humane, moral behavior. In "Oshidori," however, the heart of the dream is a cry of anger and anguish, a protest against past violence from the natural world; in "Story of a Pheasant," it is a plea for help to prevent future violence. The voice in the dream in "Oshidori" scolds the dreamer, as a parent or teacher does a child, trying to impress upon him the seriousness of what he did; it is a highly emotional voice in a state of extreme grief. But in "Story of a Pheasant," the voice of the father-in-law, while emphatic, is still very terse and matter-of-fact, as if he is being chased and has no time to talk: "Tomorrow I shall be in great danger: try to save me if you can!" If the dream speech in "Oshidori" is like a lyric poem, that of "Story of a Pheasant" is an epigram.

The hunter, though, obeys the dream's instruction that he go to the lake and see. Unlike the young farmer who chose to ignore the pheasant's plea to save it, the hunter takes the dream seriously enough to witness the pain he has inadvertently caused, to understand his sin, and become spiritually enlightened by the teaching of a bird.

"The Dream of Akinosuke"

Hearn's approach in "The Dream of Akinosuke," the fourteenth story in *Kaidan*, is somewhat different from that taken with his other dream stories in that the telling of the dream itself occupies the greater part of the story. Soldier-farmer Miyata Akinosuke, drinking with two friends under a large tree, takes a brief afternoon nap and dreams. His dream story is in some ways a variation on the legend of Urashima Taro: like Urashima, dreamer Akinosuke is suddenly taken away to a gorgeous palace in an unknown kingdom and is married to the King's lovely daughter. There, with her, he lives a happy, royal, idyllic existence until one day circumstances force him to return to his native land, where he is suddenly brought back to reality and to the realization of a mysterious discrepancy in the passing of time. But unlike "Urashima Taro," Akinosuke's dream story contains very little of the supernatural: it begins with a procession of vassals, one of whom emerges to command Akinosuke's presence at the King's palace; they go by normal carriage (albeit amazingly quickly); the arrival is announced, clothes are changed, and he meets the King, who commands him

to marry his daughter and rule the land of Raishu. Except for perhaps the speed of the trip, nothing supernatural or physically impossible happens; there are no talking animals, no cryptic warnings from beyond the grave. All is extraordinarily ordinary. It is, in a way, an adult version of Urashima Taro: Like Urashima, Akinosuke also marries royalty and finds himself in an ideal situation, but unlike Urashima he is not simply a guest; he is also there on business: he has important political duties as the ruler of a people, and he is also the father of future princes and princesses. His return home also comes in the course of duty, for as soon as his legal link to the royal family is dissolved with the death of his wife, he is mandated to go back to his country. At the King's command, Akinosuke sets sail, waking up just after the island of Raishu vanishes from sight to find that his twenty-three years away were actually but a few minutes—Urashima Taro in reverse.

Another noteworthy aspect of this story is the three friends' discussion of the dream. It is not so much an interpretation of the meaning or significance; rather it is an attempt to determine how the dream happened the way it did, to connect the contents of the dream with the physical events occurring in the here-and-now while it was happening. "Indeed, you saw strange things. We also saw something strange while you were napping," his friends tell him. They explain that while he slept, a yellow butterfly had fluttered around him but was pulled down into a hole by a very large ant. One friend suggests that the butterfly may have been Akinosuke's soul, while the other believes the ants are the key. "Ants are queer beings—possibly goblins," he says. They investigate the large ant colony by the tree and find an underground "town" in which certain places and ants correspond perfectly with the contents of the dream. Akinosuke recognizes the King, the palace, the land of Raishu, the mountain of Hanryoko, and the grave of his ex-wife—"a tiny mound, on the top of which was fixed a water-worn pebble, in shape resembling a Buddhist monument. Underneath it he found embedded in clay—the dead body of a female ant."

Is it the dream that is strange, or is it the real world? Are ants in their world somehow the same as people in ours? What are the deeper connections between human society and animal society, between dream world and waking world? The fascination lies in the reverberations Hearn sets up between the two worlds. Are all things literally "one," as Buddhism says? These were all issues that fascinated Hearn. Especially the idea that a person's soul could enter the body of someone or something else, giving up one's own life so that another might live, a phenomenon known as "migawari ni tatsu," which he had just explained in the previous story, "Jiurokuzakura."

The night before the day of his death on September 26, 1904, Hearn dreamt his last dream, and he remembered it. Setsu's memory of what he told her is as follows:

'I had a very strange dream last night.' We would always talk about our dreams. So I asked what kind of dream it was. Then he said, 'In the dream, I travelled very, very far away. Now I'm sitting and smoking here, but I'm not sure which world is real, the world in the dream or the world that I am in now. I was in a strange land, neither in the West nor in Japan.' He himself seemed to be much amused with that dream.²⁰⁾

This time, tragically, the meaning of the dream was not "by contraries"; it was indeed Hearn who left, and for someplace very far away. But the dream world and real world had already become so thoroughly fused in this man, that he seemed to exist in both places at once—he felt awake when dreaming and he dreamt while awake. When he had first arrived fourteen years ago, Japan was the

dream world, America the real world. Now all worlds had become one.

Notes

- 1) Letter dated 12/14/93 in *The Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, Vol.XVI, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1922, pp.82-83. Hereafter referred to as *Writings*.
- 2) *Writings*, XIV, 68-69. Letter to George M. Gould from Martinique, April 1889.
- 3) *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine* by George M. Gould and Walter L. Pyle, Philadelphia : W. B. Saunders, 1896. Cited from the Internet at: <ftp://sunsite.unc.edu/pub/docs/books/gutenberg/etext96/aacom10.txt> Project Gutenberg Etext.
- 4) Anthony Stevens, *Private Myths: Dreams and Dreaming*: Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995, p.3.
- 5) "The Value of the Supernatural in Fiction," reprinted in Jonathan Cott's *Wandering Ghost*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991, pp.347-54. Also printed in *Talks to Writers*, Ed. John Erskine, New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1927, p.149.
- 6) Elizabeth Stevenson, *Lafcadio Hearn*, New York: Octagon Books, 1979, pp.310-11.
- 7) *Writings*, VI, 396. "Sayonara!"
- 8) *Writings*, VI, 209. "By the Japanese Sea."
- 9) For a brief history of this belief, see *A Dictionary of Superstitions*, Ed. Iona Opie and Moira Tatem, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, p.126.
- 10) *Writings*, XIV, 95-96. To Bisland? 1889.
- 11) *A Dictionary of Superstitions*, p.125.
- 12) *Writings*, VI, 14. "In a Japanese Garden."
- 13) *Encyclopaedia of Superstition and Folklore*, Ed. Cora Linn Daniels and C. M. Stevans, Chicago: J.H. Yewdale and Sons Co., 1903; Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1971, Vol.I, p.223.
- 14) *The Japan Weekly Mail*, Nov.19, 1892, p.620. (I wish to thank the Saitama University Library for providing me with photocopies of this publication.)
- 15) Letter from Kumamoto, 12/2/92. (Unpublished).
- 16) *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., 1986, Vol.27, p.306.
- 17) *Writings*, VI, 210. "By the Japanese Sea."
- 18) *An Ape of Gods*, Yu Beong-cheon, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1964, p.41.
- 19) *Writings*, XVI, 82-83, (12/14/93).
- 20) Koizumi Setsu, "Reminiscences," translated by Yoji Hasegawa, in *A Walk in Kumamoto*, Kent: Global Oriental, 1997, p.43.