"Clothed with Poetry": Lafcadio Hearn's Decadent Aesthetics of Translation

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> Very possibly all sense of art, as well as all sense of the supernatural, had its simple beginnings in the study of shadows.
>
> (Lafcadio Hearn, *Kokoro*)

Writing in an English periodical in 1875, the French art critic and collector Philippe Burty made an impassioned appeal for the importance of translation to stimulate Western interest in Japan:

> Europeans should, above all things, set to work to translate as literally as possible all the collections of celebrated poems, national songs, historical tales, tales for women and children, illustrated geographies, the descriptions of temples containing all kinds of curiosities, the popular and serious encyclopaedias, they can lay their hands on, and such works are now to be found in considerable number in European libraries. This is the great thing to be done now. And it is a work as full of interest as the exploration of the sources of the Nile, leading as it does to the discovery of psychological regions hitherto very little known.[1]

In late nineteenth-century Europe, Japanese art had quickly become a familiar point of reference in cosmopolitan artistic and literary circles. Japanese literature, however, remained largely unknown. Therefore Burty, who is credited as the inventor of the term *japonisme*, recommended that the study of Japan that had thus far focused on visual culture should be kept alive by an

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1. Philippe Burty, "Japonism," *Academy* 194 (January 22, 1876): 84. This is part of a series of articles that Burty wrote explicitly for English readers, with the aim of promoting *japonisme* across the Channel.

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expansive and almost indiscriminate activity of translation ("all . . . they can lay their hands on"): this should comprise literary texts as well as popular works of general interest (children's books, encyclopedias). As an example of how European authors might embrace Japanese translation, he elsewhere cited the case of the French writer Judith Gautier who, after the success of her creative translations of Chinese poetry in *Livre de jade* (1867), had now incorporated translated Japanese material in her latest novel, *L'usurpateur* (1875).[2]

Given the general absence of linguistic expertise, it would take many more years for the widespread circulation of Japanese translations yearned for by Burty to become a reality. It would take even longer for European writers to find meaningful ways of engaging with Japanese literature other than in the form of a superficial exoticism. At the turn of the twentieth century, however, a major contribution to Japanese literary translation came from the pen of Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904), a cosmopolitan author who became an extremely influential mediator of Japanese culture into the English-language sphere and beyond. Hearn was born on the Greek island of Lefkada (from which he got his unusual name) of a Greek mother and an Irish father. After spending his early life in Ireland and Britain, he first migrated to the United States, where he worked as a journalist and translator, and then settled permanently in Japan in 1890. Hearn immersed himself fully in Japanese society, taking on Japanese citizenship and changing his name to Koizumi Yakumo (Koizumi was his wife's family name). Written from this partly assimilated perspective, his books on Japanese culture, religion, and society were widely read at the time and are now experiencing renewed popularity beyond academic circles, mostly thanks to his interest in ghost narratives.[3] While none of Hearn's Japanese books presented itself explicitly as a translation, the majority of his essays and stories in fact engaged with translation on multiple levels: from scattered transliterations of Japanese terms that locally enhance the feelings of authenticity and exoticism, to the insertion of translated excerpts from Japanese literature and folklore in the body of the text or in footnotes, to the reproduction of entire versions of Japanese stories with varying degrees of creative elaboration. Sometimes Hearn carefully acknowledges his sources. Other times he simply recounts a story that he has been told, which could be anything from a traditional legend to a

2. Philippe Burty, "Japonism," *Academy* 180 (October 16, 1875): 414. Burty explains that Gautier had taken inspiration from a recent French translation of Rai San'yō's *Nihon Gaishi* (Unofficial history of Japan) by Francois Turrettini (1874–75), and that her novel arose partly from a collaboration with "a young Japanese prince" then resident in Paris.

3. Recent editions aimed at a wide readership include Paul Murray, ed., *Japanese Ghost Stories* (London: Penguin, 2019); and Andrei Codrescu, ed., *Japanese Tales of Lafcadio Hearn* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

newspaper item, alerting readers to the presence of a Japanese source text, whether oral or written, without giving them precise information to locate it. It is not unusual for these different levels of translation to operate in parallel within the same text. Indeed, the very topics of the success and failure of translation are often highlighted in the essays, many of which reflect explicitly on the mechanisms of transcultural mediation that they employ.

This essay aims to shed light on Hearn's complex engagement with Japanese translation, paying particular attention to his creative practices and his handling of literary form. In light of the potentially vast nature of the archive, the analysis focuses mostly on Hearn's 1900 collection *Shadowings*, which contains some of the richest and most imaginative experiments with translation. For Hearn, rendering a Japanese text into English was never simply a linear process aimed at effective transmission of literary content from one language to another; rather, it always self-consciously comprised the opening of Japanese source texts (and traditional Japanese culture) to transcultural dialogues with a series of foreign references ranging from modern French literature to aesthetics and evolutionary psychology—a process that we could describe as "prismatic," borrowing an image provided by Matthew Reynolds.[4]

A distinctive feature of Hearn's Japanese translations is that they took shape and circulated in the context of international decadence following a double process: they drew on ideas and literary techniques associated with decadent literature in the West and fed, in their turn, a decadent fascination with the exotic, the uncanny, and the relationship between literature and the visual arts. In other words, Hearn's approach to translation was informed by decadent aesthetics and, at the same time, contributed to multiplying the intersections between *japonisme*, decadence, and symbolism that developed in this period. Decadence was the channel through which Hearn reached into the unknown "psychological regions" that Burty described as the main object of Japanese translation.

HEARN'S DECADENT STYLE

First of all, it is important to acknowledge that Hearn's own relation to decadence was far from straightforward. Like many of the writers whom we now retrospectively associate with literary decadence, he had reservations about that label and distanced himself from it. Writing to his close friend, the British philologist Basil Hall Chamberlain, Hearn professed not to understand or care for the work of "the *décadents*": "It is Manet in words, they say. It is impressionism. Some people see much in it. I can't. The principle

4. Matthew Reynolds, ed., *Prismatic Translation* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2019).

must be wrong."[5] Decadence as Hearn understood it—in the letter he gave an example from Mallarmé's *L'après-midi d'un faune* (1887)—contravened the scientific principles of evolutionary psychology in which, as a follower of Herbert Spencer, he firmly believed. This is why he condemned it, somewhat ambiguously, as "a sort of alchemy in verse,—totally false, with just enough glints of reality—micaceous shimmerings—to suggest imaginations of ghostly gold."[6] A few months later he was outraged when an American review of his first Japanese book, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (1894), commented on the apparent influence of Verlaine and the decadents: "Never read a line of Verlaine in my life,—and only know enough of the decadent school to convince me that the principle is scientifically wrong, and that to study the stuff is mere waste of time."[7]

Yet it is undeniable that Hearn's own writing developed in close symbiosis with the literary culture of decadence. During his early years in America, he made his name known as a journalist specializing in gruesome tales of violence and crime written in the gothic shadow of Edgar Allan Poe. At the same time he translated extensively from modern French fiction, mainly for the New Orleans newspaper *Times Democrat*, and made entire English versions of two French works that, with their striking antinaturalism and luxuriant style, had a strong impact on the evolution of decadent literature internationally: Théophile Gautier's fantastic tales (*One of Cleopatra's Nights and Other Fantastic Romances* [1882]) and Gustave Flaubert's *Temptation of St Anthony* (started in 1875 but only published posthumously in 1910). The fact that Hearn undertook these major translating tasks of his own choice rather than as a publisher's commission testifies to an element of personal investment. In the case of Gautier in particular, Hearn's introduction leaves no doubt that he practiced a double task of linguistic translation and advocacy of Gautier's hyperaesthetic style—the "faint perfume of unknown balm," as he said, that seems to hang over every page.[8]

According to a well-known origin myth of nineteenth-century decadence, Baudelaire is said to have developed his decadent sensibility by translating Poe's short stories into French. In the same way, Hearn used translation as a way of cultivating his own decadent style in close intercourse with that of a foreign author. It is telling in this sense that the considerations that he makes about Gautier—that "his pages were pictures, his sentences touches of colour," and that he sometimes "sacrifice[d] style to description"—would

5. Lafcadio Hearn to Basil Hall Chamberlain, May 10, 1894, in *The Japanese Letters of Lafcadio Hearn*, ed. Elizabeth Bisland (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), 307.

6. Ibid., 308.

7. Lafcadio Hearn to Ellwood Hendrick, December 1894, in *The Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn*, by Elizabeth Bisland, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 2:188.

8. Lafcadio Hearn, introduction to *One of Cleopatra's Nights and Other Fantastic Romances*, by Théophile Gautier, trans. Lafcadio Hearn (New York, 1882), vi.

routinely be turned back to Hearn himself later on in order to criticize his perceived stylistic excesses.[9] The analogy between writing and painting alerts us to a double transposition that, as we shall see, is also relevant to the Japanese essays: it describes a style that takes shape in the act of crossing artistic mediums as well as languages. Hearn's decadent style can be thought of as "translational" in the meaning that Rebecca L. Walkowitz in particular has ascribed to this term in relation to the contemporary novel:[10] it is a way of writing that comes into being through encounters with translation and that foregrounds translation as integral to its fabric. By so doing, it erodes the aesthetic and cultural barriers that traditionally separate translation from creative forms of literature.

In the Japanese works, the translational quality of Hearn's writing becomes even more pervasive. Moving to Japan in 1890, Hearn found that translation came to dominate not only his literary work but also his daily experience, as he learned to find his way in a language that was initially completely unknown to him. The essay in which he describes the tumultuous impressions of his very first day in Japan tellingly concludes with a dream in which the incomprehensible characters that he came across on signboards, paper screens, and even people's clothes during his ramblings around Yokohama morph into monstrous insects.[11] Readers of Roland Barthes will be reminded of the "dream" induced in the French critic by the Japanese language in *L'empire des signes* (1970): "percevoir en [une langue étrangère] la différence, sans que cette différence soit jamais récupérée par la socialité superficielle du langage, communication ou vulgarité; connaître, réfractées positivement dans une langue nouvelle, les impossibilités de la nôtre."[12] Similarly colored by an orientalist fantasy, Hearn's first encounter with the difficulty of Japanese imaginatively projects him to the limits of language as a system of representation. As in that first dream, the Japanese language often features as a haunting presence in Hearn's Japanese essays explicitly or implicitly. Questions of comprehension, misunderstanding, and translation frequently come to the fore as Hearn dramatizes his own efforts to come

9. Ibid., vii, viii.

10. Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). I have introduced the idea of Hearn as a translational writer in "Translational Decadence: Versions of Gustave Flaubert, Walter Pater, and Lafcadio Hearn," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 49, no. 4 (2021): 807–29. That article concentrates on Hearn's translation of Flaubert, while the present one shifts the focus onto the distinctive characteristics of his Japanese writings.

11. Lafcadio Hearn, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1894), 1:28.

12. "To perceive the difference in [a foreign language] without that difference ever being recuperated by the superficial sociality of discourse, communication or vulgarity; to know, positively refracted in a new language, the impossibility of our own" (Roland Barthes, *L'empire des signes* [Geneva: Skira, 1970], 11; English translation from Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard [New York: Hill & Wang, 1992], 6).

to terms with the sounds and meanings of Japanese. Japanese texts, snippets of texts, or even isolated words make their way into the English text through translation and/or transliteration, opening it to foreign sounds and ideas. In some cases, Hearn uses the very syntax of Japanese in order to twist the English language into unfamiliar shapes, paralleling the English decadent poets' filtering and assimilation of French forms that Clive Scott has called "suffusive translation."[13] Translation thus lodged itself in the very heart of his creative process.

The decadent formalism of the American years would also survive in the Japanese writings, albeit in a less morbid and sensational key. Hearn's Japanese essays and stories are characterized by the use of a highly crafted literary language, stylistic devices such as ekphrasis, and narrative frames that underscore complexity and artificiality. In line with a decadent rejection of realism, they are marked by an interest in the weird, the supernatural, and unsettling hybrid compounds of beauty and decay. The most pervasive sign of Hearn's decadent sensibility, however, is his perception of modernity as decline. Hearn believed that the massive importation of Western culture, technologies, and ideas on which Japan had embarked in the second half of the nineteenth century represented a threat to its identity and well-being. For all his admiration of traditional Japanese culture and for all his efforts to proclaim its vitality, he was therefore also painfully conscious that the Old Japan that he loved was on its way to extinction—that it was, in other words, a moribund culture, in a state of decadence. His cultural vantage point on Japan was one of self-conscious belatedness.

Therefore, while Hearn might have been irritated by being compared to Verlaine and the decadents, the American reviewer of *Glimpses* did put his finger on something that was true of Hearn's approach to Japan. His handling of decadence is different from the French model represented by Verlaine—Hearn was right about that. But it certainly had a lot in common with European symbolist and decadent writers from "peripheral" zones such as Scandinavia, Italy, or Wales (Eino Leino, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Arthur Machen), who compounded the formalism of what one could call Parisian decadence with ethnographic interests drawn from their local contexts.[14] This was already true of Hearn's writings on the American South, where

13. Clive Scott, "Decadent Poetry and Translation: The Suffusive and the Prosodic," in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. Alex Murray (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 254–71.

14. For examples from Scandinavia, see Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus, eds., *Nordic Literature of Decadence* (New York: Routledge, 2020); for the Italian context, see Elisa Segnini's essay on the French translations of Matilde Serao and Grazia Deledda in this special issue of *Modern Philology* (32–56); for Wales, including a study of Machen, see Alex Murray, *Landscapes of Decadence: Literature and Place at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 123–56.

he had fed especially on Creole culture. Shifting his perspective to Japan, Hearn pursued the dialogue with this ethnographic strand of international decadence, where the emphasis often fell on rural settings and primitivism. As Hearn's own case shows, theories of the aesthetic autonomy of literature often took on problematic alliances with elements of cultural nationalism and, in colonial settings in particular, with the reification of racial difference.[15]

Critical responses to Hearn's decadence exploded somewhat dramatically in the years immediately after his death in 1904, at the high point of his popularity in the West. In this period Hearn was subjected to attacks that aimed to expose alleged elements of immorality and sexual perversion, often drawing on biographical information relating to sexual relationships with African American women in his early years.[16] It is telling that in a 1910 edition of his Japanese letters, Hearn's former friend and future biographer, Elizabeth Bisland, should have taken great pains to distance Hearn from such accusations, which she ascribed to a typically American failure to "disassociate sensuousness from sensuality, passion from sexual licence."[17] However, the habit of pejoratively framing Hearn through a decadent prism was not confined to America. In a review of a posthumous collection of the American writings, the Irish writer Richard Le Gallienne, after the familiar comparison with Gautier, went on to attack Hearn's decadence in no uncertain terms: "However much we admire Hearn's literary art, there is, it seems to me, something repulsive about Hearn the man. He seems, in every way, a miscegenated being, miscegenated physically by his parentage, Irish and Greek, and miscegenated spiritually and mentally. His mental habits showed a perverted taste for miscegenation."[18] Le Gallienne, who had been close to Oscar Wilde and the British decadent circle that gravitated around the *Yellow Book*, reads Hearn through a characteristically fin de siècle vision of decadence presided over by the specter of Max Nordau's theories of degeneration. What stands out is the charge of miscegenation, whereby a phobic reaction to Hearn's cosmopolitanism is transferred onto the body of the writer. The creative practices of translation that Hearn adopted in his Japanese writings were at the heart of the effort to blur the boundaries of national cultures and identities that Le Gallienne reviled as a perverse form of decadence.

15. See Roy Starrs, "Lacfadio Hearn as Japanese Nationalist," *Japan Review* 18 (2006): 181–213; and Peter Bailey, "Deforestation and Decolonization: Lafcadio Hearn's French Antillean Writing," *Volupté* 6, no. 1 (forthcoming).

16. See esp. George M. Gould, *Concerning Lafcadio Hearn* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1908).

17. Elizabeth Bisland, introduction to Hearn, *Japanese Letters*, xlii.

18. Richard Le Gallienne, "Lafcadio Hearn's Love for the Horrible," *Literary Digest International Book Review* 4, no. 4 (March 1926): 251.

THE EMBODIED TRANSLATOR

In spite of the long time he spent in the country, Hearn's command of Japanese never got good enough to enable him to carry out ambitious projects of literary translation, as he did with Gautier and Flaubert. Nonetheless, all his Japanese collections embedded substantial elements of translation, typically from Japanese poetry, songs, Buddhist texts, and folklore. Hearn was very aware that he would have needed advanced scholarly training if he had wanted, as he put it, "to meddle with the superior varieties of Japanese poetry."[19] Therefore, he focused mostly on popular forms of literature, such as folk ballads, which he prized for their directness and simplicity, believing that they sprang "straight from the heart of the eternal youth of the race" (*G*, 32). Inspired by evolutionary sociology, Hearn's translations of Japanese folklore were in dialogue with lively debates on the relationship between (oral) folk and print culture that were taking place in Europe at this point—debates that, as Caroline Sumpter has argued, included writers affiliated with decadence and symbolism.[20] Hearn thought that folk literature had special value not only as a window into the traditional culture of Japan but as a distinctive category of world literature, in that it revealed "what belongs to all human experience rather than to the limited life of a class or a time" (*G*, 32).

It followed that Hearn's engagement with translation constantly pushed literature beyond the physical boundaries of the book. Hearn believed that, for Western readers, a full understanding of Japanese literary culture must take on the complex reality of writing, reading, and translating as embodied practices. For instance, the essay in which Hearn confesses his inadequacy to deal with "the superior varieties of Japanese poetry"—a sketch titled "Out of the Street" from *Gleanings in Buddha-Fields* (1897)—starts by projecting the reader into an almost startling encounter with the materiality of translation: "'These,' said Manyemon, putting on the table a roll of wonderfully written Japanese manuscript, 'are Vulgar songs. If they are to be spoken of in some honorable book, perhaps it will be good to say that they are Vulgar, so that Western people may not be deceived'" (*G*, 29). We then learn that Hearn had commissioned his old Japanese servant to transcribe songs that Hearn used to overhear from washermen who worked next door to his home. Manyemon is skeptical at first: he finds these verses "vulgar" because

19. Lafcadio Hearn, *Gleanings in Buddha-Fields: Studies of Hand and Soul in the Far East* (Boston, 1897), 31, hereafter cited parethetically as *G* by page number.

20. Caroline Sumpter, "Devulgarizing Dickens: Andrew Lang, Homer and the Rise of Psycho-Folklore," *ELH* 87, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 747. For the Japanese reception of Hearn's work on folklore, see Yoko Makino, "Lafcadio Hearn and Yanagita Kunio: Who Initiated Folklore Studies in Japan?," in *Lafcadio Hearn in International Perspectives*, ed. Sukehiro Hirakawa (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2007), 129–38.

they are composed, as Hearn puts it, "in the speech of the common people"—that is, in a style that is far removed from that of classical Japanese poetry (*G*, 31). But Hearn is interested precisely in the mixing of registers and in questioning hierarchies of value between oral and written cultures. As he weaves together snatches of popular verse into an essay about Japanese street songs, translating from Manyemon's manuscript, he overlays the words of the anonymous authors of the songs, the embodied voices of the oblivious washermen, Manyemon's labor of translation, and even his own literary voice into "the ghost of a romance,—into the shadow of a story needing no name of time or place or person, because eternally the same, in all times and places" (*G*, 41). Translation is not simply provided in the form of literary content but also dramatized in the form of the extended conversation between Hearn and his manservant that frames the essay, which introduces their different tastes and cultural standpoints as well as their different roles in the production of the written record.

Like "Out of the Street," many of Hearn's Japanese essays dramatize the process of translation, describing how it was conducted and rendering it on the page in the shape of complex textual hybrids. Translation for Hearn was not a solitary, bookish activity that took place behind closed doors with the aid of a dictionary. Rather, it emerged out of embodied practices of dialogue, pedagogy, sociability, friendship, and even sexual relationships. Indeed, one of Hearn's main partners in this highly discursive and collaborative culture of translation was his wife Koizumi Setsuko, who acted as his faithful storyteller and interpreter. Yone Noguchi's *Lafcadio Hearn in Japan* (1910) contains a chapter dedicated to Setsuko's reminiscences. Here she describes how, every week, Hearn would encourage her to go to the Kabuki theater in order to "bring home plenty of stories as [her] *omiyage* (return gift)."[21] In the domestic setting of Hearn's Tokyo home, which Noguchi also describes in vivid detail, translation took the form of this intimate economy of gift exchange, which involved Setsuko sharing not only stories from the Kabuki stage but also ghost stories or simply stories from the outside world that Hearn could not access on his own.

Another important intermediary revealed by Noguchi was Hearn's student Masanobu Otani. Otani had been a pupil of Hearn in Matsue—the city in rural western Japan where Hearn had spent time teaching in a local high school when he first arrived in the country. Then, in 1896, Otani enrolled at Tokyo Imperial University where he again came under the tutelage of his former teacher who had now become a university professor. In this period Hearn relied heavily on Otani, who researched periodicals, visited libraries, and collected all sorts of original material, such as proverbs, popular songs, and lists of Japanese women's names, on Hearn's behalf. This material then

21. Yone Noguchi, *Lafcadio Hearn in Japan* (London: Mathews, 1910), 59.

formed the basis for several of the essays collected in *Exotics and Retrospectives* (1898), *In Ghostly Japan* (1899), and *Shadowings* (1900).

A task that Hearn set Otani for the summer of his first year at university is revealing of his approach to translation. Otani was to research the subject of inscriptions and sculptures in Buddhist cemeteries. Hearn instructed his pupil to provide him with lists of inscriptions (both those on stone and those on traditional wooden tablets or *stupa*); and he specified that each list was to comprise the original text in Chinese characters or *kanji*, transliterations in Latin alphabet or *romanji* under each character, literal English under the *romanji*, and finally explanations.[22] The essay that resulted from this detailed commission, "The Literature of the Dead," moves freely between these different levels of translation. Hearn starts by taking the reader into the ancient and distinctly otherworldly space of the Kobudera cemetery, not far from his house in Tokyo. He then launches into an extensive analysis of funerary inscriptions based on the rich archive provided by Otani and presumably other Japanese friends whose help is briefly acknowledged here and there in the course of the essay. The impressive philological content reflects the complex transnational history of Buddhism: Hearn moves across Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese, and English, interlayering straightforward transliterations, literary translations, and more interpretative or poetic renderings. The conceit is that, in the hands of an imaginative and knowledgeable guide, such as Hearn, the cemetery can be read as a book that contains its own distinctive "poetry"—a word that is used several times in the course of the essay. And this poetry is inseparable from the embodied experience of its smells and sounds, the impression produced on the senses by the soft mossy ground underfoot and the dim light that filters through the branches of the ancient trees, which Hearn evokes not only through his descriptions but also visually by accompanying the text with a number of photographs.

The encounter with this complex aesthetic object is fraught with difficulties of interpretation and imaginative possibilities that are inextricably bound with translation:

> The marvellous texts,—the exquisite Chinese scriptures chiselled into the granite of tombs, or limned by a master-brush upon the smooth wood of the *sotoba*,—will yield their secrets only to an interpreter of no common powers. And the more you become familiar with their aspect, the more the mystery of them tantalizes,—especially after you have learned that a literal translation of them would mean, in the majority of cases, exactly nothing!
>
> What strange thoughts have been thus recorded and yet concealed? Are they complex and subtle as the characters that stand for them? Are

22. Ibid., 107.

> they beautiful also like those characters,—with some undreamed-of, surprising beauty, such as might inform the language of another planet?[23]

At the heart of Hearn's interpretation of the literature of the dead is a statement of untranslatability. To underscore this point, Hearn several times uses the literal translations provided by Otani, which prove that, as he puts it, word-for-word translation "would result in the production either of nonsense, or of a succession of ideas totally foreign to far-Eastern thought."[24] This is due to the intrinsic difficulties presented by the use of Chinese characters in the Japanese language, which operates very differently from European sound-based alphabets—difficulties that are exacerbated when dealing with Buddhist ideas and texts that have migrated to Japan by way of India and China. The comparison of Japanese to "the language of another planet" stands out in this passage. Characteristically for Hearn, he reifies the essential difference of Japanese from the European languages with which he expects his readers to be familiar: he strongly exoticizes the "surprising beauty" of Chinese characters, which often yield multiple readings in Japanese, giving rise to riddles that deepen the mystery of the language. He also tellingly compares Japanese "mortuary literature" to the Veil of Isis—a possible nod to Helena Blavatsky's foundational work of theosophy, *Isis Unveiled* (1877)—introducing an evocative parallel with ancient Egypt that further deepens the connotations of mysticism and esotericism.[25]

It is easy to see that Hearn's translational journey into this space of death is informed by a decadent taste for the morbid and the uncanny. His description of the appeal of the Kobudera cemetery relies on the aestheticization of decay. Here, the Japanese material culture of death exists in close symbiosis with the organic life of the natural environment. Both are doomed to obsolescence and likely destruction by the inexorable advancement of modernity. As Hearn notes, Tokyo's aggressive urban expansion was encroaching on all green areas dotted around the city so that the very front of the cemetery was now spoiled by one of "the ugliest of new streets."[26] The work of translation is at the same time an effort to care for this forgotten microcosm within the metropolis, an ecological project.

The collaboration with Otani is also central to the later collection *Shadowings*, which contains an essay on Japanese women's names based on Otani's research and one on "Old Japanese Songs," in which Hearn plays with the figure of the embodied translator in a particularly imaginative way. The main body of the essay is devoted to the transliteration and translation of traditional songs, reworking material provided by Otani, with minimal

23. Lafcadio Hearn, *Exotics and Retrospectives* (Boston, 1898), 100–101.
24. Ibid., 152.
25. Ibid., 101.
26. Ibid., 96.

contextual and philological explanations mostly confined to footnotes. The extensive presence of transliteration—whole pages are devoted to it—testifies to the importance that Hearn placed on conveying sound impression to English readers unacquainted with the Japanese language. However, repeating the framing device he had used in "Out of the Street," Hearn starts the essay by dramatizing an exchange with Otani—anonymously described as "a young poet of my literary class"—as he presents Hearn with two New Year's gifts intimately related to the task of translation. One is the manuscript in which Otani had transcribed the Japanese songs that Hearn goes on to discuss in the essay. The other involves a more strikingly creative use of the material text:

> It is a roll of cloth for a new kimono,—cloth such as my Western reader never saw. The brown warp is cotton thread; but the woof is soft white paper string, irregularly speckled with black. When closely examined, the black specklings prove to be Chinese and Japanese characters;—for the paper woof is made out of manuscript,—manuscript of poems,—which has been deftly twisted into fine cord, with the written surface outwards. The general effect of the white, black, and brown in the texture is a warm mouse-grey. In many Izumo homes a similar kind of cloth is manufactured for family use; but this piece was woven especially for me by the mother of my pupil. It will make a most comfortable winter-robe; and when wearing it, I shall be literally clothed with poetry,—even as a divinity might be clothed with the sun.[27]

The remarkable image of the beautiful kimono fabric woven out of material fragments of ancient poems reinscribes translation within the gift economy that we have seen in Setsuko's reminiscences. Hearn uses it here to symbolize his somatic and immersive experience of translating Japanese literature, made up of embodied encounters. As he put it in his thank-you letter to Otani, "surely it is just the kind of texture which a man of letters ought to wear!"[28] When we remember the close etymological association between text and weaving, it is not too fanciful to see Mrs. Otani's craft as a form of creative translation that cleverly mirrors Hearn's own. It is an activity of re-mediating the text that radically frees literature from representation, didacticism, and moral interpretation, offering it up entirely to the sensuous appeal of sight and touch.

THE ART OF SHADOWS

Shadowings is one of Hearn's most translational essay collections, meaning that he engages with translation extensively and in creative ways in the course of the book, but also that the aesthetics and practice of translation are a

27. Lafcadio Hearn, *Shadowings* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1900), 157–58, hereafter cited parenthetically as *S* by page number.

28. Noguchi, *Lafcadio Hearn*, 112; Bisland, *Life and Letters*, 2:415.

fundamental component of what the essays are about. The first section, subtitled "Stories from Strange Books," comprises Hearn's free versions of old Japanese tales reworked using narrative and stylistic conventions borrowed from gothic, "weird," and decadent literature. This part of the book is tellingly prefaced with an epigraph from Émile Verhaeren—a Belgian poet who was then extremely popular in international symbolist circles. Hearn had been introduced to Verhaeren by the critic Osman Edwards, an international mediator of decadence and symbolism who had promoted Verhaeren's work in the pages of the *Savoy*—the leading British decadent periodical edited by Arthur Symons.[29] Although, characteristically, Hearn had initially reacted coolly to what he saw as Verhaeren's decadent traits, the specific poem from which he quotes in *Shadowings*, "Celui de la fatigue" (from the collection *Les apparus dans mes chemins* [1891]), evokes a crepuscular atmosphere that sets the tone for the Japanese tales that follow. Matthew Potolsky has shown how decadent authors made strategic use of intertextual references, including paratexts such as dedications, in order to create an imagined community of taste that transcends languages and national borders.[30] His insight helps us to understand how Hearn uses Verhaeren's verses in *Shadowings*. In translating the Japanese stories, Hearn does not seek to present them in a neutral fashion, as though they were able to travel freely in space and time. Rather, he encourages readers in the West to approach them through the aesthetic prism of decadence and symbolism, at the same time using Japanese translation to perform an act of textual networking that links his own identity as author/translator to decadent aesthetics.

Hearn's synthesis of old Japanese literature and European decadence emerges most clearly in two stories taken from the collection *Otogi hyaku monogatari* (1706), compiled in the Edo period by the Japanese author Aoki Rosui. The first of these, "The Screen-Maiden," is Hearn's version of a story entitled "E no fujin ni chigiru," which was inspired in its turn by an old Chinese tale.[31] It tells of a young scholar who falls in love with the image of a girl painted on a screen that he has acquired for a modest sum from a secondhand shop. As he becomes more and more engrossed with an obsession that is simultaneously aesthetic and erotic, the young scholar forgoes eating and sleeping, and inevitably falls ill. Eventually he decides to seek advice from

29. Osman Edwards, "Emile Verhaeren," *Savoy* 7 (November 1896): 65–76. On the two critics' exchanges about Verhaeren, see Osman Edwards, "Lafcadio Hearn on the Decadent School: His Views as Expressed in Some of His Delightful Letters to a Friend," *Craftsman* 13, no. 1 (October 1907): 17–19. See also Clément Dessy, "Les vies britanniques de Verhaeren (1889–1916)," *Textyles* 50–51 (2017): 119–37.

30. Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 92–93.

31. See Naoko Morita, "Aoki Rosui's 'E no fujin ni chiguro' and Lafcadio Hearn's 'Screen-Maiden,'" *Hikaku Bungaku / Journal of Comparative Literature* 42 (2000): 76–91.

a "venerable scholar who knew many strange things about old pictures," who teaches him a magic formula that will make the painted woman come alive, which involves offering her wine from a hundred different wine shops (*S*, 26). The story ends on a happy note as the woman steps out of the screen and the young scholar is blissfully united with her.

Although clearly stemming from a completely different cultural context, "The Screen-Maiden" presents several elements that can be assimilated to European short fictions that explore humans' perverse desire for art objects. Notably, the Japanese story recalls the plot of Gautier's "Omphale: Histoire rococo" (1834), where a ghostly woman emerges from an old tapestry in order to seduce a young man. "Omphale" was one of the stories that Hearn had translated in America. It therefore seems highly likely that Hearn would have been sensitive to the echoes of Gautier when selecting this Japanese story for translation. English readers who had read Gautier in Hearn's translation would have been able to make the same connection. They would also have been able to draw links with contemporary decadent short stories such as Oscar Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr W. H." (1889) and those in Vernon Lee's *Hauntings* (1890), which are also heavily influenced by Gautier and likewise focus on characters who are haunted by figures from the past who manifest themselves in the present through the mediating agency of art objects. Like the fin de siècle stories produced in the West, Hearn's "Screen-Maiden" is a formally complex text that imaginatively engages with visual culture, blending fantastic and art-historical elements: the screen is said to be the work of an actual artist, Hishikawa Moronobu, whom Hearn glosses in an explanatory footnote as the founder of the *ukiyo-e* school—the traditional Japanese art of woodblock printing that had, in its turn, a strong impact on symbolist and decadent aesthetics.[32] The main difference with this body of writing is that, while in the English stories in particular the eroticism of haunting typically leads to self-destruction, in the Japanese tale desire is rewarded and, as it were, normalized. The woman, we are told, "never returned to the screen. The space that she had occupied upon it remained a blank" (*S*, 29).

In his version, Hearn enhances the formal complexity of the Japanese narrative by employing a technique that heavily underscores the mediating presence of the translator. He strategically inserts transliterated terms that highlight incidents of untranslatability, alerting readers to the semantic and cultural gaps that separate the English version from the Japanese source text. For instance, he gives the Japanese "*tsuitate*" for "single-leaf screen" when describing the key object on which the whole story revolves; and he

32. On the literary impact of *japonisme* on French decadence, see Pamela A. Genova, *Writing Japonisme: Aesthetic Translation in Nineteenth-Century French Prose* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016).

leaves the original "*manajiri*," which he glosses as "the exterior canthus of the eye," explaining in a note that the Japanese, like the ancient Greek and Arab poets, "have many curious dainty words and similes to express particular beauties of the hair, eyes, eyelids, lips, fingers, etc." (*S*, 24–25). The use of Japanese untranslatables has a double function: it creates an attractive patina of exoticism and, at the same time, it serves as a foreignizing device that, following Lawrence Venuti's well-known argument, works to underscore the presence and agency of the translator, potentially undermining legibility in the target language.[33] Hearn further enhances this alienating effect by repeatedly slipping his own voice into the story, thus delaying or breaking the flow of the narrative: he inserts substantial explanatory notes and a series of narrative frames that create a dialogue on the page between Japanese author and English translator, as we have already seen with "Out of the Street." In one instance he even steps in to explain that he has chosen the English expression "for a moment," while "the Japanese author says 'for a few seconds'" (*S*, 26). The difference between "a moment" and "a few seconds" seems hardly big enough to justify interrupting the narrative. But Hearn's aim is precisely to remind readers that they are reading a translation, and to emphasize the instability of the English translated text, which exists in a fluid zone in between the Japanese original and all its possible foreign versions.

The other story in *Shadowings* taken from the *Otogi hyaku monogatari*, "The Sympathy of Benten," also hinges on the haunting power of an untranslatable artefact. This time the object in question is a *tanzaku*—the name given to strips of paper used to write short poems, which are then traditionally tied to tree brunches or other beautiful spots as acts of devotion. A young scholar comes across a *tanzaku* near a temple dedicated to the Buddhist goddess Benten and, bewitched by the beautiful handwriting, falls in love with its unknown author. Thanks to the sympathetic intervention of the goddess, the scholar manages to meet the girl and unite with her after a series of ordeals that involve a supernatural encounter with an uncanny doppelgänger. Once again Hearn breaks up the source text by inserting his own voice: at the end of the story, expressing his dissatisfaction with the handling of the uncanny in the original tale, he adds an interpretation provided by "a Japanese friend," which has the effect of presenting translation as a dialogic activity (*S*, 54). And once again his version is littered with transliterated untranslatables (mostly terms relating to Buddhist culture), among which stands out the very text of the poem written on the *tanzaku*, which he reproduces in transliterated Japanese without providing an English translation:

33. Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008). Venuti argues that foreignizing translations are extremely rare in English and American cultures, which prefer domesticating techniques instead. In "Translational Decadence," I build on Venuti in order to suggest that foreignizing techniques are characteristic of decadent literary translations.

Shirushi aréto
Iwai zo somuru
Tama hōki,
Toruté bakari no
Chigiri narétomo.
(42)

Hearn's seemingly perverse decision to withhold the translated meaning of this crucial part of the text makes sense when we consider that it is not the content of the poem (we are told that it was the work of the twelfth-century poet "Shunrei Kyō" [(*sic*) for Shunzei], now mostly known as Fujiwara Toshinari) but rather the handwriting that bewitches the young scholar. Indeed, what seems to have interested Hearn is precisely that "The Sympathy of Benten" is about the haunting power of calligraphy as a fine art—a distinctively Japanese theme that Hearn unpacks for English readers in all its fascinating aesthetic complexity. The young scholar is seduced not only by the graceful form of the characters, from which he correctly deduces that the author must be a young girl, but by "the pure rich color of the ink," which is said to bespeak her moral virtues (43). Glossing this crucial passage, Hearn explains that the English notion of "hand" as individual writing style is inadequate to capture the unique potential for individual expression of Japanese *kanji*. He adds that, since "every person grounds or prepares his or her own ink, the deeper and clearer black would at least indicate something of personal carefulness and of the sense of beauty" (43). The Japanese poem is thus a work of art that bridges visual and literary cultures: it conjugates the abstract content of literature with the gestures and embodied practices that inform the different stages of the writing process, from the grinding of the soot necessary to prepare the ink to the fashioning of the handwritten poem into a *tanzaku*. The materiality of Japanese writing, expressed through color and texture no less than through line, is once again intrinsic to its meaning, and something that both imaginatively stimulates and ultimately eludes the translator's task.

The plasticity of Japanese characters was one of Hearn's long-standing fascinations. Already in the essay about his first day in Japan he had noted that each calligrapher

> strives to make his characters more beautiful than any others . . . so that through centuries and centuries of tireless effort and study, the primitive hieroglyph or ideograph has been evolved into a thing of beauty indescribable. It consists only of a certain number of brush-strokes; but in each stroke there is an undiscoverable secret art of grace, proportion, imperceptible curve, which actually makes it seem alive. . . . It is not surprising, indeed, considering the strangely personal, animate, esoteric aspect of Japanese lettering, that there should be wonderful legends of calligraphy relating how words written by holy

> experts became incarnate, and descended from their tablets to hold converse with mankind.[34]

This passage from 1894 anticipates the fantastic content of the story he would translate years later. The orientalist cliché about the "beauty indescribable" of Japanese *kanji*, made more precious by the Keatsian echo and the slightly foreignized English syntax, introduces something more complex: a reflection on the ideal of writing as word painting that also pulled him toward decadent literature. In the introduction to his translation of Gautier, Hearn had noted that, as a young man, Gautier had wavered between the careers of writer and painter, adding that "as a writer, however, he remained the artist still: his pages were pictures, his sentences touches of color; he learned indeed to 'paint with words' as no other writer of the century has done."[35] In Japan, Hearn found a new way of imagining the principles of aesthetic writing that he admired so much in Gautier and that informed his own literary style. It is as if the ideal of art for art's sake that was often devalued for being decorative and decadent in the West existed there as part of a harmonious tradition. As he notes in another essay, "the word 'to write' (*kaku*) in Japanese signifies also to 'paint' in the best artistic sense."[36]

The spectralization of handwriting in "The Sympathy of Benten" is compounded with the way in which the story engages with translation. At the heart of the tale, as written down by Rosui in the *Otogi hyaku monogatari*, is a metaphor of untranslatabilty: the reader is teased into imagining the unique beauty of handwriting that has been erased from the printed text, where the manuscript poem is translated in the form of stereotyped characters. Hearn's version takes this process of writing-as-disappearance one step further, in the passage from Japanese to English.

This is the sense in which his Japanese tales are "shadowings." Appealing again to a very material aesthetics of translation, Hearn presents his own writing as the shadows cast by the Japanese tales onto the foreign canvas of a different language. Rather than pejoratively conceiving of the translator's task as writing in the shadow of a foreign author, Hearn's metaphor increases the aesthetic value of translation as an art of shadows—a metaphor that connotes the giving of a definite form while hinting at the blurring of lines. This literary aesthetics of shadows demands of the reader a distinctive form of receptivity: the ability to be susceptible to the appeal of dimming, darkening, and obscuration. Operating in this dimly lit zone that activates different categories of perception and reveals new depths of meaning, the translational text as Hearn conceives it has a natural affinity with the ghostly aesthetics that informs the theme of the collection. Many of the tales in *Shadowings* are set at

34. Hearn, *Glimpses*, 1:5.
35. Hearn, introduction to Gautier, *One of Cleopatra's Nights*, vii–viii.
36. Hearn, *Glimpses*, 1:256.

dusk, like Verhaeren's poem from which Hearn takes his epigraph, or during the night, and focus on dream states, phantasmagorias, and uncanny experiences.

Hearn's image of translation as shadowing resonates with Gautier's definition of decadent style in his famous essay on Baudelaire (1868). As opposed to the sunny style of classicism, decadent writing for Gautier found its chief element in shadow (*ombre*): "Dans cette ombre se meuvent confusément les larves des superstitions, les fantômes hagards de l'insomnie, les terreurs nocturnes, les remords qui tressaillent et se retournent au moindre bruit, les rêves monstrueux qu'arrête seule l'impuissance."[37] For Gautier this evocative symbolism of the shadow is part and parcel of the formal complexity of literary decadence, alongside such traits as eclecticism, verbal innovation, and interartistic experiments. As a distinctive aesthetics, the shadowy in this sense is analogous to the gamy flavor of gently rotting meat (*faisandée*), which he also famously uses to encapsulate the peculiar quality of the decadent taste. Unlike the sculptural fixity of classicism, decadent shadows are a space of organic processes of transformation—Gautier's larvae in this sense anticipate Hearn's dreamy vision of the Japanese characters as monstrous insects.

Hearn's image of translation as an art of shadows looks back to Gautier and forward to Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, a Japanese writer who was in his turn deeply influenced by European decadence.[38] In an iconic aesthetic treatise written roughly three decades after Hearn, Tanizaki starts from an observation of traditional Japanese architecture in order to put forward the theory that shadows are the dominant and most essential element of Japanese aesthetics: "The quality that we call beauty . . . must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadows, ultimately to guide shadows towards beauty's ends."[39] Like Hearn, Tanizaki viewed the importation of Western tastes and technologies as a threat to traditional Japanese culture. He lamented Westerners' inability to comprehend the special beauty and, as it were, the magic of shadows that formed the core of Japanese art. Hearn's translational stories are hybrid cultural artefacts that fuse the literary sensibility of European decadence with the Japanese aesthetics of shadows later theorized by Tanizaki.

37. "In this shadow, there is the indistinct movement of the larvae of superstition, the haggard ghosts of sleeplessness, nocturnal terrors, regrets which quiver and fold in on themselves at the slightest sound, and monstrous dreams which impotence alone can stop" (Théophile Gautier, "Charles Baudelaire," in *Les fleurs du mal*, by Charles Baudelaire [Paris, 1868], 17; my translation)

38. See Ikuho Amano, *Decadent Literature in Twentieth-Century Japan: Spectacles of Idle Labour* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

39. Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, *In Praise of Shadows*, trans. Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker (London: Vintage, 2001), 36.

CONCLUSION

Too often, when studying literary translation, we focus exclusively on stable, and therefore recognizable, modes of publication that are produced for the book market and that are packaged and distributed explicitly as such. Hearn's Japanese essays present literary translation in a variety of fluid forms, which in their turn give rise to the hybrid aesthetics from which Le Gallienne shrank as a symptom of miscegenation. As this essay has argued, however, Hearn's translational writings represent a pioneering effort to circulate Japanese literature internationally through the framework of decadence. Rather than decrying Hearn's practice of blurring different literary cultures, the ethical question when dealing with this material should shift to how Hearn navigates the perilous waters of orientalism and cultural appropriation. Studying his practices of embodied translation, as reflected in his own writings and in the archive, can help us to do that by casting light on how he negotiates the boundary between self and other, both in his textual versions and in his social and textual dealings with his Japanese sources and aides (his wife Setsuko, his servant Manyemon, his pupil Otani, etc.). In this sense, Hearn's case is exemplary of the critical advantages, outlined by Clive Scott, of moving from a theory to a "philosophy" of translation: such a shift posits translation not primarily as a skill or a profession, but as "the pursuit of particular kinds of knowledge and self-knowledge, the knowledges that derive from reading, knowledges that we must learn how to write, in the practice of translation."[40] We have seen that translation shaped Hearn's social interactions in Japan, guiding his reading and listening; and in this process it also helped to shape his self-knowledge as cultural mediator. In other words, translation is what determined how Hearn understood his being in Japan and Japan's being in the world. We could go as far as to say that translation is what situates Hearn in Japan.

Hearn's decadent-inflected versions of Japanese literature proved highly influential. As they were in their turn translated into other European languages—he was delighted to see his work appear in Swedish, Danish, German, and French during his own lifetime[41]—they contributed to the opening toward Japanese literature that Philippe Burty designated as the main priority for European Japanophiles. In the eyes of many critics who approached Hearn from outside the English-speaking world—Hugo Von Hofmannsthal was one of them[42]—what made Hearn's Japanese versions attractive was precisely the fact that they tapped into a decadent sensibility that the critics shared.

40. Clive Scott, *The Work of Literary Translation* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 9.

41. See Lafcadio Hearn to Ellwood Hendrick, 1902, in Bisland, *Life and Letters*, 2:485.

42. Hugo Von Hofmannsthal, "Lafcadio Hearn," in *Kokoro*, by Lafcadio Hearn, trans. Berta Franzos (Frankfurt am Main: Rütten & Loening, 1913), 4–8.

One final example from *Shadowings* shows the importance of taking Hearn's decadent aesthetics of translation on its own terms. "Sémi," an essay about insect poetry (another of Hearn's favorite themes, with a distinctly decadent resonance), contains dozens of Japanese short poems about cicadas, transliterated and translated in a mixture of prose and verse. The eccentric theme of the essay and its inconspicuous position within a collected volume combine to hide the fact that "Sémi" is one of the earliest extensive compilations of haiku in the English language, before the modernists lionized this traditionally Japanese poetic form. Many more haiku are scattered across Hearn's Japanese writings; and indeed, the poet William J. Higginson has persuasively suggested that Hearn even embedded haiku-like fragments in his own experiments with poetic prose.[43]

In 1915, Hearn's distinction as a pioneering translator of Japanese poetry was honored in a posthumous collection, simply entitled *Japanese Lyrics*. The book was part of the American publisher's Houghton Mifflin's New Poetry Series, which had strong ties with Amy Lowell and the imagist movement. In a brief introductory note, the editor praises Hearn's remarkable ability to produce translations that, "though faithful to the original, have the innate feeling for beauty, the instinctive sense of the right word, the perfect phrase, common to everything that came from Hearn's pen."[44] The real reason for exhuming this material, however, lay elsewhere: "In their limitation of a poem to the presentation of a single impression and in their ability to present that impression with the utmost vividness and with the sternest economy of words, the Japanese poets are strangely akin to the Imagists, the youngest of the modern schools. And for this reason, it has seemed peculiarly appropriate that their work should be included in the New Poetry Series."[45] Stripped of the clutter of Hearn's hybrid essays and centered in the middle of a blank page, the translated poems seem indeed to harbinger the new, abstract simplicity of modernist texts. To take Hearn's Japanese translations out of the shadows, however, is to erase the complex relationship with decadence out of which they arose.

43. William J. Higginson (with Penny Harter), *The Haiku Handbook: How to Write, Share, and Teach Haiku* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1989), 250.

44. "Publisher's Note," in *Japanese Lyrics*, trans. Lafcadio Hearn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), vii.

45. Ibid., viii.