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S. T. Joshi, David E. Schultz, eds. *A Much Misunderstood Man: Selected Letters of Ambrose Bierce.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003. xxvi + 258 pp. $9.95 (audio cd), ISBN 978-0-8142-9006-4; $78.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-0919-6.

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Rethinking Ambrose Bierce

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When he disappeared into Mexico in late 1913 and was never heard from again, writer and newspaperman Ambrose Bierce left behind the twelve-volume *Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce.* Since then, many scholars, editors, and publishers have helped keep Bierce's name alive by, with varying degrees of quality, assembling, reassembling, and seemingly endlessly repackaging selections from this mass of public domain material. Hence, one can find bits of Bierce anthologized under such titles as *Tales of Haunted Houses*, *The Sardonic Humor of Ambrose Bierce*, and *The Ambrose Bierce Satanic Reader.* Editors David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi have themselves engaged in a bit of this churning, having published *The Collected Fables of Ambrose Bierce* and *The Unabridged Devil's Dictionary.* However, Joshi and Schultz have also gone far beyond hasty repackaging and have now brought out a couple of volumes that are of great assistance for anyone with a serious research interest in Bierce. The first, in 1999, was *Ambrose Bierce: An Annotated Bibliography of Primary Sources,*[1] an exhaustive compilation of Bierce's publication history, a history far-flung both in genre and venue. Such a resource is an extremely essential time-saver for the textual critic as well as researchers trying to locate obscure Bierce newspaper articles and the like. In their bibliography, Schultz and Joshi include a section listing the locations of Bierce's surviving letters. From well over a thousand letters in over fifty different locations, Schultz and Joshi have assembled *A Much Misunderstood Man: Selected Letters of Ambrose Bierce* and thus produced another extremely useful volume for those with a desire to understand the life and works of Ambrose Bierce.

Schultz and Joshi's collection is not the first, but it is by far the most useful and authoritative volume of Bierce's letters. In 1922, Bertha Clark Pope, with considerable editorial assistance from Bierce's friend George Sterling, published *The Letters of Ambrose Bierce.* Most of the letters in the volume are abridged letters to Sterling himself. In the same year, poet Samuel Loveman published *Twenty-one Letters of Ambrose Bierce*, a collection extremely limited in scope as all the letters are to Loveman and concern his poetry. There have also been several very small collections of Bierce letters published in periodicals and as pamphlet-sized editions by Bierce researchers and biographers over the years. Until now, a comprehensive, representative selection of Bierce's letters simply has not existed.

In late 1895, a friend of Ambrose Bierce's suggested that he publish a volume of personal memoirs. Bierce thought the idea "funny," and facetiously suggested a dozen titles, the first of which was "The Autobiography of a Much Misunderstood Man." It is a more than fitting title that Bierce inadvertently handed editors Joshi and Schultz for this important collection of his letters because, along with a handful of short memoirs, it is the closest thing to a Bierce autobiography that exists. Unfortunately, contemporaneous labels pinned on Bierce such as "Bitter Bierce," "The Devil's Lexicographer," and "The Wickedest Man in San Francisco," largely the result of his acerbic editorializing and often shocking short stories, stereotyped him as a hater of everybody and everything, "a misanthrope without sentiment and without heart" (p. 245) as Bierce himself put it. Over the last few years, however, a few scholars have begun challenging and accurately revising such a caricature. In 1995, Roy Morris, Jr., published *Ambrose Bierce: Alone in Bad Company,*[2] one of the very best book-length accounts of a writer whose personal life has provided more than enough grist for several biographers. Morris captures the essential Bierce more accurately than any other when he states, "When the timeworn image of Bitter Bierce ... [is] stripped away, what finally remains is 1st Lt. Ambrose Bierce, Ninth Indiana Infantry, the bloodied veteran of Shiloh, Chickamauga, Pickett's Mill, and a dozen other

battlefields who had experienced war on a scale–both large and small–that no other American writer had ever known in the half century preceding World War I" (p. 270). More recently, career-long Bierce scholar Lawrence Berkove of the University of Michigan, Dearborn, in *A Prescription for Adversity*,[3] makes the most convincing argument yet for something that many Bierce scholars have long realized: there is much more to Bierce's short fiction than unbridled, gratuitous cynicism. Instead, Berkove finds in both Bierce's literary and journalistic work "a set of intelligent and moral principles ... founded upon values that, once identified, can be respected" (p. xiv). Berkove views Bierce's thematic concerns with the uses and limits of reason as the primary reflections of his moral concern for humankind. Add to Morris's and Berkove's observations the intellect of, say, William Safire, and the public persona (and, to a surprising degree, the physical appearance) of radio personality Don Imus, and one begins to have a fairly accurate, but incomplete picture of Ambrose Bierce. What Joshi and Schultz's volume does, and the editors are extremely aware of it, is to allow Bierce himself to complete much of the picture. In so doing, the editors have added significantly to the emergent rethinking of one of America's most enduring short story writers. How absolutely apropos that they should dedicate this volume to Professor Berkove.

Those who use *A Much Misunderstood Man*, whether to read it through or to look up specific items of research interest, are, of course, yielding to Joshi and Schultz's judgement about what letters are worth selecting for the collection. After all, as mentioned above, they do have an agenda. But, by all appearances, the editors have done their job extremely well. They are careful to identify, for example, letters that are typescript copies of handwritten originals. They have also done an extremely thorough and helpful job of providing explanatory footnotes for obscure allusions, events, and people mentioned in the letters. Moreover, the self-portrait that emerges of Bierce is not entirely flattering, indicating a lack of heavy-handed bowdlerizing by the editors. What does emerge is, among other things, a picture of a man who could be an extremely devoted, but potentially dangerous friend. Bierce detested hypocrisy and immorality of all sorts, and if he saw sufficient evidence of it in a friend, that person could expect Bierce to terminate the friendship without mincing a word as to why. Admirable and morally courageous as this is, the unflattering aspect of such actions is that Bierce sometimes comes across as a strident, overly self-righteous individual. On a related note, one gains an appreciation through his letters of just how much time and energy Bierce put into nurturing aspiring writers and friends, especially poets. Bierce clearly considered himself quite a capable judge of poetic talent. Here again, however, one sees a potentially unflattering facet of Bierce in that his devotion to his younger, female understudies sometimes borders on Bierce salving his own ego with their admiration. Bierce also demonstrates an almost pathological aversion to any editor's suggested revisions of his work. He would much rather have it rejected outright than tampered with. But one also sees Bierce the concerned father and Bierce the amazingly well read and self-taught intellectual emerge in these letters as well.

Because he was such a prodigious letter-writer, especially as he grew older, merely sorting through and selecting Bierce letters for publication was an absolutely formidable task, and Joshi and Schultz have done yeoman's service for American literary studies by doing it. One might wonder, why bother? For example, one might reasonably compare certain aspects of Bierce to singer Jimmy Buffett. Both are widely considered not quite top-shelf artists. Both have a relatively small, but extraordinarily devoted group of fans. And both have one big hit that most everyone recognizes. For Buffett, it's "Margaritaville." For Bierce, it's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," a short story that still appears in almost every high school and college American literature anthology and is popular classroom viewing as a brief black and white film. Joshi and Schultz's collection is worth bothering with because Bierce, at his best, is one of America's most important short story writers. Civil War historians have also helped keep Bierce's name alive by mining his short memoirs and stories for colorful and often graphic quotations in support of narrative or interpretive accounts of various battles, campaigns, and leaders. However, the work of scholars like Morris, Berkove, and now Joshi and Schultz demonstrates Bierce's complexity and interest to a wider audience than students of American literature or Civil War history. Those concerned with the history of American politics, cultural and social criticism, and the history of ideas during Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, and the early twentieth century would also do well to turn to the writings, both fictional and nonfictional, of Ambrose Bierce.

Notes

[1]. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz, eds., *Ambrose Bierce: An Annotated Bibliography of Primary Sources* (Westport: Greenwood, 1999).

[2]. Roy Morris Jr., *Ambrose Bierce: Alone in Bad Company* (New York: Crown, 1995).

[3]. Lawrence I. Berkove, *A Prescription for Adversity: The Moral Art of Ambrose Bierce* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002).

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