

23 CRITICS DISCUSS

Ambrose Bierce

(1842-1914?)

"Mr. Ambrose Bierce as a story teller can never achieve a wide popularity, at least among the Anglo-Saxon race. His writings have too much the flavour of the hospital and the morgue. There is a stale odour of mouldy cerements about them. But to the connoisseur of what is rare, unique, and very perfect in any branch of fiction he must appeal strongly as one entitled to hearty recognition as an enduring figure in American letters."

Frederic Tabor Cooper
Bookman
(July 1911) 478-80

"He was as great a satirist as we have record of, and in his hands satire became a keen and terrible weapon. It has been deplored that he used his vast equipment of offense on small fry, but all the folk with whom he concerned himself satirically shared, in his estimation, a common insignificance, and he saw the great and famous of London and New York condemned in time to a like oblivion....He was rich in anecdotes of lethal horrors, and neither the visible nor the unseen appendages of death seemed to hold any terrors for him."

George Sterling
American Mercury
(September 1925) 15-18

"Bierce was of imperial bearing, and cavalier beauty. His friends still speak of his deep blue steel-like eyes, his curly crown of tawny hair, his voice of haughty taciturnity. Almost six feet in height, his compact, well-knit figure gave the impression of clean-cut strength and restrained power. This appearance of rugged manhood Bierce never lost; when at the age of seventy-two he crossed the Rio Grande, he was as well preserved as an English country squire."

Leroy J. Nations
South Atlantic Quarterly
(July 1926) 255

"There was nothing of the milk of human kindness in old Ambrose; he did not get the nickname of Bitter Bierce for nothing. What delighted him most in life was the spectacle of human cowardice and folly. He put man, intellectually, somewhere between the sheep and the horned cattle, and as a hero somewhere below the rats. His war stories, even when they deal with the heroic, do not depict soldiers as heroes; they depict them as bewildered fools, doing things without sense, submitting to torture and outrage without resistance, dying at last like hogs in Chicago, the former literary capital of the United States. So far in this life, indeed, I have encountered no more thorough-going cynic than Bierce was."

H. L. Mencken
Prejudices: Sixth Series
(Knopf 1927) 261

"He was full of the pride of individuality; and the same man who spent so much of his energy 'exploring the ways of hate' was, in his personal life, the serenest of stoics. The son of an Ohio farmer, he had no formal education. How did he acquire such firmness and clarity of mind? He was a natural aristocrat and he developed a rudimentary philosophy of aristocracy which, under happier circumstances, might have made him a great figure in the world of American thought. But the America of his day was too chaotic."

Van Wyck Brooks
Emerson and Others
(Dutton 1927) 152

"Sense was in balance with sensibility, for Bierce was in the very nature of the case a man of feeling. So on the aesthetic side he added the delicate perception of the portrait painter to the caustic judgments of the cartoonist. The attitude and utterance of the two are in complete contrast. The intellectual Bierce was always on the offensive; always ready to express himself in brilliant brevities."

Percy H. Boynton
More Contemporary Americana
(Chicago 1927) 89

"In his stories...the events are narrated with restraint, the descriptions have no excessive details, for the various details are 'constituents' of the atmosphere and nearly every word is necessary for the realization of the detail. As a rule, Bierce aims to obtain the total and enduring effect by means of atmosphere, and in many stories it would be unsafe to say that the narrative has greater importance than the impression or the conviction that he wishes to 'flow' from the stories; in some instances, he allows us to view an action from several points of vantage."

Eric Partridge
London Mercury
(October 1927) 637

"The force which resided in Bierce and wrought through him was wit. The wit was coupled with, actuated by, a perversity which made it recoil even from itself, to the redoublement of both movements. And action and reaction, wit and recoil, coming into play as one impulse in one instant, as a lightning-stroke and a thunder-clap so near that no interval is detected--these determined the odd pattern of Bierce's thought and of his personal literary idiom."

Wilson Follett
Bookman
(November 1928) 284

"To be sure, I hold these stories to be the greatest ever published in any language....But Bierce was a great artist in all that he wrote...So numerous were his literary activities, embracing so many classifications of literature--more classifications well done than any other author in all time achieved--that I find it impossible to isolate any one classification and say that his fame will endure mainly because of his contributions to that particular field."

Walter Neale
Life of Ambrose Bierce
(Neale 1929) 453-4

"He sought, like Poe, to make a single vivid impression upon the reader. To that end he eliminated all extraneous references. Furthermore, each story is a complete world in itself, controlled by the writer's logic, not by the illogicality of life. Since Bierce saw no point in reproducing the flat tones of ordinary life, he found an interesting topic only in the impingement of the extraordinary or unreal on the normal course of events."

C. Hartley Grattan
Bitter Bierce
(Doubleday 1929) 118, 121-22

"If his name lives, it is within the range of probabilities that it will be in a tradition of wit, courage and decency. Whatever judgment may be passed on his work, it does not affect the important fact that Bierce was one of the most provocative figures of his generation. One cannot reflect on the facts of his life without coming to entertain an admiration for his splendid courage and indomitable spirit. To those of us in the West who have watched the fate of his reputation with a peculiar and personal interest, it has always been a source of satisfaction to realize that dead, absent or unknown, he has survived his critics and that he has even bettered his enemies who pursued him into Mexico, 'to feast on his bones'."

Carey McWilliams
Ambrose Bierce
(Boni 1929) 335

"His stark simplicity, uniting beauty of diction with truth of presentation, arouses wonder, apprehension, curiosity and thrill, and the climax arrives with the reader pent-up with emotion. Then comes the startling denouement, subtly simple, extremely plausible and pregnant with power. Bierce, the soldier, had lived dangerously. His stories of the American Civil War are among his best, realistic to a high degree, provocative of deep thought."

Clifford Bower-Shore
Bookman (London)
(August 1930) 283

"His wit and satire made him the literary dictator of the Pacific Coast, strongly influencing many writers...Many of his works were potboilers, but in 1891 he issued *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, stories reminiscent of Poe's tales of horror and marked by an ingenious use of the surprise ending, a sardonic humor, and a realistic study of tense emotional states....*Can Such Things Be* (1893) is a second volume of tales, also dealing with the supernaturalism, horror, and sardonic humor of the earlier volume."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-1983)

"If it be objected that Poe's characters seldom seem lifelike, what must be our objection to Bierce? They have absolutely no relevant characteristics that strike us as human, save their outward description; it is never for the character's sake but always for the plot's sake that a Bierce story exists. Bierce was interested, even more than Brown, Poe, or Melville, in the idea of the story--seldom in the human significance of it. In fact some of the stories exist essentially for the whiplash ending, which in Bierce's handling antedated O. Henry."

George Snell
Arizona Quarterly
(Summer 1945) 51

"The militant independence of the free lance is personified in Ambrose Bierce, the earliest American author after Poe to reflect the recognizable qualities of the movement...the growth of a class of self-educated intellectuals, whose characteristic form of expression might be described as aesthetic journalism....His principal employer was the up-and-coming William Randolph Hearst, who was wise enough to give him free rein. His most effective journalistic coup was to prevent Collis P. Huntington from lobbying a railway-refunding bill through Congress. Bierce's separation from his wife, and the tragic deaths of his two sons, embittered his private life. After the turn of the century he made his home--in so far as he had one--in Washington, which afforded increased scope to his misanthropy. At the age of seventy, after supervising the publication of his collected works and revisiting the battlefields of his youth, he disappeared across the Mexican border, leaving biography to trail off into legend....

Bierce's fluent verse seldom rises very high above its occasion. His prose, on the other hand, has a crisp precision which is almost unparalleled among his contemporaries; his puristic standards of usage, which he may have brought back from England, are set forth in his little handbook, *Write It Right* (1909). American needed, but did not want, a Swift. It needed the sharp reservations of the satirist, armed like Bierce with the weapon of wit. It wanted only the blunt affirmation of the humorist. 'Nearly all Americans are humorous; if any are born witty, heaven help them to emigrate!' exclaimed Bierce. Though many of his satirical sketches suggest that Gulliver might have discovered California, one of his serious essays laments 'The Passing of Satire.' His points were too fine, his targets too ubiquitous. His phobias included millionaires, labor leaders, women, and dogs....

And, though *The Devil's Dictionary* (1906) is still quotable, it is no more than an alphabetical compendium of Bierce's deadliest witticisms and most philosophical epigrams. His securest achievement is concentrated in two volumes of short stories. 'Denied existence by the chief publishing houses of the country,' he informs us, *In the Midst of Life* was published privately in San Francisco under the original title of *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1891). The second collection, *Can Such Things Be?* attained a New York publisher two years later. There is no padding here. Defining the novel as 'a short story padded,'

Bierce preferred the abbreviated form for its totality of effect. His technique of directing suspense toward a dramatic crisis is modeled on Poe, but Bierce's horrors are more realistically motivated: thus premature burial, in 'One of the Missing,' becomes a war casualty.

Sometimes his settings encroach upon Bret Harte's territory, but Bierce's miners are far from sentimental, and even his 'Baby Tramp' comes to a macabre end. Most of his denouements take place at graves. Editors, comprehensively, were frightened away from these tales. Their violent obsession with sudden death cuts through the conventional twists of fiction to a mordant sense of reality. Dreams, flashbacks, hallucinations, as in 'The Mocking Bird,' provide irony but no escape. Bierce's heroic theme, which Stephen Crane undertook a few years later, was not the Civil War in its strange grandeur, but its impact upon the individual consciousness. Every story is a single episode of conflict: son against father, lover against rival, a house--one's own--destroyed, a spy--one's brother--shot. Underlying them all, evoked in vivid imagery, is the contrast formulated in 'An Affair of Outposts' between the civilian's preconceptions of military glory and the soldier's experience of ugliness and brutality. [As in *The Red Badge of Courage* by Crane]....

In 'Chickamauga,' an excruciating study in point of view, a child's idyl turns into a battle and the child turns out to be a deaf-mute. Further tales seek a moral equivalent for war in claim jumping and psychic experiment, ghoulish practical jokes and pseudoscientific fantasies. Naturalism did not exclude the story teller's concern with the supernatural, and Bierce's rationalism operates to lend credibility to his ghost stories. Peculiarly haunting is 'The Death of Halpin Frayser,' with its interpolation of Bierce's own recurrent dream, its Kafkaesque nightmare of the poet lost in the wood, its Freudian realization of 'the dominance of the sexual element in all the relations of life.' But his most nostalgic reminiscences are reserved for Chickamauga and Shiloh and Kennesaw Mountain. He himself is the lone survivor of 'A Resumed Identity,' a Rip Van Winkle of the Civil War to whom everything afterward is an anticlimax."

Harry T. Levin
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1068-70

"It is fitting that someone should be born and live and die dedicated to the expression of bitterness. For bitterness is a mood that comes to all intelligent men, though, as they are intelligent, only intermittently... [Bierce] will remain one of the most interesting and eccentric figures in our literature, one of our great wits, one of our most uncompromising satirists, the perfecter of two or three new, if minor genres: a writer one cannot casually pass by."

Clifton Fadiman
Saturday Review
(12 October 1946) 62

"There was never any danger that Bierce's stories would be forgotten....Throughout the writings runs a kind of fierce, disillusioned democracy, negative rather than positive--a warfare on all injustice and impiety. In Bierce's bitterness there is never a whine or a whimper. You feel he had a relish for the world, and finding it bitter he hated it with a whole heart."

Walter Havighurst
Saturday Review of Literature
(25 January 1947) 16

"Along with Poe, Bierce was one of those rare birds in American literature--a Dandy in Baudelaire's sense of the term. The Dandy opposes to society, and to the human world generally, not some principles but himself, his temperament, his dreamed-of depths, his talent for shocking, hoaxing, and dizzying his readers. An artistic Enemy of the People, Bierce exploited whatever was most questionable in his personality, dramatizing his sense of guilt and perdition in theatrical horrors and a costume of malice...Out there in his West Coast newspaper office Bierce was somehow seized by that hypnosis of evil and defiance that has inspired so much of modern literature from symbolism to Dada and Surrealism."

Harold Rosenberg
Nation
(15 March 1947) 312

"In San Francisco, in the eighteen-nineties, Ambrose Bierce was the cock of the walk, a military martinet in literary matters, a cold, ironical, arrogant man and a great reader of Voltaire and Swift who had written *The Devil's Dictionary*, a 'cynic's word-book.' In this he distinguished himself as one who preferred dry wines to sweet, as he preferred sense to sentiment...he had become a sort of oracle in literary circles on the Western coast....No doubt his irony had been at first a protective mask for a sensitive man...His stories revealed the horrors he witnessed and much of his feeling about them, and only an idealist could have been so disillusioned by the fraud and corruption of the regime that followed the war. Bierce's *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* resembled and rivalled the stories of Stephen Crane.

His earlier whimsical sketches of miners had been influenced by Bret Harte, but Poe was the master of his imagination. He shared the 'fantastic realism' that Dostoyevsky had found in Poe and that no one in America had exemplified since as well. For nothing could have been more realistic than some of Bierce's battle pieces, in spite of their occasional touches of melodrama. Bierce followed Poe in a dozen ways or shared his tastes and tendencies, his obsession with graveyards, coffins and mortuary chapels, men who are buried alive, hallucinations and murderers who quote antique treatises on the marvels of science. As in the Western tall tales with which Poe, too, had something in common, the incongruities were emphasized by the matter-of-factness. Perhaps 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge' was the finest of all Bierce's tales...

Never obliged to match his wits with first-rate minds, Bierce rode his hobbies freely and indulged his whims. He dogmatized at his ease with a too facile cynicism that over-expressed his somewhat acrid spirit. But his singular force of imagination gave permanent value to a dozen or a score of his tales. In addition to these, he poured out a mass of uncensored writings, epigrams, essays and stories, that filled twelve tasteless volumes at the end of his life."

Van Wyck Brooks & Otto L. Bettmann
Our Literary Heritage
(Dutton 1956) 212

"Bierce...was a difficult genius who never attained full stature. At his best, Bierce is a brilliant epigrammatist and a notable forerunner of such American realists as Stephen Crane, but in spite of his voluminous writings, his fame rests largely on one book of short stories, *In the Midst of Life* ...[1891,1898]; a book of epigrams, *The Devil's Dictionary* (1911)...and on many anecdotes and sayings that gave him a reputation for cruel and original wit. The characters in his stories are generally abstractions, nameless types of tragic humanity. Even in his best work their individuality is subordinate to their fate, to the mood of horror and impending calamity established by suggestive realistic detail."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"Since his disappearance in Mexico in 1913, Ambrose Bierce has maintained a curious kind of underground reputation, less as a maker of books than as a personal legend, a minority saint for the cynical and disenchanting. (A passion for taut, precise, desentimentalized English is a special part of this legend.)... He survives as a figure of bitter dissent and disaffiliation--from the bluster and prodigality of the Gilded Age, from its daydreams of comfort and success, from all its gross connivance in hypocrisy and untruth. It was as such, a scarifier of his times and an honest measure of their moral shabbiness, that [one] critic...celebrated Bierce...as 'the one commanding figure in our time'....

These stories are perhaps most impressive as emotional gestures....There is not much invention or variation in these stories. Eventually the ironies they turn upon appear mechanical: the Union soldier on picket who must shoot his Confederate father; another who must carry out orders to bombard his own house, knowing that his wife and child are in it; another who steels his nerves to put out of suffering a mortally hurt comrade whose exposed entrails have been rooted by wild pigs (he fires his pistol only to find that he has used up his bullets and must do the job by sword thrusts); a captured spy who coolly, philosophically, states his contempt for death but panics and runs amok when his execution is advanced a few hours. We begin, in fact, to see that the fidelity of these savage anecdotes is not to the way 'things are' in the world but to the shocked and haunted consciousness of the writer himself. Yet the feelings he writes

from--outrage, despair, desolation, grim resignation--do him credit. The monstrous thing would be to have written about such subjects without being somewhat overborne by their raw terrors.

Always tightly made, Bierce's stories renew a standard of form set by his master, Poe. Like Poe's they are distinguished by descriptive intensity and a strict economy of means; they are as compact and bare as mathematical equations--which is partly why they are not greatly interesting as stories. Where they are most effective is in indicating the weariness and the barbarism of men in the front lines of war; and, as we sense that for Bierce these front-line conditions are somehow only an intensification of the norm of human life, we must grant that we cannot easily argue him wrong....The vision of life in Bierce's work, though intensely personal, is also very much of its time. It is close to that of the school of 'naturalism,' which was entering American literature around 1900 with the generation of Norris, Stephen Crane, and Dreiser. Under the assault of the mindless, amoral forces of nature--or of society equally savage--men are seen as victims and casualties of agencies beyond their control."

Walter Berthoff
The Ferment of Realism
(Macmillan/The Free Press 1965) 77-79

"Death may perhaps be said to be Ambrose Bierce's only real character. In all Bierce's fiction, there are no men or women who are interesting as men and women--that is, by reason of their passions, their aspirations or their personalities. They figure only as the helpless butts of sadistic practical jokes, and their higher faculties are so little involved that they might almost as well be trapped animals. But Bierce does succeed in making Death play an almost personal role. His accounts of battles he took part in are among the most attractive of his writings, because here he is able to combine a ceaseless looking Death in the face with a delight in the wonder of the world...

But eventually, in his horror stories, the obsession with death becomes tiresome. If we try to read these stories in bulk, they get to seem not merely disgusting but dull. The horror stories of Poe, with which they have been compared, have always a psychological interest in the sense that the images they summon are metaphors for hidden emotions. The horror stories of Bierce have only in a very few cases such psychological interest as may come from exploiting dramatically some abnormal phenomenon of consciousness. There is, otherwise, merely the Gran Guignol trick repeated again and again. The executioner Death comes to us from outside our human world and, capriciously, gratuitously, cruelly, slices away our lives. It is an unpleasant limitation of Bierce's treatment of violent death that it should seem to him never a tragedy, but merely a bitter jest. He seems rarely to have felt any pity for his dead comrades of the Civil War, and it is characteristic of him that he should write as if in derision...of the soldiers who fell at Shiloh and who were burned, some while still alive, in a forest fire lit by the battle....Ambrose Bierce lacks the tragic dimension; he was unable to surmount his frustration, his contempt for himself and mankind....

Bierce's short stories are often distinguished from the hackwork of the shudder magazines only by the fact that the shudder is an emotion that for the author is genuine, and by the sharp-edged and flexible style, like the ribbon of a wound-up tape-measure....The best qualities of Bierce's prose are military--concision, severe order and unequivocal clearness. His diction is the result of training and seems sometimes rather artificial. The soldier commands one's respect, but the queer unsatisfactoriness of Bierce's writing is partly due to the fact that this marble correctitude is made to serve as a mask for a certain vulgarity of mind and feeling....There was something besides the crudeness that hobbled his exceptional talents--an impasse, a numbness, a void, as if some psychological short circuit had blown out an emotional fuse. The obsession with death is the image of this: it is the blank that blocks every vista; and the asthma from which Bierce suffered was evidently its physical aspect...His writing--with its purged vocabulary, the brevity of the units in which it works and its cramped emotional range--is an art that can hardly breathe....

He seems interested in denouncing political corruption mainly from the point of view of its giving him an opportunity to imagine macabre scenes in which the miscreants are received in Hell or left to survive alone in a universe divested of life. In his poetry, God and the angels and even the figure of Christ, as well as the Devil and his agents, are sometimes brought on to the scene, but these powers, celestial and infernal alike, act only to reject and damn....[Bierce] was not a militant atheist as he might have been expected to be. Though he baited and made fun of the clergy, he had several clerical friends, and...he especially

esteemed Jewish rabbis, for their 'broad scholarship,' their 'devotion to the traditions of their religious order' and their 'tolerance of other religions.' He was respectful toward all the faiths, but conceived them to be all the creations of men.

Like Holmes and so many others, he had been influenced by the theory of Evolution. 'Evolution accounts for God as it does for you and me...' [he said]...he talks about God in a way which, even when he is being facetious, makes one feel that the conception is still real to him, that--remote above the power of Death--it still presides in Bierce's mind....He tended to be anti-democratic. In this he was both the precursor and one of the principal inspirers of the younger writer, H. L. Mencken....He seems to have believed that monarchy was the most satisfactory form of government....Even the best of his fiction is monotonous and almost monomaniacal in its compulsive concentration on death....Neale says that he never once heard Bierce laugh...

The old apocalyptic note is occasionally struck by Bierce in connection with the Civil War, but more often in this connection he prefers to make himself disagreeable by inscribing on his list of the damned those Unionists who defame the Confederate cause or show a lack of respect for its dead. In his comment on local California affairs, it is the murders and the hangings that interest him most. His idea of whimsicality is almost invariably homicidal, as in those stories of his which begin, 'Having murdered my mother under circumstances of singular atrocity, I was arrested and put upon my trial'."

Edmund Wilson
Patriotic Gore
(Oxford 1966) 622-32

"Yet the picture of Bierce as an egotistical, malign journalist drawn by Josiah Royce in his novel of California, *The Feud of Oakfield Creek* (1887), is reasonably accurate. He was a fierce and stern moralist living in what he believed to be an age of moral looseness. For three decades he exposed, with apparent relish, the rottenness of American life, its political corruption, its moral debasement, its economic chicanery....[with] unflinching honesty, devotion to duty, fidelity--a combination of inherited puritan values...and the military virtues that the army had instilled in him. So stern was his morality that it was everywhere unsatisfied. He criticized every aspect of American life. *The Devil's Dictionary* (1906) is his demonstration that the whole thesaurus of American life had been depraved. In his journalism he recorded his revelation of the decline of American ideals. The National Anthem Americans had come to sing, he said in *The Wasp*, was 'A Rational Anthem,' which begins: 'My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of felony.'...

To his essentially puritanical ideals the morals of contemporary Christianity could not measure up.... Rejecting the Christianity of his times, he proclaimed in *The Devil's Dictionary* and *The Fiend's Delight* what he called 'the True Creed of Satanic Obsession,' in an elaborate illustration of how the degraded American faith was far less pure than his diabolical counterpart. [Compare Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*] In these he writes the American regional nightmare version of William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Following Emerson's 'Self-Reliance' to its extreme, and feeling that his morality came not from the corrupted Christianity that he knew, he as much as echoed Emerson's 'If I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil.' Like Whitman, he chanted the square deific, one in which the Trinity formed a minority. Like Thoreau, he found his virtue where and as he could...Finding no good god, Bierce made the best of the devil. Failing, too, to find the good life, in scores of stories and sketches he made the best of violent death....

In the presence of death, his characters are intensely observant, often witty, sometimes ironical, occasionally even absurdly gleeful. Their souls are summed up in the intensity of their sensations--but beyond these they have nothing. All the traditional values evoked by life and death are entirely absent, leaving only the insistent report, as in a newspaper, of their curious existence....Bierce uses characters whose consciousness refuses to go below the surface of events, behind facts. Only the mechanical motions of fact, never the values or emotions that lie behind facts, are recorded. Moreover, Bierce's leading characters are remarkably inarticulate. This is perhaps a chief feature of the grotesque world he creates. It is a world of silence, a world without values and therefore only dimly understood....Downing Madwell, victim of 'The Coup de Grace,' meditates over the body of a dying friend, kills him out of mercy, and is caught--no doubt, to be himself executed, all without speaking. The most remarkable instance of Bierce's

use of the inarticulate is in 'Chickamauga.'...Ultimately, Bierce is suggesting, life is meaningless when it can express or attach no meaning to death...

By the complete obliteration of value-discrimination in his stories, Bierce provokes the reader himself into responding emotionally and so bringing to consciousness the values which the rush of daily fact and detail has buried beneath their surface accumulation. His stories, then, are therapeutic. The stories so violently deny all meaning to existence that the reader is forced to assert, from what values he may possess, a meaning for it. Bored by life, the reader is shocked back into it by the terror of death. Bierce's world is so incomplete and biased that the reader must make it whole. Scorning and abusing, above all, traditional values based on hope, faith, love, family, innocence, and sympathy, he forces the reader to commit himself to a morality and a moral view of reality so pure as to be beyond Bierce's fierce satire. For on the summit of the ideal Bierce himself stands. Dramatizing the nightmare, he ever had the daydream in sight."

Jay Martin
Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914
(Prentice-Hall 1967) 121-24

Michael Hollister (2014)