

From Folklore to Literature

—Lafcadio Hearn and Japanese legends of tree spirits—

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When Lafcadio Hearn first arrived in Japan in 1890, he was deeply moved by the Japanese scenery, especially the beauty and charm of the trees. He recorded his first impressions of the country in an essay titled “My first day in the Orient”. It was April, a lovely spring day, he spent his time visiting temples and shrines near Yokohama. He enjoyed almost everything he was experiencing about this exotic land, but one of the things he found most striking was the cherry blossom trees in full bloom, and he describes it like this:

Why should the trees be so lovely in Japan? here it is a miracle of beauty so bewildering thatthe spectacle strikes you dumb.....Is it that the trees have been so long domesticated and caressed by man in this land of Gods, that they have acquired souls, and strive to show their gratitude?...¹⁾

He is here referring to the fantastic scene of the cherry blossoms. However, we notice that he is not just admiring the loveliness of the flowers, he feels that here, in Japan, the land of Gods, even the trees have feelings, they have hearts, and souls, and this, he thinks, is because the people love and cherish the trees as their companions; in other words, because there is an intimate and sympathetic relationship between man and nature.

1) “My First Day in the Orient”, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, Charles E Tuttle Co, Tokyo, 1976, p. 21

When he moved to Mastue of Shimane prefecture, in the summer, as an English teacher for the government junior high school, this first impression of his was strengthened. Izumo was the homeland of ancient Japanese mythology, where the gods and ancient beliefs still lived in the minds of the people.

Hearn was touched by the serene atmosphere of the forests surrounding Shinto shrines, and was impressed when he saw huge ancient trees considered to be divine with ritual ropes hanging around the trunks. In his essay “In a Japanese Garden”, he writes down every small legend, folksong, superstition etc., about the flowers and trees in his garden. In a word, Hearn simply rejoiced in the abundance of Japanese plant folklore. And he states his thoughts in the following remark:

trees, at least Japanese trees, have souls,This is a popular belief in Izumo and elsewhere.it is much closer to cosmic truth than the old Western notion of trees as “things created for the use of man”.²⁾

These first impressions of the trees and his thoughts, were to be later developed into stories of tree-spirits, included in his last book, *Kwaidan* (1904).

I would here like to focus on one of these stories: Hearn’s “Jiu-Roku-Zakura”. This short but impressive story is a legend about the spirit of an old sacred cherry blossom tree, and like many of his other weird tales, is a retold version from an original Japanese text.

But before going into my discussion, I would like to refer to the significance that folklore bears in Lafcadio Hearn’s works.

2) “In a Japanese Garden”, *Ibid.*, p. 358

Before Hearn came to Japan, he had already established a career as a journalist and a travel writer. As we all know, Hearn was interested in non-Western cultures, and non-Christian religions. First, he was attracted to the exotic. In the United States, he had sympathized with the minorities, such as the blacks in Cincinnati, and the Creoles in Martinique. He also had a strong life-long inclination towards the supernatural: the strange, ghostly world. In a word, we may say that he was drawn to the outskirts or margins of the 19th century Anglo-Saxon society. He was determined to cross the borders and go to the other side of his age and his culture. And in this, he had succeeded, with his insight into folklore as his means.

Folklore, for Hearn, was primarily the key to understand the mentalities and feelings of another people. He believed that something very essential, that touches the core of a culture, lies within such small details as legends, customs and religious beliefs; so to say, the minor, sub-culture.

So, in many of his travel sketches and essays, he makes full use of his knowledge of folklore and interposes small episodes about the district. Thus we have his books on Japan as an accomplishment of his style. He was able to depict effectively the inner life of the Japanese.

However, I believe that his folkloristic concern led him to a dimension further and deeper than he had at first intended.

Hearn, during his 14 years in Japan, eventually became more inclined to introducing and retelling Japanese old stories. In his first book, the stories were inserted in between the travel sketches, but the number of the tales included in his books kept increasing, till finally we get to *Kwaidan*, his last book. This book was totally dedicated to such retold stories.

Moreover, the folktales were not just re-written into English. He would emphasize certain parts, and other parts he would eliminate. Hearn modified the story. His initial intention probably was to make the story more artistic, effective and acceptable to Western readers. But in doing so,

he projected onto the original Japanese story a different shade of imagination.

And here, folklore had become more than the means to understand a foreign people; it had become the key to penetrate into the secrets of the human mind and of his own self.

So, from this perspective, I would like to discuss “Jiu-Roku- Zakura”. And by comparing it with the original tale, I would like to show how different a story Hearn created, and what finally he had expressed, in the form of an old Japanese legend.

Let us read the complete text of “Jiu-Roku- Zakura” by Hearn:

In Wakégôri, a district of the province of Iyo, there is a very ancient and famous cherry-tree, called “Jiu-Roku- Zakura”, or “the Cherry-tree of the Sixteenth day,” because it blooms every year upon the sixteenth day of the first month (by the old lunar calendar) — and only upon that day. Thus the time of its flowering is the Period of Great Cold — though the natural habit of a cherry-tree is to wait for the spring season before venturing to blossom. But the Jiu-Roku-Zakura blossoms with a life that is not — or, at least, was not originally — its own. There is the ghost of a man in that tree.

He was a samurai of Iyo; and the tree grew in his garden; and it used to flower at the usual time — that is to say, about the end of March or the beginning of April. He had played under that tree when he was a child; and his parents and grandparents and ancestors had hung to its blossoming branches, season after season for more than a hundred years, bright strips of colored paper inscribed with poems of praise. He himself became very old —outliving all his children; and there was nothing in the world left for him to love except that tree.

And lo! in the summer of a certain year, the tree withered and died! Exceedingly the old man sorrowed for his tree. Then kind neighbors found him a young and beautiful cherry-tree, and planted it in his garden — hoping thus to comfort him. And he thanked them, and pretended to be glad. But really his heart was full of pain; for he had loved the old tree so well that nothing could have consoled him for the loss of it.

At last there came to him a happy thought: he remembered a way by which the perishing tree might be saved. (It was the sixteenth day of the first month.) Alone he went into his garden, and bowed down before the withered tree, and spoke to it, saying: “Now deign, I beseech you, once more to bloom — because I am going to die in your stead.” (For it is believed that one can really give away one’s life to another person, or to a creature, or even to a tree, by the favor of the gods; — and thus to transfer one’s life is expressed by the term “migawari ni tatsu,” “to act as a substitute.”) Then under that tree he spread a white cloth, and divers coverings, and performed hara-kiri after the fashion of a samurai. And the ghost of him went into the tree, and made it blossom in that same hour.

And every year it still blooms on the sixteenth day of the first month, in the season of snow.³⁾

“Jiu-Roku- Zakura” is the name of a tree that actually existed in the province of Iyo . The story starts in a very quiet tone, in the simple style of a legend narrative.

The tree was known for blooming every year in mid winter, on the 16th of January. Cherry blossoms in the midst of cold, surrounded by snow; this alone is a fantastic, mystic scene. But Hearn’s story tells us

3) “Jiu-Roku- Zakura”, *The Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, vol. 11, Rinsen Book Co., p. 245

that “there’s the ghost of a man in that tree”, and that it is the spirit of a samurai who had killed himself in order to save the ancient tree he had loved from withering.

Now, the original Japanese text of this legend is to be found in a magazine named “Bungei-kurabu”, issued in 1903 (the 36th year of Meiji). It is a short article in a series titled “Shokoku-Kidan”, meaning strange stories of the provinces. It begins by explaining how widely admired this famous winter cherry tree is, and recommends that the readers visit this tree which is located near the Dogo hot spring. The article is a sort of touristic guide, introducing historic places with interesting stories.

And according to the original legend here, an old man, who owned the tree and adored flowers, feared he would not be able to live till springtime; whereupon the tree, hearing his sad words, answered his wish, and bloomed.

Here, the cherry is not necessarily an old tree, the man is not a samurai, and he does not kill himself for the sake of the tree. The tree blossoms in gratitude for the man’s love, and seeing this, the old man and the people around are all moved to tears in return.

The main point of this legend lies in the phrase, げに草木さえも心ありてその情に感ぜしならん,⁴⁾ that “even plants and trees indeed have hearts, and will respond to man’s feelings”. Similar stories, like the famous episode of Sakuramachi-Chu-nagon in Heike-Monogatari, that relate the intercourse between men and trees or flowers, can be found in other districts of Japan too.

The legend is simple but has a touching gentleness, a warmth about it, that may signify the basic intimacy of the relationship between trees and the Japanese people. And the cherry tree, by blossoming every year on the same date, provides a festive opportunity in which people can

4) 「十六日櫻」『小泉八雲名作選集 怪談・奇談』巻末「原拠」講談社学術文庫, 1990年, p. 397

reconfirm the bonds of affection that united the man and the tree.

Thus, the original legend of “Jiu-Roku- Zakura” may be regarded an ideal specimen of folklore, at least in its aspect as an embodiment of the Japanese mentality.

However, in his retold version of the tale, Hearn altered the original motif by making two major changes.

First of all, he added a striking element: that is, the act of harakiri performed by a samurai, under the tree.

Secondly, in Hearn’s story, it is the ancient character of the tree that the samurai cherishes and dies for.

Now let us examine the first point, the act of harakiri.

To begin with, we may note the fact that Hearn uses the Japanese words, “samurai”, “harakiri” and “migawari-ni-tatsu”. Hearn knew that these words had a strong impact on his Western readers.

A. B. Mitford, in 1871, had given a detailed and vivid description of the rather shocking “harakiri” scene in his book, *Tales of Old Japan*. He accounts for the act as “the mode of suicide adopted amongst the Samurai when they have no alternative but to die”⁵⁾, whether committed by free will or as an execution. Mitford had witnessed the ceremonial harakiri of Taki Zenzaburo in 1868, who had been condemned of attacking the foreign settlement in Hyogo. A witness had been sent from each of the foreign legations, and the execution thus sensationally reported in the newspapers.

In 1890, Basil Hall Chamberlain stated in his book, *Things Japanese*, that “harakiri” was then already a word well known all over the world. He explains that there are two types to the act, voluntary and obligatory. And he defined the act of voluntary death as being practiced, “when in trouble,

5) A. B. Mitford, *Tales of Old Japan*, Charles E Tuttle Co, Tokyo, 1966, p. 375

or out of loyalty, or in order to protest.”⁶⁾

We may also recall that, only four years before Hearn's *Kwaidan*, Nitobe Inazo had published his book *Bushido — the soul of Japan*, in which he had written a whole chapter about “harakiri”, as a symbolic embodiment of the noble samurai spirit.

Undoubtedly, these books, especially the widely read *Bushido*, had contributed in popularizing the image of the Japanese ritual suicide committed by the samurai class.

Now, the interesting thing about the “harakiri” act in Hearn's “Jiu-Roku- Zakura”, is that, although Hearn is usually regarded as the preacher of the values of “old Japan”, and in fact was praised in Nitobe's book as “the most truthful interpreter of the Japanese Bushido mind”⁷⁾, and was even presented a signed copy by Nitobe, he did not depict the “harakiri” act here as a performance of samurai ethics like the way Chamberlain and Nitobe explained.

But, what Hearn might have noted in Nitobe's book, is the passage stating the old belief common to both the Japanese and the Greek people, that the soul of man dwells in the abdomen, which is thus the particular part of the body that needs to be cut open⁸⁾.

Hearn had rendered in “harakiri”, a different meaning. And that is expressed in Hearn's following phrase, “to transfer one's life”.

The samurai kills himself, but his death has not much to do with such ethics as loyalty, honor or self-sacrifice. He dies in order to save the tree's life, but that does not mean he accepted self-annihilation. Instead, his soul moves into the tree and the old man, thus transformed into the

6) Basil Hall Chamberlain, “Harakiri”, *Things Japanese*, Meicho-fukyūkai, 1985, p. 239

7) Nitobe Inazo, *Bushido — the Soul of Japan, Nitobe Inazo Zenshū vol. 12*, Kyōbunkan, 1969, p. 130

8) *Ibid.*, p. 92

spirit of the tree, gains eternal life.

We may say that Hearn had re-told his story as a tale of transformation, that is, metamorphosis into a sacred tree.

Now, it is true that tree mythology, where a sort of metamorphosis is implied, exists almost all over the world. In many of these tales, flowers and plants grow out of the ashes, blood, or the grave, of men who died a tragic death. Here, the souls of the dead are believed to dwell in the plants. Or, as in Greek mythology, the gods, when they pity humans in crisis, transform them into trees. In these tales, the trees and plants are symbols of rebirth, and the tales may have been meant to have the power of a requiem or katharsis for the dead.

However, the uniqueness of Hearn's "Jiu-Roku- Zakura", when placed among such metamorphosis tales, lies in the character of the samurai's death.

There is nothing tragic, or untimely about his death. By his own will, the samurai dies a positive death; he kills himself for a definite purpose, to become the spirit of the tree.

The samurai spreads a white cloth under the tree, sits upon it and cuts open his bowels. Red blood splashes upon the whiteness of the cloth; One can visualize the soul emerging from the body and pass into the tree, thus making the tree bloom again. And every year, the phantom-like vision of the act is reflected behind the beautiful figure of the tree in mid-winter. It is as though the pale pink color of the cherry blossoms is alive with the warmth of man's blood. And it is in this strength and boldness of his intended act of transformation, that the ritual of "harakiri" takes vivid life, comprising an impressive scene in Hearn's story.

Now the second point of change marks what the samurai, hence Hearn himself, values about the specific tree.

As already mentioned, the original legend says nothing about the age of the tree. The old man adored the cherry tree for its blossoms.

But in Hearn's version, the tree is more than a 100 years old. The samurai not only cherishes his memories of having played under the tree as a child, but his speculations go back further into the past, when his grandparents and ancestors had also spent the same time under the blossoms. And it is this ancient character of the tree that was so dear to the samurai, that he had to make the tree live on.

Under the old cherry tree, seasons have been repeated; numerous lives of people have been repeated. Time passes, and is accumulated into eternity within the sacred space under the flowering branches. And it would seem as though the ancient tree had manifested its sacred nature, in the form of a ghostly tree that blossoms every year in mid winter.

Hearn's "Jiu-Roku- Zakura" is the story of a man who had faced eternity embodied in an ancient tree, and who had manifested to the world the sanctity of the tree by transforming himself into the tree spirit.

Hearn ends his tale by lighting up again the mystic beauty of cherry blossoms that bloom in the season of snow.

And I believe, that the scene of "hara-kiri" is deeply impressive, because it is only through this momentary act of a mortal human being, condensed into a ritual, that the eternity of nature was able to take visible form.

So far, I have attempted to explicate Hearn's retold story, and show how it differs from the original Japanese tale.

The characteristics of "the sacred tree" in Hearn's version that I have noted are, in a way, a projection of the author's particular vision of nature and the meaning of human existence, that he had reached after his cross-cultural experiences in life.

As mentioned in the beginning, Hearn was deeply impressed by the Japanese scenery. He especially thought the cherry blossoms, the trees and the forests were beautiful. He also was inspired by the abundance of tree-

rituals and legends in Japan.

But as he himself admits in his recollections of his childhood, which was titled “the Gothic Horror”, his original sensitive ability to feel the spirituality of a tree, had been rooted in his young days in Ireland, when he was surrounded by ancient Celtic myths and folklore. But what he had felt from the trees, before he came to Japan, was only a fearful power. In other words, he had a terribly ambivalent image of nature. This we can see in his sketches of the tropical forest in Martinique.

Perhaps we may say that, because of his Celtic upbringing, he was able to grasp the essence of Japanese folklore. But in order to open his heart, he had to cross the boundaries of the Western world.

And when he had crossed the boundaries, and had opened his heart, he expressed in his retold tales images and truths that transcend differences between East and West, or between center and the outskirts; just as we have seen in his “Jiu-Roku- Zakura”.

Or we may put it this way, that folklore led and helped Hearn to discover a universal essence through the local and particular.

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 and idealizing Japan. And there have been disputes between those who value him and those who do not. This gap between the two reputations may derive from the difficulty of interpreting a foreign culture, and the difficulty of evaluating the interpretation itself.

I believe, however, that his retold folktales, shaped into impressive works of literature, and thus creating a new archetype of man’s experiences, form a very valuable part of all his works.

I feel sure his folktales will outlive all disputes and evaluations. They will live on, not only as literature in the English language, but as a part of

the Japanese imagination.

Notes:

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