

【基調講演】

The Roots of Lafcadio Hearn's Self-Referencing Style of Journalism

Steve Kemme

One of the many captivating aspects of Lafcadio Hearn's writing is its strong appeal to the senses and the emotions. His accounts of his explorations in Japan – from climbing Mount Fuji to journeying to the Oki Islands – and his observations of ordinary Japanese life are full of vivid descriptions, poetic language and enlightening commentary. But another reason they're so enthralling is their point of view.

Hearn isn't simply a neutral narrator recording in the third-person what he sees and hears. He himself is involved in the story, writing about what he does, says, thinks and feels. He's a participant in the narrative. That's partly why he's considered a forerunner of the New Journalism of the 1960s and '70s in the United States. His influence can be detected in writers like Hunter S. Thompson, Norman Mailer, George Plimpton, Joan Didion, Truman Capote and many others.

Hearn began injecting himself into his stories while working for daily newspapers in Cincinnati in the 1870s – first for the Enquirer and then for the Commercial. He didn't use the first-person "I" in his Cincinnati stories because newspaper style forbade it. Instead, he substituted "this reporter" or the first-person plural pronoun "we" for "I." In a few humorous stories, he referred to himself by such nicknames as "the Dismal Man," and "the Ghoul."

Becoming a part of his stories helped him achieve three primary goals – to entertain, to shock and to educate his readers. Often, he did all three in one story. Although he sometimes portrayed himself as a mischievous rascal trying to startle and amuse, he usually had a serious purpose when he wrote his Cincinnati stories. He wanted to reform society, to reveal Cincinnati's underbelly and force the powerful and prosperous citizens to acknowledge and learn about the needy social outcasts and the social evils being widely ignored. During his years in Cincinnati, he experimented with different literary styles and devices, including the self-referential technique. Placing himself in the story, he believed, would add personality and color to what might otherwise be a dry newspaper story. Some of his early attempts at using this technique weren't always effective, but he kept doing it and improving it.

The first time he used self-referencing in the Cincinnati Enquirer occurred in a story about a weather station at the top of Pike's Opera-house. This Nov. 29, 1872, story, headlined "Our Local Weather Clerk," was written only a few weeks after he had begun free-lancing for the Enquirer. A meteorologist -- called a weather clerk in Hearn's day – and his staff compiled weather data and transmitted it by telegraph to certain regions of the country. Referring to himself as one of the Enquirer's "more urbane walking gentlemen," Hearn writes facetiously that his newspaper sent him to visit and write about the weather station to make amends for ignoring it for other "more trivial" news, such as murders, scandals and politics.

About half-way through the story, Hearn switches to a question-and-answer format, with the weather clerk as the "Observer" and himself as the "Reporter." At the end of the

interview, the weather clerk chides Hearn because the Enquirer is the only English-language newspaper in Cincinnati that doesn't publish his reports.

Hearn concludes his story with the sentence, "At this point, seeing Observer was getting a little personal our reporter made his exit unassisted."

In his case, his self-referencing is intended to make his scientific subject matter more palatable and entertaining for readers. Indeed, he ends his story about a mundane topic with a comic twist. But he's only partially successful. The dialogue in this story is a bit stiff and the humor forced. As a 22-year-old novice writer, Hearn was still learning the basics of his craft.

Hearn wanted to inject personality into his feature stories, to enliven them and make them more appealing. He believed he could do that by placing himself in these stories and including dialogue. He had been contributing to the Enquirer for about eight months when he wrote a feature story about the railroad's "pay-car" trips. To distribute weekly wages to its many employees working along a certain route, a railroad paymaster would travel in a single passenger coach pulled by an engine and stop along the route wherever its employees worked. At each stop, employees would come to the car to pick up the envelopes containing their money.

Hearn arranged to accompany the pay-car on its weekly trip from Cincinnati to Richmond, Ind., and Hamilton and Dayton, Ohio, to write about the 150-mile day-long trip and the railroad employees he encountered. He opens the story with a conversation between himself, referred to as "the Enquirer man," and B.D. Stevenson, the railroad paymaster. As in the weather station story, Hearn cast himself as a comical target of mild abuse.

The story opens with a playful dialogue between Hearn and Stevenson, who agrees to take Hearn along. "But none of your nonsense if you go along with me," he warns Hearn. "You reporter fellows can do the right thing, if you want to, but the trouble is that you don't very often want to. I don't desire any of your extras, and don't care whether you write any thing about the trip or not. You look sort of hungry, as if you didn't have a very good boarding-house, and I thought I would like to take you out into the country a little ways and give you a square meal and a few mouthfuls of fresh air by way of relish. That's my only motive in inviting you. But if you do write about the trip, I don't want you to say any thing except what you actually see." Hearn assures him he is much more honest than "the wicked reporters of the other city papers."

Hearn resigned from the Enquirer during the summer of 1874 to work on *Ye Giglampz*, a satirical weekly newspaper co-founded with the artist, Henry Farny. The venture proved to be a financial disaster, and Hearn returned to the Enquirer only a few weeks after quitting. Soon after his return, his editors assigned him to go to a four-day religious revival camp on a hilltop in a wooded area just northeast of Cincinnati and write about it. As a professed agnostic who had scant respect for Christianity, Hearn was comically unsuited for this assignment. Perhaps his editors were punishing him for temporarily leaving the paper or maybe they just wanted a good laugh.

Naturally, Hearn decided not to treat the assignment in a totally serious, straight-forward manner. As the narrator of and a participant in this adventure, he assumes the role at times of a slightly naughty scamp. At the beginning of his story, which appeared at the top of the front page of the Sept. 13, 1874, Sunday Enquirer, he lets his readers know he was an

unlikely person to be attending a Methodist revival camp meeting. He writes that “this Enquirer reporter” went to the revival “not to pray, but to watch better people than himself pray.”

Hearn handles the first part of the story in a conventional manner. He describes the quiet, woody setting and dutifully reports the work being done on a Thursday afternoon by carpenters and other workers to prepare for the throng of people coming that day to this religious event. He writes about the huge Tabernacle tent seating up to 2,500, the little tents where the faithful will sleep, eating arrangements and the costs.

But as he recounts the Thursday evening prayer service, the reporter-narrator lets his readers know that the prayers and hymns didn’t completely occupy his mind. He describes a young female sitting in the front row as “a prettier and more gracefully built little woman one could not wish to find.” Modern journalism generally discourages descriptions of people’s sexual appeal, especially women’s. Although it was permitted in Hearn’s day, he surely knew his more pious readers would consider it inappropriate. Like a schoolboy who couldn’t resist saying something offensive his teacher, he includes several more observations of women’s physical attributes.

On his first night there, Hearn crept close to some of the tents to watch the shadows of the people inside. As a Peeping Tom, he breathlessly describes the interaction of two shadows in one tent: “There were two strongly-defined silhouettes there; one of an old lady with spectacles and a very long nose; the other of a very shapely little woman, swan-throated and full-bosomed, with long eyelashes and long hair. The shadow had beautiful little bare arms, nice and round; and it put them around the neck of the motherly looking shadow, and it pursed up its plump little lips. Then the thin, wrinkled lips of the motherly shadow responded; the heads of the two shadows mingled into one big, black blot on the canvas, and the reporter’s mouth began to water.” Not exactly something for the church bulletin.

Hearn notices a young woman at one of the services, “the very prettiest girl on the grounds...with glorious masses of glossy black hair brushed back from either temple and falling over the prettiest little shoulders imaginable...” Then he sees twin sisters, “blondes, dressed in white, with dovelike eyes and peachy cheeks and lips ripe for kisses; but they were accompanied by a terrible...mother, a tall, thin, gorgon-eyed woman, who looked at you so wickedly if you looked at her daughters that you immediately turned your face the other way.” He also observes that during one of the services a “charming little brunette” peeked through her fingers during prayer time at some good-looking boys. Near the end of his long story, he notes that only he and the little brunette failed to march to the preacher’s stand with the rest of the congregation to be converted. Hearn survived the religious experience and remained a staunch agnostic. Halleluiah!

A church figured in another of Hearn’s self-referencing stories, but this time his irreverent persona didn’t clash with the subject matter. One day in late May 1876, he accepted an invitation to climb to the top of the steeple of St. Peter in Chains Cathedral in downtown Cincinnati with the aid of three steeple-jacks who were going to remove decorative wreaths from the cross atop the cathedral spire. Hearn and his city editor at the Cincinnati Commercial saw it as a great opportunity to produce a humorous story about an unusual adventure. Their instincts proved to be right. The story, published on May 26, 1876, the day after his climb, is young Hearn at his entertaining best.

Hearn portrays himself as the bumbling, frightened neophyte, totally dependent on the expertise and help of the steeple-jacks to avoid a fatal plunge to the street below. It's a role that would have been perfect for early 20th century comic movie actors Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin.

Hearn's anxiety increased as he, Weston, Klein and steeple-jack Peter Depretz climbed the long, narrow stairs inside the cathedral to reach the tower's clock. They crawled between the clock's bells to a window where they had to climb out to get to the top of the steeple. As Hearn looked out the window and saw "nothing but a sheer precipice of smooth stone," he was seized with fear. Weston gave him a drink from a whiskey flask to quell his nerves. Weston buckled a thick leather strap around Hearn's waist, and fastened a harness strap under and over his right thigh. He tied one end of a rope to the straps and passed the other end up the ladder outside the window. That end was pulled inside a window 25 feet above and tied to a beam. Sensing Hearn was about to back down, Depretz grabbed his thigh and pulled him out through the window. Hearn had no choice but to climb the ladder. After yet more ladder-climbing, he reached the cross. Tied to the lightning rod by a rope, Hearn sat on top of the cross, rested his feet on its northern arm and enjoyed the panoramic view. With his bad eyesight, he couldn't see distant objects in detail. But by looking through his eyeglass, he saw enough to be able to give readers a feeling for what the city looked like from his high perch.

Weston told Hearn to stand up on top of the cross. He detached the cords that tied Hearn to the lightning rod.

"His indifference to danger," Hearn writes, "inspired the visitor with sufficient confidence to perform the feat, and extend his arms for an instant 225 feet above *terra firma*. Suddenly the reporter caught sight of something that caused him to clutch the lightning-rod convulsively and sit down. Weston's braces were adorned with great brazen buckles, which bore in ghastly bas-relief the outlines of a skull and crossbones.

'What on earth do you wear such ill-omened things for?' we asked.

'Oh,' replied he, laughing and dancing on the northern arm of the cross, 'I thought I'd get smashed up some day, and took a fancy to these suspenders, as they serve to remind me of my probable fate. You seem to believe in omens. Well, I tell you I never like to do climbing on Friday, although I know it's all foolishness.'

"After inspecting the initials of the climbers out into the summit of the cross, we performed a descent which seemed far easier than the ascent. As we re-entered the belfry the clock boomed out six times, and the 'Angelus' chimed in measured strokes of deeply vibrating music from the big bell. The mists climbed higher as the sun commenced to sink in a glory of mingled gold and purple, and a long streamer of ruby light flamed over the western hills. 'That is a lovely view,' Weston exclaimed, 'but I think it is not so fine as the bird's eye view of the city by night, sparkling with ten thousand lights. You must come up on the cross some fine night with me.'

"The reporter shivered and departed."

One of Hearn's most outlandish stunts involved disguising himself as a woman so he could attend and write a story about a women-only lecture being given by a former Catholic nun. Edith O'Gorman, a notorious anti-Catholic speaker and author, had come to Cincinnati to talk about the shameful things she had allegedly experienced and witnessed during her brief time as a Catholic nun before her brother helped her escape from the convent. Because part of

this talk would cover sex-related matters, her matinee lecture on Jan. 21, 1874, at Pike's Hall was restricted to women only.

That didn't deter Hearn. He donned a blond wig, a dress, ladies' gloves and buttoned boots. After stumbling on his dress as he went up the stairs leading to the hall's entrance, Hearn sat down in the auditorium and tried to be as unobtrusive as possible. When a woman yelled, "There's a man!" his heart sank. But then he realized the woman and those near her were looking at another man dressed as a woman, not him. Describing the unfortunate fellow, Hearn observes, "...from the mustache and the general look of her we knew we were safe."

Most of Hearn's Jan. 22, 1874, story about this lecture centers on his amusing appearance, his fear of being discovered, his feigned shock at O'Gorman's scandalous allegations ("...oh, she made your reporter blush, and wish that he had stayed away.") and the reactions of the other members of the audience. The story contains very little of O'Gorman's lecture because most of it was too salacious for a family newspaper. "A trusting public expects information," Hearn writes, "but modesty forbids."

Although Hearn had to be somewhat restrained in writing about sex-related matters, he and his editors didn't shy away from stories with gory details they knew would shock their readers. In "The Dance of Death," published in the Enquirer on May 3, 1874, he's escorted by a friend named Joe Saubohnz through a medical college's dissecting rooms. (Considering Joe's name is a funny homonym for "s-a-w-b-o-n-e-s," I'm not sure if that's his real name or if Hearn made it up for a joke.) As in his climb to the top of St. Peter in Chains' spire, Hearn is the comically squeamish, over-matched participant as he walks among the sliced-up corpses. Of course, he isn't so horrified by what he sees that he can't write about it later in graphic detail, ironically forcing his readers to visualize the same nauseating images that he accuses Joe of forcing him to look at.

He describes one male corpse as "a pile of human bones, sinews, nerves and arteries, black with encrusted blood, and smelling with a smell indescribably abominable. The bones of the trunk still held together with rotting shreds of flesh; a few scraggy atoms dangled from the freshly scraped ribs; and the spinal column was streaked at intervals with green splotches of decay, looking like a huge and disgusting centipede of some pre-Adamite age. The leg, feet and thigh bones were heaped together in a festering and stinking mass; the skull and spinal vertebrae were gone; and somebody had carelessly thrown the torn hands upon the breast of the skeleton in such a manner that the poor, bleeding fingers seemed to be joined in the mockery of piteous prayer."

He uses dialogue to highlight the humorous contrast between his repulsion at what he sees with his friend Joe's casual indifference.

"I've seen enough of dissecting rooms," he tells Joe. "I feel sick."

"Humbug," Joe says. "Why, I eat my dinner in our dissecting room beside bodies worse than that."

Another Hearn shock-journalism adventure involved drinking the blood of a slaughtered steer immediately after watching the animal's throat be cut. He wrote the Sept. 5, 1875 Cincinnati Commercial story with the intention of showing how Hebrew slaughterhouses were much cleaner and more humane than Gentile slaughterhouses. In this case, he wasn't engaged in simply shocking his readers. He was exposing the cruel practices and unsanitary conditions in most slaughterhouses. But near the end of the story, the owner of a Hebrew slaughterhouse

tells Hearn that some people regularly come to Cincinnati slaughterhouses to drink the steers' blood, which they believe is good for their health. Hearn dutifully drinks a cup of fresh blood and proclaims it "simply delicious, sweeter than any concoction of the chemist, the confectioner, and winemaker." Hearn's account of his blood-drinking brings to mind Hunter S. Thompson's 20th century stories in which he gleefully ingests all kinds of illegal drugs. But as zany as Thompson was, I don't know that he ever drank an animal's blood. If he did, I don't think he wrote about it.

Hearn often employed his self-referencing technique for more serious purposes than mere shock or entertainment. He sometimes used it in stories that uncovered scams. Through dialogue, he would dramatically reveal the unscrupulous practices. Spiritualism was a frequent Hearn target. Spiritualists believed it was possible for the living to summon the spirits of the dead and communicate with them. This movement peaked in popularity in the United States from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century. Spiritualism produced countless charlatans who would charge money for conducting seances, predicting the future or providing photographs supposedly picturing ghosts.

Hearn experienced an eerie surprise when he himself became a participant in two séances at the invitation of a spiritualist friend. The medium told him at the first séance that the spirit refused to appear because Hearn was "too physically and psychically filthy." To prepare for the second séance, Hearn underwent extensive preparations to purify himself. In his Jan. 25, 1874, *Enquirer* story titled "Among the Spirits," he humorously describes these efforts. He took several baths, refrained from cursing and smoking cigars and wore a clean shirt to the séance.

The séance began after Hearn made sure the doors to the room were locked and, at the medium's request, he nailed her dress to the floor with a tack. In the dark room, Hearn felt someone's fingers tap his knee and a voice claiming to be the spirit of Hearn's dead father began talking. The voice identified himself by the real name of Hearn's father and called Hearn Patrick, the name his father had always called him and no one in Cincinnati did. In his story, Hearn admitted he couldn't figure out how the voice knew certain details about his past life, but it didn't shake his skepticism about seances. This story, one of Hearn's most memorable during his Cincinnati period, owes its power to his involvement in the story and his personal way of writing it. A third-person account wouldn't have been nearly as effective.

Grave-robbing was a big problem in Cincinnati during Hearn's time there. Selling corpses to medical colleges was a lucrative business. Instead of a conventional expose of this practice, Hearn decided to personalize the story by accompanying the coroner to Potter's Field to question the cemetery sexton about the issue. Hearn calls himself the Dismal Man, "whose rueful countenance was flushed with hope of hearing or seeing something more than usually horrible." In an otherwise serious expose, he's poking fun at his own reputation for writing about gruesome topics.

With Hearn and the coroner questioning him, the sexton admitted he didn't report body thefts to authorities and didn't give receipts for bodies received at the cemetery. The sexton also revealed another stunning part of the scandal: he routinely buried empty coffins.

"But don't you bury all the bodies sent here?," the coroner asked.

"I buries all the coffins," the sexton replied.

"Not all the bodies?"

"No, because they steals 'em afore I can bury 'em."

"How's that?"

"Why, often more bodies comes here'n I can dig graves for in one day. So I have to leave 'em lie over till the next day; and in the meantime, they steals 'em."

"But where do you leave them?"

"I leaves 'em, coffins and all, right by the grave."

"And if you find the coffin empty in the morning, what do you do?"

"Bury the box, of course. I gets a dollar and a quarter for every one I buries; and it's just as much trouble to bury a full coffin as an empty one."

"But why don't you put the bodies where they can't get them?"

"Because there isn't any place where they can't get 'em unless I puts 'em in my own house; an' I'll be d—ed if I'm going to have stiffes in my own house."

A straight-forward investigative story based on interviews would have been powerful enough, but by bringing the readers along for the investigation, Hearn highlights the absurd, outrageous nature of the scandal and, as a bonus, makes the story more fun to read.

Early in his Cincinnati Enquirer career, Hearn wrote a story about a filthy, rat-infested house where a woman almost died from a miscarriage and where one of the house's owners recruited young girls to be prostitutes. In his first two paragraphs of "A Nasty Nest," published on July 27, 1873, Hearn declared the rationale behind his muckraking journalism:

"Cincinnati may brag of having the handsomest this and the largest that in the world, but she is mighty quiet in regard to her possession of some of the most miserable and disgusting features. Her quiet may come, however, from her ignorance, for it is much better and comforting to think that good men and women of this city who sit with folded hands, and believe themselves to be Christian, have no idea that there are such foul scabs on the city's face as now and then become uncovered to the light of day."

Hearn considered it his solemn journalistic duty to shine the light on these "foul scabs on the city's face." He often accomplished this by revealing not only the injustices suffered by society's outcasts but also by showing the humanity of Cincinnati's have-nots. He sometimes placed himself in these stories to make the readers feel as though they themselves were interacting with the subjects of his stories.

He did this in a story about seamstresses entitled, "Slow Starvation" and published on Feb. 15, 1874, in the Enquirer. The seamstresses performed the work for wholesale clothing houses that paid them paltry wages. They either worked alone in their own homes or in small groups in the homes of other seamstress who paid them from their wages. Hearn visited the seamstresses' homes and interviewed them to uncover their difficult, impoverished lives. He learned that they were paid only two to three dollars for 60 to 80 hours of work each week.

By including his conversations with them in his story, he humanized them, giving a poignant emotional edge to his story. In this way, he depicted them not as abstract victims, but as individual human beings readers couldn't help but connect and sympathize with. The seamstresses' personalities come through in the long dialogues Hearn includes in his story.

After telling a seamstress he wants to learn about the prices she and others in her line of work are paid, she asks him, "Are ye a tailor? Ye look like wan, anyhow."

"No, ma'am. I'm a newspaper reporter."

“Ah! Come in an’ take a chair, an’ don’t be stayin’ out there in the could. So yer a newspaper reporter – the Lord have mercy on us! – are ye?”

“Yes, ma’am – for the ENQUIRER.”

“Better still. Divil a bettther than meself could ye have come to for intilligence. Sure the times is awful. Se ye want to put somethin’ in the paper about the poor girls?”

“Yes. I want to know what price are paid for sewing.”

“Ah, the divil take the prices! Shure we don’t get any prices at all now. I used to have a whole roomful of girls working for me; but since the prices has come down, I haven’t the face to offer them work for the little I could pay them. There’s the work we used to get forty cints for, we only get twinty-five for now. I only make pants, meself; but there’s other – God bless them – as can tell you what they pay for other kinds of work.”

“What do they pay for pants, madam?”

“Sixteen an’ a third cints is all we get now.”

“*Sixteen and a third cents a pair!*” cried the reporter in astonishment.

Hearn wrote similarly about the plight of the city’s rag-pickers, who would scour the dumps for pieces of cloth to sell to clothing merchants and other businesses. He visits a dump where he sees a woman and her two boys looking through piles of debris. Hearn again employs dialogue to reveal the plight and personality of his subjects. He begins speaking to the woman, whom he describes as possessing “a goblin-like face...A high vulture nose, great black eyes, deep-set, and glowing with a brilliancy that seemed phosphorescent, a high bold, frowning forehead, crowned with a filthy turban, long, thin bloodless lips, and a long, massive chin, all begrimed to deep blackness by the filth of the dumps.

“Do you make your living this way?” asked the reporter.

“Yes” – sullenly.

“Please excuse my questions. I’m a newspaper reporter, and would like to know something about your business. Do you make a good living this way?”

“No” – fiercely. “I am out all day, and I can’t make more’n two or three dollars a week. And then I have two boys to keep.”

“Why don’t you try something else – washing for instance? You look strong enough.”

Yes, I’ve been pretty stout, and I’m stout yet. But I cut the tendons of my right wrist all through about a year ago, and I had to give up washing. I used to do it once.”

“Can’t you get any other employment – something that will pay you better?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. You can’t do me any good anyhow, and I’m too busy to bother with you.”

“Well, where do you live? I’d like to have a talk with you some time, when you have leisure.”

“Ah!” – with a dangerous look – “I don’t want any man ‘round me. I can make my living honestly, anyhow.”

He also wrote about the hardships and culture of Cincinnati’s African-American residents. In Hearn’s time, Cincinnati had one of the largest African-American populations of any city in the United States. Bordering the slave state of Kentucky, Cincinnati was a beacon of freedom to the many runaway slaves and freed slaves who settled there before and during the Civil War.

Hearn brought his white readers into the world of the city's African-American citizens in vivid stories in which he refers to himself as "we." He ventured into the underground den of Jot, a black man who practiced voodoo and allowed scores of spiders to spin their webs among the sooty beams overhead. Many feared Jot because of his supposed dark mystical powers.

In another story, Hearn walks into one of the basement establishments of Henry "Ol' Man" Pickett, a black man who owned several saloons and brothels on what was known as Sausage Row, a rough street on the levee. At this particular saloon, the bar was in the front room and the music and dancing occurred in a back room. Whites were not welcome in these places, but Pickett knew and liked Hearn. A former slave who had earned enough money when he lived in Virginia to buy his freedom, Pickett sometimes ran afoul of Cincinnati's laws. Despite the racial stereotypes prevalent at that time, Hearn's story, published on Feb. 21, 1875, in the *Enquirer*, depicts Pickett as a complex human being with virtues and faults, someone who was sometimes accused of illegal activities but who also was known for his kindness, giving food and shelter to those who couldn't pay for it. Hearn's story is an insightful glimpse into not just Pickett, but a segment of Cincinnati society few whites were familiar with.

Whatever character Hearn assumed as the narrator/participant in his Cincinnati stories – the mischief-maker, the bungler, the muckraker or the sensitive observer – he used his self-referential technique to amuse, shock and enlighten. In doing so, he enlarged the worlds of his readers and laid part of the foundation for the rest of his life's work.