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Lafcadio Hearn's Proto-Buddhist, 'Oceanic' Caribbean Vision

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Lafcadio Hearn's early writings relating to the sea and evolution are precursors to what I call the cosmic or oceanic meditations of the later work, where the (Buddhist) oceanic quality of time and space takes a central place in his thinking about the universe. As has been shown, Hearn was one of the first European Victorians to imaginatively engage with Buddhism, fitting his own lived experience to ancient ideas newly (re)discovered and conveyed to the West from Indian, Ceylonese, Chinese, and Japanese texts, made available by the work of academic Buddhologists like Eugène Burnouf and Max Müller.¹ Such works introduced a whole new paradigm of thinking, enabling new ways of conceiving reality, which has continued for nearly two centuries with the gradual transmission and transculturation of Buddhist concepts out of its heartlands and into other fields and cultures the world over. In this article I address some of Hearn's earliest Buddhist tendencies in his Caribbean writings, his painterly descriptions of land- and sea-scapes, and how these meld into vast synaesthetic mindscapes, intimations of deeper and timeless truths – of borderless infinity and incessant change, and the transitoriness of experience. Once these writings begin to be seen within the framework of the developing Buddhist ontology in Hearn's *œuvre*, as outlined in *The Neo-Buddhist Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, Hearn's early tropical writing takes on a deeper significance and dimension – as a precursor and preparation for that greater framework, that deeper ontology that flowers in Japan.

In 'Two Painters of the Tropics: Lafcadio Hearn and Paul Gauguin in Martinique', Mary Louise Vincent points out that the writer and painter were in Martinique at the same time in 1887 though they did not meet.² For Hearn, as for the French painter, the experience was 'primarily visual'.³ His medium was 'word pictures' and a certain 'impressionism' which this article will interrogate and expand upon.⁴ Vincent is right to discern that Hearn's canvases – canvases of the

mind and meditations on reality, as will shortly become clear – owe something to Pierre Loti and have some affinity with Paul Gauguin's *Paysages martiniquais*.⁵ She is right, too, about the central quality of these writings: the bold use of colour and the 'visual delight' of the pieces.⁶ Finally, Vincent touches on the qualities of the writing itself, particularly Hearn's use of 'verbals' (past and present participles) to create a sense of 'texture, form, and line as well as color'.⁷

In this article I expand upon such ideas to suggest that Hearn's Caribbean writings may be seen as precursors to the later Buddhist 'meditations' of the Japanese period, on the oceanic nature of reality. *The Neo-Buddhist Writings of Lafcadio Hearn: Light from the East* (2020), my book on Hearn, shows the development in the writer of a Buddhist vision of existence, which began to find expression in his American writings (from his arrival in America till 1890) and then blossomed and flowered into the later works of his Japanese period (1890 to 1904). The book shows in outline the development of Hearn's interest in the intersections between evolutionary science, physics, and Buddhism, concentrating on a central idea that runs throughout Hearn's work: the 'persistence of force' and its relation to, and implications for, *karma*.⁸ This resonant synergy of ideas, scientific and religious, is at the heart of Hearn's interest in the afterlife and ghost stories, in his writings of the American period, as well as the Japanese.

But the idea of the 'persistence of force' also explains Hearn's interest, while he was in America, in the marginal, the derelict, and the dying – beings both human and animal in the liminal spaces of society and life. This outer spectrum of existence is seen in such articles as 'SPCA Notes' (first published in *The Item*, 25 March 1879), 'Some Pictures of Poverty' (first published in *The Commercial*, 7 January 1877), and 'Les Chiffonniers' (first published in *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, 26 July 1874).⁹ The last evokes desolate cityscapes – somewhere between Charles Dickens's slums and Gustave Doré's hellscapes – and descriptions of rag-pickers, deformed and stunted people. Nevertheless, as with both the French and British artists, Hearn's focus, in what might be called his rag-picker journalism, relates ultimately to transformation and regeneration, and the articles and essays of this period may be seen as first steps in a redefinition of what experience is, of what

gives rise to life and consciousness: these texts offer a deeper and more expanded sense of what it means to be human. This is most explicitly seen in such sketches as ‘When I was a Flower’, published first in *The Item*, 13 August 1880, or ‘Metempsychosis’ in the same newspaper on 7 September 1880.¹⁰ Hearn comes to the realization, gradual but increasingly compelling, in what he calls the ‘Fantastics’ of his American period, of a deeper and novel sense of the connections between the living and the dead: of how the living depend on, and feed off, the dead; and of how they are, indeed, connected to them physically as well as karmically.¹¹ We are, in so many ways, our dead. Stories of death – and more importantly dying – are everywhere in Hearn.¹² The iconic Hearnian metaphor of the ‘persistence of force’ in this period is the flower growing out of the grave of the dead beloved, which functions to frame the relations between the living and the dead, and the interdependence of the organic and the inorganic. The scent of the flower embodies the essence and energy of the deceased, and infuses what Hearn, in a story entitled ‘A Name in the Plaza’ originally published on 3 June 1885, calls a ‘dark alchemy by which flesh is transmuted into leaves and fruit – by which blood is transformed into blossom’.¹³ The senses and the very body of the being of the lover lingering by the grave, or passing by it, become one with it, wittingly or not. Such symbols are profoundly Romantic because they are primarily concerned with totalities and interconnection. They are decadent, too, in their engagement with the fecund imaginary of decay and death that underlies much of Hearn’s American journalism especially.¹⁴

And yet this work may also, in light of the above, be seen as proto-Buddhist, as occasioning meditations on impermanence and metempsychosis (a word Hearn uses interchangeably with ‘reincarnation’ and ‘transformation’) rather than, simply (and less charitably), as the morbid sensationalism in his early American writings of which Hearn was so often accused by his contemporaries and early biographers.¹⁵ Strangers become intimates in ways that transcend human consciousness – though we might call it *karma* or ‘love’ – and such Hearnian meditations redefine relations between apparently unrelated beings, as well as between the past (the dead) and the present (what *is*). An important aspect of this idea is that the interrelations between the inanimate

and animate are infinitely more complex than allowed for in any anthropocentric view of reality, and are ultimately unknowable (except, perhaps, to the enlightened). My book discusses such ideas, mostly in the ‘Fantastics’ and journalism of the American period, but also in the ghost stories of the Japanese period, and shows that these apparently morbid texts may be understood as meditations on the ‘persistence of force’ and the relations of all living things to a vast – and living – ‘dead’ precedence.¹⁶

Such relations are fundamental to the stories Hearn tells, and are, indeed, at the basis of the plot of his novella *Chita: A Memory of Last Island* (1886). From New Orleans he writes to his friend H. E. Krehbiel in October 1885 that he ‘dream[s] of a novel, or a novelette, to be constructed upon totally novel principles’ and says that underlying it is ‘the idea of evolutionary fiction’.¹⁷ A year later he writes again of what would become *Chita* and of how it shows ‘my fantastic metaphysics’: ‘I am writing a novelette. [...] It will be all divided into microscopic chapters of a page or half-a-page each. Every one of these is to be a little picture, with some novel features. Some touches of evolutionary philosophy.’¹⁸ And indeed, *Chita* is the story of a girl who is the sole survivor of a hurricane on the Louisiana coast. It demonstrates how the past inheres in the present: as the eponymous character’s father, Julien, lies in a fever at the point of death on the island which is now Chita’s home, rescued from his oceanic search for her, he sees his long-lost daughter in the moments before he dies, and the traces of her mother in the girl’s presence. Chita Viostra, on the other hand, will never know she has been with her father, and his joy is liminal, momentary. Like ‘Torn Letters’ (published first in the *Times-Democrat* of 14 September 1884), another text associated with the Louisiana coast, with death and love, this is a story of connection, of seeing, and yet not fully *knowing* connection.¹⁹ Significantly, that story, like *Chita*, is a story of love and loss, set on seaboards, in the Gulf of Mexico, in oceanic worlds – usefully defined by John Wharton Lowe as the ‘circum-Caribbean’ – from which all things come, and which brings things into consciousness from deep and from afar off in space and time.²⁰ In Buddhism, oceanic imagery is often associated

with interrelatedness and oneness, and also with death and the *bardos* of discovery – and the enlightenment potential in these liminal states.²¹

The ocean in Hearn's work of the period and in Japan is associated with such uncovering and discovery. It is in the context of these ideas that I wish to consider the oceanic meditations inherent in Hearn's Caribbean travelogues. There is a synaesthetic physicality to these, as well as, paradoxically, a meditative diaphanousness and sense of emptiness: whether the narrator is describing the vast blue-green ocean about him, or a new world arising hazy and purpling like a phantom from the sea as his ship nears it, a silent silhouette through the mist that belies the rocky physicality of the island foretokened, the accounts of his voyages and sojourns in the Caribbean show a new interest in the natural physical world writ large as a manifestation of some of the Buddhist ideas that were beginning to shape Hearn's thought. The texts are compulsively focused on the light and energy and the vast insubstantiality of apparent reality, and may be seen as precursors to the meditations on reality of the Japanese period, the 'oceanic meditations' of *Neo-Buddhist Writings* that are set, for example, in the seaside retreat of Yaidzu, or in Yokohama Bay with Mount Fuji in the background – foreshadowed (as is so often the case in the Hearnian imaginary of the *œuvre* as a whole) by Mount Pelée in Martinique.²²

'A Midsummer Trip to the Tropics'

I shall consider 'A Midsummer Trip to the Tropics' from Vol. III of the sixteen-volume Koizumi Edition of Hearn's works, *Two Years in The French West Indies*, as well as refer to other sketches of this period collected as *Martinique Sketches*: 'La Pelée', 'Ma Bonne', and 'Pa Combiné, Chè'.²³ None of these texts is examined in my book, which concentrates on other works of this period – notably stories from *Stray Leaves from Strange Literatures*, and *Fantastics and Other Fancies* – and makes clear the proto-Buddhism of the latter.²⁴

'A Midsummer Trip to the Tropics' was first published in three monthly parts or 'papers' from July till September 1888 in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, and was entitled 'A Midsummer

'Trip to the West Indies'. This travelogue was later revised and incorporated into the larger book project – *Two Years in the French West Indies* – in 1889, while Hearn was living at the residence of Dr George Milbry Gould in Philadelphia.²⁵ In an interesting analysis of 'Midsummer Trip', Peter Bailey shows that the changes between the original text as it appeared in *Harper's*, and the text as it appears in the first book version, indicate how Hearn constructs what Bailey calls the 'rhetoric of colonial decadence' against the "'negro-radical" rule' feared by the 'plantocracy'.²⁶ Bailey examines Hearn's construction, in rewriting, of a 'postlapsarian rhetoric' using what Laura Brown calls 'the rhetoric of acquisition' which is set against 'Hearn's paradisaical representations of Martinique'.²⁷ All of this shows that Hearn was very much a man of his times – employing, as John Lowe puts it, many of the usual stereotypes about colonial subjects. Lowe writes compellingly of Hearn's 'colonizing gaze', yet also notes that Hearn manages, in the end, to somewhat 'transcend his racial biases'.²⁸ I hope in this article to show a redeeming side of Hearn's vision – one which valorises the colonial subject in part, and celebrates and loves the abundance of 'coloured' life. For unlike as with the two studies just referenced, this article is not immediately political, and no ideological rhetorizing is evident in textual revisions – only artistic ones. These will be pointed out if they are relevant stylistically.

'Midsummer Trip' describes a return voyage Hearn took on the *SS Barracouta*, beginning in July 1887, from New York to the Windward Islands, particularly Martinique, returning in August-September, only to leave again – this time for eighteen months – to sojourn in Saint Pierre on Martinique and the village of Mourne Rouge during an outbreak of smallpox. The first part of the journey was, as he says in the 'Preface' to *Two Years*, a 'voyage of nearly three thousand miles, accomplished in less than two months'.²⁹

'Midsummer Trip' is the most colour-filled of all Hearn's writings. The journey begins on a 'gray' morning at Pier 49 on the East River and, as the ship moves out to sea, the narrator begins his extended meditation on the blueness of the sea, ever-changing, ever-deepening:

The morning is still gray, but the sun is dissolving the haze. Gradually the gray vanishes, and a beautiful, pale, vapory blue – a spiritualized Northern blue – colors water and sky. A cannon-shot suddenly shakes the heavy air: it is our farewell to the American shore; – we move. Back floats the wharf, and becomes vapory with a bluish tinge. Diaphanous mists seem to have caught the sky color; and even the great red storehouses take a faint blue tint as they recede. The horizon now has a greenish glow. Everywhere else the effect is that of looking through very light-blue glasses....³⁰

The daily intensification of the blue as the ship sails further towards the Sargasso Sea and Caribbean is dramatized by an ‘old French gentleman from Guadeloupe’ who comments, from sections II through IX of the account, on the narrator’s reactions to the sea’s colour: ‘[...] he declares it greenish (verdâtre) [sic]. Because I cannot discern the green he tells me I do not yet know what blue water is. Attendez un peu! ...’.³¹ He will have to wait till he gets to the Caribbean to see, as the old gentleman puts it, the ‘true blue of the tropics!’³²

The shock of discovery of the ever-changing and deepening blue is minutely described throughout the text, from moment to moment – ‘now ... then ... now’, as the days are enumerated and pass, and they sail further into the unknown. The sense of the passing of time is, like the colours arising from it and expressive of it, also acutely documented in Hearn’s essay. The deepening colour scenes are couched in a continuous, ever-changing, present. The sea is ‘spectral blue’, ‘[t]hen [...] pale-green lights play through it’, and ‘now the whole world is blue – not the least cloud is visible; and the perfect transparency and voidness about us make the immense power of this invisible medium seem something ghostly and awful ...’.³³ The blue has an ethereal, spectral quality and is variously described as: deepening into ‘ultramarine’, ‘spectral blue’, ‘glaucous’, ‘greenish black’, ‘blazing azure’, ‘azure splendor’, ‘flaming, dazzling lazulite’.³⁴ In the *Harper’s* version this is ‘a flaming, dazzling lapis-lazuli’.³⁵ The noun in the original suggests a sudden sense of opacity and hardness – present elsewhere in the sub-stream of the text in the metaphors of flashing and sparkling jewels and precious stones, gold and silver: the ocean flips instantly, subconsciously, from watery transparent depth to flashing, hard solidity, and back again. And in the changing moods of the sea seen in these colours (and the textures and elements that give them

their names) there is a sense of an energy and light present in the world, arising and emanating out of the sea. This sense of its ever-presence is captured in the present participles that dominate Hearn's account of the voyage and the islands: the 'huge tumbling of mountain-purple waves', the 'indigo sea [...] ocean color is deepening' into 'an opulent pansy hue' till, with the approaching night, the perspective drifting closer to the ship itself, it turns 'black-blue', 'the sea-circle [...] black as Acheron'.³⁶ Time is central: the evolution of each day, and days in succession to days, are described by the bewitched narrator. At intervals the narrator remarks on the reflected starlight, and the Milky Way and Southern Cross appear rhythmically throughout the text, almost as perceptual anchors in the mind of the observing consciousness rocked by the rhythms of the sea and the overwhelming vast oneness of the observable universe, above as below.³⁷ Indeed, in a slightly later story 'A Winter Journey to Japan' (first published in *Harper's* in June 1890) Hearn will pick up these colours and textures – the patterns of texture and colour spread across the *œuvre*, from text to text, that should be considered as deep patterns in the Hearnian imaginary – and characterise the sea as inky black.³⁸ This is a suggestive and satisfying deep metaphor for a writer and creative such as Hearn, who writes worlds into being, black ink upon blank white (or yellowish) paper, and whose thinking was, as we have seen in this article, 'oceanic'.

In all of this deepening and darkening world, whether at night or during the day, or at the liminal moments of transition,³⁹ the sea echoes the colours and moods of the sky and there is a sense of the interconnectedness of the whole visible spectrum of light, of all that is energy: whether it is the natural translucency of water, or the phosphor trails of the ship's single propeller, or the sun and the stars' light reflected upon the sea, above and below become one vast continuity, or indeed the orb of the sun setting orange and 'spectral' upon the 'monstrous disk' of the horizon, as the yellow light mingles with the blackening yet glittering blue to produce a whole new spectrum of greens (which we shall see picked up later in descriptions of island arboreal vegetation):

Now the horizon is gold green. All about the falling sun, this gold-green light takes vast expansion.... Right on the edge of the sea is a tall, gracious ship, sailing

sunsetward. Catching the vapory fire, she seems to become a phantom – a ship of gold mist: all her spars and sails are luminous, and look like things seen in dreams.

Crimsoning more and more, the sun drops to the sea. The phantom ship approaches him – touches the curve of his glowing face, sails right athwart it! Oh, the spectral splendor of that vision! The whole great ship in full sail instantly makes an acute silhouette against the monstrous disk – rests there in the very middle of the vermillion sun. His face crimson high above her topmasts – broadens far beyond helm and bowsprit. Against this weird magnificence, her whole shape changes color: hull, masts, and sails turn black – a greenish black.

Sun and ship vanish together in another minute. Violet the night comes; and the rigging of the foremast cuts a cross upon the face of the moon.⁴⁰

Besides this universal irradiation and almost Hopkinsian merging of light in light, there is also a sense of the emptiness and ghostliness of experience: the ‘phantom’ ship, the ‘spectral vision’, things appearing and disappearing into the ever-changing kaleidoscope of reality, and the sub-stream, as noted heretofore, of metaphors colouring the mindscape of the reader: gold and silver, light and dark, flashing burning jewel-like hardness and cold elemental wateriness, to name but a few of the text’s governing deep metaphors. Such scenes are more than merely seascapes: they are, in my view, mindscapes – and are thus amongst Hearn’s first ‘oceanic meditations’, such as I describe in my book, and which are associated with Yaidzu, Fujisan, Yokohama Bay.⁴¹ In all of these writings both in the ‘circum-Caribbean’ and in Japan, there is the sea; always the idea of the oceanic nature of existence, of being. It is at once full and empty, embodied and ghostly, multifarious and unitary, glittering surface, dark and infinite depth. The very language of the text plays with and mixes grammatical elements: in the passage above ‘light blue’ is at once a complex compound of two nouns each of a different abstract type (light and blueness) but fuses in its following instance into the adjectival ‘light-blue’. It is as though the mixing of the energies of experience is spilling over into the categories of the language used to express this: a kind of grammatical synaesthesia and a vertigo. Even the strange distortion, at the end of the passage, of noun and preposition show the vertiginous topsy-turviness of the moment: the ‘foremast cuts a cross on the face of the moon’. Here verb and direct object (noun) fuse to become (if read slightly faster, more breathlessly) the prepositional, ‘across’ succeeded directly by another preposition –

‘on’. The height of the black ‘foremast’ collapsing – or perhaps instantly expanding – into the brilliant moon echoes the Southern Cross anchoring the whole meditation (as we saw above) and foreshadows the vertiginous heights of Mount Pelée suspended above Saint Pierre, which, in turn, is suspended above the glassy, void depths of the bay below (as we shall shortly see). A few pages later in Part VI, the ‘Southern Cross [...] is only the *suggestion* of a cross’: just as these images and deep pictures arise from the pattern-making mind looking at experience, so the stars (the speaker tells us) emerge in patterns from the vast ocean of space.⁴² Light and dark instantly transform into their opposites, and back again, in the meditation of the overwhelmed and breathless speaker. ‘Night’ is ‘violet’ and ‘violet’ ‘night’, in yet another gentle synaesthetic shock. It is almost as if the speaker has arrived at what we now call a flow-state, in which the minutest of verbal energies can transpose or overturn perception in an instant, and back again. This is the basis of Buddhist insight into the transient nature of reality, and Hearn is finding it here, in phenomena, and in the word-streams and patterns that arise from them in his meditating, and mediating, perception.

After a week at sea the islands begin to appear, also ghost-like, and made of the same ‘substance’, the colours, as sky and sea: as they steam on Santa Cruz, the island looms almost like a continuation of the waves, a ‘great gray mountain shape’:⁴³

The shape is still vapory, varying in coloring from purplish to bright gray; but wherever peaks and spurs fully catch the sun⁴⁴ they edge themselves with a beautiful green glow, while interlying ravines seem filled with foggy blue.

As we approach,⁴⁵ sunlighted surfaces come out still more luminously green. Glens and sheltered valleys still hold blues and grays; but points fairly illuminated by the solar glow show just such a fiery green as burns in the plumage of certain humming-birds. And just as the lustrous colors of these birds shift according to changes of light, so the island shifts colors here and there – from emerald to blue, and blue to gray....⁴⁶

Here the mediating consciousness moves seamlessly from sea to land, with even its minutest denizens the humming-birds seen as part of this established spectrum. Again, there is verbal play on stasis in motion (using a favourite Hearn wordplay: ‘still’ fused into adjective and adverb), in ‘sunlighted surfaces come out still’. Arising and falling in an instant, the moment passes, and the

same spectral yet sensuous green-blue vapoury quality is seen in the next destinations: St Kitts, Dominica, and, finally, Martinique: ‘all gray, a vapory gray; then [...] bluish-gray; then all green’.⁴⁷ The continuities between sea and sky and land are eroded: all is one vast and ever-changing spectrum of energies, waves of light.

The island townscape and the landscape itself are examined in ways that contain the same elements as the colour of the seascape mindscapes that the observer on the voyage thus far has been constructing, though there is a shift from the blue range of the spectrum to the more earthy colours – yellows, oranges, and foliage-greens.⁴⁸ The scale of the scene changes, however, to become more human and local, and there is an increased sense of vertiginousness, of suspension in nothingness, as ‘[w]e anchor in limpid blue water’ in the harbour city of Saint Pierre.⁴⁹ Perhaps this is due to the sense of relative scale, of the human dimensions of the town intruding into the elemental meditation on the spaces of the sea, seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. So, for example, there are Hearn’s descriptions of the harbour, of the *SS Barraconta*’s passengers watching the ‘nearly white soles’ of the boys’ ‘upturned feet’ diving into the clear depths beneath the ship; or of this crystalline volume of water-space perceived from the steep streets of the town; or of the volcano above (to be later echoed in the ghostly Mount Fuji he will see from aboard his ship to Japan).⁵⁰ All of these carry the same sense of sensual dislocation, of being hanging in suspension, the ships hanging in the water above their shadows below. There is a vertiginousness to the narrator’s ‘bird’s-eye view’ of ‘descending to the harbor – by flights of old mossy stone steps – that looking down them to the azure water you have the sensation of gazing from a cliff’ with the ‘roofs of the street below [...] under your feet, and other streets [...] rising behind you to meet the mountain roads’.⁵¹ And again, there is a sense of balance in the scene with the ‘gentian-blue sky overhead’⁵² echoed on the horizontal with bursts of sea blue through the nearby-below roofs, and the azure bay below and beyond these:

On the lower side of the main thoroughfare other streets open in wonderful bursts of blue – warm blue of horizon and sea. The steps by which these ways⁵³ descend toward the bay are black with age, and slightly mossed close to the wall on either side: they

have an alarming steepness⁵⁴ – one might easily stumble from the upper into the lower street.⁵⁵ Looking towards the water through these openings from the Grande Rue, you will notice⁵⁶ that the sea-line cuts across the⁵⁷ blue space just at the level of the upper story of the house on the lower street-corner. Sometimes, a hundred feet below, you see a ship resting in the azure aperture –⁵⁸ seemingly suspended there in sky-color, floating in blue light.⁵⁹

This whole scene is bound together by the subtextual metaphor-image of the water channels cascading, sparkling, gurgling and glittering through Saint Pierre, from mountain streams to the bay below.⁶⁰ It is as though a synaesthetic stream of light and sound and sensation ties all together. The final view downwards, of the bay, sensual, verbless – timeless and still in the mind – crystallises the vision: '[s]hips at anchor in blue water, against golden-yellow horizon. A vast blue glow. Water clear as diamond, and lukewarm.'⁶¹

The vertiginousness of this and the later ascent up the 'burning green of the lofty island',⁶² up volcanic Mont Pelée covered in 'green fire' to where the narrator looks back, thousands of feet down to the present scene, has a certain pathos given Hearn's own visual disability.⁶³ The \$106 camera he bought in New York was all but useless to him in these tropics of the mind's eye.⁶⁴ The confusion of the sensual profusions with which the Caribbean world met him must have been at once delightful and painful. And one gets the sense here – as in the mature Japanese essay-meditations, and the 'oceanic meditations' on reality – that the very patterning of his vision and his writing – the spectrum of colour-energies from blue through green through yellow to the profusion of the reds of fruit and life to the gentians of elemental eternity, of fire and spark and stone – the very imagery and words and alliterative sounds in these texts – enact a balance and calming, a kind of psycho-sensual anchoring in the chaotic profusion of loveliness and existential wonder that had opened up on this voyage.

Stefano Evangelista has done excellent work on Hearn's use of colour, especially in the context of Japan, and 'international decadence', the effect of (particularly) the French Symbolists on Hearn, and the use of colour in his Japanese writing.⁶⁵ He shows that much of Hearn's 'art writing' is ekphrastic, placing the art object at the centre of his 'translations' of Japanese culture.⁶⁶

Evangelista's analysis of the history and deeper significances of colours – especially blue in Japan and in Hearn's vision – sheds light on the deeper significance of blue in some of Hearn's 'art writing'. Of most direct relevance here is his observation that the style of the *ukiyo-e* seems present in Hearn's land- and skiescapes to achieve what Hearn calls 'Cosmic Emotion' (in an essay of 1898 called 'Azure Psychology').⁶⁷ Blue, he points out, is the colour of ghostliness.⁶⁸ And finally, Evangelista observes the parallel between the traditional Japanese technique called '*aizuri* – a mode of printing that uses only the colour blue, in several shades, on white backgrounds' and Hearn's own verbal painting: he observes that often the blue haze of the phenomenal world is offset by lighter tints – almost as though to mimic the glassiness of the effect of the *aizuri* and the layering of lacquer over the paint.⁶⁹ In light of this observation these very effects are evident, as we have seen, in 'Midsummer Trip': the recurring base 'gray'; the silver and golden lights in the sea and sky; the gem-like sparking of the sea's surface; the phosphorescence in darkening water; the starlight and Milky Way above – all of these recurring images suggest that Hearn had a natural understanding, as of a watercolourist, that depth cannot be achieved unless by a trick of surface light. And in the sub-stream of the text, too, the repetition of an element or motif like the clear sparkling, gushing mountain streams pouring through Saint Pierre seems intentional and analogous to this – silver sparkling streams of light from sky, to rivulets, through stone water channels, flowing to the sea, fusing above and below into a continuum of the senses such as that which he sees in Pierre Loti's synaesthetic 'word-paintings' and 'verbal photographs'.⁷⁰ The sound of the sparkling water mingles with imaginations of light – just as (say) the texture and feel of the colours is accentuated in moments when their base elements are elicited, as we have seen Hearn do in 'Midsummer Trip': 'indigo', 'lapis lazuli', silver, gold, gemstones of all colours.⁷¹ The same can be said of Hearn that he says of Loti's 'exquisite notework': '[f]or mere description of external objects alone forms but a small part of the charm of his books; – he subjoined notes of the thoughts and fancies also which such impressions of sight, sound, or smell produced in the mind; and thus his work is as much introspective [as] it is retrospective'.⁷²

Conclusion

What, then, do we make of this vision? I have tried to show that Hearn's 'circum-Caribbean' voyages may be seen as belonging to his developing Buddhist view of the changing oneness of reality, which, indeed, is most beautifully expressed in his Japanese essay-meditations, the 'oceanic' works. There, as in the travelogue discussed here, the ocean is a metaphor for reality, and Hearn's trip to Martinique allowed him to experience the world anew, in a proto-Buddhist way.

Perhaps understanding this helps to explain more fully the animosity which arose at the very moment he was in Martinique, between Hearn and Dr George Gould, the Philadelphia ophthalmologist who became his best friend – and worst enemy – at this time. I have written about their extended encounter in 'Lafcadio Hearn and George Gould's "Philosophy of Spectacles": The story of a Buddhist-Christian encounter' as well as in my book on Hearn's Buddhism.⁷³ In both places I have surmised that it was Hearn's friendship with, and love for, women of colour on Martinique and elsewhere – as set forth in essays from *Martinique Sketches* like 'Ma Bonne' and 'Pa Combiné, Chè' – that triggered Gould and caused him to attack Hearn's faulty eyesight as being at the root of an atheistic defective vision of the world.⁷⁴ This new and boundaryless – this colourful in the greater sense – world of energy and delight, was terrifying to Gould. Adam Rothman discerns a 'tropicality' (borrowing from Edward Said's 'Orientalism') in Hearn's New Orleans and Caribbean writings. The tropics, he reminds us, were (and still sometimes are) associated with religious deviation and a 'degenerative power' that was 'either Paradise or Hell'.⁷⁵ Ironically, in May 1902, Saint Pierre was destroyed when Pelée erupted, making a Hell of this Paradise, and showing the transience of all things in the most terrifyingly physical form.

Just as in Buddhist vision the lotus blossoms from the mud, so Hearn's Caribbean writings of the later 1880s flower from the grime of destitution, the poverty and darkness described in the earlier journalistic writings mentioned at the outset of this article as part – even these – of Hearn's incipient Buddhism. His new vision, even as his physical eyesight is deteriorating, is lotus-like, a

celebration of the effusion of light and a deepening of his understanding of reality. ‘Midsummer Trip’ is at the opposite end of the spectrum that begins in the degradations Hearn revealed and discussed in his early rag-picker journalism: the diaphanous blue-green sea- and landscapes, the elementals of experience, the ocean of myriad blues, blue-greens, and reddening, golden sunsets, and the lilac evenings and black inkiness of water and night, shot through with the silver light of stars and an inner, churning phosphorescence. Like Gauguin, Hearn made sense of reality through light and colour and form in these Caribbean ‘aquarelles’ and the experiences and attitudes he took away with him to Japan would find their ultimate Buddhist expression there.⁷⁶

¹ John Antony Goedhals, *The Neo-Buddhist Writings of Lafcadio Hearn: Light from the East* (Brill, 2020), p. 141.

² Mary Louise Vincent, ‘Two Painters of the Tropics: Lafcadio Hearn and Paul Gauguin in Martinique’, *Caribbean Studies*, 10.3 (1970), pp. 172–81 (p. 181).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 178 and 179.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 180–81.

⁸ For the ‘persistence of force’, see, especially, *Neo-Buddhist Writings*, p. 1; for *karma*, see *Neo-Buddhist Writings*, pp. 74–76; pp. 113–16; pp. 162–65.

⁹ ‘SPCA Notes’, in *Lafcadio Hearn’s American Articles: Buying Christmas Toys and Other Essays*, 5 vols, ed. by Ichiro Nishizaki (Hokuseido Press, 1939), II, pp. 156–58; ‘Some Pictures of Poverty’, in *Miscellanies by Lafcadio Hearn*, 2 vols, ed. by Albert Mordell (Heinemann, 1924), I, pp. 214–27; ‘Les Chiffonniers’, in *Lafcadio Hearn’s American Articles: Barbarous Barbers and Other Stories*, 5 vols, ed. by Ichiro Nishizaki (Hokuseido Press, 1939), V, pp. 55–65.

¹⁰ In *Stray Leaves from Strange Literature and Fantastic and Other Fancies*, in *The Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, 16 vols (Houghton Mifflin, 1923), II, pp. 257–78; pp. 259–62.

¹¹ In a letter to H. E. Krehbiel written sometime in 1880, he explains that these are imaginative explorations of these extremes of the human condition: the ‘Fantastics’ have ‘one twin-idea running through them all – Love and Death’, in *Life and Letters*, in *Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, XIII, p. 211.

¹² See, for example, ‘Gibbeted’ published in *The Cincinnati Commercial* on 26 August 1876, where he feels the dwindling pulse of a hanged man, in *Lafcadio Hearn’s American Articles: Barbarous Barbers*, pp. 220–37; or ‘Two Curious Cases of Suicide’, first published in *The Item* on 12 Oct 1879, in *Lafcadio Hearn’s American Articles: The New Radiancy and Other Scientific Sketches*, 5 vols, ed. by Ichiro Nishizaki (Hokuseido Press, 1939), I, pp. 123–25; or, finally, an article about the dissection of human bodies, ‘The Dance of Death’, first published in *The Cincinnati Enquirer* on 3 May 1874, in *Lafcadio Hearn’s American Articles: The New Radiancy*, pp. 129–37.

¹³ In *Diary of an Impressionist, Creole Sketches, Chinese Ghosts*, in *Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, I, pp. 30–36.

¹⁴ See, in particular, *Neo-Buddhist Writings*, pp. 133–43.

¹⁵ In *Neo-Buddhist Writings* I explain how critical writing on Hearn has always tended to be ‘bio-critical’, the life and the work being seen in his case as particularly interwoven: see, especially, pp. 42–45.

¹⁶ See, especially, *Neo-Buddhist Writings*, pp. 202–06.

¹⁷ In *Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn*, 2 vols, ed. by Elizabeth Bisland (Houghton Mifflin, 1906), I, p. 352.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 370.

¹⁹ Lafcadio Hearn, ‘Torn Letters’, in *Miscellanies by Lafcadio Hearn*, 2 vols, ed. by Albert Mordell (Heinemann, 1924), II, pp. 56–65. Edward Laforgue Tinker writes contemptuously of Hearn’s encounter on the island with Marie, a ‘dusky islander’ on l’Île Dernière, Last Island, where he holidayed in the Gulf of Mexico, in *Lafcadio Hearn’s American Days* (Dodd, Mead, 1925), pp. 220–21.

²⁰ John Wharton Lowe, *Calypso Magnolia: The Crosscurrents of Caribbean and Southern Literature* (University of North Carolina Press, 2016), p. x.

²¹ Almost certainly Hearn had not read about ‘the *bardo*’: it is only after Walter Evans Wentz’s publication in 1927 of the translation into English of the *Bardo Thödol*, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, that the idea in this form, using this word, became known in the West. See Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead, or The After-Death Experiences on the Bardo Plane, according to Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup’s English Rendering* (Oxford University Press, 1927). And yet, Hearn seems to have understood the notion *a priori*, since it is inherent in Buddhist philosophy and incorporated into his neo-Buddhist vision, in the meditations he created out of Japanese ghost stories, and past lives.

²² For further discussion of ‘oceanic meditations’, see entries in ‘Index’, *Neo-Buddhist Writings*, p. 241.

²³ Part 2 of *Martinique Sketches* is contained in the volume *Two Years in The French West Indies*, in the collection *Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, IV, pp. 47–111. All references to ‘Midsummer Trip’ are also to this collected edition of *Two Years in the French West Indies* (*Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, III, pp. 1–112). ‘Midsummer Trip’ is thus hereafter referenced as being in *Two Years*. It should be noted that *The Writings of Lafcadio Hearn* were published in late 1922 as the Koizumi Edition, the year before the 1923 issue of the same edition, which is being quoted in this essay. The Koizumi Edition was a single printing project from late 1922 to early 1923. The 1922 deluxe edition of Hearn’s work was limited to 750 copies, and sold for the benefit of Hearn’s widow, Setsuko Koizumi, and their three children. Shortly after this 1922 ‘first issue’, the 1923 ‘second issue’ was published for wider distribution in the West.

²⁴ *Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, II, pp. 1–194; II, pp. 195–386.

²⁵ See Paul Murray, *A Fantastic Journey: The Life and Literature of Lafcadio Hearn* (Japan Library, 1993), pp. 97–98.

²⁶ Peter A. A. Bailey, ‘Deforestation and Decolonization: Lafcadio Hearn’s French Antillean Writing’, *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 6.1 (2023), pp. 1–19 (pp. 6, 8, and 11).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 13, and 17.

²⁸ John Wharton Lowe, *Calypso Magnolia*, pp. 178 and 184.

²⁹ *Two Years*, III, p. vi.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³³ *Ibid.* pp. 4–5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8, pp. 4–6 and 9–10.

³⁵ Lafcadio Hearn, ‘A Midsummer Trip to the West Indies’, First Paper, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, 77 (June/November, 1888), pp. 209–26 (p. 211). The title of the initial magazine version differs from its final title as part of *Two Years in the French West Indies*.

³⁶ *Two Years*, III, pp. 11–13.

³⁷ For references to the Milky Way and Southern Cross see *Two Years*, III, pp. 13 and 23.

³⁸ ‘A Winter Journey to Japan’, in *Miscellanies by Lafcadio Hearn*, 2 vols, ed. by Albert Mordell (Heinemann, 1924), II, pp. 243–65. Hearn writes of his first taste of Japanese waters off the coast of Japan: ‘Remembering the wondrous azure stream of the Atlantic tropics, I had hoped to look again here upon a rich luminous water: it is black as its Japanese name; – the sea is a waste of ink!’, pp. 261–62. ‘Umi’ in Japanese means both ‘sea’ and ‘dark’: the radicals of the kanji (う み) mean ‘water’ and ‘dark’ respectively.

³⁹ In Buddhist philosophy every moment (not only those assigned cultural or spiritual significance) is a transition, or *bardo*, from one state to the next.

⁴⁰ *Two Years*, III, p. 6. The original *Harper’s* version of this passage ends with ‘full-moon’: there is a pleasing simplification taking place in the revision process, a removal of unnecessary detail.

⁴¹ See *Neo-Buddhist Writings*, ch. 4: ‘Japan and the “Romance of Reality”’.

⁴² *Two Years*, III, p. 13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴⁴ There is a comma here in the *Harper’s* original.

⁴⁵ In the *Harper’s* original this is: ‘[...] the shadowed heights change to a greenish-blue’ instead of ‘[...] sunlighted surfaces come out still more luminously green’.

⁴⁶ *Two Years*, III, pp. 15–16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 30.

⁴⁸ This earthier and redder range of the spectrum will not be dealt with in this essay, as it may be seen as a whole new and, in some ways, *separate* meditation that proceeds upon the same mixing flow and profusion of colours. What might be said of it provisionally is that its palette is that of the teeming Creole life and culture of Martinique: its tones – both literal and metaphorical – are therefore politically more charged – indeed ambivalent – in its representation of brown subjects. See Peter Bailey’s ‘Deforestation and Decolonization’ and John Lowe’s *Calypso Magnolia*.

⁴⁹ *Two Years*, III, p. 31.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 31–33. Similar patterns of colour as those seen in ‘Midsummer Trip’ are seen in ‘A Winter Journey to Japan’. Hearn sees Mount Fuji for the first time from the ship in Yokohama Bay: ‘Then with a delicious shock of surprise I see something for which I had been looking, – far exceeding all anticipation – but so ghostly, so dream white against the morning blue, that I did not observe it at the first glance: an exquisite snowy cone towering above all other visible things – Fusi-yama!’, in ‘A Winter Journey to Japan’, pp. 262–63.

- ⁵¹ *Two Years*, III, p. 33.
- ⁵² Ibid. p. 35.
- ⁵³ In the *Harper's* original 'these ways' was 'the cross streets'.
- ⁵⁴ In the *Harper's* original this clause is: 'They are almost alarmingly steep.'
- ⁵⁵ In the *Harper's* original this clause reads: 'You could easily fall from the upper thoroughfare into the lower one by a single stumble.'
- ⁵⁶ In the *Harper's* original this reads: 'From the Grande Rue you will notice, as you look toward the water through these openings, [...].'
- ⁵⁷ The *Harper's* original has 'each' instead of the definite article.
- ⁵⁸ The *Harper's* original has a comma rather than this dash.
- ⁵⁹ *Two Years*, III, p. 35.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 33–35.
- ⁶¹ Ibid. pp. 48–49.
- ⁶² The *Harper's* original has '[...]' of the tropical mountain forest '[...].'
- ⁶³ *Two Years*, III, p. 53.
- ⁶⁴ John Wharton Lowe, *Calypso Magnolia*, p. 178. Jonathan Cott claims the camera cost \$400, but this seems excessively expensive. See *Wandering Ghost: The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn* (Knopf, 1991), p. 209. According to Paul Murray, in a letter to Annie Alden Hearn calls the camera 'a fraud' (*Fantastic Journey*, p. 95). In 'The Most Original of Modern Novelists: Pierre Loti' published in *The Times-Democrat* of 7 December 1884, Hearn laments 'the yet-undiscovered art of color-photography' (in Lafcadio Hearn and Albert Mordell, ed., *Essays in European and Oriental Literature* (Heinemann, 1923), pp. 133–40 (p. 136)). In the same article Hearn speaks of Loti's 'knowledge of color' and its 'technicological [sic] accuracy' (p. 137) and goes on to describe Loti's 'impressions' as 'verbal photographs' (p. 139).
- ⁶⁵ Stefano Evangelista, "'Clothed with Poetry": Lafcadio Hearn's Decadent Aesthetics of Translation', *Modern Philology*, 121.1 (2023), pp. 104–23 (p. 106).
- ⁶⁶ Stefano Evangelista, 'Translating the Beauty of Japan: Lafcadio Hearn's Art Writing', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 34 (2023), pp. 1–10 (p. 4).
- ⁶⁷ See Stefano Evangelista, 'Symphonies in Haze and Blue: Lafcadio Hearn and the Colours of Japan', Ch. 3 in *The Colours of the Past in Victorian England*, ed. by Charlotte Ribeyrol (Peter Lang, 2016), pp. 71–94 (p. 86).
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 79.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 89.
- ⁷⁰ 'The Most Original of Modern Novelists: Pierre Loti', pp. 138–39.
- ⁷¹ Evangelista, 'Symphonies in Haze and Blue', pp. 91–92.
- ⁷² 'The Most Original of Modern Novelists: Pierre Loti', p. 137.
- ⁷³ John Antony Goedhals, 'Lafcadio Hearn and George Gould's "Philosophy of Spectacles": The Story of a Buddhist-Christian Encounter', in *Diasporic Identities and Empire: Cultural Contentions and Literary Landscapes*, ed. by Anastasia Nicéphore and David Brooks (Cambridge Scholars, 2013), pp. 199–212.
- ⁷⁴ In *Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, IV, pp. 47–86; pp. 87–111.
- ⁷⁵ Adam Rothman, 'Lafcadio Hearn in New Orleans and the Caribbean', *Atlantic Studies*, 5.2 (2008), pp. 265–83 (pp. 267–68, p. 274).
- ⁷⁶ *Two Years*, III, pp. 33 and 89.