

This article is based on a seminar paper presented at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation titled “The Fight Between Anger and Tenderness in Men.” As I tell of what I learned about this fight in myself, and in the life of the writer Lafcadio Hearn, I am grateful to show what I learned from Aesthetic Realism: Art answers the questions of our lives!

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THE FIGHT BETWEEN ANGER AND TENDERNESS IN MEN The life and work of Lafcadio Hearn

Len Bernstein

As a man who once felt driven by an anger that made me ashamed and thought I would never be able to care deeply for anyone or anything, my heart is filled with gratitude to Eli Siegel and Aesthetic Realism for teaching me this: anger and tenderness can and must have the same beautiful purpose—to honestly like and be fair to the world, which is the deepest desire of every person. No man will want to put his fist through a wall, as I once did, when he learns from Aesthetic Realism that the world has a structure that can be cared for—it is the aesthetic oneness of opposites—and that this aesthetic structure is in every person, including oneself. “All beauty is a making one of opposites,” stated Eli Siegel, the founder of Aesthetic Realism, “and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.” Aesthetic Realism changed the agonizing see-saw fight in me between anger and tenderness, feeling I had to choose between being a brute or a weakling, into a dignified study of how a man’s questions are aesthetic. And studying it is enabling me to be increasingly true to myself.

Thinking back on my childhood, I saw how I was yearning to feel that anger and tenderness, force and gentleness could be one in the world and in myself. Often as a child, turbulent and unable to sleep, I would ask my mother to play on the piano two of my favorite melodies. One was The Star-Spangled Banner, with its accent on force; the other was Brahms Lullaby, accenting tenderness. I felt a deep composure and pleasure after hearing both pieces, but this feeling didn’t last. I did not know what Aesthetic Realism explains, that our desire to be stirred by beauty, to see meaning in people and things, is crippled by our desire for contempt, “the disposition in every person to think he will be for himself by making less of the outside world.”

One of the ways people make less of the world is trying to level it through anger and also making things nicer or softer than they really are. I did both. Growing up, I used the arguments between my parents and difficulty about money to feel the world was unfriendly and I had a right to be angry with this enemy. As a teenager, I began to study the martial arts and my thoughts were consumed with mock battles I staged in my mind, fighting with people I saw on the street. I also

fought pretty constantly with the people I knew. I remember with regret how meanly I treated a woman I cared for very much. Because I was uncomfortable having so much feeling for another person, and preferred the power I got from being angry, I gave her a brutal list of reasons why I couldn't be with her rather than tell her why I liked her. Afterwards, I called myself names and felt so cheap. The battle in me between wanting to care for things and wanting to get rid of any tender feelings I had, made me feel, increasingly, the only way to come to terms with this anger was to feel nothing at all.

Some years later in an Aesthetic Realism class, I told Mr. Siegel about a frightening, recurring dream I had where I couldn't move or breathe. He asked me, "Do you think it would be a triumph to take the whole world and say 'I feel nothing'? 'I know it's you Winifred, but I feel nothing'?"

LB: Yes.

ES: Do you think that not feeling can be the next best thing to ecstasy? It is a solace for the injustice we think the world does to us? I would say that wasn't a dream, Mr. Bernstein. That was a lifestyle!"

My gratitude to Eli Siegel and Aesthetic Realism is the same as my own heartbeat for the comprehension and criticism they met me with, explaining what tormented me and enabling it to change. I now have feeling for people and what they deserve, and an anger with injustice that makes me proud. Instead of looking at a person as a foil for my self-importance, I want to know the thoughts and feelings of others; I am stirred and excited as I talk with my wife Harriet, and able to look for and find meaning in the world as a photographer. I am no longer a slave to the narrow anger I thought would run my life forever. Instead, I have a conviction that feeling tender because I am affected by people and things makes me strong.

In Mr. Siegel's great lecture of 1950, "Aesthetic Realism and Anger", he said:

In a good anger we are fighting for the beauty of the world. In a bad anger we don't give a damn about the beauty of the world. The anger that is good is really an anger that is the desire to be pleased. But the anger that is bad is the desire to see the world as bad.^[1]

Tonight as I tell some of what I have learned, I am grateful to present aspects of the life and work of the 19th century writer Lafcadio Hearn whom I had the good fortune to learn about through two of Mr. Siegel's lectures. Hearn lived from 1850 to 1904, and his work is most associated with the Gulf of Mexico below New Orleans, and Japan. His prose, Mr. Siegel said "says something important about poetry and value." He showed Hearn was interested in the world as forceful and gentle, angry and tender, writing about Japanese gardens and the most foul murders, the Hellenic conception of human beauty and the daily operation of a slaughter-house,

Samurai warriors and the origin of the tea plant. The opposites of force and delicacy, terror and kindness which Mr. Siegel explained made for beauty in Hearn's work, were the very opposites Hearn needed so much to make sense of in his life.

I. We See the World as Harsh and Friendly

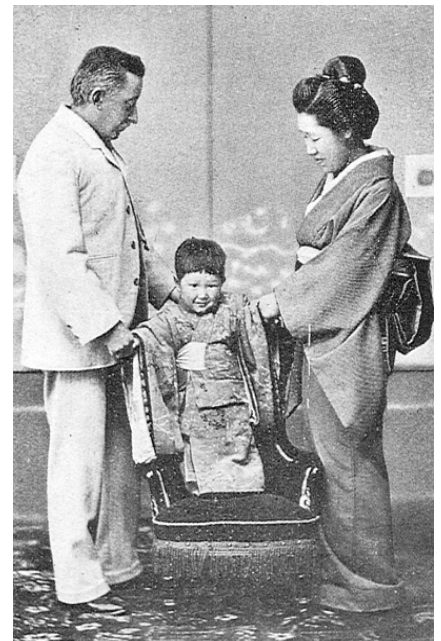
I learned from Aesthetic Realism that every person comes to an attitude to the world through the people and things we meet early. Lafcadio Hearn was born in 1850 in Leucadia, one of the Greek Ionian islands. His father was of Irish, English and Gypsy extraction and, as a military physician, was absent early and often from his family. Lafcadio's mother was Greek, Arab and Moorish and showed much affection to her son. But by the time Lafcadio was 7, his parents, after great turmoil, were separated, leaving their son in the care of a great aunt in Ireland.

Lafcadio Hearn must have felt early that the world he was in was changeable and he may have asked—how can I trust people who seem to show affection and then coldly dismiss me? Likely this young man felt the best way to take care of himself was to be suspicious of caring for anyone or anything too much. One biographer reports:

Julia Wetherall, a poet and wife of one of Lafcadio's editors who knew him well during his New Orleans days, recalled: 'He was warm-hearted and affectionate, though at the same time prone to distrustfulness; often suspecting his best friends of a design to slight or injure him.'^[2]

Meanwhile Lafcadio had a tremendous desire to be affected by the world. He was sent to school in France and added to his native Greek language, knowledge of French. An accident left him blind in one eye, his other eye weakening each year of his life—yet he read voraciously. At 19 he came to America, living in Cincinnati and endured much hardship, sometimes homeless and nearly starving. His care for writing enabled him to find work as a newspaper reporter in Cincinnati, and later in New Orleans where he learned to speak Creole, Spanish and Italian. He traveled and lived in the West Indies for two years, returned to America, and at the age of 41 went to Japan as a correspondent where he married a Japanese woman, raised a family, and became a citizen of that country. Mr. Siegel said:

[Hearn] is the most homeless writer in American literature. Nobody in American literature has such strange forbears. He makes Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, and Jack London look like they were members of the Republican Union Club.



Lafcadio Hearn with his wife Setsu and son Kazuo at Kumamoto, 1895.

I believe all his life he was trying to make sense of anger and tenderness in the world and in

himself. And this can be seen in a story by him Mr. Siegel discussed called “Chita, A Memory of Last Island,” which is based on an actual event: a terrible hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico in 1856. A little child, orphaned by the storm, is rescued from the sea by a brave fisherman and adopted by him and his wife who, in this story, give her the name Chita. This story, Mr. Siegel said, “has in it Hearn’s uncertainty about himself...about who he was, about his own father and mother.” It is, he explained, “a study in heat and coolness, gentleness and fierceness.” Hearn, he said was interested “in nature as forceful” and also “knew all the delicate flag waving of the tropics.” When the hurricane strikes, the devastation is terrible. Many ships are sunk, Last Island is nearly torn asunder, and a large hotel with all its guests in the midst of dancing are swept away. Hearn has this passage about the aftermath which Mr. Siegel said had organization:

There are casks of claret and kegs of brandy and legions of bottles bobbing in the surf. There are billiard-tables overturned upon the sand;—there are sofas, pianos, foot-stools and music-stools, luxurious chairs, lounges of bamboo....There is money in notes and in coin—in purses, in pocketbooks, and in pockets: plenty of it!^[3]

Said Mr. Siegel, “Hearn is trying to bring together the delicate arrangement of the world and its unrestraint, it’s wildness.

II. Contempt Makes Opposites In Us Fight

I learned from Aesthetic Realism that there is a hope in a person to find the world ugly, displeasing so that we can feel superior to it. I remember, as a teenager, reading the newspaper and as I read about misfortune in the world I felt both fearful and somehow warm, cozy. I was cold to what other people had to suffer and I relished turning over in my mind how I had been hurt by people, as I saw it. I didn’t know that I was nurturing contempt, that it made me dread the future and feel I could never have a real friend. Eli Siegel wrote:

The purpose of anger, when unjust, is to have contempt later. If our unjust anger is successful, contempt will ensue, pleasing the false thing in ourselves.^[4]

There were two ways Lafcadio Hearn used the ugliness and pain he saw. During the time he worked as a police reporter in Cincinnati he witnessed gruesome crimes, occupations that accented the uncomely—things that could easily be used to despise people and hate the world. But in his writing, he presented them in a way that made for more feeling, respect and even tenderness. His colleague John Cockerill said “[Hearn’s] whole nature seemed attuned to the beautiful, and he wrote beautifully of things which were neither wholesome nor inspiring.”^[5] And in reply to his friend Ellwood Hendrick’s statement that “There is nothing eternally right or eternally wrong!” Hearn stated with finality “Oh yes, there is! One thing is always wrong—always: to cause suffering in others for the purpose of gratifying one’s own pleasure; that is everlastingly wrong.”^[6] I respect this statement very much.

But, because Hearn did not understand his own hope to be superior, he could be cruel himself. His close friend Rudolph Matas said:

...he would bitterly denounce his enemies—or fancied enemies...in language that was frightful to listen to—inventing unheard-of tortures for those whom he deemed plotters against him. Yet in reality he was as gentle and as tender-hearted as a woman—and as passionately affectionate.^[7]

Hearn was both, and he did not know how to make sense of the gratification he got from causing others suffering in his mind which came from contempt and the beautiful purpose he had as a writer. He wrote in a letter: “I feel the man sometimes is much less than the work: my work, however weak, is so much better than myself, that the less said about me the better.”^[8]

Mr. Siegel, in his 1968 lecture, read one of the most moving passages I ever heard, from Hearn’s story “Chita, A Memory of Last Island”, and showed that Hearn is describing the sea as a oneness of brutal and forgiving, the way he hoped to be himself. Just before the hurricane, Carmen, the wife of Feliu, the fisherman, dreams about their daughter who had died years ago. And Hearn describes how Feliu swims against furious opposition from the sea, to save the little girl, and what follows:

She is very cold, the child, and very still, with eyes closed.

“Esta muerta, Feliu?” [Is she dead] asks Mateo.

“No!” the panting swimmer makes answer, emerging, while the waves reach whitely up the sand as in pursuit—*“no; vive!—respira todavía!”* [No; she lives!—she still breathes!”]

Behind him the deep lifts up its million hands, and thunders as in acclaim.^[9]

“This is well told,” Mr. Siegel said. “The fact that the sea can give back one living person makes the sea very proud of itself. This feeling that with all the terror of nature there was something kind about it – was Hearn’s.”

III. A Man’s Fight as to Tenderness and Anger in Love

All his adult life, Lafcadio Hearn felt the longing to see new lands, to learn about their people and culture, and to write about them. But often, after a period of feeling much care for a place and its people, he would begin to get angry and want to leave. Aesthetic Realism teaches that we can’t like a person or a country any more than we like the world itself. This is what I had the good fortune to be learning about from Class Chairman Ellen Reiss, in a class some years ago, as I commented on a lecture by Mr. Siegel I had the privilege to report on, titled “Things Are and Belong.” I said I felt very stirred up by this subject, and Miss Reiss asked me:

Do you think you like the idea of belonging to anything? Do you want to prove

that nothing owns you because nothing is dear to you? How is Mrs. Bernstein affected by this? Do you like belonging to her?

LB: I don't think I like belonging.

ER: If we belong to the world, which we do, we'd better like what we belong to, or we'll never like ourselves.

My whole life was in this discussion. It explained why I got angry and tried to dismiss the people I cared for, also why I would lose interest in the things that seemed to matter most to me. I love Ellen Reiss for her good will for humanity, and for strengthening my life so deeply, in so many ways, and each day I have more feeling for my wife and the wide world she represents.

The battle between caring for things and wanting to put them aside, raged in Lafcadio Hearn. Married for one year, he wrote to Ellwood Hendrick:

My household relations have been extremely happy. The only trouble is that they begin to take the shape of something unbreakable, and to bind me very fast here at the very time I was beginning to feel like going away.^[10]

Hearn cared for his wife Setsu; he valued her assistance in his work as she gathered stories for him to study in the writing of his books about Japan. But he did not know that he also had a desire to limit how much she could mean to him. One way this showed is that when she asked him to teach her English, he refused. I think he felt that if she could speak his language, he would know and be stirred by her thoughts and feelings more deeply, there would be less separation between them.

They had 3 children and the first, their son Kazuo, was his favorite. He received his father's lavish attention, but when Hearn felt his son wasn't listening during the school lessons that took place in his study, he disciplined him severely. Hearn felt this anger weakened him, saying to his wife: "There is no feeling so bad as after spanking the children. Everytime I scold them, my life is shortened."^[11] In *Father and I—Memories of Lafcadio Hearn*, Kazuo recalls that when his father struck him his tears would fly against the glass screen in the study. One day, at age 7, unobserved by his father, Kazuo saw him at the glass screen with a cloth "...wiping away the stains of my tears, and touching them as if they were wounds and talking out to himself, saying, 'Don't think me cruel,' followed by a sigh."^[12]

So often the people we show most tenderness for, we are most unkind to. It is common in the family, and was in mine. For a long time, my father Milton Bernstein and I couldn't even be in the same room with each other and not get into a heated argument. Aesthetic Realism changed this enmity into a desire to know. In a consultation my father and I had in 1976, I learned that how I saw him was related to how he saw his own father; that our questions were like the questions of fathers and sons in history, in literature. My consultants said: "Every father and son

have been against each other and for each other. Milton Bernstein, were you for your own father and also against him?”

Milton Bernstein: I would say more against him.

Consultants: That’s part of the history of what can go on in the family. The people we’re for are also the people we’re against. There are plays about it, novels. Even if a father is well intentioned, he can hurt his son and a son can hurt his father. So, Len Bernstein, were you ever hurt by your father?

LB: Yes.

Consultants: Milton Bernstein, were you ever hurt by your son?

MB: Yes.

LB: I think I understand something of where my father’s questions...are like mine. I see we’ve got something in common.

Consultants: That’s one of the first things that will make for a person being kinder. You feel that the other person has questions like yours.

In his writing, Hearn wanted to see other people as having feeling like his own. In his book *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, Hearn writes of his first day in that country, and his first “kuruma” or rickshaw-ride through the town of Yokohama. This writing has in it beautiful anger with injustice that is the same as tenderness, compassion for what the kuruma driver, Cha, has to endure:

For the first sensation of having a human being for a horse, trotting between shafts, unwearyingly bobbing up and down before you for hours, is alone enough to evoke a feeling of compassion. And when this human being, thus trotting between shafts, with all his hopes, memories, sentiments, and comprehensions, happens to have the gentlest smile, and the power to return the least favor by an apparent display of infinite gratitude, this compassion becomes sympathy....I think the sight of the profuse perspiration has also something to do with the feeling, for it makes one think of the cost of heart-beats and muscle-contractions, likewise chills, congestions, and pleurisy. Cha’s clothing is drenched; and he mops his face with a small sky-blue towel, with figures of bamboo-sprays and sparrows in white upon it, which towel he carries wrapped about his wrist as he runs.^[13]

In his 1965 lecture titled “America Is a Rag Bag of Instinct,” Eli Siegel read from a lecture by Hearn titled “The Question of the Highest Art.” He writes:

...if a work of art, whether sculpture or painting or poem or drama, does not make us feel kindly, more generous, morally better than we were before seeing it, then I should say that, no matter how clever, it does not belong to the highest forms of art.^[14]

Commenting, Mr. Siegel said that it was important that a person who endured so much hardship

in his life, as Heard did, should be so interested in beauty, and that “more than anyone else, [he] was for literature as strict morality, strict ethics.”

Studying the life of Lafcadio Hearn and his beautiful purpose as artist, with Aesthetic Realism as my basis, has given me a deeper understanding of literature, humanity, and what we are deeply hoping for in our own lives!

SOURCES

Photograph: Lafcadio Hearn with his wife Setsu and son Kazuo at Kumamoto, 1895.
Frontispiece in Kazuo Koizumi, *Father and I – Memories of Lafcadio Hearn*, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935).

¹ Ellen Reiss, “Aesthetic Realism and Anger,” *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known*, no. 896 (June 6, 1990), col. 6.

² Jonathan Cott, *Wandering Ghost – The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 127.

³ *The Selected Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, ed. by Henry Goodman (The Citadel Press/Carol Publishing Group, 1991), 152-53.

⁴ Eli Siegel, “Anger: A Selection,” *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known*, no. 240 (November 2, 1977), col. 1.

⁵ Cott, *Wandering Ghost*, 39.

⁶ Elizabeth Stevenson, *Lafcadio Hearn*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), 194.

⁷ Cott, *Wandering Ghost*, 164.

⁸ *The Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn*, Vol. I, ed. by Elizabeth Bisland, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1906), 446-447.

⁹ *The Selected Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, 162.

¹⁰ Stevenson, *Lafcadio Hearn*, 227.

¹¹ Cott, *Wandering Ghost*, 341.

¹² Koizumi, *Father and I*, 144.

¹³ Lafcadio Hearn, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, (Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1990), 6.

¹⁴ *Complete Lectures on Art, Literature and Philosophy*, ed. by Ryuji Tanabé, Teisaburo Ochiai, and Ichiro Nishizaki (Kanda, Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1932), 139-140. “The Question of the Highest Art” was given at the Imperial University of Tokyo where Hearn held the chair of English Literature from 1896 (September) to 1903 (March).