“Choking the Wheels of Material Progress”:
Bret Harte’s Resistant Landscapes

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Bret Harte is best known as the author of California Gold Rush romances such as “The Luck of Roaring Camp” and “The Outcasts of Poker Flat” – romances in which uncouth miners, gamblers, and prostitutes are revealed to have softer sides. With the emphasis of most critics on Harte’s characters or style, almost no serious attention has been given to Bret Harte’s environments. But Harte rarely lifted a pen without checking the weather and evoking a bit of landscape. When, as a young journalist from California, he corresponded with two eastern papers in the mid-1860s, as Gary Scharnhorst has noted, “Scarcely a letter appeared in either paper without Harte commenting on the geography or climate of the state” (*BH’s California* 4). The same comment could be made of Harte’s forty-year career in fiction: Scarcely a *story* appeared without Harte commenting on the geography or climate of his chosen scene. Harte’s frequent projection of human feeling and animation onto inanimate landscapes – his extensive use of the so-called pathetic fallacy – has rendered his environmental comments distasteful to many twentieth-century readers; and thus an early and sizeable body of nineteenth-century environmental criticism lies entombed in archives for lack of the proper taste or humor to appreciate it. Today I wish to share passages from Harte’s fiction – particularly his lesser-known tales – that make him an inviting subject for the twenty-first-century environmental critic. Brief scenic passages in his stories chastise miners and tourists for

their selfish disregard of western landscapes, among other sidebar thematics in tales that quickly move on to more exclusively *human* subjects. As an environmental writer, Harte was a keen satirist of his country. For all his melodramatic technique, some of his insights about humans in Nature remain surprisingly timely and fresh today.

Harte began criticizing the impact of mining on landscapes in his very first mining story, published in 1860. We almost never see the labor of mining in a Bret Harte story, but again and again, we see something like this passage from the second paragraph of Harte's first mining tale, "The Work on Red Mountain," later renamed "M'liss":

> There were huge fissures on the hillside, and displacements of the red soil, resembling more the chaos of some primary elemental upheaval than the work of man; while, half-way down, a long flume straddled its narrow body and disproportionate legs over the chasm, like an enormous fossil of some forgotten antediluvian. At every step smaller ditches crossed the road, . . . and here and there were the ruins of some cabin with the chimney alone left intact and the hearthstone open to the skies. (Wyatt 81)

Remarkably, Harte sees the mining landscape as a space *once* civilized and domesticated but now abandoned to chaos and ugliness. Miners have turned back the clock of civilization, returning California mountains to the "chaos" of the "antediluvian" era. Here and in many later stories, Nature [personified with a capital N] has been "outraged" by human greed and vanity (82). Harte would scarcely tell a mining tale without reminding us of this.

In many tales, Harte shows what miners do to pass the time when they are out of work because of heavy rain or drought. They gossip, gamble, tell stories, and play hoaxes

on each other. Harte makes fun of miners for their paradoxical combination of ambition and complete, helpless dependence on the weather. In "A Monte Flat Pastoral" (1874), a tale composed when Harte's talent had allegedly run dry, he inverts the claim of western boosters that Americans are taming the wilderness by giving nature the upper hand. During the dry season, the smoke from nearby wildfires

> smarted the eyes and choked the free breath of Monte Flat, or a fierce wind . . . swept down the flanks of the Sierras and chased the inhabitants to the doors of their cabins, and shook its red fist in at their windows. And on such a night as this—the dust having, in some way, choked the wheels of material progress in Monte Flat—most of the inhabitants were gathered listlessly in the gilded bar-room of the Moquelumne Hotel, . . . waiting for the rain. (2: 230).

Twentieth-century readers have had trouble with such personifications of Nature, a native of the mountains who chases people into their homes and shakes a red fist at them, or who stops the wheels of their wagons or their water-engines. I believe Harte is being deliberately campy here and in many similar melodramatics. He is writing to an audience that takes "material progress" for a religion. This fist-waving Nature is supposed to be ridiculous – she is everything the progress nuts deserve. Before Ed Abbey's *The Monkey-Wrench Gang*, Nature herself was Bret Harte's monkey-wrencher. To do the work, "she" sometimes had to take human form.

In a novella of 1887, "Devil's Ford," by changing the point of view between chapter one and chapter two, Harte serves up a scathing satire of gold miners' ambitions in the form of an outsider's view of their work. During a prosperous season, the half dozen cabins initially "scattered" on the banks of the North Fork have been supplemented

by another “twenty or thirty others,” enough to make a “thoroughfare” between them (4: 335). Successful miners have invested their first fortune in additional development, namely “engines and machinery for the boring of wells and the conveyance of that precious water which the exhausted river had long since ceased to yield” (337). The five original partners on the claim anticipate “public buildings” and “a memorial fountain” when their fortune is complete (336). But two sisters arriving with their father see only a “straggling settlement” upon a “sterile flat, dotted with unsightly excrescences that stood equally for cabins or mounds of stone and gravel.” The makeshift dwellings represent a “feeble and inconsistent . . . culmination to the beautiful scenery they had passed through, so hopeless and imbecile a conclusion to the preparation of that long picturesque journey” (341). Non-human nature is beautiful and picturesque, but the transformations wrought by miners amount to nothing more than “ditches” and “pits.” If the miners see only financial reward for their exertions, the women have an attitude closer to that of the narrator who notices that the river has “ceased to yield” because it is “exhausted.” The narrator and the newcomers see ruin, folly, ugliness, and waste, a necessary corrective to the miners’ rose-colored glasses.

Not just mining but tourism drew Harte’s attention to the environmental impact of American westward expansion. In “The Fool of Five Forks” (1874), he satirized the sensations that Yosemite and other tourist sites were expected to produce. A lengthy quotation demonstrates Harte’s satire of many aspects of the tourist experience, ranging from the vain practice of place-naming to the profusion of litter. Not far from Five Forks,

> a certain wild, rude valley . . . had become famous as a picturesque resort. Travelers had visited it, . . . Correspondents had written it up . . . Men and

> women who had never enjoyed a sunset, a tree, or a flower . . . came from thousands of miles away to calculate the height of this rock, to observe the depth of this chasm, . . . and to believe with ineffable self-complacency that they really admired nature. And so it came to pass that, in accordance with the tastes or weaknesses of the individual, the more prominent and salient points of the valley were christened, and there was a 'Lace Handkerchief Fall,' and the 'Tears of Sympathy Cataract,' . . . an 'Exclamation Point,' and a 'Valley of Silent Adoration.' And, in course of time, empty soda-water bottles were found at the base of the cataract, and greasy newspapers and fragments of ham sandwiches lay at the dusty roots of giant trees. ("The Fool of Five Forks," *Writings* 2: 407-08)

Harte treats time with Biblical compression in phrases such as "it came to pass" and "in course of time," parodying the pseudo-religious claims of tourist propaganda. Even more self-absorbed than miners, lacking miners' innocent optimism, Harte's tourists are the most insincere of his environmental destroyers.

Cynically, Harte proposes in 1898 that modern tourism is driven not by any admiration of nature but simply by fashion. Resorts court fashionable customers by falsifying nature if necessary. Such is the method of the Carquinez Springs Hotel in a late, dark story called "The Passing of Enriquez" (1898). Outside the hotel is an "arid garden, deep in the wayside dust" boasting "tropical plants" that are "washed into fictitious freshness, night and morning, by the hydraulic irrigating hose" (*Writings* 16: 87). The tourists do not come to adjust to the rhythms of the natural world. They bring their frenetic energies with them "from the baking plains of Sacramento, or from the chill

sea-fogs of San Francisco," driven by "fierce unrest" "to seek excitement in the wildest gayeties," such as "furious drives," "mad, scampering cavalcades through the sedate woods," and gambling parties. "Unimaginative men, in their temporary sojourn they more often outraged or dispossessed Nature in her own fastnesses than courted her for sympathy or solitude. There were playing-cards left lying behind boulders, and empty champagne bottles forgotten in forest depths" (87-88).

Gouged by miners, trashed by tourists, Harte's Nature fights back. Part trickster, part monkey-wrencher, part armed and outraged indigene resisting colonization, Nature simply neglects to recognize any mastering force in what Harte calls the American "occupation." Often this happens on such a small scale that no western booster needs to feel threatened. Such is the case when the flora and fauna of the forest attempt to reclaim editorial offices in "The Poet of Sierra Flat" (1871) and "The 'Boom' in the Calaveras Clarion." Noticing woodpeckers on the roof of his newspaper office, the editor of the "Sierra Flat Record" considers "that possibly the birds had not yet learned to recognize in the rude structure any improvement on Nature" (2: 38). Similarly, the editorial office of the "Calaveras Clarion" has "invaded Nature without subduing it" (16: 161).

One of Harte's most exuberant reclamations of a mining town, from a story published just a year before his death, occurs in "A Buckeye Hollow Inheritance" (1901). In the story's mining ghost town, the flowering Buckeye trees have "never yielded entirely to improvements and the incursions of mining enterprise" (18: 201). As the protagonist enters the town of "disused ditches, . . . scarred flats, . . . discarded levels, ruined flumes, and roofless cabins" the air is "filled with the radiance of [Buckeye] blossoms and fragrant with their incense." An abandoned garden has "leaped its three

acres and rioted through the Hollow. . . . By a grim satire, Nature seemed to have been the only thing that still prospered in that settlement of man" (202). These scenes are not "grim" at all but exuberant and bursting with life. In this late story, the bookend, as it were, that faces that first mining tale, "M'liss," Harte gives Nature the last laugh.

In Harte's fiction, successful westerners recognize the superiority of Nature and adapt themselves with good humor. The settlers who live above Rattlesnake Creek at Jules' settlement in a story called "When the Waters Were Up at Jules' " (1898) have made the requisite adaptations. They "calmly and methodically move~~d~~ to higher ground" when the creek waters rise (16: 199). "People took it naturally; the water went as it had come, -- slowly, impassively, noiselessly; a few days of fervid Californian sunshine dried the cabins, and in a week or two the red dust lay again as thickly before their doors as the winter mud had lain" (199). When a young mining company official arrives from Boston via San Francisco, Harte satirizes the Yankee cult of progress by causing his exasperated, critical newcomer to inquire, " 'Why, in the name of God, didn't you, after you had been flooded out *once*, build your cabins *permanently* on higher ground?' " The outsider assumes there is a high-water mark above which the settlers can build safely, but they know better. " 'Hev you ever heard *what* the highest watermark was?' " asks one of the locals of another. And when the visitor, Miles Hemmingway, refuses to give up the subject, the local speaker tells him a story about another settlement that *did* move up to higher ground, with a levee to contain the annual flood.

> "It worked like a charm at first; but the water hed to go somewhere, and it kinder collected at the first bend. Then it sorter raised itself on its elbows one day, and looked over the levee down upon whar some of the boys was washin'

> quite comf'ble. Then it paid no sorter attention to the limit o' that high watermark, but went six inches better! Not slow and quiet-like ez it useter to, ez it does *here*, kinder fillin' up from below, but went over with a rush and a current, hevin' of course the whole height of the levee to fall on t'other side where the boys were sluicing. . . . They say that 'Bulger's' was scattered promiscuous-like all along the fork for five miles. I only know that one of his mules and a section of sluicing was picked up at Red Flat, eight miles away!" (202)

Miles accepts the correction and drops the subject. To the inhabitants of Jules' settlement, it makes more sense to move uphill in tents for some weeks of every year than to try to outbuild Nature . . . and lose.

In book covers and film stills, Bret Harte's characters are often portrayed romantically, picturesquely as figures belonging to the western landscape. I consider this a selective and deceptive interpretation of his fiction. To illustrate this presentation, I was not successful finding a single image that has captured the conflict Harte portrays again and again between Anglo-Americans and western Nature. To rediscover Harte's environmental criticism, we have to reread the writer. (With reference to slides:) The pictorial archive does not capture the satiric counter-culturalism of the words.

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Contains the shorter, superior version of "M'liss."

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