

Ambrose Bierce: The Devil's Disciple

Ambrose Bierce: The Devil's Dictionary, Tales, & Memoirs. Edited By S. T. Joshi. The Library of America, 2011, 880-pages; \$35.

Civil War Stories. By Ambrose Bierce. Paintings by Chester Arnold. Kelly's Cove Press, 2011, 87 pages; \$25.

The Best of the Devil's Dictionary. Edited by Bart Schneider. Kelly's Cove Press, 2011. 85 pages; \$20.

By Jonah Raskin

Ambrose Bierce - America's most poetic war writer - belongs to the age of the telegraph and the telegram, those two infernal 19th-century technologies that transformed war reporting and connected distant individuals almost as efficiently as cell phones and text messaging. A master of brevity, Bierce excelled at the short story and at concise definitions for the common words that fill *The Devil's Dictionary*, his one universally accepted work of genius that retains its sparkling wit and biting satire 130 years after it was first published in 1881. Moreover, though he mastered weapons of war and deftly operated printing presses during peacetime, he wasn't simply a child of the machine age. The title of an early short story, "A Psychological Shipwreck," suggests Bierce's preoccupation with the strange and wonderful workings of the human mind.

Fascinated by dreams, nightmares, and hallucinations, he mapped haunted landscapes and portrayed haunted people. The term magical realism might apply to his writing, except that it has been overused and has lost much of its initial force. Perhaps surrealism is more appropriate, though sarcasm is the word that best conveys the tone of *The Devil's Dictionary*. The combination of magical realism, sarcasm, and a staccato-like prose made Bierce well suited to write about the American Civil War and the corruptions of the Gilded Age that followed it. On nearly page of his diabolical lexicon, he pokes fun at and exposes the madness and the absurdity of American politics, economics, and culture. Indeed, long before Occupy Wall Street, he lampooned banks and bankers and didn't stop there.

An “immigrant,” he wrote in his *Dictionary* was “An unenlightened person who thinks one country better than another.” An “Un-American” was “Wicked, intolerable, heathenish.” In stark contrast to the optimists of the day, he took on the persona of the crafty disciple of the devil and redefined “Americanism,” as H. L. Mencken would call them and rewrote the meanings of sacrosanct literary terms. The imagination, he wrote, was “A warehouse of facts, with poet and liar in joint ownerships.” Of all the gifts of the writer, the imagination loomed larger than any other in his storehouse of literary weapons, and so, predictably, he also extolled the romance as a genre and denigrated the novel. In *The Devil’s Dictionary*, he explains that, “In the novel the writer’s thought is tethered to probability, as a domestic horse to the hitching post, but in romance it ranges at will over the entire region of the imagination – free, lawless, immune to bit and reign.”

Unwilling to fit in, Bierce nonetheless became a kind of institution in San Francisco at the end of the 19th-century, where he met Bret Harte, along with many other luminaries of the day, then skewered them and their publication, *The Overland Monthly* as “The warmed-Overland Monthly.” Born in Ohio in 1842 - two years before Morse invented the telegraph - he fought for the Union Army during the American Civil War, from 1861 until 1865, and engaged in the savage spectacle of slaughter that he would later revisit and reinvent in a series of short stories published in 1891 under the title, *In the Midst of Life: Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*. Wounded in the head, hospitalized, furloughed and then returned to war again, Bierce knew how it felt to lose consciousness and then regain it. As a writer, he would wander in and out of the consciousness and the conscience of many of his characters such as Peyton Fahrquhar, the Confederate soldier who is hung by Union troops on a bridge that spans Owl Creek in northern Alabama, and who imagines, in the last desperate moments before he dies, his return to his plantation and wife.

“Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” – Bierce’s best known and most frequently anthologized short story – is collected in *Bierce: The Devil’s Dictionary, Tales, & Memoirs* an 880-page tome from The Library of America that includes a chronology of the author’s life as a soldier and a civilian, plus detailed notes on the text by S. T. Joshi, a Bierce expert. “Occurrence” is also published in *Civil War Stories*, an 82-page paperback from Kelly’s Cove Press in San Francisco, that contains 24 unsettling paintings by the renowned California artist, Chester Arnold,

that compliment Bierce's gruesome text. Moreover, Kelly's Cove has reprinted what the editor, Bart Schneider, calls *The Best of the Devil's Dictionary*. Schneider omits some words - immigrant, for example - but includes Un-American and imagination. In an email to me he said that he thinks of Ambrose Bierce as the "Lenny Bruce of the 19th-century" and "perhaps better suited to our times than his own." He added that Bierce's Civil War stories "constituted great anti-war literature that was basically unknown and ripe for reprinting."

Bierce wrote about Confederate and Union soldiers with equal helpings of compassion and indifference, though in "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," he derives a perverse sense of satisfaction in describing the hanging of Peyton Fahrquhar, the wealthy Southern planter who is easily tricked by a crafty Federal scout and then easily captured and executed by Federal troops before he can carry out acts of sabotage. Bierce creates the setting of the story in meticulous detail. He describes the rope that hangs Fahrquhar, the military hierarchy in the Union army, the trees in the surrounding woods that look like "black bodies," and the stars in the sky that are "grouped in strange constellations." Moreover, Bierce moves masterfully from an outer to an inner landscape in which "Death is a dignitary."

As in a Faulkner's novel - *The Sound and the Fury*, for example - time becomes his subject. Before he dies, Fahrquhar hears the "ticking of his watch" and notices ominously the "intervals of silence." Like Faulkner, who told the first part of *The Sound and the Fury* from the perspective of the idiot, Benjy, Bierce experimented with points of view and stream of consciousness writing. In the short story, "Chickamauga," which follows immediately after "An Occurrence" in the collection, *The Midst of Life*, war comes to the reader through the eyes of a child who can neither hear nor speak, though it's not until the next-to-the last sentence that the author explains, "The child was a deaf mute." In "A Son of the Gods," the very next story, which is subtitled "A Study in the Present Tense," Bierce avoids past and future and remains in the here and the now and captures what he calls "the Poetry of War."

Some of Bierce's post-Civil War tales are set in San Francisco. Others take place in Napa and Sonoma, a landscape of fog and rolling hills he knew nearly as well as the landscape of battle and bloodshed. In the story, "Can Such Things Be?," he tells the riveting tale of a southerner, Halpin Frayser, who enjoys sleeping on the ground in the

dark forests near St. Helena and who sees apparitions in the “haunted wood.”

It was the Civil War, however, not northern California that went on haunting Bierce his entire life, and so he returned to it decades after the combat officially ended in his essays. Several of them, including “What I Saw of Shiloh” (1881) and “A Little of Chickamauga,” (1891) are collected in the new Library of America edition of his work. Bierce commanded a regiment in the battle of Shiloh in 1862, and for bravery in action was promoted to lieutenant. In 1863, he fought in the battle of Chickamauga, and with his men, many of them wounded, many others left to die, he retreated from Confederate troops to the relative safety of Tennessee. Then, in 1864, under the command of William Tecumseh Sherman – who noted famously that “war is hell” and who brought it to southerners all across Georgia – Bierce discovered the hell of war for himself when a bullet pierced his head and was, in his own words, “broken like a walnut.”

“What I Saw of Shiloh” offers a first-person, eyewitness account of the horrific carnage. Like the best American war reporters, such as his near contemporary Stephen Crane author of *The Red Badge of Courage*, Bierce moves from historical fact to subjective experience. The Confederate soldiers look like “figures of demons in old allegorical prints of hell.” War exudes a “wild intoxication” and death sounds a “monstrous inharmony.” At the conclusion of the article, “What I Saw of Shiloh,” written 20 years after the battle ended, Bierce confesses that he feels nostalgic for his days as a young soldier surrounded by the “horrors of the time.” In hindsight, the Civil War comes to seem “gracious and picturesque” while the present looks “dull,” “drear,” and “somber.” Obsessed with war and addicted to writing about it, he found nothing else as horrible and as gracious.

That he disappeared without a trace in Mexico in December 1913 seems in keeping with his life as a writer who capitalized on the invisible, the unreal, and the surreal. Before he crossed the border into Mexico, Bierce revisited the battlefields he had known as a young man at Chickamauga and Shiloh. In New Orleans, he paused long enough to sit down with a reporter and say, “I’m on my way to Mexico because I like the game. I like the fighting; I want to see it.” In his very last letter from Chihuahua, Mexico on the day after Christmas 1913, he wrote, as though beginning a short story in which he would be the narrator, “I leave here tomorrow for an unknown destination.”

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