

Dissenting within Hearst's Empire: Ambrose Bierce's Columns on the Spanish-American War

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Ambrose Bierce has always been considered, first and foremost, as a writer of striking short stories. The underground reputation of the writer is mainly due to the impression of shock that emanates from his tales. Bierce's works do *not* let readers indifferent: those who are willing to be embarked on a brutish world are bound to enjoy the reading, those who are not, will not even remember his name. But Bierce's name could not be ignored at the turn of the 19th century, especially if one lived in California. Then, "Bitter Bierce" was also known as "the wickedest man in San Francisco", the "town crier", the "curmudgeon philosopher", among many others. The "philosophy" he was keen on making public was essentially published in the columns he wrote in different newspapers. For Ambrose Bierce *was* a journalist, even though he found many bad things to say about his own profession.

The specificity of Ambrose Bierce's writing, if not of his life, was that he was a "naysayer". For him, there was no use writing if it did not consist in confronting someone specifically, or, more generally, the prevailing beliefs of his days. That is why it would only be fair if, today, his writings were not merely seen as some striking accounts of the violent times his young nation was then facing. Ambrose Bierce indeed belongs to one of those marginal voices that, of all times, the present one included, have taken nothing for granted as they always question what the powers that be would like to impose as the one and only "Truth".

Having previously commented on Bierce's fictional writings (Chambost 2004), I would like now to analyze the journalistic prose of that columnist whose opinions were among the most highly-regarded ones, and not only on the West Coast. Few scholars have worked on Bierce's columns, Lawrence Berkove being one of them. The critic thus compiled Bierce's columns from 1898 to 1901 and published them in a book aptly entitled *Skepticism and Dissent* (Berkove 1980). Using Berkove's work, I have here analysed Bierce's "War Topics" plus a few of them that were published within that period with a distinct headline (from April 3, 1898 to September 4, 1898).

The turn of the century marked the beginning of a new expansionist era for the USA, that was coupled with the development of yellow journalism. We will thus first show how Bierce's fame then grew as he clearly showed in his columns his opposition to his employer's endorsement

of war and expansion. We will then delve into the tensions inherent to Bierce's prose, analysing how his strained and sharp style made explicit his opposition to journalists, to politicians and to some of the military. Lastly, when comparing the writings of Bierce's columns to what can be found in his tales, we will see that the two notions of reflections and deflections can be brought to the fore regarding his style.

I. Expansions

The last decades of the 19th century saw the emergence of the USA on the international scene as, to echo the title of Serge Ricard's book, the USA was becoming an "imperialistic republic" (Ricard 1987). The U.S.A. then used the notion of "Manifest Destiny" to develop its influence in Latin America and it resorted to the Monroe Doctrine when necessary. In 1895, in Venezuela for instance, the USA even threatened close partners—and rivals—like Great Britain. In 1898, Hawaii was annexed; then following the Spanish-American war and the ensuing Treaty of Paris,¹ the USA received Puerto Rico and Guam, assumed the control of the Philippines, and Cuba was made a protectorate. Thus, by the end of the 19th century, the USA had become a colonial empire with overseas territories.

This expansion was made popular with the development of the "yellow press" which constantly headlined sensational jingoistic topics.² Both Joseph Pulitzer's *The New York World* and William Randolph Hearst's *The New York Journal* kept urging the American government to go to war against Spain, especially after the American warship U.S.S. Maine was mysteriously blown up in the Havana Bay on February 15th, 1898. These newspapers increased their circulation figures by insisting on the atrocities allegedly perpetrated by the Spanish troops in Cuba. The news was all the more spectacular as, in those days, major technological improvements occurred and gave more impact to the information conveyed. As Jean Cazemajou shows, the dramatic aspect of the reported events was then emphasized both by the use color illustrations and, even more importantly, by the powerful sketches of skilled illustrators like Frederick Remington (Cazemajou 1987).

The expansion of yellow journalism was boosted when President William McKinley and the Congress finally waged war on Spain, on April 21st 1898. Even if reporters had gone onto the battlefield during the Crimean War—in 1854-1855—and the American Civil War, those were truly the times of war correspondents: dozens of them went to Cuba—165 according to Franklin Walter (Walter 1963: 181). Among them could be found writers like Frank Norris or Stephen Crane but also the first journalists to achieve some fame as foreign

¹ That treaty was signed on the 10th of December 1898.

² The phrase "yellow press" comes from a sensationalist cartoon, *The Yellow Kid*, periodically published in that newspaper.

correspondents—Richard Harding Davis being then a celebrity. As Michael Schudson shows, the tendency was then to mythologize the work of these daring adventurers: it was “the Age of the Reporter” (Schudson, 1978: 65),³ and it accompanied what has been since then described as “a surge of military romanticism” (Bradford 1987: 83). But as that surge swept the journalistic world, one columnist was there to stoically quell the generalized euphoria.

Ambrose Bierce was no tenderfoot in the world of journalism. He had started his career in San Francisco around 1868 and had rapidly gained his notoriety as “wicked” in newspapers like *The San Francisco News Letters*, Bret Harte’s *The Overland Monthly*, *The Argonaut* (1877-1879), *The Californian* (1880), *The San Francisco Wasp* (1881-1886). The topics of his chronicles were varied, their common point being a sharp and often cynical view on the issues he dealt with. As he was *the* journalistic authority in California, William Randolph Hearst asked him, in 1887, to write a column in *The San Francisco Examiner* that he had just bought. Bierce agreed although the two men had nothing in common. Lawrence Berkove well epitomizes their relationship when he speaks of “an unlikely symbiotic relationship of antipathies” (Berkove 1981: 39). Bierce himself was prone to criticize his employer in his *Collected Works*: “If ever two men were born to be enemies he and I are they. Each stands for everything that is most disagreeable to each other” (Bierce 1912: 306). In that strained relationship, it is said that Bierce resigned several times, but each time Hearst managed to have Bierce change his mind and write for some of his magazines until 1909.

The heyday of Bierce’s journalism occurred most probably in the late 1890s. In 1896 indeed, in what was to become the kind of journalistic crusades muckrakers were fond of, Bierce successfully denounced a political scandal in Washington involving Railroad Barons, or “Railrogs” as he called them. At that time the column he ran was also published in *The New York Journal*. His prose was so fiery that the government could no longer ignore his wrath and finally made “the Central Pacific Railroad” pay the huge amount of money it owed to the State.⁴ That feat of journalistic skill contributed to Bierce’s national fame, which allowed him two years later to keep his column even when his opinion ran counter to Hearst’s craving for jingoistic articles. Unlike Pulitzer, Hearst did not care for opinions: all he wanted was to entertain his readership with sensational news so as to build the circulation of his newspapers. But he also knew that, by adding a dissenting voice such as Bierce’s, he was increasing the number of his sales.

Bierce’s “War Topics” were therefore a way for Hearst to create some tension within his newspapers. Even when both men seemed to agree at first on the necessity to go to war, Bierce

³ Michael Schudson then explicitly quotes Irving Cobb’s work on American newspaper journalism (Cobbs 1941: 251-264).

⁴ This kind of investigative journalism was to be developed with journalists like Lincoln Steffens or Ida Tarbell in newspapers like *McClure’s* or *Munsey’s*.

found nevertheless a way of stressing the specificity of his viewpoint. Like most of his writings, Bierce's columns were activated by some resisting force. The author proved to be the perfect embodiment of what a contrarian is: Ambrose Bierce was indeed always "against"...

II. Tensions

Bierce and Hearst had therefore very little in common, but after the sinking of the U.S.S. Maine, both men felt the USA had to retaliate. However, even then, the tone of Bierce's columns was quite in contrast with the rest of the articles. As Michael Schudson rightly observes about news in general: "News tend to emphasize conflict, dissension and battle; out of a journalistic convention that there are two sides to any story, news heightens the appearance of conflict even in instance of relative consensus" (Schudson 1995: 9).

Nevertheless, the consensus was limited and soon the opposition was made explicit, Bierce questioning first the efficiency of the military—"I do not share this paper's confidence in the formidable character of the dynamite cruiser 'Vesuvius'" (Bierce 1980: 66)—then the true motives of the war—"The passion for territory once roused rages like a lion; successive conquests only strengthen it. That is the fever that is now burning in the American blood" (Bierce 1980: 87).

When considering the Spanish-American War, Ambrose Bierce had therefore the international context in mind, and that may be the reason why his columns stood so blatantly apart from the mass of jingoistic articles. Bierce stressed facts that usually went unnoticed by the press: besides the imperialist issue already mentioned, he considered the war from the Spanish point of view (Bierce 1980: 7-9) as well as he commented on the mixed feelings that the Cubans and the Filipinos experienced about the USA (Bierce 1980: 91-93). In his column, Bierce also dealt with the financial cost of massive but useless bombardments (Bierce 1980: 53), or he analyzed the efficiency of some arms and their possible use in the future—arms like "the torpedo boat", "the battleship", "the submarine", "the monitor" or "the airship" (Bierce 1980: 71-72). Lastly, he regularly considered the material problems faced by American soldiers in Cuba—problems of heat, food, diseases... (Bierce 1980: 77).

Given the adventurous spirit that animated Bierce—an ex-lieutenant in the Federal Army during the Civil War and an ex-gold digger—one might be surprised that he did not take part in the reporters' rush to Cuba. But as Lawrence Berkove admits: "[War correspondents] reported the event; Bierce corrected them. They reported the moment; Bierce explained what the moment meant" (Berkove 1981: 39). That distance allowed him indeed to give a more balanced account of the news without departing from his usual corrosive style. Thus, given his experience of the Civil War, Bierce was *the* authority on war matters and he obviously took

some pleasure in criticizing reporters for what he saw as flawed reporting. As time went by, he even included within his column a part that he called “To Certain Correspondents” in which he admonished some of them, being kind enough to address the “guilty” reporters by giving their initials only.⁵ Bierce’s comments could include simple spelling mistakes for he also relied on his experience as literary critic,⁶ or he would note when an inappropriate word was used – “Merely remarking that nobody ever was ‘hit’ by a chance shot, though many persons have been struck by them (...)” (Bierce 1980: 58). But he also established his “rules” of war correspondence and he did not hesitate to deliver the most brutal attacks: “G.G. – Aren’t you curios uttering a good deal of blather about nothing? (...) If you freaks can’t understand what you read why don’t you read what you understand? (Bierce 1980: 73).

Bierce’s position as judge of war correspondence was not limited to these specific subparts. Quite regularly, he would take up the pose of the adviser in military matters, using his status of war veteran. Sometimes, he stressed his knowledge in warfare in a humble way, starting his advice with a preterition to sound less assertive: “Far it be from me to profess either light or skill in the conduct of an illustrated newspaper, but I modestly venture to think that in war time the presence and authority of an old soldier in the art department would be worth more than his salary” (Bierce 1980: 64-65). But some other times, he explained at length why reporters or illustrators were “dead” wrong:

A word more to those sons of peace, the war-artists: I observe my children, that in the matter of the shot soldier you err. He does not, as a rule, let go his weapon, bend his legs, throw one hand to his forehead and go over backward. That is altogether too spectacular a going before to match his desire, for he is not greatly concerning himself about the impression that he is making. No, dear gentlemen, he commonly prefers departing this life as one having a feeble interest in its pomp and pageantry. He simply relaxes the tension of his muscles and drops any way. Most frequently he pitches headlong, forward, and lies as it may please the gods of chance. Sometimes he goes down “all of a heap”, as a wet towel would do if it tried to stand on end. (Bierce 1980: 79)

This last quote may give the impression that Bierce was a writer entirely devoted to a realistic conception of literature. One must not forget however that Bierce would sometimes have a change of heart and in the same column, only a few days later, he was to deride realism: “[God] met the demands of artistic vraisemblance by solemnly providing that the victors should have one man killed. With this concession to realism the dead man’s surviving seamates were so delighted that they raised a memorial fund for the widow” (Bierce 1980: 92).⁷ In fact, when

⁵ During the period analyzed, these messages sent to certain correspondents were published on the 3rd, 10th, 24th and 31st of July 1898.

⁶ Throughout his career, Bierce wrote didactic essays like “The Matter of Manner” (Bierce 1995: 131-136), “The Principles of Literary Arts” (Bierce 1998: 242-247), “To Train a Writer” (Bierce 1998: 247-248) or “Write it Right” (Bierce 1987: 221-236).

⁷ One may also refer to the disparaging definitions found in *The Devil’s Dictionary*:

Bierce reproached war-artists and journalists for not conveying what really took place on the battlefield, his attacks were more far-reaching than a simple concern for artistic representations *per se*: what he then denounced was the general tendency to romanticize that conflict and to make the American public opinion feel good about what he considered more and more as an imperialistic move to be deplored.

Thus, in many of his columns, he questioned the objectivity of the reporters's sources and writings—"As reporters and statisticians our Cuban friends are great. They never pain their American deliverers by understating the results of American valor" (Bierce 1980: 52). Bierce's distrust towards journalists was not however born during that conflict; it was in fact only intensified by it. He had worked long enough as journalist to become fully aware of the different kinds of manipulations and pressures that reporters faced when writing about the powers that be. One may simply read tales like "Corrupting the Press" or "The Bubble Reputation" to grasp how contemptuous of the journalistic world he could be.⁸ And it is not *The Devil's Dictionary* which is going to change that negative impression—"REPORTER, *n.* A writer who guesses his way to the truth and dispels it with a tempest of words" (Bierce 1996: 343).

Ambrose Bierce's wrath was never as strong as when it came to political matters, especially if the world of politics came to interfere with that of the military. Then, Bierce's attacks sometimes reached an intensity that could hardly be imagined nowadays. These were not politically correct times and the polemologist delighted in turning into a fierce polemicist. Bierce explained at length why he thought that "wit" was superior to "humor". He also acknowledged his debt to great satirists like Swift, Voltaire or La Rochefoucault, and the satire he used was much closer to that of Juvenal than to a Socratic conception of irony. With Bierce, wit was "merciless" and satire "mangle[d]" (Bierce 1998: 90). One can see then that all the *ad hominem* arguments he used in his columns were not slips of the pen on any account; rather they were part of his strategy to debunk in the most brutal way those he profoundly disliked. It would be lengthy to list all those who fell under Bierce's pen but one can take Admiral William T. Sampson as an example. That officer was certainly Bierce's favorite target as he showed poor strategic skills – according to Bierce – and as his military function was not due to his merit but to a "leap-frog promotion" decided by President McKinley (Bierce 1980: 54). Bierce resented that kind of practice which proved that the military order, that he would have liked to idealize, was not immune from the corruption of influential civilians. Thus, Admiral Sampson was variously referred to as "the admiralized captain" (Bierce 1980: 63), "Admiral" Sampson

REALISM, *n.* 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.

REALLY, *adv.* Apparently (Bierce 1996: 338).

⁸ To such tales can also be added "Mr. Masthead, Journalist" and "Why I Am Not Editing the 'Stinger'" (Bierce 1984).

(Bierce 1980: 72)⁹the inverted commas on the word “Admiral” making all the difference¹⁰or as an officer whose action was an instance of the “infantile nonsense” that “[bore] the distinctive earmarks of civilian design” and that was a “precious contribution to American humor” (Bierce 1980: 76). In his columns, other officers were treated just as harshly whether it was Major-General Elwell S. Otis who, when put to battle “[would] probably take to his heels so nimbly as to resemble a parallel of latitude” (Bierce 1980: 83) or some Captain Barnes whose obesity was mocked in the most uncouth way:

Captain Barnes, of the Bloody Eighth, (...) is as brave a man as ever weighed three hundred and fifty pounds and a veritable glutton for glory, but he does not purpose going into action without an even chance with his less obese battlemates. His ingenious plan is to have the figure of an ordinary man chalked upon his giant bulk. If the bullet strikes him outside that outline sketch it is not to count. (Bierce 1980: 83)¹¹

Following the triptych that Gilles Declercq established regarding polemics, when Bierce expressed his disagreement with his country’s policy, he used *ad rem* arguments; when he debunked what civilians and officers had said, his argument could be defined as *ad hominem*; and when he openly attacked the person he disagreed with, he resorted to *ad personam* arguments (Declercq 2003). One might be surprised that no authority prohibited the mockeries and the insults from Bierce’s columns, all the more so as the country was at war, but as Patrick Wachsmann shows in the same book on polemics, *The American Supreme Court in America* always kept in mind the notion of a “free marketplace of ideas,” which enabled journalists to exchange the most violent diatribes (Wachsmann 2003). Bierce openly expressed his liking of such a tense professional atmosphere: in one of his columns, he even admitted that, when it came to journalism, he “dote[d] upon a good row” (Fatout 1951: 204).¹² But when infuriated, he could also assert:

[Many newspapers] constitute a monstrous menace to organized society – a formidable peril to government of any kind; and if ever in America anarchy shall beg to introduce its dear friend despotism, we shall have to thank our vaunted “freedom of the press” as the controlling spirit of the turbulent time and Lord of Misrule. (Bierce 1998: 177)

⁹ This disparaging kind of writing echoes the paradox that I stated elsewhere about Bierce’s tales: namely, Bierce advocated “wit” but his writings were often closer to American Humor, a kind of humor that he criticized however in his theoretical writings (Chambost 2004: 70-112).

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¹² In fact, these rows were sometimes more than literary since some journalists were even murdered as their journalistic attacks had been too deeply felt. In Bierce’s days, Charles De Young from *The San Francisco Chronicle* and Edward C. Gilbert from *The Alta California* were thus murdered. As he worked for *The Argonaut*, in 1878, Ambrose Bierce himself was involved in a fight occasioned by the husband of an actress that the journalist had ridiculed in his column.

The columnist's will to run counter to the general trend accounted for the sharpness of his texts. Everything, in those columns, was meant to provoke a quasi-immediate reaction. The first thing to be mentioned is the extreme compactness of the columns. In his literary theories, Bierce echoed Edgar Allan Poe's preference for the short story and its unity of impression. For Bierce too, any literary work had to be read "at one sitting" (Poe 1983: 552);¹³ and journalistic articles did not depart from his principles. Indeed, so as to give his ideas an even more aggressive aspect, Bierce would regularly fragment his column into several strictly delineated parts—his columns were often composed of six or seven unrelated paragraphs, and it could sometimes even reach ten or eleven parts (Bierce 1980: 39-44 and 68-73). Thus, his readership would be given the opportunity to rejoice at a series of distinct bitter comments that could be read separately, although a common theme sometimes connected the different parts of the column.

When analyzing what makes each of these parts so fraught with tension, one soon realizes the high frequency of some literary devices. One of the most typical characteristics of Bierce's journalistic writing is the tendency to mix the most ornate style with the rudest invectives. The chiasmatic structure of the above invective ("If you freaks can't understand what you read why don't you read what you understand?") is a telling example. Also interesting is the phrase "neighborly ruction" (Bierce 1980: 33) which oddly associates a sophisticated word ("neighborly") with a word akin to slang.¹⁴ With the same logic of thought, Bierce delighted in using antiphrases and anticlimaxes: he thus speaks of the "exquisite politeness" of the Spaniards as he obviously refers to their cruelty (Bierce 1980: 11) or he abuses Admiral Sampson by using an anticlimactic metaphor implying the officer's lack of courage – "the iron hand of [Sampson's] timidity" (Bierce 1980: 78). Jolting his readership seemed to be one of Bierce's major aims, and to that purpose, he liked the semantically unlikely association of words – like the "bombardment" that "tickles the civilian ear" (Bierce 1980: 34) – or very sharp endings in which he could assert his view and / or disparage somebody he did not like.

Bierce also made reading terser thanks to incisive zeugmatic structures— "Truly we must be terrible indeed to our enemies if so fatal to our friends" (Bierce 1980: 91) —daring neologisms— "despaniarding the seas" (Bierce 1980: 71) —or puns and portemanteau words— "bitter world" instead of "better world" (Bierce 1980: 37) and "pignorant" which results from the fusion of "pig" and "ignorant" (Bierce 1980: 83).

As the energetic and buoyant nature of American Humor can be felt at times, Bierce was also careful to show that he could be funny *and* learned. Thus, only those with a good knowledge of

¹³ In *The Devil's Dictionary*, Bierce showed the little attraction he had for the novel as he defined it as "a short story padded" (Bierce 1996: 313).

¹⁴ "ruccion" is informal, its origin being not even sure. It may come from "insurrection" according to the *Collins English Dictionary*.

French were able to appreciate the beginning of the second section from his column on May 22: “To return to our muttons, ships have usually no legitimate business with land fortifications” (Bierce 1980: 34). Then indeed, the successive jumps from “ship” to “sheep” to “*mouton*” to “mutton” might have perplexed many a reader.

Likewise, quite regularly, some Shakespearean intertext would give an ironic lustre to a text that was dealing with the mundane worries of the San Franciscans. Thus, some of *Hamlet*’s lines seem to have been tacked onto the introduction of the column published on July 10— “Persons keeping a lookout for the more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in the philosophy of less sharp observers may possibly find something significant in these facts”¹⁵ (Bierce 1980: 69). The introduction of the column from May 27 is more elaborate since Bierce first alludes to *Romeo and Juliet*— “There the sheep is ‘More fierce and more inexorable far / Than empty tigers on the roaring sea’”¹⁶ —then he explicitly refers to *Henry IV, Part 1*— “Many a sturdy young patriot, imperfectly trained as a pack-horse, ‘larded the lean earth’ with a needless effusion of perspiration in a manner befitting the late Jack Falstaff footing it featly from the field of honor” (Bierce 1980: 37). The reference to Falstaff and perspiration in relation to the soldiers’ warm woollen uniforms is witty for, in Shakespeare’s play, Falstaff wants to “fleece” travellers (II, 2, 82) and he is described sweating by Prince Hal: “Away, good Ned— Falstaff sweats to death, / And lards the lean earth as he walks along” (II, 2, 103-104). One can also note that it sounds as if Bierce intends to “outshine” Shakespeare as he adds an alliteration in [f] sounds— “**F**alstaff footing it **f**eatly from the **f**ield of honor” —and as he uses the latin word “perspiration” when Prince Hal only speaks of “sweat”! Much like his satirical tales, Bierce’s columns appear as the crucible of two literary trends that melt and result in a paradoxical prose, both witty and coarse, but always run through by an invigorating energy.

Lastly, Bierce was also careful to unsettle the readers’ habits by creating the most startling metaphors and metonymies. There is little doubt indeed that when writing: “an empty stomach has a stout heart” (Bierce 1980: 3) or “the (...) most elementary duty of an officer (...) is to keep (...) his heart out of his mouth” (Bierce 1980: 89), Bierce deliberately insists on the physicality of the tropes he uses. By coupling a synecdoche (“an empty stomach”) with a metaphor (“a stout heart”), the author perfectly knows that he is bringing these tropes back to life. For a split second, these catachretic associations block the understanding and the ensuing semantic retardation that takes place eventually gives way to a powerful effect in the readers’ minds. It is as if Bierce had anticipated the surrealistic use of metaphors advocated by Jean François Lyotard.¹⁷ For the philosopher indeed, what counts is *not* the analogy between the vehicle (the

¹⁵ “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (*Hamlet*, I, 5, 174-175).

¹⁶ *Romeo and Juliet* (V, 3, 42-43).

¹⁷ “La vraie métaphore, le trope, commence avec l’excès dans l’écart, avec la transgression du champ des substituables reçus par l’usage” (Lyotard 1971: 254-255).

heart) and the tenor (courage): if the analogy is too obvious, the trope is dead and worthless. On the contrary, it is the arbitrariness or the gap between these two notions that matters: tropes must have a transgressive value to wake the readers up. Such was Bierce's aim, when, in his columns, he toyed with a saying often taken for granted. Then, "The pen is mightier than the sword" was successively turned into "The sheep is mightier than the sword" (Bierce 1980: 38), "The pen is more serviceable than the sword" (Bierce 1980: 58) or "The tin can is mightier than the sword" (Bierce 1980: 61). In such instances, the reader is caught off-balance and he needs to take the context into account to understand what is meant¹⁸.

For all these reasons, Bierce's columns were self-contained pieces of literary feats that constantly triggered controversy on the national level (more than on the international one).¹⁹ But no matter how self-contained these columns were, an insight into Bierce's ideas might be gained by trying to see up to what point a parallel can be drawn between his journalism and his tales.

III. Reflections and deflections

1) Reflections

Without giving a full-fledged comparative study of Bierce's production, one might however use the above-mentioned tropes and see that they echo one major feature typical of Bierce's tall tales. Indeed, the author's focus on the human body seen as a composite of organs (the stomach, the heart, the throat, the hand...) is by no means unique to his columns. This emphasis echoes the Artaudian "explosive affirmation" of the human body that can be felt in Bierce's most grotesque tales (Artaud 1974: 94). However, the word "grotesque" may be misleading: if Bierce *does* put the human body in the foreground, he does not mean to extract Man from any sort of limitations. On the contrary, he mainly intends to remind us of our basic nature as living organisms. Just as Antonin Artaud would do later on, Bierce wants to dismiss Man's lofty aspirations, but he does not go as far as the French artist who aimed at developing another reality freed from social constraints—what he called a "body without organs" (Artaud 1974: 104). If Bierce's view of Man is "grotesque", then it must be the kind of "*romantic grotesque*" that Mikhaïl Bakhtin specified in his long introduction on the works of François Rabelais (Bakhtin 1970). Man is merely an animal, and the recurrent use of domestic animals is then a way of striking the lively chord of American humor while simultaneously undermining

¹⁸ The sheep that is stronger than the sword could be regarded as an "inverted synecdoche" since the animal refers to the American woollen uniforms that Bierce considered as more lethal than the Spanish troops, given the heat in Cuba.

¹⁹ Many of Bierce's columns dealt with local topics from the San Francisco Bay area, and it is often quite difficult for a reader of the twenty-first century to understand all that is implied in such sharp and short articles.

Man's arrogance. In his tall tales, Bierce was fond of using the most common animals that he endowed with the most extraordinary characteristics.²⁰ In his columns, Bierce also reduced Man's aura by anthropomorphizing such an ignoble thing as a disease: thus, the yellow fever was regularly referred to as "Yellow Jack" (Bierce 1980: 77, 82 and 88) and, as everyone knows: "Yellow Jack is not an agreeable trenchmate" (Bierce 1980: 77). In such a case, one is forced to agree with John Ruskin and see "pathetic fallacy" as a truly *morbid* artistic device.²¹

In his constant effort to belittle Man's pretensions, Bierce also often stresses that Man's death is not grandiloquent, and one can easily see how similarly death is described in his columns and in a tale like "One Officer, One Man": "[The shot soldier] simply relaxes the tension of his muscles and *drops* any way. Most frequently *he pitches headlong, forward*, and lies as it may please the gods of chance." (Bierce 1980: 79. My italics) / "The man at Captain Graffenreid's side *dropped* his rifle; his knees gave way and *he pitched awkwardly forward*, falling upon his face (...)" (Bierce 1984: 327. My italics).

The pessimistic tone of Ambrose Bierce's *Tales of Soldiers* cannot be missed, but as the author keeps stressing how doomed Man is, he is also careful to differentiate the braggarts who all meet the most atrocious death from some humble soldiers (privates as well as officers) who stick to an ascetic ethic and meticulously do their duty, which will not prevent them from dying, but which will trigger the reader's compassion rather than his mockery.²² Such a view also pervades Bierce's journalism and it is explicit when he asserts: "A soldier who shrinks from duty however inglorious through fear of death in whatever shape it threatens is not a good soldier. (...) the highest duty is obedience when obedience is least agreeable and the most honorable service is forbearance when it is hardest to forbear" (Bierce 1980: 104). In "An Affair of Outposts", one may be surprised to see an apparently respectable officer compliment his valorous troops with a cigar in his hand. That cigar could indeed be misunderstood as a sign of sophistication inappropriate on the battlefield. However, Bierce's columns can help us interpret that attitude correctly: "(...) in a stubborn stand-up fight [the good officer] is likely, if on foot, to lean nonchalantly on his sword, or fold his arms and look bored. *If he has a cigar* he will probably give himself the happiness of a quiet smoke. Affectation, if you like, but *it is an officer's duty to keep his men cool*, and it can best be done by example" (Bierce 1980: 65.

²⁰ A ram is homicidal in "My Favorite Murder", a cow is irascible in "Curried Cow", a horse is abominable in "The Race at Left Bower"...

²¹ John Ruskin coined the phrase "pathetic fallacy" in 1856 (in *Modern Painters, vol III, part 4*) to refer to the human feelings that some writers applied to the inanimate. He thought that the excess of it in the works of Shelley and Wordsworth was "morbid" (Ruskin 2000).

²² A good example of a dutiful sentinel is Carter Druse in "A Horseman in the Sky". As the young soldier of the Union is required to shoot his Confederate father, one can read: "The duty of the soldier was plain: the man must be shot dead from ambush (...) He was calm now. (...) Duty had conquered; the spirit had said to the body: 'Peace, be still.' He fired" (Bierce 1984: 360-361). Carter Druse does not experience physical death at the end of the story, but his peace of mind is for ever shattered.

My italics). Columns and short stories therefore echo each other and the comparison here sketched out gives a more accurate view of Bierce's works.

Not surprisingly, the discredit that Bierce cast on pageantry in both his columns and his tales directly led him to question the notion of History when the latter was intent on portraying some events in the most glorious way. In "The Coup de Grâce" he showed how subjectively a body count could be done: "The enemy's fallen had to be content with counting. But of that they got enough: many of them were counted several times, and the total, as given afterward in the official report of the victorious commander, denoted rather a hope than a result" (Bierce 1984: 319). As patriotism was in full swing after some Spanish defeats, Bierce used the same mocking style to denounce what he saw as blatant disinformation:

(...) on Tuesday last, at Guantanamo a handful of our fellows fell upon four hundred of the enemy—exactly four hundred by actual conjecture—who were straightway put to flight with a loss of "about forty" killed. The number less seriously impaired is mercifully withheld in deference to a credulity about to be severely taxed by the statement that all this slaughter was accomplished at a sacrifice of the comfort one (1) American, and his wound was "slight." Probably he did himself an injury by loading his bayonet with more Spaniards than it would accommodate. (Bierce 1980: 52)

In the same article, Bierce got rid of his ironical tone and rammed the point home: "Whenever we get impartial reports of the military situation and operations in the Antilles we find no justification for our stupendous national conceit – no reason whatever for screaming the eagle" (Bierce 1980: 53).

Parallel to that debunking of jingoistic attitudes, Bierce also stressed the positive characteristics of the defeated Spaniard that he described as "not so very bad a chap after all" (Bierce 1980: 95), but that was only once the enemy had been defeated (for on the eve of the first battle, he had warned the Americans about the cruelty of the very same soldiers). In "The Bivouac of the Dead", Bierce also stressed the valor of the Confederate soldiers forgotten by History: "They were honest and courageous foemen, having little in common with the political madmen who persuaded them to their doom and the literary bearers of false witness in the aftertime. (...) they have no voice in the thunder of the civilians and the shouting" (Bierce 1984: 399). Bierce was indeed always willing to side with the underdog: he tended to question the victors' account of History and the violence they used as a means to increase their power while pretending to found the rights of oppressed peoples. Bierce could not be more explicit than on his columns of the 31st of July and of the 7th of August:

The disposition to regard Cuba as rightfully belonging to the United States and its actual possession as necessary to their security and welfare is one of the permanent factors of American politics, ever underrunning American political thought and feeling. (...) The passion for territory once roused rages like a lion; successive conquests only strengthen it. That is the fever that is now burning in the American Blood. (...) Either like ancient

Rome or modern Great Britain, we have entered upon a permanent policy of conquest, colonization and general expansion (...) (Bierce 1980: 85-87).

We can conquer these people without half trying, for we belong to the race of gluttons and drunkards to whom dominion is given over the abstemious. We are the descendants and the successors of the robber barons, the villeins and the carls of medieval days who, unlike in all else, felt the fellowship of drink and bloodshed (...). We are successors to the Berserkers, who fought all comers and all stayers, and drank themselves shivering drunk in every port of Europe. We are the blood of the English, who with seventy thousand devotees of the great Belly God, to whom they offer abundant sacrifice of beef and grog, can hold in subjection and punish for infraction of their will two hundred and fifty millions of Asiatic vegetarians and tee-totalers. (...) We can thrash them consummately and every day of the week, but we cannot understand them; and is it not a great golden truth, shining like a star, that what one does not understand one knows to be bad? (Bierce 1980: 94-95).

These excessive lines obviously caricature the victors' ways of acting and of obliterating the existence of the vanquished (and their versions of facts). Such a conception of History evokes what Walter Benjamin was to write a few decades later as he blamed historicism for giving a petrified view of History, a view which only took into account the victors' version of facts. In that light, Ambrose Bierce could then be likened to a "historical materialist" who fights against the "authorized version of History" as "he regards it as his task to brush history against the grain" (Benjamin 1971: 433). Of course, that hypothesis is too extreme and Ambrose Bierce was no revolutionary. Nevertheless, his columns as well as his tales on simple soldiers do participate to the "ethics of solidarity" that was advocated by the German philosopher, but Bierce had no hope and no intention to change the world he lived in. Here lies the deep pessimism which accounts for the transformation of irony into sarcasm.

But if that pessimistic trend can be felt both in Bierce's journalism and in his fictions, one must admit however that, globally speaking, the tone of his columns and that of his most brilliant tales (his Civil War tales) vary. The kind of writing being different, Bierce's shafts are then modified to some extent.

2) Deflections

As clearly shown with the excessive, energetic style of the previous quote, Bierce's rough invectives correspond much more to the lively atmosphere of his tall tales than to the helplessness and bitterness of his war tales²³. Even when these tales of soldiers deal with the erasure of some versions of history, the author still lays the emphasis on the *individual* suffering which is then entailed and, as a consequence, the notions of compassion and lack are

²³ "Jupiter Doke, Brigadier General" is the only war tale that denounces the victors' conception of History in a burlesque mode.

more important than those of anger and excess. This variation can easily be explained for, when he wrote his columns, Bierce *had* to be dynamic if he wanted to catch the attention of a readership that could not be taken for granted. Only once did he resort to pathos in the studied selection of columns.²⁴

In order to stress the didactic messages conveyed in his columns, Bierce did not hesitate to assert things in the most authoritative manner. That foregrounding of the journalist's voice is also one of the major differences with the writer's tales on the Civil War. As shown before, some parallel can, however, be cautiously drawn between the columns and some tall tales, for in the latter, histrionic first-person narrators are very present as they want to "steal the show" (but of course, one cannot liken Bierce who writes as a columnist to those deranged narrators, even if the first-person pronoun is used in both cases).

In fact, Bierce's presence within his columns was never as perceptible as when he directly referred to the international scene, for then he would take advantage of his status of war veteran to give some weight to his arguments and to assert a dissenting voice that had to "shout" indeed if it wanted to be heard while Hearst's victorious accounts of American History kept "screaming the eagle."

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²⁴ In the column entitled "Letter from a Dead Sailor" which was published on the 3rd of April. That column is one of the very few not to be fragmented in several parts.

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