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Japanese Ghosts: Lafcadio Hearn's *Kwaidan. Stories and Studies of Strange Things*

Sunt aliquid Manes: letum non omnia finit.
(Propertius)

Nineteenth century Britain was haunted by ghosts, literally and literarily. While ordinary people still held beliefs deeply rooted in local and national folklore, writers drew from an equally ancient tradition that interwove classical and Christian literature and gave birth to new narrative models. In *The Iliad* Patroclus' ghost ("like what he had been in stature, voice, and the light of his beaming eyes, clad, too, as he had been clad in life") appears in dream to Achilles, complaining that his body has not yet been cremated, thus preventing his spirit from entering Hades (Book XXIII, trans. by Samuel Butler). *Te lucis ante terminum*, the hymn sung by Catholic clergy and monks at the Compline, namely after sunset, also clearly admits the existence of beings that neither live nor die:

> Te lucis ante terminum
> Rerum Creator poscimus
> Ut pro tua clementia
> Sis praesul et custodia.
> Procul recedant somnia,
> Et noctium phantasmata …
>
> To Thee, before the close of day
> Creator of the world, we pray
> that with Thy wonted favour, Thou
> wouldst be our Guard and Keeper now.
> From all ill dreams defend our eyes,
> from nightly fears and fantasies.
> (trans. by J. M. Neale)

Though they differ in several ways, Patroclus' ghost and the Christian *noctium phantasmata* both contradict the idea (and the hope, sometimes accompanied by agony, as the well-known words pronounced by Macbeth in the third act of his tragedy, "… The time has been/That, when the brains were out, the man would die,/And there an end", demonstrate) that there is no life after death. Life may continue after death, instead. *Qui ante nos fuerant* continue to co-exist with us, either in our thoughts during the daytime or in our dreams, at night, when body and mind are defenceless and open to unexpected visits. Sometimes *Manes* may even reproach the living for the wrongs they have done to them, as happens in Propertius's

Elegies (IV, 7), when Cynthia appears in dream to her poet lover, complaining that he has already forgotten her:

> Sunt aliquid Manes: letum non omnia finit,
> Luridaque evictos effugit umbra rogos.
> Cynthia namque meo visa est incumbere fulcro,
> Murmur ad extremae nuper humata viae.
> …
> At mihi non oculos quisquam inclamavit euntis:
> Unum impetrassem te revocante diem:
> Non crepuit fissa me propter harundine custos,
> Laesit et obiectum tegola curta caput.
> Denique quis nostro curvum te funere vidit,
> Atram quis lacrimis incaluisse togam?(1-4; 23-28)
>
> The Shades are no fable: death is not the end of
> all, and the pale ghost escapes the vanquished pyre.
> For Cynthia seemed to bend o' er my couch's head,
> Cynthia so lately buried beside the roaring road.
> …
> Yet no man called upon my name as I passed and mine
> eyelids closed: surely hadst thou recalled me, I had
> been granted one more day. No watchman rattled
> his cleft reed for my sake, and a broken tile wounded
> my defenceless brow. Aye, and who saw thee bowed
> with grief at my graveside? Who saw thy robe of
> mourning grow hot with thy tears?
> (trans. by Harold E. Butler)

These three examples, all rooted in antiquity and all taken from the so called high canon of western literature, are paradigmatic in that they show some characteristics bound to remain more or less unchanged to our day and to the nineteenth century in particular: the possibility that the dead and the living may 'speak' and 'look' to each other (hence "visa est", "oculos", "vidit" in Propertius's elegy; but the whole poem is scattered with words referring to sight), that the dead continue to be – as they are able to demand changes in the real world or even put them into effect – juridical persons; in some cases (Patroclus, Cynthia), that a duty has been forgotten, a law broken and that order must be restored.

This last distinguishing trait allows us to take Lafcadio Hearn's ghost tales into account and link them both to classical antiquity and, to a greater extent, to the years when they were written. It is widely known, in fact, that in the nineteenth century the triumph of genres like the gothic and detective novel gives literary shape to – contemporarily trying to solve it – a fundamental contradiction: while the macabre, fantastic, demoniac, criminal, supernatural, and whatever goes along with them (sex repression, for instance: M.G. Lewis and Stoker's novels are exemplary) mark the existence of impulses that reason cannot control, reason is appealed to

whenever subversive pressures go too far. This explains why in writers like Radcliffe, Walpole, Bulwer-Lytton, Le Fanu, Dickens, and the above quoted Lewis and Stoker, the irrational and sinful is given free rein throughout (say, for three quarters of the novel or the story), but is defeated in the end. Order (and law) must be restored; right and wrong, good and evil, must be given a clear-cut division again. This is even true of Poe (whom Hearn knew and admired, as he read and also admired Bulwer-Lytton, whose novel *The Haunted and the Haunters*, published in 1859, was among his favourites) as were some of Poe's most famous tales. In the preface to his *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* he maintains that "terror is not German, but of the soul", and there is no doubt that in "The Pit and the Pendulum" or in "The Black Cat" terror stems from this root, finding in itself its own justification, but it is also true that in "The Murders in Rue Morgue" or "The Gold Bug", whatever in the opening paragraphs appears absurd and demoniac is given a rational explanation in the last pages.

There is only one case in which the suspension of disbelief must be almost complete, namely when a ghost comes back from the unknown boundaries of the unknown space where he or she keeps wandering. I say almost because, in order to be convincing, any ghost tale relies on a more or less perfect balance between rational and irrational: the irrational presence of a ghost (ghosts may exist in folklore or in the reader's imagination but are nonsensical from a scientific point of view) must be rationally justified by being placed in a plausible framework. Or rather, the more plausible (realistic) the framework is, the more accurate the details are, and the more the ghost acquires conceptual depth and emotional strength.

All these characteristics are easily found in the tales collected by Hearn in a volume published in 1904, *Kwaidan. Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, with one substantial difference.[1] With the possible and partial exception of Algernon Bertram Mitford, who also spent long periods in Japan and is the author of *Tales of Old Japan* (1871), one of the books that better introduced the Japanese culture into Britain, Hearn is the only British writer who died a Japanese citizen. The fourteen years spent in Japan (from 1890 to his death in 1904), the help he received from his Japanese wife and friends, allowed him to attain an outstanding knowledge of the Japanese culture, in particular of Buddhism and national folklore.

We might even maintain that today his works are read more in Japan than in the western world. Yoko Makino is ironic: "In Japan, Hearn is widely read and appraised as a writer who could understand the inner life of the Japanese people. In the West, on the contrary, he has been neglected, or criticized for dreaming an idealistic Japan".[2] Roger Pulvers (born in New York City and now an Australian citizen), a writer and a theatre

[1] His love for Japan found its literary expression in several essays and works of fiction: *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, 1894; *Out of the East*, 1895; *Kokoro*, 1896; *In Ghostly Japan*, 1890; *A Japanese Miscellany*, 1901; *Kottō*, 1902; *Kwaidan*, 1904; *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation*, published posthumously in 1905.

[2] Yuko Makino, "From Folklore to Literature. Hearn and Japanese Legends of Tree Spirits", in *An Ape of Gods: The Art and Thought of Lafcadio Hearn*, ed. by Beongcheon Yu (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1964), 112-119.

director, though the author of a novel, *The Dream of Lafcadio Hearn*, where he draws an appreciative portrait of him, claims instead that Hearn "created an illusion and lived his days and nights within its confines. That illusion was his Japan. He found in Japan the ideal coupling of the cerebral and the sensual, mingled and undistinguishable, the one constantly recharging the other and affording him the inspiration to write".[3]

However that may be, it must also be underlined that most ghost tales by Hearn betray a Chinese origin, which gives him the opportunity to shed light on both traditions (sometimes making wise use of footnotes in his books). In 1887, that is before his journey to Japan, he had published *Some Chinese Ghosts and Other Stories*, which clearly demonstrated how deep his studies had been. Allusions to China can also be found in the already quoted collection *Tales of Old Japan* by A.B. Mitford, who before 1871 served in the Diplomatic Corps in Peking. It may not be by chance, however, that Hearn's ghost stories all belong to the last five years of his life, when he knew more about Japanese and Eastern culture. It might be useful to bear in mind that Hearn arrived in Japan on 4 April 1890. In January 1891 he married Koizumi Setsuko, who gave him two sons and one daughter. In 1895 he took Japanese citizenship and chose the name Koizumi ("little spring", "little source") Yakumo ("eight clouds"), by which he is nowadays known in Japan.[4]

As for *Japonisme*, as the French critic Philippe Burty named it, the influence of Japan on European and American literature is a complex and important phenomenon, whose origin goes back to the second half of the nineteenth century in France, when the de Goncourt brothers extolled the beauty and richness of Japanese poems and drawings. Among the writers, Stéphane Mallarmé, Pierre Loti and Émile Zola (joined in the following decades, in the English speaking world, by Ezra Pound) were the first to acknowledge their debt to Japanese tradition and to *haiku* in particular (*haiku* poems can be found in Hearn's books, too: in the final section of *Kwaidan. Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, for instance). In the United States *Japonisme* was studied in depth by the great scholar Ernest Fenollosa, who also favoured the development of Japanese studies in his country. Perhaps this explains why – apart from the fact that for a period he lived and published in the States – Hearn has always been granted a particular attention by American critics.[5]

The prominence of the Buddhist tradition, however, is outstanding in Hearn and is demonstrated by the presence, in the fifteen tales of *Kwaidan. Stories and Studies of Strange Things* of five priest figures who are either the protagonists of the stories or play an important role in them (the last three sections: "Butterflies", "Mosquitoes", "Ants", collected under the title "Insect Studies", while justifying the second part of the subtitle, *Studies of Strange Things*, are in fact little more than brilliant digressions). Such a

[3] R. Pulvers, "Lafcadio Hearn: interpreter of two disparate worlds", *The Japan Times* (19 January 2000), 18.

[4] See the biographical studies: Nina H. Kennard, *Lafcadio Hearn* (New York: Appleton, 1912); Sean G. Ronan and Koizumi Toki, *Lafcadio Hearn (Koizumi Yakumo). His Life, Work and Irish Background* (Dublin: Ireland Japan Association, 1991); Jonathan Cott, *Wandering Ghost: The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn* (New York: Knopf, 1991); Paul Murray, *A Fantastic Journey: The Life and Literature of Lafcadio Hearn* (Folkestone: Japanese Library, 1993. English and Japanese text).

[5] A well thought-out approach to *Japonisme* is in Earl Miner, *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958). See also Siegfried Wichmann, *Japonisme. The Japanese Influence on Western Art since 1858* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999).

relevant presence in "The Story of Mimi-Nashi-Hōïchi", "Oshidori", "Jikininki", "Rokuro-Kubi" and "The Story of Aoyagi" cannot be simply a coincidence: priests are not only those who preserve tradition, both written and oral (like Christian preachers, Buddhist priests and monks make large use of anecdotes and parables), but it is they who are, so to speak, qualified to mediate between the visible and invisible world, between the living and the dead. Sometimes, for instance when they act as exorcists, this is given an official sanction: in the already quoted "The Story of Mimi-Nashi-Hōïchi", a priest and his acolyte try to free the protagonist, a singer and a player of *biwa* (a kind of four stringed lute), from the ghosts ready to kill him; an exorcist is at work in "A Dead Secret", too, where a Zen head-priest succeeds in placating the ghost (a perturbed spirit, Hamlet would call it) of a dead woman.

"The Story of Mimi-Nashi-Hōïchi", however, is important for other reasons. Together with some other tales in the volume which I shall refer to later, it shows Hearn's ability to shape a perfectly structured story, where the formerly quoted opposites (rational and irrational, true and false, plausible and implausible) converge to form a well-balanced whole, strengthened by a style both direct and (perhaps for this very reason) emotionally powerful. The story begins in the most traditional way, by referring, as happens in fables and fairy tales, to a remote past:

> More than seven hundred years ago, at Dan-no-ura, in the Straits of Shimonoséki, was fought the last battle of the long contest between the Heiké, or Taira clan, and the Genji, or Minamoto clan. There the Heiké perished utterly, with her women and children, and their infant emperor likewise – now remembered as Antoku Tennō. And the sea and the shore have been haunted for seven hundred years. … But there are many strange things to be seen and heard along that coast. On dark nights thousand of ghostly fires hover about the beach, or flit above the waves – pale lights which the fishermen call *Oni-bi*, or demon fires; and, whenever the winds are up, a sound of great shouting comes from that sea, like a clamor of battle.[6]

Then the reader learns that in a Buddhist temple nearby lives "a blind man named Hōïchi, who was famed for his skill in recitation and in playing upon the *biwa*". At night, when he his alone, someone who appears to be a samurai[7] comes and invites – or rather, orders him to play and sing the story of the battle in front of "a person of exceedingly high rank" and his court. Hōïchi obeys. Soon he is in the presence of a crowd he does not see but hears: "There he thought that many great people were assembled: the sound of leaves in a forest. He heard also a great humming of voices, – talking in undertones; and the speech was the speech of courts"(*K*, 9). Hōïchi, in fact, is more than the humble guest of a Buddhist temple, he is an artist. All the courtiers praise his bravura:

[6] Lafcadio Hearn, *Kwaidan. Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (Tuttle: Boston, 1971), 3-4. Hereafter indicated as *K*.

[7] Together with Buddhist priests, samurais are the characters the reader most often meets in *Kwaidan*: "The Story of Mimi-Nashi-Hōïchi"; "The Story of Aoyagi"; "Jiu-Roku-Zakura", "Diplomacy". Sometimes the two typologies intertwine, as in "The Story of Aoyagi", where a samurai ends by taking the Buddhist vows and becoming an itinerant priest, thus emphasizing the homiletic aims of most tales in the collection.

> But when at last he came to tell the fate of the fair and the helpless, – the piteous perishing of the women and children, – and the death-leap of Nii-no-Ama, with the imperial infant in her arms, – then all the listeners uttered together one long, long shuddering cry of anguish; and thereafter they wept and wailed so loudly and so wildly that the blind man was frightened by the violence of the grief he had made.(*K*, 10)

As a matter of fact, the blind singer is singing for no one. Or rather, he is singing to the ghosts of those who died in the battle of Dan-no-ura and now haunt the beach where it was fought. When some servants are sent to look for him, they find Hōïchi sitting alone in a sort of black nothingness:

> But the men at once hastened to the cemetery; and there, by the help of their lanterns, they discovered Hōïchi, – sitting alone in the rain before the memorial tomb of Antoku Tennō, making his *biwa* resound, and loudly chanting the chant of the battle of Dan-no-ura. And behind him, and about him, and everywhere above the tombs, the fires of the dead were burning, like candles. Never before had so great a host of *Oni-bi* appeared in the sight of a mortal man.(*K*, 14)

All the elements of a typical tale of terror are present: darkness, tombs, ghosts. What makes them new and intriguing, however, and effective from a literary viewpoint, is the way Hearn employs them. The most wisely used device is the contrast between sight and hearing; or, to put it another way, between blindness and sound. In the passages quoted above the insistence on hearing is impressive (the acoustic range goes from humming to wailing to shouting and vice versa), but this happens throughout the tale, thus forcing the reader to share with the protagonist an attention to all the nightly sounds (for at night, to paraphrase a saying by Sophocles, everything rustles), and a blindness which in the end will fling them both into a state of terror. It must not be forgotten, as I underlined before, that Hōïchi is an artist, a dangerous quality that in the opinion of many European writers (see Hoffman, Poe, Baudelaire) was often associated with the sinful and the diabolic. We might go so far as to state that what originated as Apollonian has now (that is to say in all these authors, Hearn included) become Dionysian, to an extent that paves the way to some trends in modern and post-modern poetics. It is an ambiguous feature. Devilish as it is, art has a power to console both the living and the dead: those fallen in the battle of Dan-no-ura may be dreadful ghosts, but they are also capable of weeping for grief when art succeeds in performing such a miracle. Hōïchi is to them what the musician Orpheus was to both the souls of the dead and the Maenads. This interpretation might seem audacious, but a close reading of the text confirms it. The dismemberment theme, for instance, clearly emerges in the second half of the tale, when the priest of the temple where Hōïchi lives tells the *biwa* player what had really happened to him:

> All that you have been imagining was illusion – except the calling of the dead. By once obeying them, you have put yourself in their power. If you obey them again, after what has already occurred, they will tear you in pieces. But they would have destroyed you, sooner or later, in any event… Now I shall not be able to remain with you tonight: I am called away to perform another service. But before I go, it will be necessary to protect your body by writing holy texts upon it.(*K*, 15-16)[8]

[8] The dangerous quality of art is underlined by the first words the priest tells Hōïchi when he comes back from his ghostly recital: "Hōïchi, my poor friend, you are now in great danger! How unfortunate that you did not tell me all this before! Your wonderful skill in music has indeed brought you into strange trouble"(*Kwaidan*, 15).

Which is precisely what he and his acolyte do. The acolyte, unfortunately, forgets to write the text of the holy sutra on Hōïchi's ears, which are torn off by the ghostly samurai that every night comes to fetch him, turning him into a modern Orpheus, who is not so heroic, alive although maimed.

After this, the blind *biwa* player is given a nickname evoking both his story and its cruel conclusion: "But from the time of his adventure, he was known only by the appellation of *Mimi-Nashi-Hōichi*: Hōïchi-the-Earless". As for proper and family names, nicknames are obviously intended to endow the story with a surplus of authenticity. This is not the case of the genealogy (a nomenklatura, in some ways) of demons and ghosts that Hearn scatters about in his twice-told tales, which pursues a different goal. To cite them, to conjure them up as Hearn does using their Japanese names is to strengthen the fascination of the story, because while introducing the reader to such a different national folklore, they serve to stress the remoteness and otherness of what is told, making it – if we want to use the German definition so cherished by the experts of fantastic literature – all the more *Unheimlich*.

Fig. 1: Masaki Kobayashi, still from *Kwaidan*, 1965.

In "The Story of Mimi-Nashi-Hōïchi", for instance, besides common 'evil spirits', *Oni-bi*, or demon fires, and *Kijin*, goblins, are at work; the very title of "Jikininki" is the name, taken from Japanese Buddhism, of the spirits of impious individuals who seek out and eat human corpses (literally, *Jikininki* means 'human-eating ghosts'); "Mujina", which gives the eighth tale of *Kwaidan. Stories and Studies of Strange Things* its title, is a synonym of *Noppera-bō*, a faceless ghost; in "Rokuro-Kubi", though making a mistake (he describes, in fact, a *Nukebuki*, namely a ghost whose head takes off from the body and flies about in search of human prey), Hearn is describing one of the innumerable ghosts in Japanese folklore; in "A Dead Secret" the soul of a dead mother appears at night to her relatives, invisible from the waist downwards ("Her head and shoulders could be very distinctly seen; but from the waist downwards the figure thinned to invisibility"(*K*, 104),

a characteristic common to every kind of *Yūrei* (a comprehensive term for ghost).

Ghosts may appear at night or in the daytime (this is perhaps the most striking difference with European ghosts), in most cases when someone is particularly fatigued.[9] As may easily be expected, a common nightly situation is represented by dreams, as in "Oshidori", where a hunter shoots a female mandarin duck with his arrow and that very night is visited in his dream by a beautiful woman who claims to be the soul of the dead mandarin-duck (or a human being reborn as a duck), but in most cases – which are by far the most interesting – the nightly theme is linked to the theme of tiredness and (one more feature shared with fairy tales) to the situation of being lost in an unknown place. In "Jikininki", for instance:

> Once, when Musō Kokushi, a priest of the Zen sect, was journeying alone through the province of Mino, he lost his way in a mountain-district where there was nobody to direct him. For a long time he wandered about helplessly; and he was beginning to despair of finding shelter for the night, when he perceived, on the top of a hill lighted by the last rays of the sun, one of those little hermitages, called *anjitsu*, which are built for solitary priests. (*K*, 65)[10]

Something similar happens in "Rokuro-Kubi" and "The Story of Aoyagi":

> In the course of his first long journey, Kwairyō had occasion to visit the province of Kai. One evening, as he was travelling through the mountains of that province, darkness overtook him in a very lonesome district, leagues away from any village. So he resigned himself to pass the night under the stars; and having found a suitable grassy spot, by the roadside, he lay down there, and prepared to sleep.(*K*, 84-85)

> It was the coldest period of the year when he started; the country was covered with snow; and, though mounted upon a powerful horse, he found himself obliged to proceed slowly. The road which he followed passed through a mountain district where the settlements were few and far between; and on the second day of his journey, after a weary ride of hours, he was dismayed to find that he could not reach his intended halting-place until late in the night. He has reason to be anxious; – for a heavy snowstorm came on, with an intensely cold wind; and the horse showed signs of exhaustion.(*K*, 122)

Fig. 2: Yasumasa Fujita, colour woodblock frontispiece, in Lafcadio Hearn, *Kwaidan. Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (Tokyo: The Shimbi Shoin, 1932).

[9] In Japan ghosts are divided into two main categories, the *shiryō*, the ghosts of the dead, coming at night only, and the *ikiryō*, the ghosts of the living, that may come either by night or day (in *Kottō* Hearn deals with them in two separate stories, "Ikiryō" and "Shiryō"). See Stephen Addiss, *Japanese Ghosts and Demons: Art of the Supernatural* (New York: Braziller, 2001).

[10] "Mujina", together with "Jikininki", "Rokuro-Kubi" and "Yuki-Onna", also engages with the theme of the shelter/trap, emphasizing (the topic is common to fairy tales) the difference between things and persons as they appear and as they are.

Loneliness, tiredness, night: all of them, taken together or separately, create in Hearn's tales a sort of suspended space – suspended between the real and unreal, the discernable and blurred, good and evil, true and false – where anything may happen, and indeed, does. In "The Dream of Akinosuké" the protagonist all of a sudden feels very drowsy (it is a hot afternoon) and has a dream, a long dream, which is in fact the story, lasting twenty-three years, of a happy regal couple that comes to an end when the princess dies. When he wakes up and tells his friends about his dream, they in their turn tell him that while he was sleeping a little yellow butterfly was fluttering over his face. Then it had alighted on the ground, and soon "a big, big ant came out of a hole, and seized it and pulled it down into the hole"(*K*, 154). Then one of his friends observes that "Ants are queer beings – possibly goblins", and Akinosuké starts to unearth a nearby ants' nest:

> The ants had furthermore built inside their excavations; and their tiny constructions of straw, clay, and stems bore an odd resemblance to miniature towns. … In the wreck of the nest he searched and searched, and at last discovered 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. (*K*, 155).

It is the princess's dead body of course. In "Jiu-Roku-Zakura" (that is, "the Cherry-tree of the Sixteenth Day"), a samurai dies instead of his withered cherry tree. In "Ubazakura", O-Sodé, a wet nurse, dies in the place of her young mistress, only asking for a cherry-tree to be planted in the garden of the local temple. Her wish is fulfilled:

> The tree grew and flourished; and on the sixteenth day of the second month of the following year – the anniversary of O-Sodé's death – it blossomed in a wonderful way. So it continued to blossom for two hundred and fifty-four years, – always upon the sixteenth day of the second month; – and its flowers, pink and white, were like the nipples of a woman's breast, bedewed with milk. And the people called it Ubazakura, the Cherry-tree of the Milk-Nurse». (*K*, 41).

In European folklore as we find it preserved in the oral or written tradition, reshaped by both ballad-singers and professional writers, the animal, vegetable and human kingdoms meet continuously. But it is only in the Japanese tales, and the ghostly tales in particular, where love for nature, the cult of the dead and the theories or rebirth and reincarnation converge into a complex and comprehensive view of the world, literally overwhelming the page. A tree may hide the spirit of a man ("Jiu-Roku-Zakura"), a woman may turn into a tree ("Ubazakura"), a dead ant may once have been a royal princess ("The Dream of Akinosuké"). This means

that man, far from being at the centre of the universe, is merely a part of it; but this also underlines the metamorphic quality of literature as such and of Japanese culture in particular, whose stress on the metamorphic energy of reality finds an equal only in Greek mythology and in Ovid's verse.