

Bret Harte, Unitarianism, and the Efficacy of Western Humor

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We don't often think of Bret Harte as a didactic writer or as a moralist, much less a writer in the liberal Christian tradition of Theodore Parker, William Ellery Channing, and Edward Everett Hale. In fact, Harte insisted in the preface to *The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Sketches* (1870) that he had "abstained from any positive moral" in the tales collected in that book (vi). Mark Twain also famously disparaged him in his autobiographical dictation: "He was bad, distinctly bad; he had no feeling, and he had no conscience. . . . I think the sense of shame was left out of Harte's constitution" (Clemens 272, 281). By his own testimony, moreover, Harte had little spiritual training. As he reminisced near the end of his life, "I never, as a boy, was able to take John Bunyan seriously. The 'Pilgrim's Progress' affected me very much in the same way as the converted Africans or Indians who were introduced to me at Sunday School by their missionary showmen, and who talked 'baboon' or 'pigeon' English. . . . I used to roar with laughter over 'Mr. Facing-both-ways' and 'Mr. By-ends,' to the great detriment of my spiritual education" (qtd. in Pemberton 330).

Still, as a young writer Harte became an active Unitarian. He met Thomas Starr King, the founder of the First Unitarian Society of San

Francisco, in 1860, shortly after each of them settled in the city, and he soon joined King's congregation. The minister was indefatigable on behalf of the Union and abolition, and he enlisted Harte in these causes as well. King routinely read Harte's patriotic poetry—e.g., "The Reveille," "Our Privilege," "The Goddess," "The Copper-head"—at the close of pro-Union rallies around the state after the start of the Civil War, and as early as November 1862 he predicted in a Boston newspaper that Harte "will yet be known more widely in our literature" (2). Harte even met his future wife at King's church: Anna Griswold sang contralto in the choir there.

On his part, Harte admired the minister as he admired few other men. King was a "true apostle" of humanity, Harte believed, with a "flashing genius and personal magnetism," who had "infused into this hard money-loving community something of his own tenderness and magnanimity" (*Bret Harte's California* 89, 119). His "broad, Catholic spirit passed even the liberal boundaries" of his church (23), and his sermons, Harte thought, were "remarkable for their precision of epithet, artistic construction of sentence, and felicity of illustration conveyed in an English often as exquisite as Hawthorne and as genial as Irving" (Booth 132). While he may not have taken Bunyan seriously, Harte obviously respected King as a writer and thinker. He so admired the minister that he named his second son Francis King Harte a few months after the minister died suddenly from diphtheria, and he memorialized his friend in three early poems. In "At the Sepulchre," Harte contemplated King's gravesite on the grounds of his church on Stockton Street, in effect making him into a type of Christ. In "Relieving Guard," Harte apotheosized him as one of the angelic host:

Came the relief. "What sentry, ho!
How passed the night through thy long waking?"
"Cold, cheerless, dark,—as may befit
The hour before the dark is breaking."

"No sight? no sound?" "No; nothing save

The plover from the marshes calling,
And in yon western sky, about
An hour ago, a star was falling.”¹

“A star? There’s nothing strange in that.”
“No, nothing; but, above the thicket,
Somehow it seemed to me that God
Somewhere had just relieved a picket.”

(3, 4)

Harte believed, too, that by raising money for the U. S. Sanitary Commission and battling Southern sympathizers up and down the state King had almost single-handedly saved California for the Union.

Harte’s Unitarianism led him in turn to become the California correspondent of the *Christian Register*, the Boston Unitarian weekly. Between January 1866 and November 1867 he contributed nineteen essays to its pages in which he chronicled, as he put it, “the prosperity of Liberal Christianity” on the west coast (*Bret Harte’s California* 20). He repeatedly celebrated the growth of what he called the “Pacific branch of the Liberal Christian Church” or “the Liberal Society” in the West (61, 96). In March 1866, on the second anniversary of King’s death, for example, Harte reported that the First Unitarian Church of San Francisco “was thronged with a multitude to whom King’s memory was precious” to hear “an eloquent discourse” by his successor “upon the ‘Divine Nature in Humanity’” delivered “from the pulpit his presence had consecrated” and including “a tender tribute to his memory” (23).

Let me be as explicit as possible: Harte’s best and best-known stories, all of them written for the *Overland Monthly* between 1868 and 1870—“The Luck of Roaring Camp,” “Mr. Thompson’s Prodigal,” and “Miggles” among them—were written from a Unitarian or liberal Christian perspective. Each of these three tales burlesques or otherwise evokes biblical texts in order to challenge narrow or comfortable beliefs. That is, Harte’s most popular tales were often antiparables defying overtly di-

¹Harte’s poem appeared a year before Whitman invoked a similar trope in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.”

dactic readings, subverting or disrupting the tenets of religious or cultural orthodoxy, and ridiculing sham and hypocrisy—but all for moral or spiritual purpose.

As for Harte's humor, he often hoaxed or played subtle jokes on his readers. Wallace Stegner notes that Harte's brand of comedy was "pervasive, unprudish, often still fresh and natural" (xv). Harold Kolb argues that he was "a master of juxtaposition—a technique he developed as a parodist at the beginning of his career" (56–57). Briefly put, Harte's humor challenged social norms and conventional values. His gamblers may be libertines, but they are also chivalrous; his miners may be coarse, but they share their grubstakes with the poor and friendless; and his fallen women may have "easy virtue," but in their breasts beat proverbial hearts of gold. Lest I seem to dismiss Harte as a one-trick pony, however, I should add that I vigorously disagree with Bernard DeVoto's assertion that he was a "literary charlatan" whose tales "delight the second rate" (164). "Tennessee's Partner" is less a sentimental tale of two miners' undying affection than it is a subtle story of deceit and revenge. Read according to the conventions of western humor—that is, as a story that traps the unwary reader—"Tennessee's Partner" is a paradigm text: Harte "tricks his readers all the while he seems to be trying to satisfy their pious presuppositions" (Conner 115).

To the second issue of the *Overland* (August 1868) Harte contributed his story "The Luck of Roaring Camp," often considered a modern retelling of the Nativity with the Christ child renamed "the Luck" and the dissolute mining camp a "city of refuge" gradually redeemed through his influence (3). Allen Brown argued some forty years ago that Harte's "religious teaching" may be inferred from "the multitude of Christian symbols" in the tale (629). Cherokee Sal, the only woman in the camp, dies in childbirth and is buried in a "rude sepulture." Her son is "swathed" in red flannel and adopted by the miners—Kentuck, Stumpy, Jack Hamlin, and others of their ilk—many of them criminals and all of them "reckless" (3). They decide against hiring a nurse because they do not think any decent woman could be persuaded to settle in Roaring Camp and "they didn't want any more of the other kind"—their "first spasm of propriety" or "the first symp-

tom of the camp's regeneration" (9). Instead, they christen the child Thomas, and "so the work of regeneration began in Roaring Camp. . . . Almost imperceptively a change came over the settlement" as the miners begin to observe "stricter habits of personal cleanliness" (12). They forswear cursing and decorate their cabins with shrubs. The expressman, the only outsider admitted to the camp, reports that the miners have "vines and flowers round their houses," "wash themselves twice a day," and "worship an Ingin baby" (12). The tale ends as the camp is washed away in a spring flash flood which drowns the child.

Rather than a sentimental updating of the Nativity account, however, "The Luck of Roaring Camp" humorously evokes the birth of Christ to make a very different point. Harte cautions the reader in the opening paragraphs to beware of appearances: the "greatest scamp" in the camp "had a Raphael face" (3). As a "dissolute, abandoned, and irreclaimable" prostitute, a "very sinful woman," Cherokee Sal is an ironic Madonna who, at her death, "climbed, *as it were*, that rugged road that led to the stars" (1, 4; italics added). The phrase qualifies if it does not undermine the suggestion of her sainthood; in fact, as Harte's narrator suggests, "Perhaps the less said of her the better" (1). Little Tommy Luck's father is unknown, but not because he is born of a virgin. Similarly, the miners are ironic Magi whose gifts to the child include stolen silverware, a tobacco box, and a revolver. Except for a Bible, as Fred Schroeder notes, "all the donations represent violence, objects of sensual pleasure, or merely monetary booty" (198). The miners christen the child in a "ludicrous" ceremony that is a "burlesque of the church service" (11). You get the idea: Tommy Luck is not an incarnation of Christ on the frontier, but a false Messiah. His first name recalls the Doubting Apostle and an apocryphal gospel, and his surname,

as J. R. Boggan argues, "is not that of the supposed far-seeing Christ but, rather just the opposite, that of blind Chance" (275). To be sure, that "golden summer" the mines "yield enormously" and in these "flush times" the "Luck was with them" (16). The town soon launches a program of civic improvement, but to what effect? The saloon is refurbished with a new carpet and mirrors and the men begin to bathe.

These are the “symptoms”—the metaphor is borrowed from etiology—of the camp’s “regeneration.” The narrator concedes that tales of Tommy Luck’s ability to talk with animals “rest upon the statements of prejudiced friends” (15), reports as spurious and unreliable as similar stories about Jesus recorded in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. In the final pages, Roaring Camp washes away in a flood of biblical proportions, as though by a judgment of God. In the last sentence of the story, Kentuck clings to the “frail” body of the child who “drift[s] away into the shadowy river that flows forever to the unknown sea” (18). These adjectives hardly commend his martyrdom or vicarious sacrifice; on the contrary, they suggest that his death is utterly insignificant. The luck of Roaring Camp is, in the end, all bad. That is, the story is a subtle burlesque, a nineteenth-century equivalent of Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* (1979) that suggests the consequences of worshipping Mammon or a false god.

Similarly, Harte’s story “Mr. Thompson’s Prodigal” (July 1870) inverts or reverses the parable of the Prodigal Son. Whereas in the parable the son repents his rebellion and returns home, the elder Thompson comes to the West—represented as a far country that corrupts the young and innocent—to seek his son. Whereas the father in Christ’s parable rejoices in their reunion, Harte’s Mr. Thompson, a religious hypocrite, remains essentially estranged yet fond of quoting Scripture:

After a hard and wilful youth and maturity,—in which he had buried a broken-spirited wife, and driven his son to sea,—he suddenly experienced religion. “I got it in New Orleans in ‘59,” said Mr. Thompson, with the general suggestion of referring to an epidemic. [Here again there is a hint that orthodoxy is disease.] “Enter ye the narrer gate. Parse me the beans.” (122)

He finds his son (or so he thinks) by chance, and afterwards he builds a “fine house . . . on the sand-hills” of San Francisco where they may live together (126). But “the old man did not seem to be happy,” mostly because “he had little love for the son he had regained” (125). He again read the parable of the Prodigal Son, “which he had long

ago adopted for his guidance,” and discovered “that he had omitted the final feast of reconciliation.” He tells his supposed son to “invite everybody” to the party—“everybody who knows that I brought you out of the wine-husks of iniquity, and the company of harlots; and bid them eat, drink, and be merry” (126). During the feast, however, the real Charles Thompson—“a man, shabbily dressed, and evidently in liquor” (129–30)—suddenly breaks into the room. The false prodigal begs the elder Thompson’s forgiveness—“thanks to your kindness, I now see the way by which an honest livelihood is gained”—but Mr. Thompson refuses to shake his hand. The tale ends on a pathetic note, with the true prodigal son still steeped in iniquity, in a drunken stupor passed out on the couch, and Thompson estranged “forever” from the man he had thought his son (133). Whereas Christ’s parable celebrates a father’s unconditional love for his son who “was dead and is alive again,” Harte indicts Thompson for his religious bigotry and selfishness.

Harte’s tale “Miggles” (June 1869), often read as a feminist allegory, also takes off from a biblical source: the character of Mary Magdalene. The narrator of this story, in company with the driver and six other passengers aboard a stagecoach, is forced by inclement weather to spend a night in the cabin where Miggles lives with an “imbecile paralytic” named Jim or James, according to legend the name of Jesus’ brother. The invalid is obviously dying of venereal disease. Six years earlier, when she ran the Polka Saloon in Marysville, he “used to know me,” Miggles explains: “Everybody knew me there, and everybody had the right to know me” (50). When Jim fell ill and the doctors said “that he would never get better, and couldn’t last long anyway,” they advised her to “send him to the hospital, for he was no good to anyone and would be a baby all his life” (51). Instead, Miggles sold her business and bought a ranch where she could nurse Jim until his death. “Perhaps I’ve changed some,” she confesses. Then the narrator adds:

With a woman’s intuitive tact and poetry she had, as she spoke, slowly shifted her position so as to bring the mute figure of the ru-

ined man between her and her audience, hiding in the shadow behind it, as if she offered it as a tacit apology for her actions.

Silent and expressionless, it yet spoke for her. (51)

Harte refers here to Christ's injunction recorded in the Gospel of Matthew (25:40): "as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." By implication, Miggles has atoned for her sins by her recent life of selfless devotion. None of the passengers, among them a judge, condemns her. Miggles falls asleep that night with her head "pillowed on the low stool" before Jim's chair and, near morning, the narrator awakens to see the light of a full moon fill the cabin and "baptize with a shining flood the lowly head of the woman whose hair, as in the sweet old story, bathed the feet of him she loved" (54). Harte here makes explicit the association of Miggles with Mary Magdalene, who according to the Gospel of John (12:3) anointed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair. (W. D. Howells later referred to her as one of "the edifying Magdalenes of the mining communities" [2, 226].) The story ends as the passengers, finally arrived at their destination, toast their gracious hostess: "Here's to Miggles—GOD BLESS HER!" declares the Judge. "Perhaps He had," concludes the narrator. "Who knows?" (*Luck* 55).

Several of Harte's other *Overland* tales are written according to the formula I've outlined here. "Brown of Calaveras" (March 1870), for example, revises Christ's parable of the Good Samaritan. In "The Idyl of Red Gulch" (December 1869) Harte compares the dissolute miner Sandy Morton to Samson and the Eastern schoolmarm Miss Mary to Delilah, although in this version Samson repels Delilah, who flees the vulgar and uncouth West for the genteel society of Boston. "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" (January 1869) ridicules the myth of the hardy pioneers by burlesquing not a biblical source but Hawthorne's "The Canterbury Pilgrims." Harte's satirical version of the sketch features a madam he names Mother Shipton after a legendary medieval English prophet well known in the 1860s for having predicted the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world in 1881.

To be sure, the satirical formula Harte followed in his *Overland* stories was not universally approved. It was, in fact, condemned in such religious journals as *Zion's Herald*, a Methodist weekly, whose reviewer complained that Harte "gilded vice" and "abolished moral distinc-

tions." The reviewer complained, for example, that at the close of "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" "nobody can tell" which woman "is pure and which corrupt," and so "they are buried in the same grave" (which of course is Harte's point). Moreover, according to this reviewer, Harte's "heaven is free love and good humor. Gamblers, harlots, thieves, murderers . . . are sent by him to heaven." Harte, the reviewer accuses, apparently subscribed to "Universalism and free religion" ("Personal" 572; "Our Book Table" 221). Ironically, Harte satirized precisely this brand of dogma in the stories I've mentioned.

A final note: near the end of his career, Mark Twain repeatedly parodied biblical texts in such works as "Letters from the Earth" and "The Diaries of Adam and Eve." It was, in fact, a formula Harte had pioneered some thirty years earlier.

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