Introduction

"Time," Bierce once remarked to a friend, "just has a way of thrusting his mighty hand into the huge bin that we call the world and plucking from the surrounding chaff the living grains of literature."\(^1\) Always hostile to the taste and criticism of his contemporaries, Bierce felt that time alone—the impersonal and disinterested judgment of posterity—would decide an author’s reputation. In his own case, time has proved an exacting critic. From a vast amount of chaff it has culled only a few grains: The Devil’s Dictionary and a handful of short stories which are the subject of the present study. Whatever reputation Bierce is ultimately to have (it will not be a large one) seems destined to rest on only a tiny fraction of all that he wrote during his long career. The assumption underlying this critique is that Bierce’s fiction not only includes his most permanently valuable work, but also offers the clearest explanation for his limited achievement. Focusing on a few representative tales, I have tried to define Bierce’s controlling conceptions, to describe his characteristic fictional devices and techniques, and to show significant parallels of theme, action, and symbolic imagery. In treating such matters, my primary concern has been to trace the causes—paradoxically the same—of Bierce’s achievement and failure as a writer, and to analyze the ambivalent impulses which give his short stories their characteristic form. Although Bierce has a remarkably
long bibliography for a writer so little known or read, there has been no full-length study of his fiction. There have been several biographies, innumerable articles, a few dissertations, but none have examined in any comprehensive way the kind of fictional world Bierce creates, nor have they explored the idiosyncratic relationship between his fiction and his own dilemma both as a man and as a writer.

Bierce has always had what Arnold Bennett aptly called an “underground reputation,” and has been the subject of more speculation, extravagant criticism, and misinformed opinion, than most American writers. One biographer gives us an idea of the range of critical response in his list of terms that have been applied to Bierce: “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, a fine satirist and something of a charlatan.” Bierce is like a kaleidoscope: the individual elements remain the same but they form a different pattern for each viewer. It is no wonder that as recently as 1951, Edmund Wilson, reviewing the latest biography of Bierce, noted that “there is as yet no book on Ambrose Bierce that can really be said to come to grips with its prickly and puzzling subject,” that “there are strange contradictions in Bierce that have never really been explained.” While it may not be possible to explain the strange contradictions in Bierce, it is possible to locate and identify them, and that has been the principal aim in this study. If Bierce has proved a protean figure, his fiction, at least, has a curiously homogeneous quality which origi-
nates in his obsessive vision. Specifically, Bierce’s fiction takes its form from a series of violent oscillations between art and life, idealism and cynicism, and a richly romantic imagination and a rational awareness of life as a diminished thing. It was the pressure of the warring impulses Bierce could never manage in his own life that determined the controlling conception of his short stories. The conception itself severely restricted the range of his ideas and finally destroyed him as a serious writer. But in a handful of his war tales, it also enabled him to do what time may judge to be his finest writing.

In a letter to George Sterling, the California poet, Bierce remarked:

How many times, and covering a period of how many years, must one’s unexplainable obscurity be pointed out to constitute fame? Not knowing, I am almost disposed to consider myself the most famous of authors. I have nearly ceased to be “discovered,” but my notoriety as an obscurian [sic] may be said to be worldwide and apparently everlasting.²

If this was Bierce’s curious situation near the end of his life (the letter was written in 1908), it became intensified after his disappearance in 1913. In fact, “discovering” Bierce—either the fate of the man or the stature of the writer—turned out to be something of a critical pastime, especially during the 1920’s when a spate of articles appeared bearing such titles as “The Mystery of Ambrose Bierce”⁶ and “Ambrose Bierce: Notorious Obscurian.”⁷ The only mystery in these articles is the extravagant claims they make for their subject. Rescuing a writer from supposed neglect is a risky business since the rescuer, feeling he must rationalize
such a mission, often tends to overrate his man. The result is commonly a distorted image of genius suffering unjustly his sentence in literary limbo. Some of criticism's zanier estimates have produced such an image of Ambrose Bierce. Although they have little currency today, they show some of the problems involved in identifying Bierce as a writer.

In his book *On Strange Altars*, appropriately subtitled *A Book of Enthusiasms*, Paul Jordan Smith asserted:

When young Americans leave off going to Dostoeievsky and Tchekoff for their knowledge of human nature and for some glimpse of the depths to which stricken souls may descend, . . . the greatest writer of the short story this country has yet produced may come into his own.  

The critic Percival Pollard, who seldom let a genius go undiscovered, was convinced that Bierce was the "greatest artist in English on our continent," "the greatest journalist, and the greatest tale-teller in America."  

One partisan defender considered Bierce "a literary artist, one of the most delicate and finest that English literature has known. He has the savageness of Swift with the polish of Pope, and in intellect and literary feeling is the equal of both."  

To another, not to be outdone in reckless superlatives, Bierce was "the arch prince of Literary Darkness. His light shines with clinging phosphorescence, mysterious as the night, and, like it, eternal."  

Bierce's friend Herman Scheffauer was hopeful that some future generation would discover "the full height and measure of Bierce's greatness," although this might have to take place in Europe
rather than in “our mollusc-like and Philistine civilization.”

Perhaps the clearest expression of this particular kind of Bierce criticism—if it may be called that—is found in one of Wilson Follett’s numerous articles on Bierce and what Follett called “his brilliant obscurity.” Wagging a stern finger from the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Follett warned:

A nation which does not eventually salvage the treasures which a Bierce leaves accessibly buried would not deserve to breed men of genius. For a man of genius—pure literary genius—is exactly what Ambrose Bierce was. It is only a question of time, and perhaps not much time, when we shall see him emerge from the mists of his legend and appear not only as an American writer of the very first stature, but also as a world figure.

Follett made his prediction in 1937; it seems no closer to being fulfilled today. Indeed, for reasons discussed in this study, none of the extravagant praise or prophecies of coming greatness that have been lavished on Bierce appear destined to stand. Bierce may well have emerged “from the mists of his legend,” but he can hardly be regarded as a “writer of the very first stature,” let alone a “world figure.” Although Follett was hopeful about getting Bierce’s “manifest destiny realized,” he saw Bierce’s fame largely in terms of wit and satire, the Bierce who has survived mainly in *The Devil’s Dictionary*; like several critics, Follett practically ignored the tales. Calling Bierce “a man who was no story writer,” Follett was sure that “if his stories as a group are deemed important it is because he is important; but it is not the stories that make him so.” How this
statement is to be squared with a claim for Bierce as "pure literary genius" is unclear, but so is a good deal of the criticism represented by Follett's articles. As one anonymous writer sanely observed: "If Bierce were as great as his admirers maintain, it is almost unthinkable that his fame and fortune should never have penetrated beyond the esoteric coterie of those who have made him a cult." ⑩

While not all Bierce criticism was as enthusiastic as the examples given in the preceding paragraphs, it is true that Bierce was discovered largely during the 1920's. As one of "the ghosts of underground reputations," ⑪ he was resurrected by a postwar generation looking for new idols, dusted off and, like Melville, praised to the skies. Critics were particularly impressed by his war stories. Disillusioned and fatalistic, filled with unsparing descriptions of death and suffering, they seemed much closer to the prevailing taste of the 1920's than to that of the 1890's. Moreover, they showed a concern with form and craftsmanship, a controlled irony, and an economy of detail that were distinctly modern. When critics cannot assign a writer a convenient niche in literary history, they frequently resort to the simple expedient of saying that he was in advance of his time. But with Bierce such a conclusion appears justified. Nothing quite like his Tales of Soldiers and Civilians had appeared before in American fiction, although a great deal like it has appeared since, and we have grown so accustomed to an existential world of gratuitous horror and meaningless annihilation that today Bierce seems a trifle old-fashioned. To those who had recently experienced World War I,
however, and were living in its aftermath of cynicism and disillusionment, Bierce was a startling revelation. It was during this period that his reputation reached its apogee.

For a number of years after World War I, when interest in Bierce’s short stories was at its height, there was no biography of him. To many readers Bierce was only a man with an unusual first name, who happened to write some powerful and depressing stories. This sketchy knowledge, combined with the strange circumstances of his disappearance, supposedly into Mexico, tended to make Bierce an intriguing man of mystery and to shroud his name in “the mists of his legend.” He was said to have been a bizarre fellow who “indulged in anti-Christian orgies in cemeteries, pulled down holy crosses, exhumed corpses, loved snakes as he loathed dogs, and enjoyed meditation in graveyards, where he had once contracted asthma by sleeping on a tombstone.” 18 His Tales of Soldiers and Civilians, reprinted in 1898 under the title In the Midst of Life, was generally available.19 Boni and Liveright brought out an edition in 1918. In 1927 two editions, that of the American Library (A. and C. Boni) and that of the better-known Modern Library, were published, both with an introduction by Bierce’s friend George Sterling, which did much to stimulate interest in Bierce. On the other hand, the overstuffed and expensive edition of his Collected Works 20—in twelve volumes—had long been out of print, and had never been widely distributed in the first place. Because the Collected Works contain everything of importance that Bierce ever wrote, besides a good deal that is trivial and of no
interest, it has the merit of representing Bierce both at his best and at his worst. Moreover, it shows significant relationships between the large body of his journalism and expository writing and his relatively small amount of fiction. Consequently, much of the earlier criticism of Bierce’s work is based upon an imperfect knowledge of both the man and the writer.

The lack of a biography was handsomely corrected in 1929, an annus mirabilis for Bierce enthusiasts. In that one year, four Bierce biographies were published: Adolphe de Castro’s Portrait of Ambrose Bierce, C. Hartley Grattan’s Bitter Bierce: A Mystery of American Letters, Walter Neale’s Life of Ambrose Bierce, and Carey McWilliams’ Ambrose Bierce: A Biography. Of these, Carey McWilliams’ book comes closest to being the definitive biography. McWilliams was mainly interested in dispelling or correcting the “wild and fantastic rumors” about Bierce’s life; to do so he not only read through the entire body of Bierce’s journalism from 1868 to 1909, but talked and corresponded with Bierce’s close friends and relatives. The result is “as much a source book as it is a biography.” 21 Where McWilliams is weak, however, is in the brief chapter he devotes to Bierce’s fiction. 22 McWilliams simply dismisses the short stories on the assumption all were written according to an inherited formula and fail to embody any of Bierce’s most deeply felt beliefs. As he puts it, “Bierce accepted a theory of aesthetics which did not accord with his own personality and his own vision.” This study is intended to show, McWilliams and others notwithstanding, that Bierce’s best stories not only accord fully “with his own personal-
ity,” but also constitute the clearest expression of his “vision.” Unfortunately, but understandably, the main point of McWilliams’ biography is that Bierce “was much more interesting as a personality than he was important as a writer.”

Walter Neale’s *Life of Ambrose Bierce* is another important book. Actually, it is not so much a biography as a collection of reminiscences by Bierce’s publisher and close friend during the latter part of his life. It is especially valuable since it contains extensive summaries and quotations of Bierce’s beliefs and discusses his temperament and personality in some detail. While C. Hartley Grattan’s biography is reliable enough, it is not nearly as well informed as is McWilliams’ book, nor does it give more than a superficial review of Bierce’s fiction and journalism. Of the four biographies published in 1929, the least useful—because it is the most biased—is Adolphe de Castro’s book. De Castro, whose real name was Danziger, had collaborated with Bierce on *The Monk and the Hangman’s Daughter*, but the two men had a serious quarrel over the exact extent of Bierce’s role in rewriting Richard Voss’s *Der Mönch von Berchtesgaden*. When de Castro is not justifying himself or admiring his own accomplishments, he is playing the sycophant; his book tells us more about himself than about Bierce. Since 1929 there has been only one other biography of Bierce, Paul Fatout’s *Ambrose Bierce: The Devil’s Lexicographer*. Fatout sees Bierce largely in terms of the impact of an unhappy childhood, the result of a stern Calvinist upbringing which Bierce renounced intellectually while permitting it to dominate his emotional life. Although
this thesis has much to be said for it, the book is written, according to Edmund Wilson, "in a species of provincial journalese and characterized by a badgering and boorish tone that cheapens such distinction as Bierce possesses."  

What became evident as the facts were disentangled from the fancies was that in his own day Bierce was best known on the West Coast for his satirical journalism. This career spanned some forty years and made Bierce, as one friend put it, "the best hated and the best loved man in California." According to George Sterling,  

Bierce, during all but the earliest years of his life in California, was our Radamanthus of letters, from whose decisions there was no appeal. With a scratch of the pen he made or broke reputations, literary or otherwise, and his pathway through time was strewn with innumerable pretenders, pierced in their vainest spots.  

Although the reputation Bierce established was largely a regional one, his newspaper polemics did much to spread his fame as America's most bitter cynic and misanthrope. Western readers, raised in a well-defined tradition of personal journalism, eagerly devoured his columns and looked on, fascinated, as he poured forth an endless stream of abuse on those who had offended him or who failed to meet his own standards. Some critics have found the "essential" Bierce in this journalism; to others, less impressed, he was only a writer "with a talent for turning a phrase which fluttered the parish dovecots." The truth is that most of Bierce's journalism, written on topical issues and local figures, has proved highly ephemeral. Much of it lies buried in
the files of obscure or long-defunct California journals and newspapers, and even the San Francisco *Examiner*, for which Bierce wrote some of his best columns, has no index for the years from 1887 to 1896 when he was a star attraction in Hearst's stable.

On the other hand, the journalism that has been preserved in the *Collected Works* has a more than parochial interest. Although the minor figures and often petty crimes on which Bierce spent so much of his energy have passed into oblivion, the larger causes of his discontent remain and help to illuminate his dilemma as a writer. His newspaper work, seldom exceptional and often merely strident in its sterile abuse, reveals a man so profoundly at odds with his age that his only means of contact with it was through ruthless cynicism and the violence of his disgust. Quite simply, Bierce hated the society that emerged from the Civil War—hated its cheap patriotism, sentimentality, and crude materialism and tastes. His assaults on all forms of mediocrity and mendacity are part of his disenchantment with America itself, in which he saw only "a great, broad blackness with two or three small points of light struggling and flickering in the universal blank of ignorance, bigotry, crudity, conceit, tobacco-chewing, ill-dressing, unmannedly manners and general barbarity." 29 Like many of this country's critics, Bierce distrusted the whole democratic experiment and scorned the notion that "in the New World the old causes would not have the old effects" or that "a republic had some inherent vitality of its own." 30 Essentially, what called forth Bierce's mockery and despair was, as Lewis Mumford remarked of Twain, "the fu-
tility of a society that denied, starved, frustrated its imaginative life, and had sacrificed every legitimate human desire for the spread of mechanical contrivances and the successes of finance.” And, like Twain, Bierce translated this futility “into the futility of mankind itself.”

Bierce’s cynicism and sense of futility, however, do more than measure the crudities of the Gilded Age, which had other critics at least as effective and perhaps more discriminating in their assaults. As certain of his essays, and particularly his letters, make evident, behind all the raillery and bitter satire lay a romantic temperament and a frustrated idealism that left Bierce stranded when he could find no way to justify them through his experience. By his own admission and the testimony of friends, Bierce had once approached life filled with extravagant expectations and youthful dreams of achievement. Specifically, this time of promise was the period covered by Bierce’s war service, which Bierce always regarded as the most exciting and significant experience of his life and looked back on with an almost incredible nostalgia. It became the focal point of his existence, against which he opposed the dreary civilian aftermath, a means of defining the gulf between former youthful hopes and dreams and a present experience that mocked all sanguine assumptions about life. Bierce talked about the war, thought about it, wrote about it, all his life, and paid repeated visits to the Civil War battlefields where he had fought. Emotionally, he never left the army at all, and as his disillusionment and frustration increased, his war days became increasingly a cherished memory. As one of his
characters remarks, "Youth is Gilead, in which is balm for every wound. Ah, that I might again dwell in that enchanted land!"  

It is difficult to understand Bierce as a writer without reference to his divided sensibility and to his contradictory responses to experience. Although the conflicts in Bierce are apparent to anyone reading his journalism and correspondence, and have been remarked by Carey McWilliams and others, their relevance to his short stories has never been explored. As this study shows, however, Bierce's inability to reconcile extremes in his temperament determines the very form and texture of his imaginative world. Too many critics have regarded his fiction either as mechanically contrived or as a fictional version of his cynicism and misanthropy. While this is true of his least successful stories, it misses the significance and symbolic complexity of his war fiction, which is highly idiosyncratic.

Although Bierce always found a ready audience for his newspaper work, he had no illusions about yellow journalism or about the bitter fact that he produced far more of it than of the pure and permanent art he so revered. In his imaginative literature Bierce instinctively turned away from the prosaic constricting world dissected in his journalism. He did so either by returning to the scenes of his war experience, with all their ambiguous associations or, less successfully, by working within the tradition of terror and the supernatural. This impulse to seek out the remote or unusual, part of his romantic theory of art and the imagination, explains why Bierce never dealt in his fiction with the world of everyday experience and why his stories fall within sharply defined limits. They are circumscribed
by the fact that the impulse to withdraw into a world of imagination was invariably blocked by Bierce's pervasive sense of the futility and emptiness of life itself. A recurrent pattern in Bierce's fiction is one in which the imagination is denied or frustrated by rational knowledge and empirical experience.

The qualities in Bierce's fiction which made him an exciting discovery during the 1920's had not produced the same effect in 1891 when he published *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, his most important collection of stories. Although the book received some favorable reviews, the response of the general reader was either indifference or distaste. In fact, Bierce could not get any of the magazines or major publishers to accept his stories, and virtually all of them appeared for the first time in the San Francisco *Examiner*, for which he had gone to work in 1887.38 A few had been printed earlier in such papers as *The Wave* and the *Argonaut*, but a striking fact about Bierce's fiction is that almost all of it was written within a ten-year period, and much of it in his first few years with Hearst's *Examiner*. As Bierce's friend Bailey Millard remarked: "Beginning in the early 'eighties he wrote story after story, but nearly all were considered by magazine editors to be impossible for their pages; and when he sent a lot of manuscript tales to book publishers they would have none of them." 34

Consequently, in the first edition of the *Tales*, now something of a rarity, we find the following acknowledgment: "Denied existence by the chief publishing houses of the country, this book owes itself to Mr. E. L. G. Steele, merchant, of this city. In attesting Mr.
Steele’s faith in his judgment and his friend, it will serve its author’s main and best ambition.” With the appearance in 1893 of Can Such Things Be?, Bierce’s career as a short story writer was just about at an end. He wrote an occasional ghost story after that time, but nothing that approached his war fiction. Stymied by the chilling metaphysic he had erected in his tales, and their indifferent reception, Bierce turned once more to his journalism and the tirade of abuse that was becoming characteristic of him.

The reaction of editors and publishers to Bierce’s fiction is hardly surprising. His war stories seemed particularly offensive, with their rotting corpses and gaping wounds and their unmitigated concentration on death and suffering. About the most that could be said for them at the time was that they were a powerful indictment of war’s horror, and this is how they have frequently been read. While the horror of war is real enough in these stories, that is not their ultimate concern. It is a very special kind of Civil War that is waged in Bierce’s fiction, one shaped by his own conflicting responses to life. Nevertheless, his war tales were generally viewed either as antiwar tracts or as inhuman excursions into the realm of pain and death. Neither interpretation favored their acceptance by magazines which wanted “no fiction which might seriously disturb the equanimity of the family circle.” 35 Bierce knew what he was up against. Of reading he remarked: “In our country it consists, as a rule, of Indiana novels, short stories in ‘dialect’ and humor in slang.” 36 He hated the new realism, the sentimental romance, the novel itself. He refused to write a story
with a happy ending, and it is even doubtful whether he could have conceived one. In one of his stories, the narrator, who has just met his fiancée at the railway station, hastens to assure us that "this is not a love story. I am no story-teller, and love as it is cannot be portrayed in a literature dominated and enthralled by the debasing tyranny which 'sentences letters' in the name of the Young Girl." 37

There is no denying the authority of the "Young Girl" or of those who sought to serve her best interests. When she grew up, she became that formidable creature Thomas Beer calls "the Titaness," addicted to firing off letters to the editor whenever she sensed a breach of the fictional amenities. 38 Principally, these included a happy, or at least morally edifying, conclusion, total abstinence, considerable sentiment, no overt passion, and a vocabulary as tightly laced and elegantly padded as the Titaness herself. She could get Huckleberry Finn removed from the shelves of the Concord Library or end a play on the New York stage, and her influence upon the leading magazines and the tastes of the Gilded Age was painfully evident. "If," Beer tells us, "you were a proper editor, bred in the society of Newark or of Hartford, you did not trifle with the Titaness and for her sake you issued tales of women, by women, for women, in which one discovers the strangest things about that duel of the sexes, a deal discussed in the '90's." 39 For Bierce, she made the popular magazine "as like as one vacuum to another," 40 a view one is apt to share after glancing at the fiction that appeared in the Cosmopolitan, for which Bierce wrote near the end
of his career. Even F. Marion Crawford, whose knowledge of popular taste made him one of America's highest-paid novelists, found that "the school-girl practically decides what we are to hear at the theater and, so far as our own language is concerned, determines to a great extent what we are to read." When Bierce's tales came back from the leading magazines and publishers, it was because they seemed to flout the whole ethos of the Gilded Age. In their largest sense they expressed only the futility of his despair—the "reality" he discovered to be "the dream of a mad philosopher," "the nucleus of a vacuum." To see Bierce exclusively as a victim of circumstances, however, would be a serious misjudgment. Yet this is how he has sometimes been thought of, especially by friends and ardent admirers who made him into a figure too fine for his age, his talent hobbled by the prevailing standards of taste, his creative impulse deadened by neglect. One awed female "pupil" saw Bierce as "a sensitive, idealistic, poetic man forced by circumstance to bear silently many blows." To his friend Herman Scheffauer he was "a lion in a vast squirrel-cage, a Gulliver held down by a thousand threads of public hostility, indifference and ignorance." Such opinions are as misleading as others which found in Bierce only "a bitter black cynic, and a cruel, domineering old bigot." All of these views are true up to a point, but their truth is only partial since they are responses to one side or another of a curiously divided personality. Insofar as Bierce was proud and sensitive in the extreme, the lack of a large or enthusiastic audience for his fiction did much to curb his ef-
forts. But Bierce did not simply drown in a sea of sentiment. If Bierce was "held down by a thousand threads of public hostility," he was equally immobilized by his own limitations as an artist and by the nature of his vision. What remained after Bierce had rejected the literary tastes and conventions of his day was the only kind of imaginative world he could create in the first place—one utterly without joy or hope. In his journalism he appears to have seen himself in lonely rebellion against his age; in his letters, on the other hand, he is most conscious of his own inadequacies as a writer, with fine intention mocked by actual achievement. His best stories recreate the poignant contrast between his knowledge and his dream and expose the fatal conspiracy of outward circumstances and inner weakness that makes all effort useless.