

Book Review of Monique Truong's *The Sweetest Fruits* (2019) on the Interpretations, Impressions and Adaptions of Lafcadio Hearn's Life

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Abstract. *The Sweetest Fruits* (2019) by Monique Truong is a novel based on the life and career of Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), an Irish-Greek writer, journalist, teacher, and essayist. The structural layout of the novel offers an unusually multi-faceted approach to storytelling. The story is told by three women, who had an important role in his life and career. The storytellers are Rosa (Hearn's Greek mother), Alethea (liberated Afro-American slave, and Hearn's first wife), and Setsu (Hearn's second, Japanese wife). Through their stories Truong's female protagonists introduce themselves and their love relationship to Hearn, and thereby formulate their own impressions, interpretations of his life and understanding of how he adapted his life to suit his new environments. The stories relate their interpretation and version of truth on which Hearn's life and career has been established. The singular structure and narrative mode of the novel attempts an extraordinary approach to the life of an exceptional man. Truong's style is above all intriguing, fluid and dynamic. The interesting and page-turner approach make it an exciting reading.

Key Words. Lafcadio Hearn, Monique Truong, storytelling, memory, adapting.

The human consciousness is a construct made up of a multitude of memories and recollections, as countless scientific experiments have shown. However, how and according to what system

humans organise these memories, impressions and recollections is yet to be explored. Consequently, the truth remains a mystery as Monique Truong's 2019 novel *The Sweetest Fruits* introduces readers to the mysteries of human memory and how the recollections are coloured by time and place.

Vietnamese-born American author Monique Truong arrived in the United States as a refugee in 1975. She currently lives in Brooklyn, New York. In the past two decades, she has published three novels, *The Sweetest Fruits* (2019), *Bitter in the Mouth* (2010), and *The Book of Salt* (2003). Truong is also a songwriter, lyricist and librettist working in collaboration with performer-composer Joan La Barbara, and is also well known as an essayist, and has been a writer-in-residence at several prestigious American, Japanese and European universities over the past two decades.

Monique Truong's novel *The Sweetest Fruits* (2019) follows the life of Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), an Irish-Greek journalist, teacher, writer and essayist. The unusual structure of the work focuses on different methods of storytelling. The three narrators in the novel are the three female figures who have played a crucial role in Hearn's life: Rosa, the Greek mother; Alethea, a former African-American slave, Hearn's first wife; and Setsu, his Japanese second wife. These very real and non-fictional female characters led very interesting and unique lives. In an interview with *Library of America* on 9 July 2020 Truong points out that it was the diversity of Hearn's life that led her to choose this narrative mode for the novel ("Library of America"). Her approach to *storytelling* is unique in which she colours the recollections and memories with smells, sights and food.

From among the three women, Rosa and Alethea were illiterate, as their living conditions and poverty did not allow any form of education. The stories relating their years spent with Hearn are told and noted down by a stranger, therefore their recollections and impressions are communicated through an outside source. Setsu, the Japanese wife, on the other hand, is not as elusive, because she came from a well to do Japanese family, could read and write Japanese and spoke English at a basic level. After Hearn's death, Setsu wrote a short memoir titled *Reminiscences of Lafcadio Hearn*, originally published in 1918 (2022), which not only described her loving impressions and memories of Hearn's life and his adapting to Japanese societal expectations, but also gave an insight into her own life and family background.

The novel adopts a three-dimensional approach, gradually unfolding Lafcadio Hearn's somewhat tangled and tragic life and his attempts at adapting to different and varied cultures. These take on the form of impressions, memories and recollections in which Hearn does not

speak or express his own views, rather his persona is brought to life through the voices of Rosa, Alethea and Setsu. One of the main questions that inevitably surfaces in reading the novel, is whose life is Truong telling: Hearn's, Rosa's, Alethea's or Setsu's? The narrative is set in different locations (Greece, Ireland, the United States and Japan), which highlight the origins of the three women and their home environment. In this way, the three female figures, lost in the passage of time, are now brought back to life, offering a more human and emotional impression and recollection of Lafcadio Hearn.

Hearn's works were received with acclaim by critics and writers of the time, but his persona remained obscure, as the 1918 issue of the *Nyugat* confirms. Földi's article in the *West* references A. Bellesort's article from the *Revue des deux Mondes*, in which he mentions Hearn when he visited Tokyo in 1889 and met the "esteemed writer", whom he describes in the following:

a short, broad-shouldered yet frail man[...] his delicate and regular face was without the left eye, which made his right eye seem incomparably large. This huge eye, under a finely arched forehead in this almost charming body, gave the impression of a cyclops. There was something reassuring in his smile, which was overshadowed by his moustache, but this effect was in peculiar contrast with his shyness, that instinctive fear which is embarrassed at the shadow of an image. (Földi 1918)

The key to understanding Hearn is the elusiveness of his personality, which Truong seeks to bring to life through the people with whom he had the closest and most intimate relationships. Through these human relationships, loves and emotions the work succeeds in making Hearn's character tangible. This unique approach to the narrative conveys a sense of immediacy, which makes the work increasingly interesting and readable.

The motto of the novel is taken from Emily Dickinson's best-known poem: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant". This is an invitation to understanding different ways of telling the truth, suggesting that the truth can be approached in an indirect way through loosely knit memories and impressions which make the story more accessible. Through the three narrators, Truong takes the reader on a tour of presenting the different stages of Hearn's life. The truth the author seeks emerges from the information gathered and the interpretations made. This is relative, however, because in the case of Rosa and Alethea the narrative is even looser, since their illiteracy means that we are presented with a third-person version. Setsu, however, is an exception, because she writes her husband's memories herself, so her truth is more credible.

There is a fourth person, however, Elizabeth Bisland, who is Hearn's official biographer. Bisland's two-volume work on Hearn's life and work was published in 1906 titled

The Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn, and her official biography of Hearn provides the framework for the novel. Structurally, Dickinson's motto is followed by a brief description of Bisland, and then by the first narrator, Rosa's recollections and impressions. Each narrative by Rosa, Alethea and Setsu is followed by a separate chapter from Bisland's biography, supplemented by official facts and figures to highlight the narrator's account. Similarly, at the end of the book Bisland's official biography of Hearn's years in Japan and the circumstances of his death are presented. An interesting feature of this structure is that each section containing Bisland's description is printed in italics, while the other chapters with the three narrators use a regular font type.

With this technique, Truong draws the reader's attention to the need to distinguish between the official biographer's factual data and account, and the emotionally rich tale told by the three women. The first is nothing more than a set of data, while the other approach humanises the protagonist, who, in contrast to the multitude of biographical data, emerges from the work as a human, flesh and blood, three-dimensional figure. Truong leaves it up to the reader to decide which narrator to believe. Truong's obvious aim is to make her narrative human-centred, which, despite the author's reliance on official biographical data, should be read as an engaging fictional story. The work is successful in this respect, as the novel can be compared to an impressionist painting, encompassing many minor emotional impressions, colourful memories and sentimental projections which form a harmonious whole.

There is no doubt that Lafcadio Hearn was a very special man, who experienced great adversity, whose whole life was about adapting to new environments and searching for a home and family. His childhood was no ordinary childhood either, as his mother was forced by her Irish husband's family to place him with aunts in Dublin to raise him as an Irishman. It is at this point that his relationship with his mother is severed to the point where they never see each other again. Truong ingeniously fills this void by beginning the novel with Rosa's narration, thus providing a basis for Hearn's Irish-Greek ancestry. At the same time, Hearn's Greek ancestry is also presented on his mother's side, which becomes authentic and accessible through his mother's version of his early life. Truong makes Rosa's exotic Greek environment – the island of Lefkada, one of the most beautiful islands in Greece – tangible through sights and smells. Indeed, Rosa identifies some of the people in her immediate environment, such as her brothers, by their smell and not by their names. Although Rosa's narrative seems a little lengthy at times – for she repeatedly stresses that the purpose of her story is to get the written account to her child and to meet him again – we can also feel her sadness, for she knows full well that her attempt is futile.

After somewhat vague family conflicts, he was abandoned by his father and his paternal aunt in Dublin, who was also his legal guardian. His journey from there led to boarding schools, where, under circumstances that are not entirely clear – since Bisland’s and Alethea’s versions differ – he went blind in his left eye. Hearn left school and set off for the world at the age of nineteen, leaving behind a bitter and unhappy life in Ireland and England. The first stage of his self-expression and literary development emerges in the United States, first Cincinnati and then New Orleans, where he met Alethea Foley and began a new life.

Alethea Foley is a former African-American slave, illiterate like Rosa, who tells her story to a journalist. In her memoir, we learn mostly about Alethea’s troubled life and the discrimination that surrounded her, while Hearn’s character is rather overshadowed. Alethea worked as a cook in a large tenant house that rented out rooms, and it was here that she met Hearn, who was also a tenant in the building. For Alethea, food and cooking were the freedom that supported her boundless personal expansion. While Rosa was inspired by the sights and smells in the first story, Alethea’s motivation was the food, the cooking and the feeding of guests and then her husband. In her relationship with Hearn, Alethea was aware of the negative aspects of their mixed marriage. When Hearn left her, seemingly without explanation, she accepted it, as their marriage seemed more a relationship of convenience and less of love. Alethea’s story is written after Hearn’s death, in the hope of inheriting her share of Hearn’s legacy. She is the one who repeatedly stressed in her narrative that there is more than one truth to a story, for each participant in a story formulates its own truth.

The search for truth is the central leitmotif of the novel. Each narrator tells her own version of the truth set in a fundamentally patriarchal society at the end of the nineteenth century. Hearn’s second wife, the Japanese Koizumi Setsu, however, only tells her own account after the death of her husband. In contrast to Rosa and Alethea, Setsu is an educated woman, the daughter of a samurai, who addresses her dead husband in her writing, because by telling her life and story, she also brings him to life.

Hearn’s years in Japan have given him the home he sought all his life. He arrived in Japan in 1890, then still a country very much isolated from the Western world, where he took the name Koizumo Yakumo and became a Japanese citizen. He married Setsu, started a family and published several volumes of studies on Japanese life, customs and folklore. These works are now available in Hungarian translation, as well. Beside his writings Hearn also taught English literature in general at several Japanese universities.

Truong’s novel is about a man in constant search of himself, whose life is about his broken family relationships and his special love affairs. Instead of addressing the writer directly,

Truong addresses the women who have had the greatest influence on his life. Are we talking about the same man Rosa raised as her beloved Patricio, then called simply Pat by his first wife, but officially named Patrick after his father? Could this be the same man who became a well-known writer under the name of Lafcadio Hearn, and then, putting all that aside, became a full-fledged writer in Japan under the name of Koizumo Yakumo? What is in the name and where is the truth? Truong says it is always on the side of the one who tells the story. Here, however, Hearn is not the storyteller, but rather the women who have made up his life and interpreted his persona to gather a multitude of impressions. From these, and from Elisabeth Bisland's biographical record, the story unfolds and presents a vivid portrayal of the life of a man who, during his adventurous and eventful journeys, found his own identity in an unusual yet remarkable way.

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