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Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Lafcadio Hearn': A New Translation

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Hugo von Hofmannsthal's short essay 'Lafcadio Hearn' (1904) provides a brief but powerful insight into the resonance of Hearn's Japanese writing for European decadent and modernist writing in the early twentieth century. Writers and artists turning to Japan since the mid nineteenth century were building on a history of transnational engagements between East Asia and Central Europe, as well as long-established artistic and intellectual practices of European Orientalism.[1] Studies of *japonisme* have demonstrated the specific place that Japan held in German and Austrian imaginations by 1900, especially in Hofmannsthal's Vienna.[2] As European knowledge of Japanese art and culture developed over the nineteenth century, Hearn's work fuelled fascination with both the 'old Japan' and contemporary Japanese life.[3] Hofmannsthal's essay shows this tension in his response to Hearn's work: his elegiac tone in describing ancient Japanese spiritual practices is combined with stark images of the ongoing Russo-Japanese War, his condescending praise of Japanese intellectuals placed alongside weary dissatisfaction with the 'burden' of Western culture.

Hofmannsthal wrote the essay in the days after Hearn's death on 26 September 1904 and published it in the Vienna monthly *Die Zeit* on 2 October. The news of Hearn's death came at a moment when Hofmannsthal was immersed in his books, having returned to *Kokoro: Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life* (1896) in January and read *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (1894) and *Gleanings in Buddha-Fields* (1897) in July of the same year.[4] Hofmannsthal's essay was republished with minor amendments in 1905 as the foreword to Berta Franzos' German translation of *Kokoro*. The translation was extremely successful and ran to as many as thirty-five editions: even if Hofmannsthal's boast of the 'commercial significance' of his foreword may overstate his role in its popularity, he certainly became closely associated with Hearn's continuing reception in German-speaking Europe.[5]

In Walter Pache's analysis of Hofmannsthal's reception of Hearn's work, he locates this essay at an inflection point in the writer's development – from a 'melancholy, even decadent vision of Japan that was fashionable in Europe in the 1890s' to an increasing interest in Japanese spirituality and philosophy.[6] Yet the power of Hofmannsthal's essay lies just as much in his experimentation with style. The back-and-forth of his lists, the rhythm of his repetitions and the powerful affective force of his writing all show Hearn's influence. Above all, Hofmannsthal ascribes great significance to, in his words, 'trivial', 'anecdotal', and 'sentimental' aspects of Hearn's style. By recounting the telephone call, pondering over time zones and often lapsing into lament, Hofmannsthal positions his text as an echo that speaks to Hearn as a source of literary inspiration.

The two versions of Hofmannsthal's essay are very similar, and I have mostly used the 1905 *Kokoro* foreword with its minor revisions and the added subtitle.[7] The exception is the first sentence, where I retain the 1904 version from *Die Zeit*: 'Dazu hat man mich ans Telephon gerufen'. This earlier version better communicates the immediacy of the 'impression' made on Hofmannsthal by Hearn's death, which I have also endeavoured to convey in my translation of Hofmannsthal's tenses.

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[1] See especially Joanne Miyang Cho, Lee M. Roberts, and Christian W. Spang, eds, *Transnational Encounters between Germany and Japan: Perceptions of Partnership in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). On German and Austrian orientalism in this period more broadly, see Todd Kontje, *German Orientalisms* (University of Michigan Press, 2004); Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Katharina Herold-Zanker, *Decadence and Orientalism in England and Germany, 1880–1920: 'The Indispensable East'* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

[2] Mirjam Dénes, Györgyi Fajcsák, Piotr Spławski, and Toshio Watanabe, eds, *Japonisme in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy* (Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts, 2020), and Aglaja Kempf, 'Oskar Kokoschka und der Japonismus: Wien um 1900 und die japanische Ästhetik', in *Oskar Kokoschka: Neue Einblicke und Perspektiven*, ed. by Régine Bonnefoit and Bernadette Reinhold (de Gruyter, 2021), pp. 402–20.

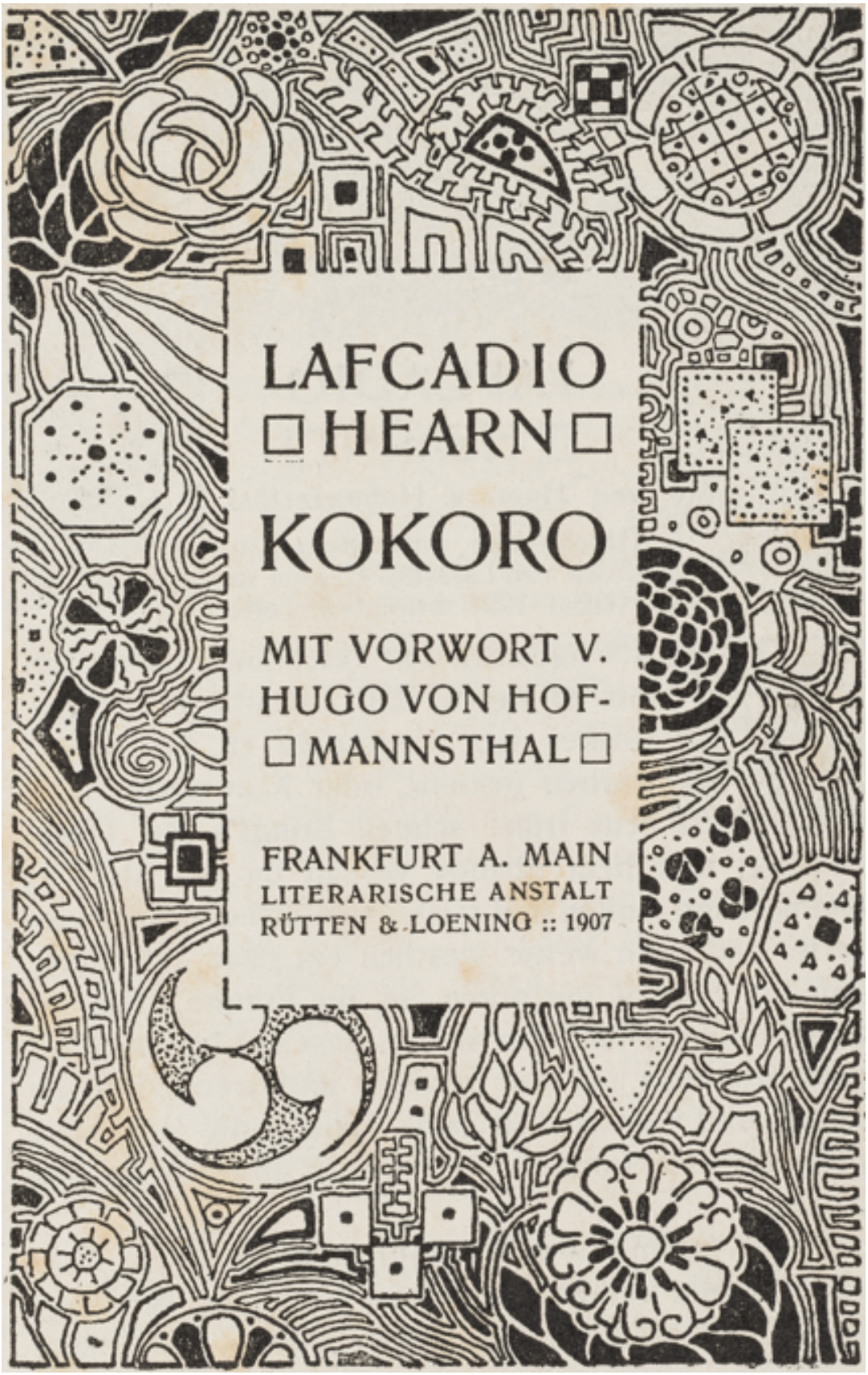
[3] See Kathleen M. Webb, *Lafcadio Hearn and his German Critics: An Examination of His Appeal* (Lang, 1984), and Gerhard Schepers, 'Exoticism in Early Twentieth-Century German Literature on Japan', in *Japanese-German Relations, 1895–1945*, ed. by Christian W. Spang and Rolf-Harald Wippich (Routledge, 2006), pp. 98–116.

[4] Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. by Rudolf Hirsch and others (Fischer, 1975–), XXXVIII, *Aufzeichnungen: Text*, ed. by Rudolf Hirsch and others (2013), pp. 468 and 480.

[5] Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Sämtliche Werke*, XXXIII, *Reden und Aufsätze 2*, ed. by Konrad Heumann and Ellen Ritter (2009), pp. 332–33. All translations are my own.

[6] Walter Pache, 'Das alte und das neue Japan: Lafcadio Hearn und Hugo von Hofmannsthal', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 67.3 (1993), pp. 451–65 (p. 455).

[7] For details, see Hofmannsthal, *Sämtliche Werke*, XXXIII, pp. 332–33.



Emil Orlik's artwork from the German translation of Lafcadio Hearn, Kokoro: Mit Vorwort von Hugo v. Hofmannsthal, trans. by Berta Franzos (Rütten & Loening, 1907)
Courtesy of the University of St Andrews Libraries and Museums.

Lafcadio Hearn

Written in response to the impression made by Lafcadio Hearn's death in Autumn 1904

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

That was the reason I was called to the telephone: to tell me that Lafcadio Hearn has died. Died in Tokyo, died yesterday, or this evening, or this morning: the wire carries the news quickly, and this evening a few people here and there in Germany, and further west a couple hundred more, and even further west a few thousand will know that their friend has died, their friend to whom they owed a great deal and whom they have never seen. And I, too, have never seen him and never shall see him, and the letter that I so often meant to write to him will never find its way to his now motionless hands.

And Japan has lost its adoptive child. It is losing thousands of its sons now day by day: the corpses piled high on top of one another, blocking the flow of the rivers, lying with eyes unblinking on the sea floor, and in ten thousand houses, with proud, silent devotion, without weeping or crying, a small meal is being prepared, a friendly candle lit for a dead man. And now the foreigner has died too, the immigrant who loved Japan so dearly. Perhaps the only European who has truly known, truly loved this country. Not with the love of an aesthete or with the love of a scholar, but with a love that is stronger, all-embracing and all the more unusual: with the love that shares in the inner life of the beloved land. His eyes took everything in, and there was beauty in everything, because it was filled from within with the breath of life: the old Japan that lives on in the private gardens and unexplored houses of the great lords and in remote villages with their little temples – and the new Japan, criss-crossed with railways, burning with the fevers of Europe; the lonely beggar who wanders from Buddha to Buddha and the great new army, filled with ancient deadly courage; the small burial place by the side of the road, built by children from mud and scraps of wood, and the great Osaka, the powerful industrial city with its hundred thousand people who drive its trade with passion and dedication, just as others drive the war, with their vast silk stores

and salesmen with pale faces cowering for months behind their supplies, slaves to a sense of duty that almost makes a fairytale out of this trivial reality: 'A Salesman in a Silk Emporium'.

And his ears understood what they were saying: there are hundreds of children's words in his books and words spoken by grandmothers to grandchildren, and tender words, as delicate as birdsong, spoken by women in love and in torment, that without him would have faded away between the paper walls of their small chambers, and the words of ancient wise men, devout rulers and the words of the finest intellects of our age, whose words are chosen as meticulously as those of the most intelligent, most educated European, and whose tone is indistinguishable from the tone of one who bears the burden of our great inherited knowledge.

These books are inexhaustible. As I open them, it is almost unfathomable to think that they should still be all but entirely unknown to Germans. There they are alongside one another: *Gleanings in Buddha-Fields* and *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* and the lovely book *Kokoro*, perhaps the most beautiful of all. The pages that make up this volume are concerned more with the inner than the outer life of Japan – this is the reason why they are bound together under the title *Kokoro* ('heart'). Written with Japanese characters, the word all at once means 'mind', 'spirit', 'courage', 'resolve', 'sentiment', 'affection', and 'inner meaning' – just as in German we would say 'Das Herz der Dinge': the heart of things.[8] Yes, the heart of things truly is contained within these fifteen chapters and, as I read over their titles, I understand that it is just as impossible to give a precise impression of their content as it would be of a new perfume, or of the sound of a voice that someone else has never heard. Yes, I could not even adequately describe the artistic form into which these artworks by an unrivalled pen have been compressed. Here is the chapter with the title 'At a Railway Station'. It is a short anecdote. An almost trivial anecdote. An anecdote that is not quite free of sentimentality. Yet it was written by a man who can write, and before that felt by a man who can feel. And then there is the story of 'The Nun of the Temple of Amida'. This is almost a little novella. And next to it the chapter 'A Conservative'. This one is no novella at all: it is a piece of political insight, condensed like a work of art, presented like an anecdote: I think, in

short, it is a product of a sort of journalism, the most highly cultivated, most fruitful and serious that there can be. And alongside it this unique series of thoughts with the title 'By Force of Karma', in which profound matters that evade our grasp are dredged up from the ocean depths into the light and laid out next to one another. That is philosophy, if I am not mistaken. But it does not leave us cold; it does not draw us into the barren wastes of terminology. That might make it religion. Yet it is not threatening, it does not wish to exist alone in the world, it does not weigh on the soul. I would like to call it a despatch, a friendly despatch from one soul to many others, journalism beyond any newspaper, artworks without pretention and without artifice, science without gravity and full of life, letters written to unknown friends.

And now Lafcadio Hearn is dead and no one from Europe, no one from America, none of all his unknown friends will ever answer him, no one will thank him for his many letters, not anymore.

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[8] Hofmannsthal translates almost word-for-word Hearn's own description in *Kokoro: Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life* (Houghton Mifflin, 1896): 'The papers composing this volume treat of the inner rather than of the outer life of Japan, – for which reason they have been grouped under the title *Kokoro* (heart). Written with the above character, this word signifies also mind, in the emotional sense; spirit; courage; resolve; sentiment; affection; and inner meaning, – just as we say in English, "the heart of things".'