

A STUDY OF THE FORMATION, EXECUTION, AND
CONTRIBUTION OF AMBROSE BIERCE'S
SHORT STORIES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
Kansas State Teachers College of Emporia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

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August 1971

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for
my mother and father
because they are

PREFACE

Ambrose Bierce, for an unknown and unread author, has an unbelievably long bibliography. His works have been translated into every European language, including Russian and Norwegian. Until recently, however, no one has closely examined the fictive world of Bierce. Stuart C. Woodruff, in his book The Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce: A Study in Polarity, and Eric Solomon, in a Midwest Quarterly article entitled "The Bitterness of Battle: Ambrose Bierce's War Fiction," seriously consider the fiction of Bierce. But just as it is impossible to assess an entire panoramic view with one stationary glance, so it is impossible to assess the art of Ambrose Bierce employing the same technique. Too many critics have passed over Bierce's short stories and have merely lumped them together with his other writings to form a rather blurry picture.

Bierce, himself, is partially responsible for this lack of literary interest; he failed to publish competently his artistic efforts. Nevertheless, he deserves to be republished skillfully so that his talent as a writer can be seen and appreciated.

My intent here has not been to catalogue another

frustrated artist on the shelf of American literature. I have sought to elevate Bierce in the eyes of the reading public by tracing the formation, execution, and contribution of his short stories. By concentrating on a selection of representative tales, I have tried to establish a firm foundation for Bierce's fiction and to erect his rightful position in American letters.

In preparing this thesis, I received the assistance of several individuals, three of whom must not go unnamed. I first must acknowledge the guidance of my thesis advisor, Dr. Gary Bleeker, who helped in converting my metaphorical wanderings into readable prose. Dr. Green Wyrick provided helpful suggestions as second reader. A deep debt of gratitude I owe to Pam Donald. Through her proficient office of director of the Kansas State Teachers College Inter-Library Loan, I obtained the necessary materials to draw up this paper. In addition to her professional services, she offered personal assistance when needed, instant help when unasked, and an unintentional cheerfulness that sustained my waning spirit. To her, I append a written thank-you.

Emporia, Kansas

G.E.W.

July, 1971

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CHAPTER I

FORMATION--THE BIERCE MILIEU

Although particulars often refute the generalizations they represent, one statement offers a comprehensive view of Ambrose Bierce and his art that has undeniable validity. Ambrose Bierce, in life and art, recognized and contested the curse of life. Even though life's curse has unfathomable dimensions, four specks can be sifted from its cloudy atmosphere: man is awkward, things are not as they seem, man demands and repels order, selfhood is both a boon and a bane.

First, man is damned by a curse of ineptitude. To survive, he must function within a social milieu that both sustains him and minimizes his importance. He must expose his individuality or invite self-destruction, and yet, his social climate dictates conformity. Immersed in this merciless approach-avoidance conflict,¹ man fumbles awkwardly for an answer. His actions are inadequate and clumsy.

Second, man is damned by the inability to separate illusion from reality. Indeed, the two often appear inseparable.

¹An approach-avoidance conflict is primarily a psychological term indicating a goal that both attracts and repels the observer.

Man encounters daily the baffling riddle of the what-is and the what-is-not, the reality and the dream, the rational and the irrational. It is a mystery that man finds insoluble.

Third, man is damned by an ordered system. He is bordered by the laws of man and the laws of nature. His free will requests free reign to run untrammelled through the boundless track of the universe. Ironically, however, man craves order. Whenever he encounters chaos, he finds a temporary security in the imposition of a systematic order. If he permits chaos to run rampant, he is ultimately consumed by it. Once again, man finds an approach-avoidance conflict facing him, and whatever the outcome, he proves himself a creature too weak to prevail.

Finally, man is damned by selfhood. Selfhood is, at the same time, a blessing and a curse. Man chooses his direction and, in so doing, his fate. He is blessed with a curse.

An artist's view of life and his art are interrelated. In describing this relationship, Bernard DeVoto made an observation that is applicable to Bierce:

In the deepest psychological sense, even in a biological sense, a man's work is his life. That is to say, the sources of his talent are inseparably a part of his feeling of wholeness, of his identity, and even, quite nakedly, of his power.²

²Bernard DeVoto, Mark Twain at Work, p. 108.

An unmistakable correlation exists between an artist and his art, and DeVoto has etched this correlation into this observation. In the case of Ambrose Bierce, his life supplied the raw materials out of which he produced his artistic creations. The life of Bierce parallels the conflict of his protagonists, the chronicle of man striving to transcend the curse of life.

Much of the biographical information on Bierce is irregular and irrelevant.³ He has been divergently characterized as

³Four Bierce biographies were published in 1929: Carey McWilliams' Ambrose Bierce: A Biography, Walter Neale's Life of Ambrose Bierce, Adolphe de Castro's Portrait of Ambrose Bierce, and C. Hartley Grattan's Bitter Bierce: A Mystery of American Letters. In his impersonal account, McWilliams claims that Bierce is more interesting as a man than he is important as an author. Having been a personal friend of Bierce, Neale presents a character study pieced together from a series of reminiscences. He pictures Bierce as a Southern gentleman, snobbish and intolerant in his aristocratic chivalry. De Castro, also a personal friend of Bierce, dwells on Bierce's hypocritical side, using the book as much for self-praise as Bierce-praise. And Grattan, in an impersonal account, touches only the peaks of Bierce's life and sweeps the loose ends under the rug. A contemporary of Bierce, George Sterling, provided a good deal of biographical information. He presents Bierce as an alcoholic and a sex pervert.

Other biographies have since appeared. Paul Fatout, in his Ambrose Bierce: The Devil's Lexicographer, emphasizes the impact that Bierce's unhappy childhood had upon his entire life. Richard O'Connor's Ambrose Bierce: A Biography does little but reiterate past observations. In short, the biographers of Ambrose Bierce, while contributing a necessary link to the Bierce chain, have pursued him through their own private mists. As a result, Bierce emerges a more baffling and probably a more complex man than he no doubt was.

great, bitter, idealistic, cynical, morose, frustrated, cheerful, bad, sadistic, obscure, perverted, famous, brutal, kind, a fiend, a God, a misanthrope, a poet, a realist who wrote romances,⁴ a fine satirist and something of a charlatan.

One must agree with an observation made by E. L. Bleiler. After reading all the biographies of Ambrose Bierce, one finds it difficult to believe that they were written about the same man.⁵ A critic is beset with the problem of distinguishing illusion from reality, what Bierce appeared to be from what he really was.

Placing Bierce in the proper context is not a simple task. He was born in 1842 and died in 1914, making him a contemporary of Mark Twain, who was born in 1835 and died in 1910. This approach defines the chronological context, but it fails to properly identify Bierce's place. In an attempt to situate Bierce, C. Hartley Grattan compares him with William Dean Howells.⁶ Having been born in the same region, at about the same time, and being exposed to literature through printing and through the deprivation of a formal education, they diverged to the opposite poles of the literary spectrum. Howells migrated to Italy during the Civil War,

⁴Carey McWilliams, Ambrose Bierce: A Biography, p. 3.

⁵E. L. Bleiler (ed.), Ghost and Horror Stories of Ambrose Bierce, p. xi.

⁶C. Hartley Grattan, Bitter Bierce: A Mystery of American Letters, p. 9.

settled afterward in Boston, the literary hub of the nation, and by accepting his environment, he became the literary magistrate of his day. Bierce, on the other hand, voluntarily joined the Civil War, settled afterward in San Francisco, the literary outpost of the nation, and by rejecting his environment, he became the literary outcast of his day.

Carey McWilliams places Bierce in the spiritual company of Oliver Wendell Holmes and the parallels between the two are surprising.⁷ Being born only months apart, they both found their idealism dethroned by the tragedy and the disillusionment of the Civil War. Having adopted what McWilliams calls "a frosty Olympian manner," they maintained the demeanor of soldiery, wielded their pens like swords, and disguised an inner sensitivity with an outer stoicism. In rejecting his environment and in meeting unflagging disillusionment, Bierce became a victim of the curse of life.

The life of Ambrose Bierce can be conveniently divided into nine segments: childhood, war, San Francisco at dawn, Europe, San Francisco at noon, the Black Hills, San Francisco at dusk, Washington, and Mexico. The curse of life manifests itself in each stage, growing more intense in each successive period.

Bierce was a tenth child; he had twelve brothers and

⁷Carey McWilliams (ed.), The Devil's Dictionary, p. x.

sisters.⁸ Both of Bierce's parents were of a rigid, puritanical mind. Resenting the strict atmosphere, Bierce cultivated an early independence. He read ghost stories to escape momentarily the iron hand rule of his parents.⁹

One person to exert a noticeable influence upon the young Bierce was his uncle, General Lucius Verus Bierce, who provided the arms in John Brown's capture of Harpers Ferry. He supplied a model of charm, patriotism, and

⁸Paul Fatout, Ambrose Bierce: The Devil's Lexicographer, p. 8. Fatout's information does not concur with other critics'. In fact, no three agree on this simple matter of the number of children in the Bierce family. For example, Hopkins states that Bierce was the youngest of eight children (Ernest Jerome Hopkins ed., The Complete Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce, p. 12.); Fadiman asserts that Bierce was the youngest of nine children (Clifton Fadiman ed., The Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce, p. xi.); McWilliams ambiguously says that Bierce was the ninth in a brood of children (Carey McWilliams, Ambrose Bierce: A Biography, p. 21.); McCann declares that Bierce was a tenth child (William McCann ed., Ambrose Bierce's Civil War, p. ix.); de Castro mentions that Bierce was one of eleven children (Adolphe de Castro, Portrait of Ambrose Bierce, p. 4.); Sterling also contends that Bierce came from a family of eleven children (Bertha Clark Pope ed., The Letters of Ambrose Bierce, George Sterling, "Memoir," p. xxv.); and Grattan states that Bierce was one of twelve children (C. Hartley Grattan, Bitter Bierce: A Mystery of American Letters, p. 10.). The exact number of children in the Bierce family is not crucial to any discussion of Bierce; the wide variety of opinions, however, does reveal the wide variety of viewpoints that continually disfigure the truth. Bierce's rank in the Civil War at the time of his dismissal and the particulars of his wedding day, in addition to a host of other events, are so muddled by conflicting stories that the truth is likely to remain buried forever. The mist of ambiguity hangs over not only particulars, but generalities as well.

⁹Joseph Noel, Footloose in Arcadia: A Personal Record of Jack London, George Sterling, Ambrose Bierce, p. 65.

bravery after which Bierce fashioned his own life.¹⁰ A second individual to effect Bierce was Bernie Wright, his schoolgirl sweetheart. He was unhappy in her absence and unhappy in her presence. Unhappy love only fed his unhappy life.

Because of his detached relationships, Bierce became a black sheep early in life. He was never close to anyone, in or out of his family. To add to his adolescent misery, Bierce despised his name, Ambrose Gwinnett.¹¹ His hatred was not unfounded when one considers the names of his siblings, all beginning with the letter "A": Abigail, Addison, Aurelius, Amelia, Ann, Augustus, Andrew, Almeda, Albert, and Ambrose. Bierce believed that the collection of names was maddening. According to Bleiler, Bierce grew up in a mad family environment, including the following situations: a father who envisioned himself once being the President's confidential secretary, an uncle who stormed the Canadian town of Windsor to free the inhabitants from British oppression and luckily

¹⁰ Adolphe de Castro, Portrait of Ambrose Bierce, p. 4.

¹¹ Grattan, op. cit., p. 10. Later, Bierce used the name A. G. Bierce to circumvent this discomfort. Arthur Ewen, after being the brunt of Bierce's humor in the San Francisco Examiner, called him Almighty God Bierce, parodying his initials. Shortly after, Bierce dropped the G and the Gwinnett and thereafter was known as Ambrose Bierce. The origin of "Ambrose Gwinnett" is another interesting story. For the details, consult Paul Fatout, Ambrose Bierce: The Devil's Lexicographer, p. 8.

salvaged his life, a brother who ran away from home to become a strong man in a circus, and a sister who was eaten by cannibals on a missionary mission in Africa.¹² It is not unlikely that Bierce would withdraw from such an array of figures. In fact, all of Bierces's early experiences nurtured his growing individualism.¹³ He learned at a tender age the harsh side of life--that man is awkward, that things are not as they seem, that man demands and repels order, that selfhood is both a boon and a bane--in short, he learned the curse of life.

Ambrose Bierce enlisted second in Company C of the Ninth Regiment of the Indiana Volunteers on April 19, 1861. No doubt he accepted the challenge of war as a gesture of noble idealism. Being homeless, he volunteered his life to find one. Rendering the services of a topographical engineer, Bierce advanced rapidly through the ranks, from volunteer to first lieutenant. He was cool under fire and skillful as an officer. His war days took him through the battles of Shiloh, Stone River, Chickamauga, Chattanooga, Missionary Ridge, Pickett's Mill, Kennesaw Mountain, Franklin, Murfreesboro, Atlanta, and Nashville.

General William Babcock Hazen exerted an influence upon

¹²Bleiler, op. cit., p. v.

¹³Fred Lesis Pattee, The Development of the American Short Story, p. 302.

Bierce the soldier. Of Hazen's deportment and influence, Robert A. Wiggins comments: "Hazen was a fearless and brilliant tactical leader, constantly at odds with higher authority. Upon this commander's conduct Bierce doubtless modeled much of his own."¹⁴ Bierce aspired to equal Hazen and since his duties involved danger, capture, and death, he came close. Bierce was captured once and injured twice. Some declare that he twice risked his life rescuing injured comrades.¹⁵ Bierce apparently found a home in the army, but at a very heavy price.

Bierce saw many horrifying sights during the war, pictures never to be erased from his mind. He writes in "What I Saw of Shiloh":

He lay face upward, taking in his breath in convulsive, rattling snorts, and blowing it out in sputters of froth which crawled creamily down his cheeks, piling itself alongside his neck and ears. A bullet had clipped a groove in his skull, above the temple; from this the brain protruded in bosses, dropping off in flakes and strings.¹⁶

Scenes like this one and the following one made an unforgettable impression upon his soul:

¹⁴Robert A. Wiggins, "Ambrose Bierce," University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, p. 9.

¹⁵Allen Johnson (ed.), Dictionary of American Biography, II, 252.

¹⁶Ambrose Bierce, The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce, I, 255. Hereafter, all entries from this source will appear with the appropriate volume and page number following the surname.

Their clothing was burnt away--their hair and beard entirely; the rain had come too late to save their nails. Some were swollen to double girth; others shriveled to manikins. According to degree of exposure, their faces were bloated and black or yellow and shrunken.¹⁷

Many years after this occurrence, Bierce's daughter was to comment: "Soldiering in the Civil War, he had seen many shattered bodies, and could never rid himself of the horror of them."¹⁸ Without a doubt, the tragedy of war remained as fresh in Bierce's mind as the morning's sunrise.

As a result of the Civil War, pain became a permanent fixture in Bierce's thinking. Pain became almost indistinguishable from pleasure.¹⁹ War nurtured his former unhappiness until it grew to bitterness. Bierce's experience in war became the seminal event in his life and art. Its impact upon his mind is best explained by Larzer Ziff: "The Civil War, the years since had taught him, was the most horrible and yet the only unhypocritical event in his life."²⁰ Amid splattered skulls and chipped lead, Bierce discovered a belittling fate. He witnessed the futile enterprise of living. He stood and helplessly watched the heroic shrivel up under

¹⁷Bierce, I, 262.

¹⁸Helen Bierce, "Ambrose Bierce at Home," American Mercury, XXX (December, 1833), 458.

¹⁹Franklin Walker, San Francisco's Literary Frontier, p. 239.

²⁰Larzer Ziff, The American 1890's, p. 166.

the heat of ruthless and idiotic chance. His initiation into life came like a slap in the face. He learned of man's ineptitude:

O those cursed guns!--not the enemy's, but our own. Had it not been for them, we might have died like men. They must be supported, forsooth, the feeble, boasting bullies! It was impossible to conceive that these pieces were doing the enemy as excellent a mischief as his were doing us....²¹

Bierce learned that the dream does not always come true; battle nourished disillusionment and hardened sensibilities.²² He saw the orderly tension of the battle line melt into the hopeless confusion of the aftermath. He saw man exerting his free will and was shocked into sensing man's inhumanity to man.²³ In short, what Bierce's childhood had written upon his mind, the Civil War burned indelibly into his very soul--the curse of life.

Bierce arrived in San Francisco for the first time in 1867. The city was human delirium personified. Reading and writing flourished along with murder and blackmail. In fact, the ordure that filled the West Coast journals bordered on murder and blackmail. The arena of journalism was not unlike the Roman games. After several minor jobs, Bierce

²¹Bierce, I, 259.

²²Pattee, op. cit., p. 302.

²³George Barkin (ed.), The Sardonic Humor of Ambrose Bierce, p. v.

found stable employment on the News Letter staff. Using the pen name "The Town Crier," Bierce soon mastered the satirical paragraph and became known as San Francisco's "laughing devil."²⁴ Probably, Bierce found San Francisco too chaotic for his liking. Beneath the glamor and the gaiety, the city brooded in literary stagnation. In any event, after a somewhat surprising marriage to Mollie Day on Christmas in 1871, Bierce bundled up his wife and his possessions and sailed for Europe, looking for a time and a place to negate his past.

At this time, London was the literary capital of the world, seemingly devoid of the ineptitude, the illusion, the chaos, and the restraints that prevailed in San Francisco. Writing under the pen name "Dod Grile," Bierce published several books, wrote for several periodicals, and consorted with the cockney wits.²⁵ After three years in London, Bierce's wife returned to the states. Learning soon after that she was pregnant with their third child, Bierce left London forever and returned to the pit of San Francisco. McWilliams contends that Bierce's stay in London was pleasant. According to him, Bierce regained order through a marriage

²⁴Ernest Jerome Hopkins (ed.), The Enlarged Devil's Dictionary, p. xv.

²⁵Robert E. Spiller, et. al., (eds.), Literary History of the United States, II, 1068.

of happiness and a re-appraisal of his confidence.²⁶ If such is the case, his departure must have been reluctant. Having had a meaningful life at his fingertips and seeing it suddenly jerked away from him, he must have sensed a forthcoming futility. According to Vincent Starrett, Bierce was impoverished during his stay in London, both in money and spirit.²⁷ If Starrett's version is closer to the truth, the effect of London upon Bierce was even more traumatic. The one place on earth that afforded him real hope turned into a vaporous illusion. Whatever the truth may be, Bierce retained enough London in his blood to make San Francisco even more untidy and life even more unbearable. Bringing back from London a mind of modern ideas,²⁸ Bierce found the literary soil of San Francisco sterile. The city of San Francisco was too small for his genius.²⁹ The curse of life mounted to an incessant chant.

Returning to San Francisco, Bierce discovered a madhouse. Mob rule prevailed. The Bohemian Club offered refuge,³⁰

²⁶Carey McWilliams, Ambrose Bierce: A Biography, p. 108.

²⁷Vincent Starrett, Buried Caesars, p. 37.

²⁸Robert Morss Lovett, "Five Books on Ambrose Bierce," American Literature, I (January, 1930), 437.

²⁹Gertrude Atherton, Adventures of a Novelist, p. 202.

³⁰Robert E. Spiller, et. al., (eds.), Literary History of the United States, Bibliography, 353.

but Bierce responded to its favors with tepidity. In the heart of a rich cultural wilderness, Bierce was a solitary figure, resplendent in his aloneness.³¹ Later, Bierce was to remark of San Francisco: "Of all the Sodoms and Gomorrahs in our modern world it is the worst. There are not ten righteous (and courageous) men there."³² Working for the Argonaut, Bierce began writing short stories regularly. His first story, "The Haunted Valley," had already appeared in the Overland Monthly in 1871. Having earned the sobriquet "Bitter Bierce," Bierce reportedly carried a large pistol, at least in his travels in California, to ward off would-be assailants.³³ The entire city was colored mauve which, according to Whistler, is "just pink trying to be purple."³⁴ Bierce saw beneath the purple, but the pink clashed with his soul.

To add to his misery, Bierce acquired a chronic and incurable asthmatic condition that plagued him for the remainder of his life, requiring at times the power of

³¹Maurice Valency (ed.), The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter, p. v.

³²Bertha Clark Pope (ed.), The Letters of Ambrose Bierce, George Sterling, "Memoir," p. 135.

³³George Sterling (ed.), In the Midst of Life: Tales of Soldiers and Civilians, p. v.

³⁴Quoted in Thomas Beer, The Mauve Decade: American Life at the End of the Nineteenth Century, p. frontispiece.

chloroform to ease the pain.³⁵ Bierce stayed at several hotels around San Francisco, trying to find a place where the air agreed with him. He faced his illness alone, without companions and care. Furthermore, Bierce's married life was far from perfect, and its rocky condition took its toll on him. He was an absentee father and husband, hounded and harried by his mother-in-law.³⁶ One of Bierce's sons asserted: "My father is a greater man than Christ. He has suffered more than Christ."³⁷ Bierce, however, had no vinegar.

One of the most obscure periods of Bierce's life occurred in 1880 when he, for no particular reason, journeyed to the Black Hills of South Dakota, became acting manager of a gold mine, and returned in the same year.³⁸ Evidently, Bierce's dreams failed to materialize. Once again, experience thrust a wedge between the what-is and the what-is-not, between the reality and the illusion.

Returning to San Francisco, Bierce became the editor of the Wasp. He continued to write short stories in addition to his journalistic duties. In fact, during 1886, he locked

³⁵Pope, op. cit., p. xxxv.

³⁶Paul Fatout, Ambrose Bierce and the Black Hills, p. 45.

³⁷Grattan, op. cit., p. 22.

³⁸Ibid., p. 55. For the details, consult Paul Fatout, Ambrose Bierce and the Black Hills.

himself in an Oakland rented room and lived on his savings, with the monumental task of mastering the short story mapped out in his head.³⁹ Bierce had a difficult time getting his stories published, although most of them finally found their way into print. The American magazines, the channel for exposing short stories in the 1880's and 1890's, were terribly discreet, rejecting the grim, the circumstantial, the realistic; hence, the rejecting of Ambrose Bierce's work.⁴⁰ Bierce chose to write fiction despite his antagonizing environment, and his exercise of selfhood seemed as much a curse as a blessing.

Bierce reached the peak of his journalistic career on the Examiner staff. His extraordinary local influence earned him the position of the unchallenged West Coast Samuel Johnson.⁴¹ As the guiding light in matters of literary decorum, Bierce was a genial and a severe master.⁴² Two

³⁹Ernest Jerome Hopkins (ed.), The Complete Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce, p. 17.

⁴⁰Percy H. Boynton, More Contemporary Americans, p. 92.

⁴¹Frank N. Magill (ed.), Cyclopedia of World Authors, p. 101. Fadiman also calls Bierce "a kind of West Coast Samuel Johnson" (Clifton Fadiman ed., The Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce, p. xiii.). Hopkins describes Bierce as the literary mentor of San Francisco (Ernest Jerome Hopkins ed., The Complete Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce, p. 18.), McCann as the monarch of Western literature (William McCann ed., Ambrose Bierce's Civil War, p. ix.), and Grattan as the literary dictator of the West (C. Hartley Grattan, Bitter Bierce: A Mystery of American Letters, p. 39.).

⁴²Van Wyck Brooks, Emerson and Others, p. 155.

situations, however, dimmed the splendor of his success. He had yet to find an outlet for his fictive streams of thought. When his 1891 collection of stories appeared, they bore the name of E. L. G. Steele, a private publishing house. Denied by all the major publishing firms, Bierce's efforts met with a mediocre reception, a Pyrrhic victory. Some critics loved his work; an equal number hated it. In addition, Bierce had separated from his wife. She had become the recipient of a stranger's love letters, and being misdirected, some fell into Bierce's hands.⁴³ Unable to reconcile the fact before his eyes with the image in his head, Bierce formally left the home he had only informally frequented. Being homeless, he was friendless as well. Most of Bierce's friends knew him only slightly. He responded to those who knew him well in bizarre ways, such as breaking his cane over their heads.⁴⁴ And so, at the apex of his career, the imbecility of man, the disillusionment of reality, the

⁴³Carey McWilliams, Ambrose Bierce: A Biography, p. 189. The exact relationship between the stranger and Mollie Bierce is not known. According to Bierce's daughter, Mollie was somewhat enraptured with the stranger's love letters and did not discourage his efforts (Helen Bierce, "Ambrose Bierce at Home," American Mercury, XXX (December, 1933), 455.). McWilliams insists that the serious relationship was unfounded and that it represented to Bierce only "a trifling irritation, a merely selfish annoyance" (Carey McWilliams, Ambrose Bierce: A Biography, p. 188.).

⁴⁴Albert Parry, Garrets and Pretenders: A History of Bohemianism in America, p. 78.

confusion of life, and the bane of selfhood relentlessly tormented Bierce's mind.

In 1896, William Randolph Hearst, the owner of the Examiner, sent Bierce to Washington to follow Collis P. Huntington who was in Washington to pass the Funding Act in the interests of the Central Pacific's "Big Four," Charles Crocker, Leland Stanford, Mark Hopkins, and Huntington. The act would have postponed for eighty years a debt of seventy-five million dollars accrued by the railroads. Through Bierce's journalistic efforts, the bill was defeated. Hearst, however, received the credit for its defeat.⁴⁵ Bierce stayed in Washington, writing for two magazines. Again he was lonely and without friends.

Calamity continued to haunt Bierce. In 1899, his older son was shot in a brawl over a sixteen-year-old girl. In 1901, his younger son died of alcoholism. In 1904, Bierce's wife sued him for divorce on grounds of desertion. And in 1905, Mollie Bierce died. Neale insists that Bierce maintained adulterous associates throughout his life.⁴⁶ Unable to find security and confidence in his own wife and home, Bierce sought them elsewhere. In any event, Bierce's troubles were primarily of his own making.

⁴⁵Ernest Jerome Hopkins (ed.), The Ambrose Bierce Satanic Reader, p. 213.

⁴⁶Walter Neale, Life of Ambrose Bierce, p. 150.

His last years of life tugged at him with an insistent annoyance. He began editing a collection of his writings and found the task a great burden: "I'm working hard on the proofs of my 'Collected Works.' Have nearly done Vol. VI, and am pretty tired of the whole scheme."⁴⁷ A year later Bierce remarked: "I shall be working pretty hard as soon as able, on two additional volumes of 'Collected Works.' I rather tire of it."⁴⁸ Bierce must have experienced futility; he definitely had an acquaintance with failure: "But the work is to be in ten or twelve costly volumes, and sold by subscription only. That buries it fathoms deep so far as the public is concerned."⁴⁹ As if a last effort to openly defy the neglect of the entire human race,⁵⁰ Bierce published what Percy H. Boynton calls "the smallest respectable monument in the graveyard of literary dreams."⁵¹ Bierce had finally separated the illusion from reality.

In the final months of his life, while he was planning a trip to Mexico and South America, Bierce uttered hints of approaching death. His hints fell upon deaf ears. In a

⁴⁷Samuel Loveman (ed.), Twenty-one Letters of Ambrose Bierce, p. 21.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 27.

⁴⁹Pope, op. cit., p. 147.

⁵⁰H. L. Mencken, Prejudices: Sixth Series, p. 265.

⁵¹Boynton, op. cit., p. 76.

letter to Mrs. Josephine Clifford McCrackin dated September 13, 1913, Bierce foreshadowed the plan he was about to execute: "May you live as long as you want to, and then pass smilingly into the darkness--the good, good darkness."⁵² Before his last letter of December 26, 1913, from Chihuahua, Mexico, Bierce had written to Mr. Roosevelt Johnson that he was "dressed for death."⁵³ After September 26, 1913, one finds only the good, good darkness. Bierce's comment, "Nobody will find my bones,"⁵⁴ may well serve as the epitaph on his unmade grave.

The stories of his death are many.⁵⁵ By whatever means

⁵²Pope, op. cit., p. 196.

⁵³Quoted in Carey McWilliams, Ambrose Bierce: A Biography, p. 318.

⁵⁴Quoted in Paul Fatout, Ambrose Bierce: The Devil's Lexicographer, p. 328.

⁵⁵Most likely, Bierce was killed in January, 1914, at the battle of Ojiniga (Arthur Hobson Quinn, American Fiction: An Historical and Critical Study, p. 252.). It is possible that he died a natural death, being old and of ill health (Paul Fatout, Ambrose Bierce: The Devil's Lexicographer, p. 325.). Other stories toy with the absurd: Bierce joined the forces of Pancho Villa and was promptly executed by either Villa or his executioner for deserting (George Sterling ed., In the Midst of Life: Tales of Soldiers and Civilians, p. vii.); Bierce was in Chihuahua when Villa captured the town. Bored with the proceedings, Bierce got drunk, openly criticized Villa, and pointed out his weak points. Villa then allegedly ordered him out of the town, shooting him on the outskirts of the village (C. Hartley Grattan, Bitter Bierce: A Mystery of American Letters, p. 81.); Adolphe de Castro personally visited Villa after the war and copied down Villa's ambiguous remarks concerning Bierce (Adolphe de Castro, Portrait of Ambrose Bierce, p. 336.);

he met his death, Bierce's disappearance was an artistic touch to a rather inartistic life.⁵⁶ Mankind's response to his disappearance constitutes the most concentrated bundle of ineptitude, illusion, chaos, and selfhood that has ever been assembled. Perhaps, this one last time, Bierce saw behind the purple to the pink and found it to his liking.

That Bierce recognized and contested the curse of life cannot be disputed. Each stage of his life represented a growing awareness of the ineptitude of man; each stage exposed him to more illusion mingled with harsh reality. He simultaneously craved and repelled order in each stage; he experienced the blessing and the curse of selfhood

Bierce met his death at the treacherous hands of some Mexican assassins (C. Hartley Grattan, Bitter Bierce: A Mystery of American Letters, p. 81.); Bierce was on the staff of Lord Kitchener after the outbreak of World War I (Paul Fatout, Ambrose Bierce: The Devil's Lexicographer, p. 319.); Bierce committed suicide (H. L. Mencken, "The Ambrose Bierce Mystery," American Mercury, XVIII (September, 1929), 124.); Bierce never crossed the Mexican border, staying in the State Insane Asylum at Napa with his former secretary (Joseph Noel, Footloose in Arcadia: A Personal Record of Jack London, George Sterling, Ambrose Bierce, p. 262.); and one story had Bierce still living heartily as late as December of 1918. The author in May, 1920, still felt that Bierce was alive and well (Vincent Starrett, Buried Caesars, p. 67.). McWilliams summarizes the more plausible accounts of Bierce's death (Carey McWilliams, "The Mystery of Ambrose Bierce," American Mercury, XXII (March, 1931), 330f.).

⁵⁶Frank Monaghan, "Ambrose Bierce and the Authorship of The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter," American Literature, II (January, 1931), 337.

throughout his life. To overcome these inadequacies, Bierce gravitated toward the second-rate, thereby proving superior to the forces that engulfed him: "Besides, I've a preference for being the first man in a village, rather than the second man in Rome."⁵⁷ Once again, an observation made by Bernard DeVoto concerning authorship seems singularly appropriate when applied to Bierce: "The artist is driven to make what he can of experience, and art is the terms of an armistice made with fate."⁵⁸

Bierce was an intellectual aristocrat; consequently, he held the notion that an aristocratic monarchy is the best form of government. His contempt for the masses extended into the sphere of theology as well. He rejected institutionalized religion. In an essay entitled "Religion," Bierce gives his moral platform:

That is my ultimate and determining test of right--'What, under the circumstances, would Christ have done?'--the Christ of the New Testament, not the Christ of the commentators, theologians, priests and parsons.⁵⁹

In all of his mental dealings, Bierce subordinates group experience to individual free choice.

Bierce had a special interest in woman and death.

⁵⁷Pope, op. cit., p. 150.

⁵⁸DeVoto, op. cit., p. 125.

⁵⁹S. O. Howes (ed.), The Shadow on the Dial and Other Essays, p. 143.

His classic statement on woman is an excellent example of the approach-avoidance conflict: "Woman would be more charming if one could fall into her arms without falling into her hands."⁶⁰ It is no wonder that Bierce viewed the gestures of mankind as inept. Man, as Bierce realized, is in an unenviable position.

Bierce was preoccupied with death. Defining longevity as the "uncommon extension of the fear of death,"⁶¹ he defended the individual's right to commit suicide. Again, the exertion of free will is the keynote:

It is urged that not knowing the purposes of the Creator in creating and giving us life, we should endure (and make our helpless friends endure) whatever ills befall, lest by death we ignorantly frustrate the divine plan. Merely pausing to remark that the plan of an omnipotent Deity is not easily frustrated, I should like to point out that in this very ignorance of the purpose of existence lies a justification of putting an end to it. I did not ask for existence; it was thrust upon me without my assent. As He who gave it has permitted it to become an affliction to me, and has not apprised me of its advantages to others or to Himself, I am not bound to assume that it has any such advantages. If when in my despair I ask why I ought to continue a life of suffering I am uncivilly denied an answer, I am not bound to believe, that the answer if given would satisfy me. So the game having gone against me and the dice appearing to be loaded, I may rightly and reasonably quit.⁶²

⁶⁰Bierce, VIII, 377.

⁶¹Bierce, VII, 197.

⁶²Bierce, IX, 335.

The emphasis upon the individual's choice is unmistakable. Bierce came to see life as only a means to an end; death became not only an end, but an end in itself.⁶³ He assumed that in death one is freed from ineptitude, illusion, chaos, and himself.

Various words have been used to describe Bierce, one of which is alienation. Van Wyck Brooks contends that a lonelier man never existed.⁶⁴ Wilson Follett asserts that Bierce was "intellectually the most homeless man of our time."⁶⁵ Percival Pollard, a contemporary of Bierce, described him thus: "For he is of that great company of artists who, whatever country they may have belonged to by birth or residence, belonged in the last analysis to no country whatever."⁶⁶ In all he did, Bierce stood alone, by necessity. The singularity of his existence is unmistakable in his speech: "I sometimes think that I am the only man in the world who understands the meaning of the written word. Or the only one who does not."⁶⁷ And so, this man who identified with no time and no place went through life

⁶³Robert Littell, Read America First, p. 184.

⁶⁴Brooks, op. cit., p. 150.

⁶⁵Wilson Follett, "America's Neglected Satirist," Dial, LXV (July 18, 1918), 51.

⁶⁶Percival Pollard, Their Day in Court, p. 257.

⁶⁷Quoted in Pope, op. cit., p. xxviii.

devoid of an identity.⁶⁸ He coined a phrase, born of unhappiness and revised into a philosophy of life-- "Nothing matters."

Bierce may rightfully be called a cynic. Follett sees him as the universal cynic.⁶⁹ Indeed, when one preaches "The world does not wish to be helped"⁷⁰ and "Expect nothing of others,"⁷¹ he deserves that title. At times, his cynicism bordered on nihilism.⁷² Without a doubt, he anticipated the vociferous pessimists of the 1920's.⁷³ Bierce appeared to be the universal cynic because he had learned, unlike most people, to distinguish between appearance and reality.

Bierce's theory of art contains traces of alienation and cynicism. He believed in art for art's sake; that is, art involved fixed principles, universal and immutable laws. He leaned heavily upon tradition: "Nothing new is to be learned in any of the great arts--the ancients looted the

⁶⁸Marcus Cunliffe (ed.), In the Midst of Life and Other Tales, p. 250.

⁶⁹Follett, op. cit., p. 51.

⁷⁰Pope, op. cit., p. 6.

⁷¹Quoted in Grattan, op. cit., p. 201.

⁷²Leroy J. Nations, "Ambrose Bierce: The Gray Wolf of American Letters," South Atlantic Quarterly, XXV (July, 1926), 258.

⁷³Granville Hicks, The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature since the Civil War, p. 155.

whole field."⁷⁴ Originality came to be simply a clothing of old ideas with freshness and wit.⁷⁵ He stressed exactitude, conciseness, objectivity, and unity of impression. He scorned the novel as simply a short story padded and diluted with nonessentials: "The only way to get unity of impression from a novel is to shut it up and look at the covers."⁷⁶ He repelled most of the literary customs of the day: local color, dialect, realism, and slang.⁷⁷ He derided what the modern formalist critics do: the biographical fallacy and the intentional fallacy. And he evolved his own short story form: forceful, witty, and climactic.⁷⁸ Actually, Bierce followed the philosophy of the short story to its theoretical pinnacle. Writing in

⁷⁴Bierce, X, 43.

⁷⁵Arthur M. Miller, "The Influence of Edgar Allan Poe on Ambrose Bierce," American Literature, IV (May, 1932), 150.

⁷⁶Bierce, X, 236.

⁷⁷Bierce penned some classic definitions of those things that he found appalling. For example, he defined realism as "the art of depicting nature as it is seen by toads. The charm suffusing a landscape painted by a mole, or a story written by a measuring-worm" (Bierce, VII, 276.). He made the following comments on slang: "The grunt of the human hog (Pignoramus intolerabilis) with an audible memory" (Bierce, VII, 322.); "Slang is the speech of him who robs the literary garbage carts on their way to the dumps" (Bierce, VIII, 358.); and "Slang is a foul pool at which every dunce fills his bucket, and then sets up a fountain" (Bierce, VIII, 369.).

⁷⁸Ambrose Bierce, In the Midst of Life, p. coverpiece.

1901, some ten years after Bierce's first collection of short stories, Brander Matthews proposed the following dogma: (1) "A short-story deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation;"⁷⁹ (2) "In no class of writing are neatness of construction and polish of execution more needed than in the writing of . . . Short-stories;"⁸⁰ (3) "The writer of Short-stories must be concise, and compression, a vigorous compression, is essential;"⁸¹ and (4) "If to compression, originality, and ingenuity he add also a touch of fantasy, so much the better."⁸² To each of these, Bierce adhered faithfully. In fact, his stories become so singular, so polished, so compressed, and so ingenious that they are almost elliptical tales.

Three literary modes also influenced the development of Ambrose Bierce: realism, romance, and naturalism. Realism is the faithful reproduction of facts as they appear to the senses, a one-to-one relationship between the object and the representation of the object.⁸³ Romance, on the other

⁷⁹Brander Matthews, The Philosophy of the Short-story, p. 15.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 29.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 22.

⁸²Ibid., p. 23.

⁸³William Flint Thrall, et. al., A Handbook to Literature, p. 397.

hand, deals with the picturesque, the more desirable features of existence.⁸⁴ At the close of the nineteenth century, naturalism became a factor in life and letters. The naturalist computed man as a summation of his environment, his heredity, and his destiny, over which he has no control.⁸⁵ An uncolored, objective style, perhaps best described as scientific, became a tool in depicting the uncolored, objective cosmic view that prevailed.⁸⁶ This tradition, as well as realism and romance, found a place in Bierce's artistic repertoire.

Ambrose Bierce spent a lifetime under a curse, the curse of life. Utilizing tradition and experience, Bierce cast the lessons that he had painfully learned into the mold of fiction.⁸⁷ His protagonists become ensnared in ineptitude, created by the exercise of their own free will. They fall short of their dreams and blindly sign an armistice with fate.

⁸⁴Eugen Current-Garcia and Walton R. Patrick (eds.), American Short Stories 1820 to the Present, p. xxvi.

⁸⁵Danforth Ross, The American Short Story, p. 25.

⁸⁶Charles Child Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream, p. 22.

⁸⁷Lawrence Ivan Berkove in a dissertation for the University of Pennsylvania in 1962 entitled Ambrose Bierce's Concern with Mind and Man discusses some of Bierce's short stories from the vantage point of his philosophy of life. Berkove reads the stories as manifestations of Bierce's skepticism and his failure to evade doom through rationalistic procedures.

CHAPTER II

EXECUTION--THE MILITARY FICTION

Among the millions of words that Ambrose Bierce willed humanity are some ninety-three short stories. Twenty-three of these are comic pieces, written more in the satiric mode than in the fictive mode. The remaining tales are a conglomerate, the usual classification being twofold: the tales of war and the tales of the supernatural. The range of these tales is wider than what the standard classification implies. The one unifying thread that runs throughout the stories is precisely the theme that weaves its way throughout the life of Ambrose Bierce--man recognizing and contesting the curse of life. Bierce designed a fictive world to depict man in his futile attempt to transcend his inadequacies.

Those stories that critics have lumped together as "tales of war" are tales of war in setting only. Each story is enacted within military borders. Bierce's purpose was much larger than simply a revelation of the brutality of war; he wished to reveal the brutality of life itself. This group of tales represents a conscious effort to give fictive representation to a basic truth--the curse of life.

In Bierce's stories of military borders, one finds recurring situations and recurring conflicts. Bierce's protagonists are naked and alone; his heroes are empty and their heroism goes for nought; they are annihilated by their own psychic fear; they are insignificant pawns in the hands of infinity; they are torn apart by antipodal thoughts; they find death, or rather death finds them, in the midst of life; and they exercise independence and individuality, but none too wisely.

Bierce's protagonists are naked of care and comfort. He presents them in their isolation, in their abnormality. Amidst anxiety, there is no humor and no sentiment. Love is always other than where they happen to be. Disenchantment melts into disillusionment, melancholy into pessimism. A chilling indifference crystallizes into a frigid inhumanity. Bierce's protagonists are drowning men, struggling in violent waters, often man-made.⁸⁸ Naked man is but one facet of the human farce.

The Biercean hero is not heroic. His gestures turn out to be empty gesticulations. He is a bewildered fool, performing senseless acts.⁸⁹ He never achieves more than a Pyrrhic victory. He is usually young, good, and brave.

⁸⁸ Edward J. O'Brien, The Advance of the American Short Story, p. 184.

⁸⁹ Mencken, op. cit., p. 261.

He is alone and lonely. Death comes not in the roar of battle, but in the absolute stillness of isolation. The Biercean hero experiences the reverse of military glory.⁹⁰ Bierce's war is not heroic, glorious, and idealistic; it is a sputtering ash, stupid, savage, and degrading.⁹¹ In speaking of the Biercean hero, Stuart C. Woodruff states: "He is, as someone has said of Hemingway's protagonists, the hero to whom things happen."⁹² Bierce once remarked: "Courage is the acceptance of the gambler's chance: a brave man bets against the game of the gods."⁹³ Bierce's heroes play the game with a stacked pile, a dealer who passes from the bottom of the deck, and their own bad luck. They lose.

Rather than the battlefields of the Civil War, Bierce's war fiction is staged on the battlefield of the mind. He shows on page after page the unbalancing effect of key situations on the mind. He sensed that the subconscious distorts and disfigures the world of the senses; he realized that the creations of the mind can make a hell of heaven

⁹⁰The National Cyclopedia of American Biography, XIV, p. 180.

⁹¹Mencken, op. cit., p. 261.

⁹²Stuart C. Woodruff, The Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce: A Study in Polarity, p. 50.

⁹³Bierce, VIII, 368.

and a heaven of hell. Bierce's protagonists become prey of the bizarre situations and the momentary stresses of their own creation.

The real enemy in Bierce's war stories is psychic fear. According to Edna Kenton, Bierce's thesis is that "man is a machine set in motion by fear."⁹⁴ Emotional tension and psychic unrest dart across each page of Bierce's stories, insisting that no man is immune to irrational fear. Bierce observed: "We are all dominated by our imaginations and our views are creatures of our viewpoints."⁹⁵ He realized that the mind is capable of producing physical pain and torture. He defined pain as "an uncomfortable frame of mind that may have a physical basis in something that is being done to the body, or may be purely mental"⁹⁶ In his war stories, Bierce's concern is not the marking of an army's progress from defeat to victory, but the analysis of a man's fleeting thoughts as he marches from life to eternity.⁹⁷

Throughout Bierce's war pieces, one senses the presence

⁹⁴Edna Kenton, "Ambrose Bierce and 'Moxon's Master,'" Bookman, LXII (September, 1925), 78.

⁹⁵Bierce, IX, 139.

⁹⁶Bierce, VII, 244.

⁹⁷"An English Tribute to the Genius of Ambrose Bierce," Current Opinion, LVIII (June, 1915), 427.

of an overriding impersonal force that reduces man to an insignificant cipher. Although this cosmic power often checks the protagonist's attempts to assert himself, it never checkmates him. Ultimately, the protagonist experiences disintegration from within rather than from without. Although this whimsical power often knocks man down, it never stomps on him. It may set the boundaries in which the hero functions, but it does not dictate his behavior.

Destiny almost seems a misnomer. Infinity would, perhaps, be a better term. The difference between the two concepts may be seen in Bierce's distinction between "casualties" and "losses" in war. He writes: "The essence of casualty is accident, absence of design. Death and wounds in battle are produced otherwise, are expectable and expected, and, by the enemy, intentional."⁹⁸ What appears to be at first the cold protruding hand of fate is really the ruthless grip of man upon his own throat. The keynote, then, is frustration. Man is frustrated by his own ineptitude, his absolute insignificance when painted upon the backdrop of infinity. He senses the futility of trying to control the flow of time. He feels cheated by life. Leroy J. Nations writes:

He [Bierce] caught the vision of the human

⁹⁸Ambrose Bierce, Write It Right: A Little Blacklist of Literary Faults, p. 17.

race, trapped and betrayed in the wilderness of the world; but, whereas most men have the heart to fight and win, Bierce had the heart to fight and lose.⁹⁹

Bierce's heroes fight, not the iron hand of destiny, but the self-made wilderness of the world, planted by their predecessors but tilled by their own ineptitude. Ultimate futility is knowing that the meaning of existence is meaninglessness. The curse of life comes from realizing that those gestures that are made by man to free himself from the wilderness only drive him deeper into the forest.

Bierce's heroes are ripped asunder by extremes. They experience a frustrated idealism, crushed by a harsh realism. They witness a world in which the creative imagination must always succumb to an empirical reality. In war and life, romance must yield to realism, and man, unable to satisfy his preconceived ideals, encounters failure and disillusionment. Experience drives a wedge between former beauty and present ugliness.

In most of Bierce's war stories, the hero is young and untried. He possesses a predilection for war. Bierce defined predilection as "the preparatory stage of disillusion."¹⁰⁰ The hero becomes a bruised idealist, holding

⁹⁹Nations, op. cit., p. 258.

¹⁰⁰Bierce, VII, 263.

the fragments of his dream.¹⁰¹ The theme of illusion-reality permeates even his less successful tales. At times, Bierce seems to be saying that there is no boundary between appearance and reality. One can attest the switching of the two almost at will, or as Wiggins words it, "He need only cock his head at a slight angle to see appearance and reality quickly shifting places."¹⁰² One might reach the chilling conclusion that nothing is really real, that existence itself is only an illusion.

Clearly echoing this theme of illusion-reality is Bierce's concept of time. He says: "The present is the frontier between the desert of the past and the garden of the future. It is redrawn every moment."¹⁰³ In other words, looking back, one sees only a road of thorns; looking ahead, one sees the path strewn with flowers. The same notion is contained in the following definition of the past by Bierce:

A moving line called the Present parts it from an imaginary period known as the Future. These two grand divisions of Eternity, of which the one is continually effacing the other, are entirely unlike. The one is dark with sorrow and disappointment, the other bright with prosperity and joy. The Past is the region of

¹⁰¹Ruth Guthrie Harding, "Mr. Boythorn-Bierce," Bookman, LXI (August, 1925), 643.

¹⁰²Wiggins, op. cit., p. 34.

¹⁰³Bierce, VIII, 369.

sobs, the Future is the realm of song. In the one crouches Memory, clad in sackcloth and ashes, mumbling penitential prayer; in the sunshine of the other Hope flies with a free wing, beckoning to temples of success and bowers of ease. Yet the Past is the Future of yesterday, the Future is the Past of tomorrow. They are one--the knowledge and the dream.¹⁰⁴

Once again one arrives at the conclusion that everything is not as it appears to be. Existence itself is a mocking dream. In drawing his circle of disillusionment, Bierce makes his arc to enclose all eternity:

Why don't you study humanity as you do the suns--not from the viewpoint of time, but from that of eternity. The middle ages were yesterday, Rome and Greece the day before. The individual man is nothing, as a single star is nothing.¹⁰⁵

Neither retreat nor progress will exempt man from futility.

Bierce's heroes constantly encounter a world of violent contrasts. They are tricked by the disparity between assumptions made about life and conclusions reached through life. What they hope for and what they get are two entirely different packages. As a result, Bierce's protagonists are crucified by dreams. Sometimes the memory of a memory will dismember the protagonist.¹⁰⁶ Unable to conquer the inconsistencies of life, the hopelessness of hope, the

¹⁰⁴Bierce, VII, 247.

¹⁰⁵Pope, op. cit., p. 149.

¹⁰⁶de Castro, op. cit., p. viii.

cruelty of obedience, and the uselessness of glory,¹⁰⁷ man signs an armistice with infinity. Bierce believed that "life is a farce to him who thinks, a tragedy to him who feels."¹⁰⁸ He might have added "a curse to those who think and feel."

The disparity between illusion and reality is Bierce's artistic credo of war; death is the coda. In most of Bierce's war stories, the denouement takes place at the grave. Once again, the reader witnesses the downfall of the young, the good, and the brave, only now the result is fatal. Suicides, which are plentiful in Bierce's fiction,¹⁰⁹ dramatize man trapped in the snare of the world and betrayed until the vision is unbearable. The fatal consequence is usually a product of uncontrollable fear, the fear usually an illusion. Because of his negative world, Bierce was called "a death-man, a denier of life."¹¹⁰ Indeed, he warrants that appellation with ideas like the following to his credit or discredit, whichever the case may be: he

¹⁰⁷Ernest Jerome Hopkins, The Complete Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce, p. 262.

¹⁰⁸Quoted in Woodruff, op. cit., p. 120.

¹⁰⁹Suicides occur in the following war stories: "The Mocking-Bird," "One of the Missing," "Killed at Resaca," "One Officer, One Man," "The Story of a Conscience," "George Thurston," and "A Tough Tussle."

¹¹⁰George P. West, "The California Literati," American Mercury, VIII (July, 1926), 284.

stated that the enemies of mankind are two in number, life and the fear of death;¹¹¹ he indicated that perhaps the ultimate damnation would be to live forever.¹¹² Richard O'Connor summarizes Bierce's concept of death and its role in his stories in the following manner:

Death was the trap at the end of the path down which Bierce led his readers, and he would make them realize that all the religions in the world, all the philosophers and comforters, could not spring its jaws.¹¹³

Paradoxically, the only relief from the curse of life in Bierce's stories seems to be one last awkward gesture, the death rattle.

One remaining situation that recurs in Bierce's war fiction is the freedom of choice exhibited by the protagonist. A. M. Wright lists this exercise of choice as following three patterns: (1) as a solution to a dilemma, (2) as a change in attitude under stress, or (3) as a reiterated choice.¹¹⁴ Because Bierce's protagonists often make their choices with high, noble motives in mind, the gulf between illusion and reality is extended. The hero appears all the more awkward.

¹¹¹Bierce, VIII, 360.

¹¹²Bierce, VIII, 344.

¹¹³Richard O'Connor, Ambrose Bierce: A Biography, p. 165.

¹¹⁴Austin McGiffert Wright, The American Short Story in the Twenties, p. 240.

M. E. Grenander classifies Bierce's stories into two groups:

- (1) those stories in which the protagonist diagnoses a situation as harmless and it is in reality harmful; and
- (2) those stories in which the protagonist diagnoses a situation as harmful and it is in reality harmless.¹¹⁵

Since the hero's choice is wrong, he proves even more inept.

Even though Bierce implies that all existence is an illusion, he did believe that there exists one reality--truth. "Truth is what happens, whether it appears to be a mere coincidence or not."¹¹⁶ Although Bierce's themes have been described as "sick,"¹¹⁷ there is a degree of verisimilitude in each of the stories that is undeniable. If they are, indeed, sick, then humanity itself is ill. And the way to alleviate a malady is to first recognize the ailment as such.

Bierce utilizes several techniques in his stories of military borders. The first is the function of the military itself. Instead of the Civil War, one may insert any war, attaching universal significance to each tale. But Bierce's

¹¹⁵M. E. Grenander, "Bierce's Turn of the Screw: Tales of Ironical Terror," Western Humanities Review, XI. (Summer, 1957), 261.

¹¹⁶Howard W. Bahr, "Ambrose Bierce and Realism," Southern Quarterly, I (July, 1963), 311.

¹¹⁷William Peden, The American Short Story: Front Line in the National Defense of Literature, p. 112.

intention transcended even this. He employed what may very well be the perfect metaphor for the human condition. As Woodruff has observed, war in Bierce's military fiction is the controlling metaphor for the world and its ways.¹¹⁸ Within this metaphor, Bierce could depict man responding awkwardly to his environment. He could dramatize the illusion-reality theme. He could clearly reveal the attraction and the repulsion of order. And he could lucidly show the advantages and the disadvantages of selfhood. In short, war is the epitome of the central fact of existence; that is, the self-destruction of each man by each man. The substance of all of Bierce's war stories is the violence of life; war is only the fictive setting. In fact, all of Bierce's observations in his war-world find equal expression in a nonmilitary setting. Life is just as impersonal, just as chaotic, and just as senseless as war. Man is just as idiotic in civilian clothes as he is in a soldier's garb.¹¹⁹ Bertha Clark Pope describes Bierce's fictive portrayal of man as "the greatest human drama--the conflict between life and death--fused with genius."¹²⁰ War is only the stage on which the drama is enacted.

¹¹⁸Woodruff, op. cit., p. 23.

¹¹⁹"Novel Notes," Bookman, VII (May, 1898), 257.

¹²⁰Pope, op. cit., p. xx.

Bierce's method of characterization may be considered a technique. His characters are, in large part, mechanical. Rather than being fully drawn, three-dimensional individuals, they are types. Eric Partridge suggests that Bierce supplies just enough life to his characters so that the reader senses the human significance of their actions.¹²¹ Bierce, no doubt, intentionally drew his characters with this frigid detachment. Since it is utterly impossible to feel any acute emotion for Bierce's dead protagonists, they appear all the more trapped, rejected, and alone.

Inherently complementing the characterization is Bierce's style of writing. He insisted that the exact word is indispensable in conveying a thought. As a result, his writing reveals a specificity in expression and an impeccable presentation of detail. His style is crisp and lucid.. It has been described as "what Kipling's would have been had Kipling been born with any understanding of the significance of the word 'art.'"¹²² Because of the accolades, one must agree with Fred Lewis Pattee that Bierce is unsurpassed in precision of diction.¹²³

¹²¹Eric Partridge, "Ambrose Bierce," London Mercury, XVI (October, 1927), 630.

¹²²"Another Attempt to Boost Bierce into Immortality," Current Opinion, LXV (September, 1918), 184.

¹²³Fred Lewis Pattee (ed.), American Short Stories, p. 29.

Bierce experiments with point of view in his stories. At times, he uses a first person narrator. In addition, one often encounters an intrusive narrator who supplies auctorial comment on the action. And in one of his tales, Bierce employs a first person plural narrator who relates the action in present tense.

Although Bierce uses a variety of narrators, he usually employs a detached and impersonal mode of narration that objectifies the events. In these tales, the staccato scenes are journalistic in their calmness and reserve.¹²⁴ These military accounts are fittingly related with a military precision. The narrative is a succession of explosions of ironic surprise, verbal rockets of compression and impact, each stage igniting the following stage.¹²⁵ The conciseness is pitiless and cruel. Pollard describes Bierce's style as "absolutely impersonal; it was as relentless as Fate, as perfect and as purposeless as the diamond."¹²⁶ This precise and concise style of writing consistently provides

¹²⁴Eugene C. Flinn in a 1954 dissertation entitled Ambrose Bierce and the Journalization of the American Short Story for St. John's discusses the role of journalism in the evolution of the short story in general and the role of Bierce's journalistic experiences in the development of his short stories in particular.

¹²⁵Wilson Follett, "Ambrose Bierce: An Analysis of the Perverse Wit that Shaped His Work," Bookman, LXVIII (November, 1928), 285.

¹²⁶Pollard, op. cit., p. 262.

the background on which chaotic, cruel, grim, and horrendous scenes are enacted. It is a chilling presentation of a chilling universe. Bierce's craftsmanship through its compression and economy reinforces the detachment and the remoteness that haunt the protagonists.

Like Poe, with whom Bierce is sometimes compared, Bierce desired to leave one vivid impression in the minds of his readers. He spoke of "a virgin attention at a single setting."¹²⁷ Each word should work to achieve an unity of impression. The device he employed to clinch a vivid impression was the surprise ending. With an unnerving conclusion, he stuns the reader with a blinding flash. Often, the final sentence forces the reader to reconsider the entire story in a new perspective.¹²⁸ Without a doubt, Bierce wrote for effect, for revelation through a startling climax.¹²⁹ Although the surprise ending may at times seem forced, no one has used it more effectively than Bierce.

Some critics argue that the snap ending is an artificial device and an artistic flaw. Whether it is a limitation or an accomplishment, Bierce executed it better than any other

¹²⁷Bierce, X, 18.

¹²⁸Claude M. Simpson and Allan Nevins (eds.), The American Reader, p. 860.

¹²⁹Fred Lewis Pattee, A History of American Literature since 1870, p. 379.

practitioner. F. T. Cooper argues that Bierce conceals the scaffolding of the story so well that the story flows with an easy spontaneity.¹³⁰

Another complaint leveled against Bierce's technique is that a story once read ceases to thrill the reader with the initial anticipation. This criticism, however, could very easily be directed at all literature. George Sterling contends that Bierce's stories can be read repeatedly because of their subtle artistry, without a diminution of pleasure.¹³¹ In addition, Bierce engages the reader in his stories. One often feels himself a participant in the narrative rather than a mere reader.¹³² Seeing the protagonist in an awkward situation battling ineptitude with rationality, the reader quickly sides with the hero. Because the reader identifies with the protagonist, his identification is heightened until the end when he is crushed along with the hero. The reader experiences a kind of catharsis, a relief from the intense immediacy of the action. For this reason, Bierce's tales continue to excite the reader throughout subsequent readings.

In addition to the preceding techniques, Bierce utilizes several others. He uses contrasts consistently to offset

¹³⁰Frederic Taber Cooper, Some American Story Tellers, p. 345.

¹³¹Sterling, op. cit., p. xvi.

¹³²Bailey Millard, "Personal Memories of Ambrose Bierce," Bookman, XL (February, 1915), 657.

key action. For example, secondary characters often function as foils to the protagonist. Men are sometimes described in terms of animals or machines, and the instruments of war are, in turn, given human characteristics.¹³³ Sometimes the setting functions as a foil to the action. The setting often operates as an objectification of the protagonist's psychological disintegration. The forest, the most common setting, represents the psyche, where fear, isolation, and the unknown stalk hidden pathways. Bierce uses flashbacks and momentary interruptions to emulate the workings of the human mind. Through these fictive techniques, Bierce achieves a workable fictive world.

Perhaps the tale most representative of Bierce's fictive world is "One of the Missing."¹³⁴ The story concerns a private named Jerome Searing. Throughout the first paragraph, he is described in heroic terms: "an incomparable marksman, young"; "hardy, intelligent, and insensible to fear"; and "his extraordinary daring, his woodcraft, his sharp eyes, and truthful tongue" (71). His aloneness is dramatized as

¹³³Eric Soloman, "The Bitterness of Battle: Ambrose Bierce's War Fiction," Midwest Quarterly, V (January, 1964), 158.

¹³⁴Bierce, II, 71-92. All further references to "One of the Missing" will be taken from this source. To accommodate expediency and logicality, quotations from the primary source will be given internal documentation immediately following the quoted portion after the story has been clearly indicated and the source fully cited.

he turns his back upon his comrades, steps outside of the perimeter of the camp, and disappears into a forest. Entering the forest, he also symbolically enters the foliage of his own mind. All of the descriptions of the forest apply to Searing's mental wilderness as well as to his immediate physical surroundings. In spite of lurking danger, Jerome Searing remains calm and brave: "His pulse was as regular, his nerves as steady, as if he were trying to trap a sparrow" (73). From the initial exposure to Searing, one would think it utterly impossible for him to succumb to the enemy. The foe that defeats him, however, is not a Confederate battalion, but his own self.

Maneuvering through the forest like a true soldier, stealthy Jerome Searing comes upon a deserted plantation. Since it is obviously uninhabited, Searing races to the deserted granary, located upon a slight elevation. It is a shaky structure, looking "as if the whole edifice would go down at the touch of a finger" (75). From this structure, he sees the rear-guard of the retiring Confederate army. For no particular reason, Searing decides to send a shot flying that way. He realizes that his firing will not alter the course of the war, but he insists on exercising his own free will. The same capricious assertion of self prompts a Confederate captain, mistaking a blotch on a hill for Federal officers, to fire in Searing's direction. The shot

hits one of the timbers supporting the granary and Searing is buried beneath a cloud of dust. Of this scene, the narrator remarks:

Nothing had been neglected--at every step in the progress of both these men's lives, and in the lives of their contemporaries and ancestors, and in the lives of the contemporaries of their ancestors, the right thing had been done to bring about the desired result (77).

This reflection is a simple paraphrase of Bierce's idea of truth; that is, whatever happens is truth. Searing appears to be trapped by heritage, but it is by an act of free will that he reveals his ineptitude. With eternity as a background, Searing's act appears even more absurd.

Regaining consciousness, Searing discovers himself to be the victim of a premature burial. Unable to move, he intermittently looks at a ring of shining metal before his eyes, unable to understand what it is. Suddenly he realizes that it is the muzzle of his own rifle, cocked, and pointed at the exact center of his forehead. At first, Searing is unaffected. Slowly, but assuredly, his mind begins the one-way trip to self-annihilation. First, he attempts to free himself in aimless, groping gestures. His senses become more acute. The ring of metal that once seemed "an immeasurable distance away--a distance so inconceivably great that it fatigued him" (79) now seemed to have moved nearer. A short time later, it seemed to be once more at

an inconceivable distance away. From the darkness, silence, and infinite tranquillity of the solemn forest and Searing's solemn mind sprouts a seed of fear.

The fear starts as a dull ache. "He opened his eyes and it was gone--closed them and it returned" (85). The fear is obviously a mental apparition. The dull ache grows to tension and matures finally to delirium. A colony of rats appears in the granary. Searing, at first, pays little regard. Then he is seized by the dreadful thought that they might trip the trigger. He screams frantically for them to go away. When they do, he ponders the scene of his death, with the rats returning to gnaw away at his dead body. He grows progressively more delirious.

The pain in his forehead was fierce and incessant. He felt it gradually penetrating the brain more and more deeply, until at last its progress was arrested by the wood at the back of his head. It grew momentarily more insufferable; he began wantonly beating his lacerated hand against the splinters again to counteract that horrible ache. It seemed to throb with a slow, regular recurrence, each pulsation sharper than the preceding, and sometimes he cried out, thinking that he felt the fatal bullet (88).

Searing's delirium is not insanity but fear. The granary becomes the cosmos. "Here in this confusion of timbers and boards is the sole universe. Here is immortality in time--each pain an everlasting life. The throbs tick off eternities" (88). And it is precisely the confusion that terrifies Searing. His fear is not so much that he is to

die, but that he does not know when death is coming. The lack of order frightens him until "his teeth rattled like castanets" (89).

Suddenly, Searing shapes a design of death in his mind, and just as suddenly, he regains his composure. Having freed a hand, he secures a board and reaches to trip the lever himself. Closing his eyes and thrusting the board against the trigger with all his might, he meets death, a planned and ordered encounter. But "there was no explosion; the rifle had been discharged as it dropped from his hand when the building fell" (90). Searing's last act of free will, his last attempt to overcome his awkwardness, results only in more stupidity and more absurdity.

Bierce often utilizes an epilogue to heighten an already exaggerated effect. In "One of the Missing," Lieutenant Adrian Searing, the brother of the protagonist, leads a group of soldiers upon the collapsed granary. He sees the body and concludes that the man has been dead a week when in reality it has been only twenty-two minutes. The body, covered with dust, and the features, altered by fear, are unrecognizable. Self-inflicted fear has transformed Searing beyond recognition; he has lost his individuality. What appears to be heroism is actually suicide.

In "One of the Missing," Bierce uses the setting to underscore the theme. The cruel-looking sky and the strangely

ominous song of birds underline the cruel cosmos and the strangely ominous song of selfhood. Searing's journey into the forest has acquainted him, not with the fear of unknown physical dangers, but with the danger of psychic fear. Descending into the forest, he discovers the inner reaches of his own mind.

"One of the Missing" is the paradigm of Bierce's fictive world and private Jerome Searing is the prototype of the Biercean hero.¹³⁵ In striving to transcend his ineptitude, he only entrenches himself deeper in it. Rejecting the order of his military position, he asserts his selfhood, and later finds a flicker of hope in restoring order upon his chaotic world. His ultimate error is in conceiving a harmless situation to be harmful and allowing his own mind to become unhinged. Searing is a modern man destroyed by a primitive emotion.

As is often the case, Bierce assigns the protagonist a name that underscores his condition. "Sear" has a dual meaning. On the one hand, it is a verb meaning to "wither away." It is also a noun denoting the catch that holds a gun half-cocked. Jerome Searing, of course, withers away before a half-cocked gun. With this technique as a crowning touch, Bierce preaches his message that in the midst of life there is death, that man is stamped with the curse of

¹³⁵Woodruff, op. cit., p. 27.

life, and that much, if not all, of existence is illusion.

In "A Tough Tussle,"¹³⁶ the protagonist travels the same one-way road to self-destruction as Searing does. The story opens with Second-Lieutenant Brainerd Byring sitting "alone in the heart of a forest" (106). He is "a brave and efficient officer, young and comparatively inexperienced" (107). He is gallant, educated, and prepossessing. In short, Byring is the model of youth, courage, and military fineness. The forest that surrounds him reflects his mind.

He to whom the portentous conspiracy of night and solitude and silence in the heart of a great forest is not an unknown experience needs not to be told what another world it all is-- how even the most commonplace and familiar objects take on another character (110).

With only the thoughts of silence and solitude to keep his lonely mind company, Byring is prey to fear. A later description of the mind-forest foreshadows the action:

There are sounds without a name, forms without substance, translations in space of objects which have not been seen to move, movements wherein nothing is observed to change its place (110).

The eerie, ghostlike trance of the forest reflects the mental state of the protagonist as well as prefigures forthcoming action. Just as the forest is boundless in its "primeval mystery of darkness, without form and void, himself the sole, dumb questioner of its eternal secret," (111) Byring

¹³⁶Bierce, III, 106-120.

is to learn that his own mind is boundless in primeval fear, without form and void.

Byring sees an object lying a short distance from him. He swears it was not there before. Already his imagination is toying with actuality. He realizes that the object is a dead body. His recognition of the object as a human figure brings little comfort, and he grows uneasy as the figure, obviously dead, seems to move nearer when he isn't looking. Byring quickly catalogues the indefinable feeling that is racing through his mind as a sense of the supernatural rather than fear. He rationalizes for his experiencing it by insisting that it is a part of every man's nature. It is a "heritage of terror, which is transmitted from generation to generation--is as much a part of us as are our blood and bones" (113). Having emerged from the shadow, the body lies "ghastly white in the moonlight" (114). Byring, in order to convince himself that he is no coward, decides to look boldly at the body to prove his courage. His gaze falls on the dead man's face and becomes fixed to it, as if it were nailed. Byring's thinking deteriorates to the point of not even recognizing his own laugh. Violently trembling, he becomes enslaved in his own ineptitude. "His face was wet, his whole body bathed in a chill perspiration. He could not even cry out" (116). His psychic aberration intensifies as he notes that the body has again

moved. In a moment of fury, he sees the dead body actually in the process of moving, visibly before his eyes. Finally, Byring is reduced to bestiality. "With a cry like that of some great bird pouncing upon its prey he sprang forward, hot-hearted for action!" (118). The confusion of the ensuing scene is lost in the confusion of a broader scope. The sounds are muffled by shoutings. Retreating soldiers firing backward at random and mounted madmen storm upon the scene. The heart of the forest becomes the vortex of a mad storm of absurdity, symbolizing the crazed mind of its chief occupant.

Byring is discovered the following morning by a captain and a surgeon of his own company. Byring is dead, with his own sword carefully stuck through his heart. They conclude that the combatants experienced a tough tussle. As they pull at the other dead man's leg, it separates from the body and a faint, sickening odor drifts into the air and a colony of maggots crawls from the hole. Once again, what appears to be glorious heroism is in reality empty suicide.

As Woodruff has noted, the story is set upon a contrast between the rational view that Byring holds and the irrational experience that he confronts.¹³⁷ It is a tale of abortive ratiocination. The tough tussle occurs not only in the

¹³⁷Woodruff, op. cit., p. 140.

haunted solitude of a forest, but also, and more importantly, in the primeval wilderness of the hero's mind. Byring's first name, Brainerd, leads one to believe that he is a man of great intellectuality. Judging by his name and his initial credentials, Brainerd Byring should be the last person to yield to ineptitude, illusion, and chaos. But he does, and the curse of life gains another victim.

Yet another story involving suicide is "Killed at Resaca."¹³⁸ It begins with the Biercean hero garbed in his familiar clothing of youth, courage, and military finery. Lieutenant Herman Brayle possesses "a gentleman's manners, a scholar's head, and a lion's heart" (94). Brayle's most distinctive quality is his refusal to take cover from oncoming enemy fire.

He would stand like a rock in the open when officers and men alike had taken to cover; while men older in service and years, higher in rank and of unquestionable intrepidity, were loyally preserving behind the crest of a hill lives infinitely precious to their country, this fellow would stand, equally idle, on the ridge, facing in the direction of the sharpest fire (95).

Brayle chooses to behave in the foregoing manner. Through his exercise of choice, he isolates himself from his comrades.

During the battle at Resaca, Georgia, Lieutenant Brayle

¹³⁸Bierce, II, 93-104.

is ordered to deliver a message to another officer. Rather than going on foot through the woods, Brayle canters into the open field taking the shorter route. His appearance provokes an onslaught of enemy fire and the general orders a private to retrieve the "'damned fool'" (99). Before he travels ten yards, the private and his horse are riddled with bullets. It is a stupid order. By this time, Brayle had ridden into the center of the open field, untouched. "Invisible now from either side, and equally doomed by friend and foe," (100) he halts at an impassable gully. "He could not go forward, he would not turn back; he stood awaiting death. It did not keep him long waiting" (101). Brayle's freedom of choice and his insistent execution of it place him in an avoidance-avoidance situation. He can neither proceed nor retreat. He is as trapped as was Jerome Searing beneath the fallen timbers of the granary. Like Searing, Brayle awaits the cold breath of death.

The narrator of the story is burdened with the task of ordering Brayle's possessions. Among his mementoes is a letter from Marian Mendenhall, charging Brayle with the crime of cowardice. The reader now realizes with the narrator that Brayle has courageously flirted with death to refute his lover's allegation. The narrator decides to deliver the account of Brayle's heroic death personally to the lady. When the letter is placed in her hands, she

itches it into the fire.

The light of the burning letter was reflected in her eyes and touched her cheek with a tinge of crimson like the stain upon its page. I had never seen anything so beautiful as this detestable creature (104).

Outraged that a woman could be so cruel, the narrator refuses to give her the satisfaction of knowing that her scheme has proven successful. When she asks how Brayle died, the narrator replies, "'He was bitten by a snake!'" (104).

The narrator of "Killed at Resaca" is a reflector of the reader's vision; he acquires a knowledge of defective love. In the eyes of the narrator and the reader, Brayle's death becomes even more senseless and stupid. The contrast between what he hoped to gain in a glorious death and what he actually gets is almost unbearable. His heroism goes for nought. Beside the infidelity of his lover, Brayle's faithful courage appears all the more empty. As the homonym of his name suggests, Brayle was blind to the inconsistencies of life and futilely groped for happiness. He deliberately and knowingly played the game of the gods and lost. Upon the narrator falls the burden of awareness, a dramatization of the curse of life.

The tune of heroism goes unsung also in "The Coup de Grace."¹³⁹ This narrative begins as the smoke of battle

¹³⁹Bierce, II, 122-132.

is just leaving a field of fallen soldiers. The burial squad is performing its odious task of collecting, tagging, and burying the dead. Captain Downing Madwell, a Federal officer, watches the hideous ritual from a distance. "From his feet upward to his neck his attitude was that of weariness reposing; but he turned his head uneasily from side to side; his mind was apparently not at rest" (123). Madwell is obviously a thinking man. He is seemingly lost in thought as well as disoriented to his surroundings. Stalking into the forest, he walks into "the red west, its light staining his face like blood" (124). As in most of Bierce's stories, the forest represents the haunting solitude of the protagonist's mind. He enters his own mental wilderness as he descends into the forest. The bloodlike sun foreshadows the denouement.

Madwell, "a daring and intelligent soldier, an honorable man," (125) walks over a carpet of bodies upon the forest floor. Having no water and being no surgeon, Madwell ignores the living as well as the dead. He comes upon a friend, Sergeant Caffal Halcrow, mortally wounded.

He [Halcrow] moaned at every breath. He stared blankly into the face of his friend and if touched screamed. In his giant agony he had torn up the ground on which he lay; his clenched hands were full of leaves and twigs and earth. Articulate speech was beyond his power; it was impossible to know if he were sensible to anything but pain (128).

Madwell is just as helpless to his friend as he was to the

horde of dying men that he just passed over. A horse, neighing piteously, captures Madwell's attention. Drawing his revolver, he sends a bullet between the eyes of the animal and releases him from his death struggle. Seeing a herd of parasitic swine rumaging distant corpses and sensing Sergeant Halcrow's silent plea for death, Madwell decides to administer the coup de grace to Halcrow as well, thus alleviating his friend's mortal anguish. Placing his revolver upon Halcrow's forehead, Madwell turns his head, and fires. The gun clicks, the last cartridge having been used on the horse. Halcrow is now moaning convulsively and frothing at the mouth. Madwell draws his sword and runs it through his friend into the ground. At this moment, three figures emerge from a clump of trees; two are hospital attendants and the third is Major Creede Halcrow, the Sergeant's brother. Madwell's heroic act, no doubt, appears stupidly ruthless to the onlookers. What Madwell hoped to achieve is drastically different from what he actually gets. In attempting to overcome man's awkward, disorderly manner, Madwell only multiplies the ineptitude.

Once again, the name of the protagonist bears special significance. Madwell wished his friend "well," but to the objective viewer his actions seem "mad." The crux of the story is contained in the hero's name.

Because of its explosive ending, "The Coup de Grace"

stuns the reader with its sudden significance.¹⁴⁰ A. H. Quinn considers the tragic ending to be terrific in its presentation and effect.¹⁴¹ Certainly, the surprise ending functions in this story as the essential vehicle in conveying the meaning.

In terms of craft, "Parker Adderson, Philosopher"¹⁴² is one of Bierce's best stories. The story opens with General Clavering interrogating Adderson, a Federal spy captured by the Confederate army. Amidst tainted candlelight, Adderson responds to the general's questions with iridescent wit and brilliant humor. Outside the General's tent, a tempest is raging.

It was a stormy night. The rain cascaded upon the canvas in torrents, with the dull, drumlike sound familiar to dwellers in tents. As the whooping blasts charged upon it the frail structure shook and swayed and strained at its confining stakes and ropes (135).

Adderson's philosophic wit and sophomoric humor appear even more calm and soothing against the backdrop of nature's fury. The general is quite fearful of death and regards it with a good deal of respect. Adderson's nonchalance is underscored by the general's fidgety behavior.

To Clavering's questions, Adderson counters with

¹⁴⁰Current-Garcia, op. cit., p. 182.

¹⁴¹Quinn, op. cit., p. 523.

¹⁴²Bierce, II, 133-145.

witticisms and understatement. He lectures the general on pain, death, and life itself. He preaches that since there is no transition period between life and death, one should meet it with a cold indifference. In the middle of Adderson's harangue, General Clavering orders him to be shot immediately. Thinking that he was not to be executed until the following morning, Adderson cries hoarsely, shouts inarticulately, and begs for his life. In a last effort to secure his life, Adderson attacks his opponents "with the fury of a madman" (141). They struggle blindly beneath the collapsed tent. When the canvas is lifted and the combatants separated, the captain is found dead, the general is seriously wounded, and the spy is relatively free from physical injury, although he is pale, frightened, and utterly incoherent in his speech.

The storm clears and the moon appears.

Ten minutes later Sergeant Parker Adderson of the Federal army, philosopher and wit, kneeling in the moonlight and begging incoherently for his life, was shot to death by twenty men (144).

General Clavering smiles calmly, says, "'I suppose this must be death,'" (145) and dies. In ending the story in this manner, Bierce has inverted the situations that initiated the tale. Adderson, who appeared to maintain a philosophic pose toward death, has his idealistic notions dashed upon the rocks of a bitter reality. General Clavering, harboring at first a nervous anticipation of death, meets death like

a true philosopher.

In adopting an undisturbed equanimity, Parker Adderson attempts to transcend the ineptitude that he vociferously cites as a primitive heritage. As his ordered plan is crushed and as chaos comes to the forefront, Adderson buckles under the strain of reality. Woodruff suggests that the significance of this story is that the reasoning faculty is itself an illusion.¹⁴³ One must not overlook, as A. M. Wright points out, that Adderson deliberately and knowingly chooses cowardice.¹⁴⁴ His exercise of selfhood proves more of a curse than a blessing.

In "Chickamauga,"¹⁴⁵ one clearly sees the legacy of ineptitude tormenting subsequent generations. In this story, a six-year-old child enters a forest unobserved on a sunny autumn afternoon. Having seen his father's military picture books, the child has made himself a wooden sword. He is in pursuit of imaginary foes. Only minutes into the wilderness, the child encounters a rabbit that terrifies him.

With a startled cry the child turned and fled, he knew not in what direction, calling with inarticulate cries for his mother, weeping, stumbling, his tender skin cruelly torn by

¹⁴³Woodruff, op. cit., p. 133.

¹⁴⁴Wright, op. cit., p. 240.

¹⁴⁵Bierce, II, 46-57.

brambles, his little heart beating hard with terror--breathless, blind with tears--lost in the forest! (48).

This is his first exposure to reality and he finds it unbearable. Since the child has learned from his elders, his elders have obviously conditioned him to an illusory world where the creative imagination allows no empirical reality to enter, not even real rabbits.

As twilight settles upon the forest, the child sees "a strange moving object which he took to be some large animal--a dog, a pig--he could not name it; perhaps it was a bear" (49). It moves awkwardly in a very unnatural way. The object, unknown to the child, is a man, wounded in battle. He is dragging himself to freedom. Suddenly, the forest is alive with moving men, all dragging their dying bodies toward the brook. The child views the ghastly spectacle as a game. He runs among the men, peeping into their faces with an innocent curiosity and laughing at their clownlike gestures. He hops aboard one of the men, riding him like a horse.

The man sank upon his breast, recovered, flung the small boy fiercely to the ground as an unbroken colt might have done, then turned upon him a face that lacked a lower jaw--from the upper teeth to the throat was a great red gap fringed with hanging shreds of flesh and splinters of bone. The unnatural prominence of nose, the absence of chin, the fierce eyes, gave this man the appearance of a great bird of prey crimsoned in throat and breast by the blood of its quarry (52).

Still regarding the clumsy multitude as objects of play, the child brandishes his wooden sword, places himself in the lead, and directs the hideous pantomime as if a parade.

The march proceeds towards a strange red light that becomes brighter as they draw nearer. As the light comes into view, it bursts into a vast red illumination that brightens the entire forest. Sensing the excitement, the child hurls his wooden sword into the blaze and dances with glee, imitating the wavering, flickering flames. Suddenly, the child recalls a vague familiarity of the surroundings. He recognizes the blazing building as his own home and a nearby object as his mother, tattered and shattered by a shell.

The child moved his little hands, making wild, uncertain gestures. He uttered a series of inarticulate and indescribable cries--something between the chattering of an ape and the gobbling of a turkey--a startling, soulless, unholy sound, the language of a devil (57).

The ghastly scene is further dramatized by the reader's learning that the child is a deaf-mute. The story ends with the child standing motionless, looking down upon the burning wreck.

"Chickamauga" reveals the indoctrination of innocent youth to the curse of life. The child's dream is disturbed by a real rabbit. A real battle is disturbed by the child's dream. Illusion and reality run together to make one indistinguishable picture. The child is imprisoned within

the forest, just as his mind is trapped within the ineptitude of man. The central significance of the story is not unlike other Bierce tales: man is his own source of destruction, the seeds of which are passed from generation to generation. Although Pattee criticizes "Chickamauga" as being mechanical in structure and the ending as being contrived in effect,¹⁴⁶ McWilliams considers it one of Bierce's most successful tales.¹⁴⁷ The curse of life and its devastating effect is, perhaps, nowhere more vividly presented.

No other Bierce short story has received as much critical attention as "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge."¹⁴⁸ Critical commentary ranges from Pattee's pronouncement of "deliberately manufactured"¹⁴⁹ to Valency's assertion that it is an American classic.¹⁵⁰ The tale itself is quite simple.

The opening lines produce an immediate and intimate awareness that strikes the keynote of the tale. Sean O'Faolain insists that a story must immediately establish

¹⁴⁶Fred Lewis Pattee, The Development of the American Short Story, p. 305.

¹⁴⁷Carey McWilliams, Ambrose Bierce: A Biography, p. 51.

¹⁴⁸Bierce, II, 27-45.

¹⁴⁹Fred Lewis Pattee, The Development of the American Short Story, p. 305.

¹⁵⁰Valency, op. cit., p. vi.

this rapport.¹⁵¹ Indeed, Bierce achieves this contact in the opening sentence of the story. "A man stood upon a railroad bridge in northern Alabama, looking down into the swift water twenty feet below" (27). The reader is immediately thrust into the tale and immersed in the action. Before he has time to get his bearings, he is involved in an undeniably arresting situation.¹⁵² With the man's hands behind his back, his wrists tied with a cord, and a rope about his neck, he is as trapped as any of Bierce's protagonists. Standing upon a bridge plank in complete silence, Peyton Farquhar awaits the sudden dropping of the plank, the instantaneous tightening of the rope, and the snapping of the neck. He suddenly becomes conscious of a sound like the bang of a blacksmith's hammer upon his anvil.

He wondered what it was, and whether immeasurably distant or near by--it seemed both. Its recurrence was regular, but as slow as the tolling of a death knell. He awaited each stroke with impatience and--he knew not why--apprehension. The intervals of silence grew progressively longer; the delays became maddening (310).

The sound is only the ticking of his own watch. The mind of the condemned man toys mercilessly with time.

As the plank on which Farquhar stands is slipped away,

¹⁵¹Sean O'Faolain, The Short Story, p. 217.

¹⁵²H. E. Bates, The Modern Short Story, p. 55.

the chronological sequence breaks and a flashback sweeps the reader back to the events leading up to the execution. Momentarily suspended, the narrative resumes its natural sequence with Farquhar falling, losing consciousness, and awakening to pain, pressure, and darkness. He realizes that the rope has broken and that now he is engaged in a struggle for life. His senses become preternaturally keen. He can feel each ripple of the water strike his cheek. He can see the veins of the leaves on the trees in the distant forest. He hears the dragonflies beating their wings and the water spiders stroking their legs like oars. His senses are interrupted as the soldiers on the bridge begin to fire at him. He dives beneath the surface as deeply as his lungs will allow to evade the stinging bullets. The current of the river drives him far enough downstream to permit his crawling onto land. He lingers to admire the Edenlike foliage and then darts into the forest to wend his way home.

To Farquhar, the forest seems interminable. It is wild and uncanny. He walks as if in a dream, his feet not feeling the roadway. He sees a vision. It is his house with his wife waiting upon the veranda with a smile. As he reaches for her, he is lost in a blinding flash of light that melts into darkness and silence. "Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side

to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek Bridge" (45). Swinging like a human pendulum, Farquhar has lived hours in the fleeting moment between the sudden dropping of the plank and the snapping of the neck.

It may very well be argued that "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" is Bierce's best story, technically. The style is controlled perfectly. It is sharp and cold when the story opens, it becomes mellow and fanciful as Farquhar nears his home, and it becomes chilly and detached again in the closing sentence.¹⁵³ In addition, Bierce has captured a basic psychological fact; that is, in an intense moment, the mind transcends time. An eternity may be poured into a few seconds and a few seconds may be stretched to encompass infinity. Writing before the stream of consciousness technique of narration, Bierce utilizes its advantages in enacting Peyton Farquhar's mental experiences.

Some critics do not view "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" as being structurally sound. William M. Sale considers the story a contrivance.¹⁵⁴ The most brutal attack the story has suffered has been at the hands of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. Assuming for the sake of argument that the tale is psychologically real,

¹⁵³Cunliffe, op. cit., p. 254.

¹⁵⁴William M. Sale, et. al., (eds.), Short Stories: Tradition and Direction, p. xiii.

Brooks and Warren ask several questions concerning the ending of the tale. All of the questions lead to the conclusion that the story contains no significant fictive meaning.¹⁵⁵ The tale, they imply, is not fiction.

At the other critical pole is a large group of ardent supporters and voiceful enthusiasts. Cunliffe insists that the surprise ending is quite appropriate within the context of the story.¹⁵⁶ Wiggins,¹⁵⁷ Wright,¹⁵⁸ and Woodruff¹⁵⁹ concur with this evaluation. It would seem that Brooks and Warren are at least outnumbered, though perhaps not outranked.

Considered thematically, the ending of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" is not a gimmick. During the time a dream is flitting across the imagination, it is the most real thing in the world. Only when the imagination is slapped by reality does the dream lose its credibility. Such is the case in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." Ultimately, imagination must answer to reality.

Because of its craftsmanship, "An Occurrence at Owl

¹⁵⁵Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (eds.), Understanding Fiction, p. 123.

¹⁵⁶Cunliffe, op. cit., p. 254.

¹⁵⁷Wiggins, op. cit., p. 25.

¹⁵⁸Wright, op. cit., p. 243.

¹⁵⁹Woodruff, op. cit., p. 157.

Creek Bridge" has exhibited the widest appeal of any of Bierce's stories. A number of critics consider it one of the greatest short stories in the world.¹⁶⁰ The tale initiates the last section, "War Is Fought by Human Beings," of Men at War: The Best War Stories of All Time, a 1942 Crown Publishers of New York publication, based on a plan by William Kozlenko and edited with an introduction by Ernest Hemingway. Twilight Zone, a former CBS television series, produced a French film based on "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" for a television broadcast.¹⁶¹ As a film, the story won the 1962 Grand Prize at the Cannes Film Festival and an Academy Award for the Best Live-Action Short Subject in 1963.¹⁶² Apparently, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" has rightfully claimed a niche in literary immortality.

One of Bierce's stories, "A Son of the Gods,"¹⁶³ borders on allegory. The story concerns a young horseman

¹⁶⁰O'Brien (Edward J. O'Brien, The Advance of the American Short Story, p. 183.) and Sterling (George Sterling ed., In the Midst of Life: Tales of Soldiers and Civilians, p. xv.) both consider it one of the greatest short stories in the world. Cunliffe (Marcus Cunliffe ed., In the Midst of Life and Other Tales, p. 254.) states that it is near perfect and provides the ultimate justification of Ambrose Bierce as man and artist.

¹⁶¹O'Connor, op. cit., p. 4.

¹⁶²Paul A. Schreivogel (ed.), An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge: A Visual Study, p. 5.

¹⁶³Bierce, II, 58-70.

who is presented as a Christ-figure. He rides a white horse and is even referred to as a "military Christ" (65). During a battle, he charges into the open, exposes the enemy's position by becoming a moving target, and sacrifices his life for the lives of his comrades. The onlookers become so inspired by his sacrificial death that they storm after him, being riddled with enemy fire the moment they charge onto the open field. Ironically, this military Christ leads his band of disciples to a premature, awkward death.

The young horseman becomes an inverted Christ-figure, bringing death rather than life into the world. To emphasize the single consciousness of the mass of soldiers, Bierce uses a first person plural narrator who tells the story in present tense. The reader becomes part of the single consciousness and follows the military Christ as blindly as the other soldiers. In spite of its faults, "A Son of the Gods" contains a remarkable use of point of view and is the object of praise from several critical corners.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴Solomon considers this story to be Bierce's "most perfectly constructed war tale" (Eric Solomon, "The Bitterness of Battle: Ambrose Bierce's War Fiction," Midwest Quarterly, V (January, 1964), 160.). Morrow ranks it as a masterpiece in short fiction (W. C. Morrow ed., A Son of the Gods and A Horseman in the Sky, p. vii.). Perkins speaks very highly of it in a letter to Hemingway (John Hall Wheelock ed., Editor to Author: The Letters of Maxwell E. Perkins, pp. 205-206.).

In several tales, Bierce relies almost solely on the final twist for the story's meaning. In "An Affair of Outposts," Armisted, the protagonist, joins the war to forget his unfaithful wife. Unknowingly, he dies saving his wife's lover. The contrast between what Armisted hoped to achieve in the service and what his duty actually does is solely dependent upon the snap ending. In "The Affair of Coulter's Notch," the protagonist shells his own home and kills his own family in the line of duty. The story reveals man's desperate need for order, as Coulter chooses to obey the rigid command rather than desert order and suffer the chaotic penalties. The message is nailed on with the surprise ending. In "A Horseman in the Sky," Carter Druse deliberately and knowingly shoots his father in the line of duty. Once again, Bierce's techniques are few and his dependence upon the snap ending is too evident. Even so, Edward J. O'Brien¹⁶⁵ and W. C. Morrow¹⁶⁶ consider it a masterpiece. In "One Kind of Officer," Captain Ransome is the victim of the strict formation and the literal interpretation of the laws that he represents. Although Bierce makes effective use of the name of the protagonist in this tale, he fails to implement other devices

¹⁶⁵O'Brien, op. cit., p. 183.

¹⁶⁶W. C. Morrow (ed.), A Son of the Gods and A Horseman in the Sky, p. vii.

that would make the story more structurally sound.

Bierce's military fiction reveals the curse of life in its naked horror. In the more effective tales, Bierce merges several thematic dimensions with an impressive array of fictive techniques. The portrait that he paints of man enslaved in his own futile attempts to transcend his inadequacies evokes both pity and fear.

CHAPTER III

EXECUTION--THE NONMILITARY FICTION

Ambrose Bierce sets some of his stories in the realm of the unreal. In doing so, Bierce joins those artists who readily acknowledge that the supernatural is an active force in literature. Lafcadio Hearn states that practically all of the great authors in European literature have distinguished themselves in the portrayal of the supernatural.¹⁶⁷ Certainly in English literature, from the Anglo-Saxon poets through Shakespeare to the modern writers, one finds the great artists writing of the supernatural.¹⁶⁸

The supernatural tradition in American literature springs from Increase and Cotton Mather, continues through Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, Poe, Hawthorne, Fitz-James O'Brien, and Lafcadio Hearn, and finds a home in the writings of Ambrose Bierce.¹⁶⁹ Bierce writes in an essay:

Tales of the tragic and the supernatural are

¹⁶⁷Lafcadio Hearn, Interpretations of Literature, II, 90.

¹⁶⁸Loc. cit.

¹⁶⁹Grattan, op. cit., p. 153.

the earliest utterances in every language. When the savage begins to talk he begins to tell wonder tales of death and mystery--of terror and the occult. Tapping, as they do, two of the three great mother-lodes of human interest, these tales are a constant phenomenon--the most permanent, because the most fascinating, element in letters.¹⁷⁰

Because man subconsciously loves the unknown, the supernatural will always have a place in literature. Dorothy Scarborough suggests that man loves the supernatural because in it he feels a link with infinity.¹⁷¹ Bierce probably comes the closest to describing man's true relationship with supernatural phenomena:

Belief in ghosts is natural, general and comforting. In many minds it is cherished as a good working substitute for religion; in others, it appears to take the place of morality.¹⁷²

In any event, Bierce partook of a vital literary tradition and left it richer than he found it.

Just exactly why Bierce chose to work within the supernatural tradition is the subject of great speculation. Since Bierce treats insanity, a type of the supernatural, some insist that he himself was insane.¹⁷³ Actually, there are several reasons that adequately explain Bierce's

¹⁷⁰Bierce, X, 296.

¹⁷¹Dorothy Scarborough, The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction, p. 2.

¹⁷²Bierce, XI, 368.

¹⁷³Scarborough, op. cit., p. 110.

concern with the realm of the unreal. His childhood, with vivid dreams, puritanic parents, and an exposure to spiritualism, explains it in part. In England, Bierce believed that he experienced a supernatural encounter, as a wind-wraith brushed by him at the exact moment that his friend, Thomas Hood, passed away.¹⁷⁴ The most logical reason for Bierce's working in this medium is his essentially romantic character. Because of his romantic notions and his ghostly tales, he was called the "Shadow Maker."¹⁷⁵ The name not only identifies Bierce but it also provides insight into the meaning of his tales of supernatural proportions.

Although Bierce's supernatural stories are so diverse that many defy classification, they basically involve the same situations and the same conflicts as the war stories. The move from Bierce's war fiction to his tales of the supernatural is more of a step than a leap. One still finds the disintegrating presence of psychic fear, only now ghosts rather than rifles supply the source of horror. Rather than the web of infinity covering all, the mist of the supernatural settles upon everything. And still, the imagination reigns supreme, buckling to reality only in the ultimate contest between life and death. Man and the

¹⁷⁴Bleiler, op. cit., p. xviii.

¹⁷⁵George Sterling, "The Shadow Maker," American Mercury, VI (September, 1925), 18.

cosmos have not changed. It is the same house; man has just moved into a different room with new fixtures.

The major characters in Bierce's supernatural stories are solitary figures. They encounter the insoluble mystery of life, and their minds and bodies become unhinged largely through psychic fear. Bierce regarded fear as the motivating force in psychic life. He defined a ghost as "the outward and visible sign of an inward fear."¹⁷⁶ By depicting scenes of man confronting his own fear, Bierce shows what a sorrowful creature man is, not unlike his war fiction. Man is reduced to a helpless idiot by atavistic terror.

Usually, the protagonist attempts to impose order upon an irrational situation by rational explanations. He is torn between the two extremes. The same problem of distinguishing between the what-is and the what-is-not that haunted Bierce's war protagonists plagues his supernatural heroes. The recurring idea that all existence is illusion becomes even more acute. Bierce defined reality in the following ways: "the dream of a mad philosopher";¹⁷⁷ "the nucleus of a vacuum";¹⁷⁸ and "that which would remain

¹⁷⁶Bierce, VII, 115.

¹⁷⁷Bierce, VII, 276.

¹⁷⁸Bierce, VII, 277.

in the cupel if one should assay a phantom."¹⁷⁹ These concepts reach a pinnacle of expression in his supernatural tales.

In the final analysis, the ultimate horror is the mind of man. It is not so much that man is manipulated by the touchless entity of the supernatural as it is that man is so minute when pictured against its infinitude that he feels himself dwindled down to insignificant proportions. Confronted with a fourth dimension, man manifests the curse of life in tragic ways.

The realm of the unreal functions as a metaphor in much the same way as war in Bierce's stories of military borders. Placing the protagonist in a real and natural world, he confronts him with the unreal and the unnatural. Conditioning him to the near and the particular, he forces him to reconcile the remote and the absolute. These mental oscillations expand and contract the hero's mind and ultimately stretch it too far for sanity to span. The centripetal thought combats the centrifugal thought and the protagonist's mind provides the battlefield.

To intensify the meaning, Bierce employs numerous fictive techniques. A rigidly objective narrator often describes the intensely subjective fear. Through the contrast,

¹⁷⁹Bierce, VII, 277.

the psychic fear appears even more striking. His economy of phrase produces what Bleiler calls the "crystallization of emotion."¹⁸⁰ Sudden, deft endings render the reader helpless with impressions of forceful impact. And throughout the tales, Bierce employs silence in strategic spots to dramatize the workings of the characters' mind amidst stillness and tranquillity. Silence becomes the speech of the unknown and fear the rhetoric of the mind.

In "The Man and the Snake,"¹⁸¹ Harker Brayton, the protagonist, has just read a scientific account concerning the power of a serpent's eyes to seize whoever happens to fall within the range of its gaze, despite the individual's will to resist. He scoffs at the idea, being "a man of thought" (311). Suddenly, he becomes aware of two points of light protruding from the shadow of his bed. At first, he takes them for reflections of the gas jet. He resumes his reading, but when he looks again only moments later,

they seemed to have become brighter than before, shining with a greenish luster which he had not at first observed. He thought, too, that they might have moved a trifle--were somewhat nearer (312).

Again he tries to ignore the situation by returning to his book, but his eyes are attracted once more to the two points

¹⁸⁰Bleiler, op. cit., p. xv.

¹⁸¹Bierce, II, 311-323.

of light, now shining like fire. Suddenly, he realizes that the two gleams are not what he originally thought, but are, in fact, the eyes of a snake, glaring menacingly into his own.

At this point in the narrative, a flashback sweeps the reader back to the events leading up to the man's encounter with the snake. Harker Brayton is described as "a scholar, idler, and something of an athlete, rich, popular, and of sound health" (313). The home in which he stays belongs to Dr. Druring, a distinguished scientist. Located in "an obscure quarter of the city," (313) Dr. Druring's house represents "the eccentricities which come of isolation" (314). In like manner, the mind of Harker Brayton contains an obscure corner that houses fear, the eccentricities which sprout from isolation. The flashback ends with the following comment: "Brayton found life at the Druring mansion very much to his mind" (315). At that very moment, upstairs, Harker Brayton is finding life in the Druring home very much to his mind indeed.

The narrative resumes natural time order with Brayton staring at the snake with a kind of absurd calmness. He could easily ring the bell cord to elicit help, but he deliberately and knowingly decides to confront the situation alone. Being a thinking man, he reflects upon his present condition and gradually grows weak from the conclusions he

reaches. From two points of light, the serpent's eyes have grown in Brayton's mind to be "electric sparks, radiating an infinity of luminous needles" (318) and "two dazzling suns" (319).

They gave off enlarging rings of rich and vivid colors, which at their greatest expansion successively vanished like soap bubbles; they seemed to approach his very face, and anon were an immeasurable distance away" (319).

Slowly, Brayton is being dismembered by the unreal and the unnatural, the remote and the absolute products of his own mind.

Lapsing into an enchanting dream, Brayton momentarily escapes his terror. His dream is crushed, however, by his falling to the floor, the abrupt intervention of reality. The snake itself is not so much the source of terror as is the thought of the serpent. The entire conflict is contained in Brayton's mental apparatus. The mental apparition reduces the protagonist to bestial dimensions:

His face was white between its stains of blood; his eyes were strained open to their uttermost expansion. There was froth upon his lips; it dropped off in flakes. Strong convulsions ran through his body, making almost serpentine undulations (321).

The serpent has become the master; the man has become the beast.

A terror-ridden cry rings through the house, bringing Dr. Druring to Harker Brayton's room immediately. Brayton is dead. Druring

reached under the bed, pulled out the snake, and flung it, still coiled, to the center of the room, whence with a harsh, shuffling sound it slid across the polished floor till stopped by the wall, where it lay without motion. It was a stuffed snake; its eyes were two shoe buttons (323).

Brayton is the victim of ineptitude, illusion, and selfhood. He is killed by his own mind. He proves no stronger than two shoe buttons.

Brayton, like many of Bierce's war heroes, conceives a harmless situation to be harmful. He falls prey to the intellectual, emotional, and sensory factors of his own psyche. The name, Harker Brayton, implies a man who carefully considers all possibilities and then exercises his acute awareness. Rather than a man who boisterously exercises his keen perception, Brayton proves to be just the opposite.

In achieving the fictive meaning, Bierce employs the minor characters as foils. Mrs. Druring represents the emotional element in man. Dr. Druring represents the intellectual element. Brayton becomes the dissolution of man, incapable of reconciling the two extremes. Although Woodruff asserts that the story is marred by a breakdown in unity and coherence, resulting from uncertain tone,¹⁸² "The Man and the Snake" reveals man in all his bestial

¹⁸²Woodruff, op. cit., p. 148.

clumsiness, contesting the curse of life.

Man is defeated by a product of his mind also in "Moxon's Master."¹⁸³ The story opens with the narrator and Moxon engaged in an argument concerning man and machine. Outside a violent storm rages. Moxon insists that a machine and man are inseparable by definition. Their debate is interrupted by a sound that transcends the gale outside. It comes from Moxon's machine-shop. The narrator describes it as a thumping sound, "as of some one pounding upon a table with an open hand" (92). When Moxon goes into the room, the narrator hears more confused sounds, "as of a struggle or scuffle" (93). Both conjectures foreshadow the denouement.

Unable to restrain his question, the narrator asks Moxon upon his return who he has in his machine-shop. Moxon replies:

'Nobody; the incident that you have in mind was caused by my folly in leaving a machine in action with nothing to act upon, while I undertook the interminable task of enlightening your understanding. Do you happen to know that Consciousness is the creature of Rhythm?' (96).

Unsatisfied with the answer and unmirthful in his disposition, the narrator storms out of the house.

Immersed in rain and darkness, the narrator reflects upon Moxon's statement that consciousness is the creature

¹⁸³Bierce, III, 88-105.

of rhythm. He suddenly realizes the tremendous import of the comment and instantly recognizes Moxon as his mentor. He returns to Moxon's dwelling to share his new feelings. Except for his machine-shop, all is silent and dark.

The wind was blowing a gale and dashing the rain against the thin walls in sheets. The drumming upon the shingle roof spanning the unceiled room was loud and incessant (99).

Entering Moxon's forbidden machine-shop, the narrator sees Moxon playing chess with a companion. His friend is facing the other way, giving only a back view to the narrator. Moxon's play is "quick, nervous and lacking in precision" (101). His antagonist moves the chess pieces with "a slow, uniform, mechanical and, I thought, somewhat theatrical movement of the arm" (101). Suddenly, the narrator realizes that Moxon's companion is an automaton chess-player. Just as Moxon shouts "checkmate," the storm subsides.

The wind had now gone down, but I heard, at lessening intervals and progressively louder, the rumble and roll of thunder. In the pauses between I now became conscious of a low humming or buzzing which, like the thunder, grew momentarily louder and more distinct (102).

The setting provides commentary on the storm brewing within the mechanical man. With the table overturned and the candle extinguished, the machine and the master struggle in black darkness. In bits of blinding white light, the narrator sees the combatants on the floor:

Moxon underneath, his throat still in the clutch

of those iron hands, his head forced backward, his eyes protruding, his mouth wide open and his tongue thrust out; and--horrible contrast!--upon the painted face of his assassin an expression of tranquil and profound thought, as in the solution of a problem in chess! (104).

The machine has become master of the man.

Regaining consciousness in a hospital, the narrator tells his story. He concludes his account, however, with the following remark: "That was many years ago. If asked today I should answer less confidently" (105). The interim of years has placed an irrational situation into a context of rationality. Rather than aggravate the tension between mental poles, it is easier to discard experience and selfhood and ignore the fine line between illusion and reality.

Edna Kenton views this tale as the epitome of Bierce's vision.¹⁸⁴ Heraldng ideas that modern writers would exploit and etching his message with a variety of techniques, Bierce in "Moxon's Master" presents, if not the epitome of his vision, a fictive representation of the plight of man.

In practically all of Bierce's supernatural tales, the main figure becomes involved in a terrifying experience largely through his own doing. In "A Watcher by the Dead," Mancher volunteers to play a corpse in scaring a friend. In a turn of the tables, Mancher is the one driven insane. In "The Suitable Surroundings," Willard Marsh accepts a

¹⁸⁴Kenton, op. cit., p. 78.

challenge from a friend to spend a night in solitude, reading a ghost story in a deserted house by candlelight. Marsh is killed by fright, mistaking the face of a farm boy peering in the window at him for his friend's ghost. In "The Famous Gilson Bequest," Henry Brentshaw, largely to blame for having Gilson hung, willfully acts in accordance to the conditions put forth in Gilson's will. If five years pass with no added proof of Gilson's crime, Brentshaw is to receive the entire Gilson estate. Brentshaw literally works himself to death clearing Gilson's name, and having spent the equivalent of the estate in doing so, Brentshaw dies a broken man. In these stories, the main character, attempting to prove himself in some way, exercises his free will to his extreme disadvantage. The characters are victims of the curse of life.

The power of psychic fear permeates many of Bierce's supernatural tales. In "A Holy Terror," Jefferson Doman experiences the kind of situation one finds in "A Tough Tussle" or "The Man and the Snake." The absolutely harmless body of a woman works upon his mind until the mental threads of life stretch too far and snap. And in "Jug of Sirup," an entire town in a fit of mass hysteria reverts to atavistic terror upon encountering an alleged ghost. In other tales, the illusion-reality theme is important. In "The Damned Thing," the real and the supernatural are so interwoven as

to make distillation utterly impossible. The story, "The Moonlit Road," involves a simple sequence of events being told from three entirely different points of view by the participants in the action. Bleiler nominates this piece as a minor masterpiece for its method of narration.¹⁸⁵

Although Bierce never ceases to impress upon the reader the elusive line between illusion and reality and the intense, immediate power of the imagination, most of his supernatural tales fail to employ the necessary techniques that characterize his war fiction. As a result, some of the tales serve as little more than diversion. They are, however, delightful diversion.

One of Bierce's stories, "Haita the Shepherd,"¹⁸⁶ involves allegory and Bierce discursively draws his message. The chief character in the tale is Haita. He personifies the innocence of youth.

In the heart of Haita the illusions of youth had not been supplanted by those of age and experience. His thoughts were pure and pleasant, for his life was simple and his soul devoid of ambition (297).

Living the innocent life, Haita recognizes that "happiness may come if not sought, but if looked for will never be seen" (298). But gradually he begins reflecting upon his

¹⁸⁵Bleiler, op. cit., p. cover.

¹⁸⁶Bierce, III, 297-307.

condition and the encroachment of death. With the employment of his rational faculties comes the startling revelation that he is basically unhappy.

It was through thinking on these mysteries and marvels, and on that horrible change to silence and decay which he felt sure must come to him, as he had seen it come to so many of his flock--as it came to all living things except the birds--that Haita first became conscious how miserable was his lot (299).

Brooding on these thoughts, Haita becomes melancholy and morose. Nature no longer wears a benign smile but dons a grim countenance. Life becomes a curse.

One day, in the middle of a pile of gloomy reflections, Haita suddenly encounters a beautiful maiden. She is the personification of happiness.

So beautiful she was that the flowers about her feet folded their petals in despair and bent their heads in token of submission; so sweet her look that the humming birds thronged her eyes, thrusting their thirsty bills almost into them, and the wild bees were about her lips (301).

Entranced with her beauty, Haita asks her her name, her origin, and her purpose. The maiden disappears. Upon a second meeting, Haita again questions happiness. Again the maiden disappears. A third confrontation produces the same results. Haita flees to the cottage of a wise hermit. The hermit wipes away the youth's tears and lectures him thus: "She cometh only when unsought, and will not be questioned. One manifestation of curiosity, one sign of doubt, one

expression of misgiving, and she is away!" (306). Haita hears the message that he himself had uttered meaninglessly at the beginning of the story. In asserting that to seek happiness is to lose it, Bierce unfolds but another dimension to the curse of life.

Bierce's fictive purpose in treating the supernatural is obvious. Not satisfied with depicting man's ineptitude within a real and natural world, he sought in his nonmilitary tales a fictive confrontation of man and the unknown, the unreal and the unnatural, to show just how insignificant he is in his uncharted universe. And so, Bierce confronts man with inexplicable disappearances, with the secrets of the dead, with mysterious phenomena, and with the realm of the unreal. He hurls him amidst uncanny happenings and invisible beings. How successful Bierce was in achieving his ends is a moot question. Some critics praise his supernatural tales quite highly.¹⁸⁷ Others contend that

¹⁸⁷Neale considers "A Baby Tramp" a masterpiece (Walter Neale, Life of Ambrose Bierce, p. 61.). Partridge calls "John Mortonson's Funeral" a masterpiece (Eric Partridge, "Ambrose Bierce," London Mercury, XVI (October, 1927), 631.). Of "The Damned Thing," Fadiman says that it is a masterpiece (Clifton Fadiman ed., The Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce, p. xviii.); Neale says of the same story, "Nothing in all the literature of which I have any knowledge is superior to The Damned Thing, in craftsmanship, in the art of the short-story" (Walter Neale, Life of Ambrose Bierce, p. 344.). Sterling ranks "The Death of Halpin Frayser" second only to Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" as the greatest tale of terror in American literature (George Sterling ed., In the Midst of Life: Tales of Soldiers and

they fail in the very tenant of fiction that Bierce so highly cherished, unity of impression.¹⁸⁸ In the final analysis, one must agree with F. T. Cooper:

We may not agree with the method that he has chosen to use, but we cannot escape from the strange, haunting power of them, the grim, boding 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.¹⁸⁹

The curse of life is, perhaps, nowhere in more evidence than in the supernatural tales of Ambrose Bierce.

Civilians, p. xv.); of the same tale, Cooper remarks that it represents the very pinnacle of Bierce's "strange and fantastic genius" (F. T. Cooper, Some American Story Tellers, p. 352.).

¹⁸⁸Woodruff, op. cit., p. 151.

¹⁸⁹Cooper, op. cit., p. 346.

CHAPTER IV

CONTRIBUTION--THE LEGACY OF AMBROSE BIERCE

Ambrose Bierce's position in American literature is still a matter of debate. Although he has faded out of view at times, he has always managed to evoke enough interest to keep his literary reputation alive. Critical opinion on Bierce ranges from those who think he is the greatest writer of prose America has ever produced to those who regard him as some kind of monster.¹⁹⁰ Many contend that Bierce's satire represents the best satire ever produced on the American continent.¹⁹¹ His verse has collected both praise and dust. Bierce's short stories have been called both great and insignificant. As a result of fragmented criticism, Bierce's reputation has been equally fragmented. Many of his ideas have found a modern audience; many of his phrases are still quoted. Unfortunately, however, Bierce's name has been divorced from his work.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰Littell, op. cit., p. 183.

¹⁹¹Pope, op. cit., p. xxiv. Harry Lynn Shelley discusses Bierce's satire in his 1945 dissertation for the University of Southern California entitled The Satire of Ambrose Bierce: Its Objects, Forms, Devices, and Possible Origins.

¹⁹²Grattan, op. cit., p. 4.

In the final analysis, Bierce, although he is apotheosized by some, has remained on the periphery of American literature.

Bierce's short stories, like a large portion of his art, have been falsely evaluated.¹⁹³ He deserves a niche in the American literary tradition on several counts.¹⁹⁴ In addition to realistic, romantic, and naturalistic notions, one can find traces of modern thought in Bierce's short stories. Being one of the most remarkable writers of his generation, Bierce combined several traditions in forming his artistic canon. Bierce influenced several writers, thereby justifying his place in the continuum of American literature. His short stories span the wide gulf between the Civil War and modern America, bridging the past and the future. And finally, the execution and polish of several of his short stories reveal a true genius at work. Any one of these areas would warrant Ambrose Bierce a permanent place in American literature; taken together, they represent an undeniable argument.

Bierce was fundamentally a romantic; his artistic theory echoed romantic concepts.¹⁹⁵ He once remarked that

¹⁹³Loc. cit.

¹⁹⁴Carey McWilliams (ed.), The Devil's Dictionary, p. vi.

¹⁹⁵In a 1948 dissertation at Chicago, Mary Elizabeth Grenander examined Bierce's fiction in terms of his critical dogma. Her study is entitled An Examination of the Critical Theories of Ambrose Bierce, with a Discussion of Their Particular Application to Certain of His Selected Short Stories.

"the first three essentials of the literary art are imagination, imagination, and imagination."¹⁹⁶ The terror-romance tradition obviously influenced Bierce. His tales of the supernatural contain many terror-romance conventions: haunted houses, stormy nights, and mysterious disappearances. Although Bierce depended largely upon romance for his literary theory, he did not permit it to become a limitation.

The romantic tendencies of Edgar Allan Poe exerted a tremendous influence upon Bierce. Bierce's critical theory is in large part a paraphrase of Poe's. In fact, many of Bierce's short stories are direct descendants of Poe's ideas and techniques.¹⁹⁷ Because of the obvious parallels between the two writers, many critics have compared Bierce and Poe, and Bierce often emerges on top. Although some critics assert that the formula for a Bierce story is Poe plus water,¹⁹⁸ many contend that Bierce is the better writer. Sterling argues that Bierce's tales have a "steely reserve" that makes Poe's tales appear "almost boyish by comparison."¹⁹⁹ Arguing in the following manner, Gertrude Atherton insists that Bierce surpasses Poe:

¹⁹⁶Bierce, VII, 231.

¹⁹⁷Miller, op. cit., p. 149.

¹⁹⁸H. L. Mencken, Prejudices: Sixth Series, p. 62.

¹⁹⁹George Sterling (ed.), In the Midst of Life: Tales of Soldiers and Civilians, p. xvi.

In the latter's work one can pick out each stone from each structure as one reads, analyzing its shape and ingredients. But Bierce's art of construction is so subtle and his power so dominant that the minds of his readers are his until they lay down the work.²⁰⁰

Eric Partridge agrees with Atherton by saying that Bierce "maintains a higher level of genius."²⁰¹ Other critics are just as emphatic in their praise.²⁰² In short, Bierce utilized not only the romantic tradition but also the romantic theory of Poe. In so doing, Bierce may have outdone his predecessor. Since Edgar Allan Poe has rightfully secured a permanent place in American literature, one must admit that a writer who beat Poe at his own game deserves recognition.

Even though Bierce scorned realism, his stories reflect the realistic mode. In fact, most critics agree with Mencken in asserting that Bierce was "the first writer of fiction ever to treat war realistically."²⁰³ Solomon describes

²⁰⁰Gertrude Atherton, "The Literary Development of California," Cosmopolitan, X (January, 1891), 271.

²⁰¹Partridge, op. cit., p. 638.

²⁰²Belknap Long differentiates between Bierce and Poe in the following manner: "Bierce, besides being a poet and artist, was a fighter; Poe was the neurotic dreamer purely" (Adolphe de Castro, Portrait of Ambrose Bierce, Belknap Long, "Note," p. ix.). Boynton bluntly states that in bulk of good writing Bierce surpasses Poe (Percy H. Boynton, More Contemporary Americans, p. 93.).

²⁰³H. L. Mencken, Prejudices: Sixth Series, p. 260.

Bierce's realistic portrayal of war in the following manner:

A remarkable aspect of Bierce's very short war stories is that in each one he manages to evoke the feeling of reality, the sense of fact and place that makes war not an abstract moral condition but a concrete physical reality.²⁰⁴

Bierce achieves this sense of realism by giving the minutiae of war. As a result, he shuns the heroic visage of war and reveals its true countenance.

Bierce's war stories also have a definite kinship to the naturalistic mode. Bierce's detached style of writing as well as the recurring idea of scientific determinism reveal the noticeable influence of naturalism. His stories often contain statements propounding the importance of heredity in determining behavior. In an essay entitled "The Ancestral Bond," Bierce writes:

My own small study in this amazing field convinces me that a man is the sum of his ancestors; that his character, moral and intellectual, is determined before his birth. His environment with all its varied suasions, its agencies of good and evil; breeding, training, interest, experience and the rest of it--have less to do with the matter and can not annul the sentence passed upon him at conception, compelling him to be what he is.²⁰⁵

This same idea is repeated in some of Bierce's war stories, such as "One of the Missing" or "A Son of the Gods." Bierce's

²⁰⁴Solomon, op. cit., p. 151.

²⁰⁵Bierce, XI, 328.

stories, however, transcend the naturalistic mode.

At the same time, Bierce anticipates modern thought in his short stories. His concern with form and a controlled irony heralds modern fiction. In many respects, Bierce's fiction is better suited for the 1960 audience than for the 1890 audience.²⁰⁶ Some critics sense the seeds of existential philosophy in Bierce's fiction. In fact, Clifton Fadiman calls Bierce a minor prophet of hopelessness.²⁰⁷ Solomon considers Bierce the first modern writer in the English language because of his war tales.²⁰⁸ If such is the case, Bierce warrants more than the cursory attention given him in the past.

One may wonder whether Bierce was a realist, a romanticist, or a naturalist. Howard W. Bahr responds to this question in the following manner:

The answer that I propose is that there was only one kind of 'ist' that he desired and attempted to be: artist. If the requirements of his art demanded realistic techniques, he employed them; if his interest pointed, as it often did, in the direction of the bizarre and the unusual, he was not adverse to the use of the romantic point of view. Above all, however, and at all times, he attempted to adhere to the 'immutable laws of literature' with the catholic rigidity of the classicist,

²⁰⁶Bleiler, op. cit., p. xx.

²⁰⁷Clifton Fadiman (ed.), The Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce, p. xiv.

²⁰⁸Solomon, op. cit., p. 155.

even though he attempted just as assiduously to interpret life realistically as it was given him to see it.²⁰⁹

Bierce's greatness, then, stems from his ability to transcend the very traditions that shaped his art. Bierce provided self-criticism when he stated: "A popular author is one who writes what the people think. Genius invites them to think something else."²¹⁰ In an era when sentimentalism was the watchword in popular fiction, Bierce invited the reading public to think something else. In heralding a new literature, Bierce deserves a secure place in the evolution of American literature.

A second reason why Bierce merits a niche in American literary history is the influence he has had upon succeeding writers. His journalistic style of writing inspired H. L. Mencken.²¹¹ In addition to influencing O. Henry, Bierce supplied Stephen Crane with many ideas and techniques.²¹² Crane freely confessed his admiration for Bierce's short stories and even remarked of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge": "Nothing better exists. That story contains

²⁰⁹Bahr, op. cit., p. 331.

²¹⁰Bierce, VIII, 356.

²¹¹Edmund Wilson, Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War, p. 628.

²¹²Paul Jordan-Smith, On Strange Altars, p. 275.

everything."²¹³ When one considers Crane's tremendous influence on Hemingway, Bierce looms an even larger figure. Bierce's Devil's Dictionary preceded Mark Twain's "Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar" and his "Famous Gilson Bequest" antedated Twain's most famous short story, "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg." Perhaps even Twain owes a debt to Bierce. In any event, Bierce has exerted enough of an influence upon succeeding writers to warrant a more secure place in American literature.

Ambrose Bierce is also a transitional figure in American fiction. In employing the psychological time dimension, Bierce utilized a fictive tool that would not enter the writer's workshop for several years. In fact, Solomon credits Bierce with five bequests:

There are five fictional methods in which he anticipates the writers of the next century: the treatment of time, the process of animism, the approach to nature, the use of religious symbolism, and, finally, the employment of the theme that was to be raised to its finest schematization by Stephen Crane, the development from innocence, through war, to experience.²¹⁴

By preparing future writers through his artistic experiments, Bierce represents the fulcrum for modern fiction. William Peden observes that the curve of fiction passing from Poe and Hawthorne to Joyce and Hemingway runs directly through

²¹³Quoted in John Berryman, Stephen Crane, p. 275.

²¹⁴Solomon, op. cit., p. 155.

Ambrose Bierce.²¹⁵ H. E. Bates summarizes Bierce's position as follows:

Isolated, too bitterly uncompromising to be popular, too mercurial to be measured and ticketed, Bierce is the connecting link between Poe and the American short story of to-day.²¹⁶

As the transitional figure spanning two centuries, Ambrose Bierce warrants a place in American literature.

In assessing Bierce's rightful position in American letters, several other observations should be made. One must consider Alfred Kazin's statement that Bierce, along with Poe, represents the American tradition of literary horror.²¹⁷ Pollard contends that Bierce affected the course of the English language.²¹⁸ And finally, Nations insists that ages from now America will look back on Bierce with Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, and Poe as the shapers of American literature.²¹⁹ Although such praise may be exaggerated, it certainly reveals a figure that deserves more attention than has been accorded him.

Although genius is overworked in describing artists,

²¹⁵Peden, op. cit., p. 9.

²¹⁶Bates, op. cit., p. 56.

²¹⁷Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds, p. 372.

²¹⁸Pollard, op. cit., p. 269.

²¹⁹Nations, op. cit., p. 268.

Bierce may deserve the title. De Castro calls Bierce America's great classic²²⁰ and Pollard describes him as the "one great genius in American literature."²²¹ President Theodore Roosevelt, although not a recognized literary critic, believed Bierce to be the greatest writer of short stories who had ever lived.²²² Even William Dean Howells in a Columbia University lecture stated that "Mr. Bierce is among our three greatest writers."²²³ Although opinions are often misleading, the identical verdict rendered by a biographer, a friend, a president, and an established author should prove reasonably accurate.

Without a doubt, Bierce has contributed some of the finest short stories in the English language.²²⁴ His stories represent the products of a deft craftsman, the touch of a master chemist.²²⁵ Both his tales of war²²⁶ and his tales of the supernatural²²⁷ have been cited as having no forerunner

²²⁰de Castro, op. cit., p. 45.

²²¹Pollard, op. cit., p. 268.

²²²Neale, op. cit., p. 112.

²²³Quoted in Carey McWilliams, Ambrose Bierce: A Biography, p. 219.

²²⁴Magill, op. cit., p. 102.

²²⁵Starrett, op. cit., p. 60.

²²⁶Nations, op. cit., p. 264.

²²⁷Jordan-Smith, op. cit., p. 272.

or peer. Bierce has been described as the greatest teller of tales in America,²²⁸ the master of the short story,²²⁹ and "the greatest writer of the short story this country has yet produced."²³⁰ And still, he has been denied a place in the evolution of American literature.

Whether or not Bierce attains the audience and the place he deserves rests upon the passage of time. If his writings pass as strangely out of the literary world as he did out of the earthly, the curse of life will have struck the absolute coup de grace.

²²⁸Pollard, op. cit., p. 256.

²²⁹Cooper, op. cit., p. 333.

²³⁰Jordan-Smith, op. cit., p. 275.

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