popular entertainment that the boundaries are not easy to fix, or else... it has no relation to the world at all..."

It may well be that John Berryman himself succumbed to some of these dangers late in his own career. He loved to be treated as a celebrity, gave indiscreet interviews to large-circulation magazines, and even wrote a series of poems in Love & Fame) that seem more neededly addressed to a popular than to a serious audience.


Berryman’s major achievement in short fiction is ““Wash Far Away,”” drafted in the 1950s but discovered and published only after his death. The title is from Milton’s “Lycidas,” a text that figures prominently in the story. Along with Recovery, “Wash Far Away” is Berryman’s most extensive prose treatment of the theme of loss and regeneration, and whereas the novel treats of experience late in its author’s life, the partially autobiographical story draws to an event that took place early in his career as a writer and teacher. In 1939 Berryman met and sawmermed with Blain Campbell, a fellow aspiring poet, and the two men taught and roomed together, along with Campbell’s wife, during the 1939-40 academic year at Wayne University (later Wayne State) in Detroit. But by late 1940 Campbell was dead from cancer. The loss was a major one, and the character of Hugh in the story is largely modeled on Campbell. This biographical parallel adds a third layer to the text, a story of a man dealing with loss while attempting to teach one of the great poems of loss...

Awareness of a dead self and the desire for reinvigoration matters, for ultimately the teacher’s challenge is not so much to conquer loss as it is to find self-significance... In the process of coping with loss, a rebirth of self has begun. Berryman repeatedly alludes in his unpublished papers to what he saw as a clear connection between loss and freedom, death, and rebirth.


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BIERC, Ambrose (1842-1914?)

His stories are their own justification. We may not agree with the method that he has chosen to use, but we cannot escape the strange, haunting power of them, the grim, black sense of their having happened—even the most weird, most supernatural, most grotesquely impossible of them—in precisely the way that he has told them... 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 ceremonies 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.


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.


With his air of a somewhat dandified Strindberg he combined what might have been described as a temperament of the eighteenth century. It was natural to him to write in the manner of Pope: lucidity, precision, "correctness" were the qualities he adored. 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.


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. He has a delicate sense of the shades of meaning and of strength in words; therefore, he puts the right word in the right place. The style, in brief, is excellent.


If his name lives, it is within the range of probabilities that it will be as a tradition of wit, courage and decency. Whatever judgement
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. p. 335

The fame of Ambrose Bierce ultimately will rest upon his literary work as a whole. That his distinction as an author is not confined to his short-stories alone is apparent, for his fame as a writer was firmly established before any of them were written; they but extended his renown. 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; he was no better in one branch of literature than he was in another, poetry excepted—and his verse that was not poetry was yet the best of verse. 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.


Rejecting violently the novel, realism, dialect, and all use of slang, humorous or otherwise, Bierce stood firmly for the short story, romance, and pure English produced through intense, self-conscious discipline. Bierce was first and foremost a disciplinarian. He placed great emphasis on the technique of fiction and verse. He was constantly eager to be correct, and to see that others were correct even in the details of punctuation. . . . 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 the unreal on the normal course of events.


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 anteceded O. Henry. But the Bierce story can be reread with some profit for there is real evidence of a technician’s hand.


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. It is proper that there be at least one man able to give penetrating expression to that mood. Bierce is such a man—limited, wrong-headed, unbalanced, but in his own constricted way, an artist. He 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.


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 dream—of depths, his talent for shocking, hoaxing, and dizzying his readers. An aesthetic Enemy of the People, Bierce exploited whatever was most questionable in his personality, dramatizing his sense of guilt and perversion in theatrical horrors and a costume of malice. . . . Out there in his West Coast newspaper office Bierce was somehow seized by the hypnotic power of evil and defiance that has inspired so much of modern literature from symbolism to Dada and Surrealism.


Like Swift he was driven by a passion for clarity; he simply could not write a muddied sentence. Like Swift, too, he was obsessed by a fierce determination to be precise and was, so to speak, a lexicographer by instinct. Not only does the *Dictionary* contain the best of Bierce’s satire but it also reveals some of his underlying preoccupations.

Most readers of *The Devil’s Dictionary* are so entertained by Bierce’s wit that they fail to notice the recurrent themes. Politics, for example, was high on the list of subjects that most frequently engaged his attention. Bierce lived and wrote in a period when American politics were turgid, fatuous, and corrupt—the period from "the bloody shirt" through "rum, romanism and rebellion" to "Remember the Maine!" An idealist by temperament, he had recoiled violently from the bombast and corruption of the post-Civil-War decades. He liked to convey the impression that he regarded political realities with complete disdain. But almost single-handedly he defeated the attempt of the Southern Pacific Railroad to make a final raid on the federal treasury—in the fight over the so-called Funding Bill in 1896—and in doing so had a strong case made for the public ownership of railroads.


While Bierce was read and admired by many another writer, it is difficult to see his work as a direct influence on the journalistic style of later practitioners, few of whom possessed his skill. The same factors which formed his techniques—the cynicism which allowed him to live with conditions he felt himself powerless to affect; his fascination with words and their syntactic combinations as opposed to straight reporting styles—could have led others to imitate him unconsciously. But the imitations, conscious or unconscious, lacked Bierce’s distinguishing mark, the tone of arrow-like
contempt, because they were assumed as an artificial way of dismissing the troubles of the world. Bierce's tone was a natural outgrowth of a personality so shocked by war that it held itself together only by the compulsive demonstration that meaningless slaughter contained all the meaning there was.


It was his precise recollection of atmosphere, the limpid clarity of his description of physical setting that gave his Civil War stories such a startling air of realism. Mencken considered him the "first writer of fiction ever to treat war realistically." Certainly he was the first to show that heroism had no place in the scientific slaughter which war had become even in his time. Both in his short stories and in his nonfictional sketches he conveyed the reality of Shiloh, Stones River, Chickamauga, Kennesaw Mountain and Franklin as no other writer has....

If he is rediscovered in the near future, it will likely be as the first notable exponent of black humor in America. Prudish as he was in anything written for publication, he would be offended at inclusion in such raffish company. Anything bordering on the pornographic evoked an outcry for rigid censorship and harsh penalties from Bierce. Today's black humorists could, however, meet him with profit. He is their natural father.


Bierce's tales of war are not in the least realistic; they are, as he doubtless intended them to be, incredible events occurring in credible surroundings. Triggered like traps, they abound in coincidences and are as contemptuous of the "probable" as any of Poe's most bizarre experiments. Bierce's soldiers move in a trance through a prefigured universe. Father and son, brother and brother, husband and wife, collide in accidental encounters. The playthings of some Power, they follow a course "decreed from the beginning of time." Ill-matched against the outside forces assailing them, they are also victimized by atavistic ones. Bierce's uncomplicated men-at-arms, suddenly commandeered by compulsive fear or wounded by shame, destroy themselves.

Yet each of Bierce's preposterous tales is framed in fact and touched with what Poe called the "potent magic of verisimilitude." Transitions from reality to surtality seem believable not only because the war was filled with romance and implausible episodes but also because of the writer's intense scrutiny of war itself. The issues of the War no longer concerned him by the time he came to write his soldier stories. They had practically disappeared in the wake of history. But the physical and psychological consequences of constant exposure to suffering and death, the way men behaved in the stress of battle—these matters powerfully worked his imagination, for the War was only meaningful to Bierce as a personal experience. If war in general became his parable of pitifully accoutered man attacked by heavily armored natural forces, the Civil War dramatized his private obsessions.


It was not simply that [Bierce] had learned to despise social ideals of any sort, and to have "a conscience uncorrupted by religion, a judgment undimmed by politics and patriotism, a heart untainted by friendships and sentiments unsoured by animosities." More than this, the world, as he perceived it, took on a threatening aspect; like the musket ball, it attacked his head, his reason. The terrain of reality which he plotted—he was a topographic officer—he saw filled with traps. Where others saw a handsome prospect, he saw danger lurking and always assumed that beneath pleasing appearances was a threatening reality. He was convinced, in short, that reality was delusory. By emphasizing mind he attempted to preserve mind, always threatened by physical obliteration or mental deception; he defended the mind, and in doing so, took as his major theme the "growth of reflection," the compulsion to scrutinize and observe.

This might have been a tragic theme, for reflection leads to a deeper and deeper penetration of delusion and at last to the conviction that all is delusion—that, ultimately, as Bierce said in a late letter, "nothing matters." Reality, Bierce did conclude in *The Devil's Dictionary*, was "the dream of a mad philosopher," the logical product of irrational minds, and therefore absurd—"the nucleus of a vacuum." But he treated this conviction comically, and employed humor to expose the absurdities of his deluded contemporaries and the institutions delusions created and perpetuated. In short, he preserved his own mind by ridiculing the crazed world that questioned his sense and sensibility.


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