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The Image of the Mother in the Work of Hearn

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Reading Lafcadio Hearn we are very often in the company of mothers. They are prominent in both his fiction and non-fiction, and have a key role in his general ideas. We find them in his writings on America, in his French translations (such as ‘La mère sauvage’ of Maupassant [see Adventures]), in his writings on the West Indies and of course in his writings on Japan. Motherhood is discussed by Hearn in relation to evolution, to dreams, to reverie. It is a topic in his discussions on human society, in his writings on insects (on mother ants?) and in his fond descriptions of his cat. The word ‘mother’ itself is not one he avoids; it creeps into his language often, and in revealing conjunctions, as when he says in a letter that ‘passion was the inspiring breath of Greek art and the mother of language’ (Life and Letters I: 218).

Hearn’s own mother was Greek. And it is the context of nostalgic Hellenism that most helps us in understanding his treatment of mother images. ‘Some of us,’ he says in Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation, in 1904, ‘have often wished that it were
possible to live for a season in the beautiful vanished world of Greek culture’ (15). In a rough word-count of the book I find seventy-three such occurrences of ‘Greek’ or ‘Greece.’ Hearn’s wish for a Greek world is set in the past tense (‘have often wished’) and expressed through uncertain verbs – subjunctives (‘wished that it were possible’) – or conditionals (‘If the wish could be realized . . . ’). It is the wish of a dreaming scholar, who would like to enter the world of his own books. But it is also more than that: it precedes his studies. Hearn says that it ‘comes to us even before we are capable of imagining the true condition of [Greece].’

Hearn’s Hellenism is supported by his reading of anthropology, but it undoubtedly springs from personal identification, from the feeling that is an undercurrent throughout his writing, of his debt to his mother and his Greek origins. ‘Being of a meridional race myself, a Greek . . . ’ he says in an early letter (Life and Letters 1:276). Writing to Pierre Loti, he says: ‘C’est un Hellène qui vous écrit, Ionien.’ (Gleanings of LH 2:3). ‘It is the mother who makes us,’ he told his brother in 1890, ‘makes at least all that makes the nobler man’ (Kneeland 27). He connected his mother with his success as an artist, and also with his deepest self, what he called his ‘dark race-soul’ (Kneeland 26).

When Hearn talks of his own mother directly, he describes her as having a ‘dark and beautiful face’ and ‘large brown eyes like a wild deer’s’ (Kneeland 23). These are important associations which are echoed elsewhere, but we must be aware that he can have had no clear image of his mother on which to base such descriptions; his memories of her must have been extremely vague. He was fascinated by photographs and portraits, and longed to obtain one of her, but there was none available. Biographies tell us that Rosa Cassimati left the young Hearn in Ireland in 1854, before he was four years old. She may have tried to see him once after that; she may have tried to gain news of him – he certainly thought so. But he did not have a chance to see her after the age of three. He was not unlike the Japanese girl in one of his stories, who is given a mirror by her dying mother and told to look into it every day. She sees her own face, and thinks it to be that of her dead mother. Hearn says the story is near to ‘eternal truth’: ‘Surely that girl saw and spoke to her mother’s very soul’ (Out of the East 82–83). In the absence of Rosa Cassimati, Hearn had to turn hopefully to shadows in himself. And then he might turn to other women, to dark women in the United States, in the West Indies and Japan. To his