Ambrose Bierce: Between politics and philosophy

Jeffrey Raymond MacMillan

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AMBROSE BIERCE:
BETWEEN POLITICS AND PHILOSOPHY

by

Jeffrey Raymond MacMillan

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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in

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THESIS APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the political thought of Ambrose Bierce. Because of his aversion to Gilded Age politics, Bierce did not participate in the political process. As a result, his political thought must be considered from an ideological or philosophical perspective.

Examination of his views suggests Bierce was a philosophical conservative much like the "father" of British conservative thought, Edmund Burke. Though many political historians argue American political culture has never contained elements of British conservatism, others claim there has always existed a small strain of Burkean conservatism throughout American political history. This study supports the latter view by holding the political thought of Ambrose Bierce closely follows the conservative philosophy of Burke and other British conservatives.
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Although Ambrose Bierce is largely remembered for *The Devil's Dictionary* and his unusual disappearance, his rare wit, uncommon powers of observation, and his singular outlook have continued to delight those who recognize a far greater man than first glance offers. As testament to this enduring figure of American letters, researchers continue to explore and uncover new facets of Bierce nearly a century after his departure. It is then somewhat surprising to find Bierce's political thought has gone unnoticed.

Not long ago, the leading authority on Bierce, M. E. Grenander, mentioned the need for more study on Bierce's political thought. She concluded, "Bierce's political thinking has on the whole been given short shrift. Although it has been customary to dismiss it lightly, no really adequate study of it has yet been made. One reason may lie in its complexity."¹ It is complex because much of it lies buried within thousands of columns Bierce wrote during a career in journalism that spanned nearly forty years. Complicating this is Bierce's use of the short forms of literature. He disliked novels and never wrote lengthy studies, rather, his literature is composed of short stories, fables, brief essays, poems, epigrams, and definitions.

Another, and more important explanation for the "complexity" of Bierce's political thought can be found in his aversion to politics. The political climate of the Gilded Age appalled Bierce, and as a
result, he refused to participate. He was not affiliated with either political party, didn’t attend political functions, vote, or openly endorse a candidate. A final explanation for the lack of study of Bierce’s political thought may be bound in Bierce himself.

Due to Bierce’s compelling personality and the interesting life he led, researchers have understandably focused on the man and not the message. Indeed, rarely does one find both sides considered as does Carey McWilliams in his brief comparison of Bierce to Oliver Wendell Holmes:

> the best of Bierce . . . should be part of every American’s inheritance.

And so should Bierce the man. To identify him properly—he has been grotesquely misplaced—he should be thought of as somehow belonging to the same spiritual company as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes.

. . . Both fought with conspicuous gallantry in the Union Army in the Civil War, were severely wounded and carried throughout their lives the deep, invisible scars of that tragic experience. Both were disillusioned with post-Civil-War America, adopted a frosty Olympian manner, and went in for a kind of Social Darwinism on social issues. Yet Holmes and Bierce embodied the finest elements of American idealism and each maintained, in his own way, an integrity of purpose and a fierce private patriotism that remained unaffected by the corruption of the postwar decades. Each was secretly proud of his fine military record, carried himself like the soldier he was, and used a pen like a rapier. Each had come close to death himself and had seen many fine men die; with both, an outward stoicism concealed a remarkable inner sensitivity. Both men were mean of great force, of acute perception, of commanding presence. At heart both were romantic idealists who, in later life, must have been troubled by echoes of the lovely bugle calls that long years ago had summoned them to such horrors as Cold Harbor and Shiloh. Both had learned that in the midst of life there is always death; that in pursuit of great dreams
men stumble over cadavers and fall headlong into pools of blood. Yet both men had moments when the searing experiences of the Civil War were to be preferred, in retrospect, to the degradation of that war's ideals in the decades that followed. They were immensely attractive men, handsome, debonair, erect, in the habit of looking out and over life, so to speak, as from an eminence.²

While this study is primarily concerned about the political views of Ambrose Bierce, there is an underlying element as well. Unlike the previous Century, political thought in the late 1800s does not derive from distinguished statesmen and political theorists. Rather, political ideas were expressed largely by the nonparticipant, from college professors, editors, journalists, and literary men.³ Given this shift, it seems more appropriate to study the political views of Bierce. He was a prolific writer whose weekly column often contained references to the political events and issues of the day. While most studies of late nineteenth century political thought have concentrated on the New England men of letters, Bierce was one of the most widely read writers on the West Coast. Considered by contemporaries to be among America's greatest writers, Bierce was commonly ranked along side of Hawthorne and Poe.

All accounts of Bierce's political thought, however brief, have focused on the authors perceived preference Bierce held for one or another form of government. In fact, Bierce expressed his distaste for all forms of government many times. He wrote, "I think no more of one form of government than of another . . ." Bierce was "no contestant for forms of government--no believer in either the practical value or the permanence of any that has yet been devised." Finally, he thought, "For
forms of government fools have contested from the dawn of history."^{4}

Because of Bierce's aversion to politics and speculative theories on government, his political thought must be considered from an ideological or philosophical standpoint. His views on human nature--the basis of all political theory--serve to provide a foundation for his political ideas. Additionally, his occasional remarks about political personalities, issues, and events of the postwar decades, help to establish a clearer picture of his political views.

Examination of these views reveal a conservative disposition similar to that found in British political culture. Unlike American conservatism, which is considered to be a point of view influenced by modern liberal traditions emphasizing property, natural rights, individualism, progress, and a generally favorable view of man, the philosophical conservatism of Edmund Burke and other British thinkers evolved during an age of classical liberalism. While conceding the need for some liberal political measures, conservatives like Burke became alarmed over industrialism, materialism, irresponsible individualism, and the chaotic conditions surrounding the French Revolution. As a result, they emphasized conservative values of community, social obligation or duty, and authority. Having taken a dim view of human nature, these men doubted the likelihood of much social progress.

To argue Ambrose Bierce, or any figure in American literature, held a conservative political philosophy similar to Edmund Burke raises an issue concerning our understanding of American political culture. For several decades various political historians have debated the legitimacy of other political ideas in American political history. Authors like
Louis Hartz, Morton M. Auerbach, Lionel Trilling, Allen Guttman, and more recently, John Diggins, have argued Burkean conservatism has never existed among predominant American political traditions. Others, like Russell Kirk, Peter Viereck, Clinton Rossiter, and William F. Buckley, Jr., argue that within American political culture there has always existed a conservative element not unlike that found in British political culture and elsewhere.

While trying to untangle Bierce's political thought, I became convinced his views were very much like those held by Edmund Burke and other philosophical conservatives. To demonstrate this, in Chapter One, I will briefly examine some possible influences in Bierce's life which can be considered the foundations of his conservative thought. In Chapter II, I will place Bierce among other conservatives generally considered to be philosophical conservatives in the tradition of British conservatism. Finally, Chapter III examines the nature of philosophical conservatism in the tradition of Edmund Burke and compares those views to Bierce's.

Aside from academic reasons for examining Bierce's political thought, there is a personal interest as well. Bierce was a distant relative of mine who corresponded regularly with my great aunt, Lora Bierce, around the turn of the century. The last letter she received was postmarked Laredo, Texas, November 13, 1913, and was among the last written words of Bierce prior to his crossing the Mexican border November 15, 1913. While conducting research at The Bancroft Library at U. C. Berkeley, I came upon a curious volume containing a reference to these, heretofore, "lost letters":

I told him, if you could find the correspondence with the Bierces--Laura Bierce had all the correspondence of Sterling's for twenty years--there are letters in which he talks about his past. Laura had said definitely to me, however, I am not going to let anybody look at them. "I'd feel I'd be betraying our friendship." Anyhow, before she died in Guerneville she might have destroyed them. Her nephew inherited everything, but there was no mention of any letters. All those letters, documents and masses of photographs that Laura had--what has become of them I don't know. There are a number of Ambrose Bierce letters there, too.'

The "masses of photographs" and the eighteen "Ambrose Bierce letters" depict Jack London, George Sterling, and numerous prominent Bay Area writers, artists, and personalities. Although these letters are of marginal value to this study, they offer a unique portrait of Bierce just prior to his disappearance.
ENDNOTES

Introduction


2. Ibid., 1.


CHAPTER I

Impartial, adj. Unable to perceive any promise of personal advantage from espousing a controversy or adopting either of the conflicting opinions.

Conservative, n. A statesman who is enamored of existing evils, as distinguished from the Liberal, who wishes to replace them with others.

Ambrose Bierce, The Devil's Dictionary

From the Civil War through the turn of the century, Ambrose Bierce published his column "Prattle" for several journals around the San Francisco Bay Area. In these columns he introduced many short stories and epigrams that established his reputation as a unique literary figure. In his day, he was equally known for his compelling editorials which were often at odds with the political and social convention of the Gilded Age of American history. He had adopted a highly critical, almost abusive style of journalism which was employed liberally while scrutinizing politicians, literary men, reformers, clergymen, and most everyone. No doubt it was this impartiality that moved a contemporary to conclude Bierce "was a man more adored and more hated than anyone on the west coast."1

In his classic study, Main Currents in American Thought, progressive literary historian Vernon Parrington found the conservative editor of the Nation, E. L. Godkin, to be "the severest critic of the Gilded Age."2 If this is true, Bierce was a close second, and
interestingly enough, Parrington’s characterization of Godkin is
descriptive of Bierce as well:

Throughout the Gilded Age this transplanted English liberal was the high priest
of criticism in America. His caustic intelligence played ironically about the current
shibboleths and fetishes, reducing them to shreds and patches. He could discover little
that was good in the Gilded Age, in its tariffs and land grants, its Credit Mobilier and other
scandals, its buccaneer plutocracy, its undisciplined proletarianism, its bitter
agrarianism; and he was prompted to a severity of judgement that easier-going natures thought
harsh. Enemies sprang up in his every footprint; but too much was at stake, he
believed, to temper his criticism to flabby minds, and he laid about him with what he
considered a fine impartiality.3

It was impartiality Bierce strived to reflect in his copy. A writer, "should free himself of all doctrines, theories, etiquettes,
politics, simplifying his life and mind . . ."4 Of himself, he
declared, "I keep a conscience uncorrupted by religion, a judgement
undimmed by politics and patriotism, a heart untainted by friendships
and sentiments, unsoured by animosities . . ."5 Bierce went to great
lengths to distance himself from all special interests, and was
especially emphatic about preserving political neutrality: "My position
as a looker-on enables me to see more of the game than the players do;
that my indifference to the result makes me a better critic of the
moves; that my freedom from political sympathies and antipathies gives
my judgement an intrinsic worth . . ."6

Determined to be objective, Bierce did not vote nor belong to a
political party, and he was reluctant to speculate on the outcome of an
election or endorse a candidate. When prompted by readers to choose in
a particularly heated race, he would do so only to the extent of finding one candidate less objectionable than the other. This aloof disposition toward political affairs was unique in an era of American political history when partisanship and participation reached their highest levels, and it was partly this detached attitude that assured the success of Bierce's column. His popularity rested to a large degree on his sense of confidence and finality. Because he was politically independent, these pronouncements were well received by independent, intellectually oriented subscribers who looked beyond the sensational press common to the era.

While conceding Bierce's desire to "judge everything upon its own merits--each case as it comes up," most of his views were of a conservative nature. During a period of heightened social and economic tension, when demands for social reform measures became increasingly more vocal and justifiable, Bierce urged moderation. Based upon a dim view of human nature, and a perception that man was unable to change that nature, he argued against liberal measures advocating prison reform, public education, most regulation of labor and industry, and most legislation intended to reduce poverty. He held a traditional view of the poor, in maintaining they had mostly their own failings to blame for their condition. Moreover, human nature was largely fixed, and hereditarily transmitted, which preempted opposing arguments predicated on environmental, and therefore, alterable conditions.

Much like E. L. Godkin, Henry Adams, Charles Eliot Norton, and other conservatively minded aristocrats of the postwar decades, Ambrose Bierce grounded his conservatism in a version of ancient natural law.
Spurred by recent discoveries in science—especially in the fields of physics, astronomy and biology—the United States in the mid-1800s witnessed a resurgence of natural law theory, and this in turn strengthened the traditional Anglo-American view of economy which held that social modification through economic regulation must be minimized to allow the "invisible hand" of the economy to achieve its natural balance. In keeping with these universal, immutable laws of economy, Bierce advocated free trade and renounced all forms of market protection; supported "sound money" and opposed inflationary policy; and argued against anti-trust legislation, having felt monopolies ultimately benefitted society. What led Bierce to espouse consistently conservative economic reform measures, while condemning most social reform legislation, is difficult to say.

For nearly a century biographers have attempted to sort out the influences which shaped the critical outlook of Ambrose Bierce. Yet recent research has found many of these studies to have been largely misguided. A leading authority has observed: "A few puzzled individuals [have] attempted various ingenious theories to account for the complexities of his character . . . This spectrum of reactions has continued among the many published interpretations, and the Bierce mythology has grown . . . Exactly what the relation is remains a question that can be answered only by recourse to very deep-seated psychological motivations." The "Bierce mythology", Dr. M. E. Grenander has written, is the result of inadequate biography and Bierce himself.

Bierce was a complex man who became interested in a variety of
schools of thought, as the wide range of topics found within his journalism and literature suggest. A very private, almost reclusive individual, Bierce seldom spoke of himself or his past, and as a result, in nearly every extensive study written about the man there is a note of frustration. For example, Paul Fatout concluded, "Never was a man more secretive"; M. E. Grenander described Bierce as an "enigmatic figure" in American letters; and Carey McWilliams referred to Bierce as, "this strange, aloof, and solitary figure." Also, Bierce may have maintained "a clam like silence" because he couldn't stand biographers. "A fruitful source of error in history is the contagion of biography," he wrote, "and biographers are the most hardy and impenitent liars of the entire outfit." Because he mostly avoided the public, Bierce had to endure many inaccurate accounts of his life and character which developed into an aversion to biographers. Even Mark Twain, an acquaintance of Bierce's, could not get his facts straight:

I have been looking through Mark Twain's new Library of Humor and find that it justifies the title. Possibly I am a trifle prejudiced in its favor, for the very funniest thing in it, according to my notion of humor, is a brief biography of myself. It is fallacious barring the bracketed words:

Ambrose Bierce, author of "Bierce's Fables" [I am not] was born in Akron, Ohio. [I was not]. He served as a soldier in the war, and in 1865 went to San Francisco [I did not], where he was engaged in newspaper work until 1872. Then he went to London, where he had great success [I had not], and published "Bierciana" [I did not]. With the younger Tom Hood he founded London "Fun" [I did not]. He returned to California in 1877 [I did not] and is now director of the "San Francisco Examiner" [I am not].

Nonetheless, among the many biographies there are three which
stand out, and collectively they provide an introduction to an interesting man. Moreover, these major themes and overall conclusions offer a reasonable explanation for Bierce's political conservatism, and more importantly, they provide a framework of ideas which will be expanded in subsequent chapters to support arguments therein. The first biography considered is Paul Fatout's *Ambrose Bierce: The Devil's Lexicographer*. He maintains it was a rigid Puritan childhood which influenced Bierce throughout his life. In 1929, when no less than five biographies were published, Carey McWilliams wrote what has become one of the best and most enduring studies, *Ambrose Bierce: A Biography*. McWilliams holds the Civil War was an ordeal by fire which destroyed Bierce's sense of idealism and forged his bitterness. Lastly, M. E. Grenander's literary study and brief biography, *Ambrose Bierce*, is decidedly neutral, but concedes the influence of the war, and suggests Bierce's stay in England was a significant chapter in his early life.

Ambrose Gwinette Bierce was born June 24, 1842, in Meigs County, Ohio. His parents were poor farmers who must have found great difficulty raising thirteen children in the largely unsettled Western Reserve. His mother, Laura Sherwood, was the daughter of Deacon Joshua Bradford Sherwood, a descendant of the Mayflower Puritan, William Bradford. Named after the stoic philosopher, Ambrose's father, Marcus Aurelius Bierce, had a similar puritan heritage to that of Laura's. Both were prominent members of the new Congregationalists, the last vestige of Calvinist Orthodoxy which had been so thoroughly embraced by the New England Puritans a century before. According to biographer Paul Fatout, "In Marcus and Laura Bierce, the Calvinist current ran steadily
and deep, and over it hung the holy spirit of righteousness to which they dogmatically attempted to enforce the allegiance of their son, Ambrose." Perhaps the Bierces were too zealous, as Ambrose came to doubt the notion of a god, questioned the effectiveness of the Church, and criticized the corruption in organized religion. This is made clear in *The Devil's Dictionary*:

Clergyman, n. A man who undertakes the management of our spiritual affairs as a method of bettering his temporal ones.

Minister, n. An agent of a higher power with a lower responsibility.

Christian, n. One who believes that the New Testament is a divinely inspired book admirably suited to the spiritual need of his neighbor.

By combining an environment of Congregationalism with evidence of a deprived childhood, Fatout believes he located the key sources of influence in Bierce's life. In support of this, he cites this quatrain written by Ambrose at age sixty-one:

Oh, woe is his, with length of living cursed, Who nearing second childhood, had no first. Behind, no glimmer, and before no ray-- A night at either end of his dark day.

Fatout declares, "At long last he struck the dolorous note of a joyless childhood. Therein lies the key to his character, the cause of troubled, contradictory traits and inner despair, of authoritarianism, and loneliness." Thus the conservative tenets of Congregationalism—the fall of man and his subsequent depravity, a determined universe, and independence through hard work—played a significant role in shaping Bierce's character.

Although neither author refers directly to Fatout's
interpretation, M. E. Grenander and Laurence Berkove are reluctant to attach much importance to Calvinism. In his dissertation, Ambrose Bierce's Concern with Mind and Man, Berkove argues:

It is tempting to group Bierce with the other American nineteenth century writers whose childhood Calvinism was transparently adapted to their mature art, but to do so is to grossly underestimate how thoroughly Bierce, a fervent anti-religionist, replaced inherited theological doctrines in himself with humanistic convictions. It was not Bierce's disposition to substitute one unknown for another, to ridicule God but embrace a belief in an equally hypothetical entity.20

Perhaps, but often one's dispositions are subconscious products of childhood experience and conditioning, and it would seem Bierce supported the comparatively recent view that socialization is crucial in determining political behavior and outlook:

The children are from infancy subjected to the same or very similar, influences accustomed from the earliest dawn of his intelligence, to regard the opinions of his father as next to infallible, and judging of the truth of all others according to their conformity with these; his political reading confined to the books and papers which inculcate like beliefs because selected by the same authority.21

The authority Bierce referred to was his father who had one of the largest libraries in the county, and years later, in a letter to a friend, he recalled the significance of this collection, "You are right about that library. I owe more to my father's books than to any other educational directive influence."22 Although Bierce was particularly fond of the classics, judging from recommendations to others, he admired the conservative literature of English authors like Burke, Pope, Spencer, Gibbon, and Coleridge.
Carey McWilliams, arguably Bierce's best biographer, found the Civil War and the influence of Bierce's commanding officer, General Hazen, to be the most important influence in shaping his character:

"... Bierce was not essentially a cynic or skeptic but rather an idealist, more accurately perhaps a moralist who, at an early age had been exposed to a frightful baptism of fire--an ordeal of suffering and horror--that had shaped his character and outlook."\(^{23}\) Having completed high school, Bierce began working as a printer's helper for a local anti-slavery paper, The Northern Indianian. After attending The Kentucky Military Institute for two years, where he studied drafting, surveying, and civil and topographical engineering, he became the second man in the county to enlist.

Ambrose Bierce entered the war with a sense of mission and idealism, but along with many of his generation, it would be the last time in his life he would look toward the democratic process as inspiring and something basically good. Nearly half a century after the conflict he reflected on those lost during the fighting, their lost cause, and the loss of the nation's identity:

In this tiresome tumult of interests and sentiments which we are pleased to call "politics" there has been in my time but one contest of principles in which it seemed worthwhile for a serious man seriously to engage. The struggle between freedom and slavery affected earnest souls with a compelling fervor. Great-hearted and great-minded men felt the stress, marched to the polls and thence to camp. There was a chance of action consistent with self-respect for even the pessimist and cynic. In those turbulent days it meant something to be a Republican--and something else to be a Democrat ... \(^{24}\)

Though he rarely spoke of his role in the conflict, Bierce's acts
of heroism were truly astonishing. All told, military dispatches mention Bierce fifteen times. He was wounded three times—once seriously—and even captured, but escaped. As a result of these dauntless acts and topographical ability, he was promoted to sergeant major, and then second and first lieutenant in less than two years after his "three month" enlistment. But, as the war dragged on, several events of a political nature began to contribute to a sense of disillusionment. During the battle of Shiloh, Bierce's regiment received the highest casualties of any on the Union side, and it was this battle, according to McWilliams and others, that signaled a turning point in his life. Years later Bierce emphasized the political posture of this battle.

". . . It was a campaign of 'excursions and alarums' of reconnaissances and counter-marches, of cross-purposes and countermanded orders. For weeks the solemn farce held attention, luring distinguished civilians from fields of political ambition to see what they safely could of the horrors of war." The politics of war was mentioned in The Devil's Dictionary as well:

War, n. A by-product of the art of peace. The most menacing political condition . . .

Battle, n. A method of untying with the teeth a political knot that would not yield to the tongue.

Corruption during the Civil War has been well-documented over time, but even during the conflict the soldiers were well aware of widespread graft. Allegations the war had become "a rich man's war, a poor man's fight" were common, as those wealthy enough could pay for a
substitute, and conversely, those seeking entry into the service could receive an appointment as an officer providing they had the right connections. Carey McWilliams mentioned the likelihood of political influence playing a part in Bierce’s regiment: "Instead of turning politician and getting better opportunities, he [General Hazen] cursed darkly to himself and became more saturnine. It is altogether likely that this old campaigner rather disillusioned Bierce about the integrity of generals and the altruism of brother officers who have relatives in politics." 27

The result of inexperienced officers commanding troops in battle during the Civil War occasionally led to criminally poor leadership, and during a particularly fierce battle, Hazen’s brigade was decimated by an inexperienced officer issuing an order to charge needlessly into the awaiting enemy. "The Crime at Pickett’s Mill, Georgia", as Bierce remembered it, was a bitter lesson for the young officer.

The Civil War had a lasting effect on Bierce, and years later it served as a setting in which to cast many of his short stories. In A Bivouac With the Dead, he mentions the politics of the war, and the often largely fictitious, sensational accounts of that conflict which followed:

They were honest and courageous foeman, having little in common with the political madmen who persuaded them to their doom and the literary bearers of false witness in their aftertime. They did not live through the period of honorable strife into the period of vilification . . . Among them is no member of the Southern Historical Society. Their valor was not the fury of the non-combatant; they have no voice in the thunder of the civilians and the shouting. 28
For Bierce "the political madmen" began the war, and it was the politicians sought to exploit the freedmen and soldiers following the war. "It was once my fortune to command a company of soldiers—real soldiers" he wrote years later, "not professional life-long fighters, the product of European militarism—just plain, ordinary American, volunteer soldiers, who loved their country and fought for it with never a second thought of grabbing it for themselves; that is a trick which the survivors were taught later by gentlemen desiring their votes."²⁹

Ambrose Bierce was discharged in March or April 1865, and having accompanied Sherman on his march to the sea, he remained briefly in the South. He found work as a Treasury Agent confiscating cotton for the Union, but finding the work "exceedingly disagreeable," as was the carpetbag regime of the decimated South, and the political wrangling over its future, Bierce was anxious to leave. So when General Hazen, his former commanding officer, offered him a position as engineering attache on a mapping expedition, he promptly accepted. In addition, they were to inspect military posts from Omaha to Nevada where, upon completion, Bierce would be awarded the rank of captain.

Nearly a year after their departure from Omaha, the survey team arrived in San Francisco in the spring of 1867. Awaiting Bierce was a telegram commissioning him a second lieutenant, not the captaincy he had been promised. On April 4, he wired the reply, "I respectfully decline the appointment." Determined to stay in San Francisco, he soon found employment at the United States Sub-Treasury as a night watchman. Here he had time to begin a rigid program of self education, whereupon he announced, "It is my ambition to write books and to do this well you
must be acquainted with the language and be a master at the use of words." Shortly thereafter, Bierce began submitting prose to the local press which accepted two poems, *Basilica* and *A Mystery*. Drawing political lampoons and taking an interest in local politics, he soon published his first essay titled *Female Suffrage*. He joined the staff of the *San Francisco Newsletter and California Advertiser* and by December 1868, Bierce took over the column, "The Town Crier." It was in his first column he began a method or format he used for thirty years.

Bierce’s column consisted of miscellaneous observations on most everything. But among the incidental, there was often some consideration given to political issues and events, social and economic matters, and local and national personalities. Never writing scholarly or philosophic studies on forms of government or political theory, his political views were expressed in random, satiric, often humorous and occasionally serious sketches. This method was neatly characterized in the byline of his column while writing for the *Examiner*, "Prattle: A Transient Record of Individual Opinion."

All of Bierce’s writing—his essays, short stories, poems, epigrams, fables, and definitions—were written and introduced in various columns for several papers over the years, and when he eventually published books, they were simply an edited compilation of these columns. It was in the *Argonaut* he began to write definitions which eventually were eventually included in the much celebrated *Devil’s Dictionary*. Bierce began with the letter "P."

**Politician, n.** An eel in the fundamental mud upon which the superstructure of organized society is reared. When he wriggles he mistakes
the agitation of his tail for the trembling of the edifice. As compared with the statesmen, he suffers the disadvantage of being alive.

**Politics, n.** A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles. The conduct of public affairs for private advantage.

Many of these definitions are clever, some curious, and several have endured. For example, Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan used Bierce's definition of Revolution as, "an abrupt change in the form of misgovernment," in their study *Power and Society.*

His style of journalism is variously described as "invective," "furious ink slinging," "offensive," "preaching," "cynical," "an abuser," and as "Western journalism, [with] its innuendo, insults, and indifference to nice scruples." Paul Fatout describes his journalism as, "a bark with a bite," as Bierce called, "a spade a bloody shovel."

A case in point is Bierce's description of the California legislature:

> If nonsense were black, Sacramento would need gas lamps at noonday; if selfishness were audible, the most leather-lunged orator of the lot would appear a deaf mute flinging silly ideas from his finger tips amid the thunder of innumerable drums. So scurvy a crew I do not remember to have discovered in vermiculose,—at least not since they adjourned.

With the exception of the rapidly growing Chinese community and attendant issues, the California political climate was very similar to that of the nation. Accordingly, within the larger cities of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Sacramento, there existed a political machine, or organization which consisted of party "bosses" and their subordinates, whose business was simply to "get the vote out." It is well known that during this era of American political history, election
results and political influence were determined by a variety of extra-
legal means, and in California and elsewhere, the period has come to
symbolize sordid politics and wide scale corruption. Though recent
studies have emphasized the positive aspects of The Gilded Age\textsuperscript{35}, the
seamy side of politics during the postwar decades provided Bierce with
infinite subject matter, and he quickly expanded his editorial assaults
to include issues and personalities of national scope. During the
presidential campaign of 1884, for example, the Republican candidate,
James G. Blaine, and Democratic hopeful, Grover Cleveland, were locked
in a razor close race for the White House. Upon noticing the headlines
in a local tabloid, "Blaine explains his defeat in Ohio on Tuesday last
by saying that the farmers were against him," Bierce dashed off this
response:

\begin{quote}
What! you incomparable want-wit!--you spitting idiot!--you moral outlaw and intellectual
knave!--you headless horseman astride upon a
lie!--you birth-bent and will-bound professional
detestable! do you think that audacious folly is
not the same thing as brutal stupidity? Do you
suppose you are the less a liar because your
falsehood is short-couples to a fantastic
tomfoolery more hideous than itself? Think you
have one reader who does not despise you for the
poverty of expedient that drives you to so mad
and mean a trick for his deception? With
advantage to your dignity you might be a dog.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

Bierce came to enjoy a good measure of success and recognition in
just a few short years, and by 1872 he had married Mollie Day, the
daughter of Holland Hines Day, a wealthy miner and prominent politician
in Nevada and Utah. As a wedding gift, Day gave the couple an all
expenses paid trip to England. In London, Bierce began writing columns
for several small publications like Fun, Figaro, and the Lantern. The
English were especially receptive to Western American writers, and it was in London that Bierce published his first three books, *Nuggets and Dust, Cobwebs From an Empty Skull* and *Fiend's Delight*.

If there is any common ground of agreement among biographers, it is the extent to which English culture had shaped Bierce's aristocratic disposition. Indeed, having had an opportunity to interview several people who had been acquainted with Bierce, Carey McWilliams was surprised to find how many had thought Bierce was an English gentlemen. In M. E. Grenander's biography and literary study, *Ambrose Bierce*, the significance of Bierce's stay in England is reiterated. Although in London for only three years, it is clear those years had great impact on Bierce's political views. Bierce found, "In learning and letters, in art and the science of government, America is but a faint and stammering echo of England." "The English are undoubtedly our intellectual superiors ... they are our moral superiors likewise." England was, "a better country, has nicer people, and is in every way superior." More to the point, McWilliams observed, "when considering his ideas, then, from an objective standpoint, it is apparent that many of them are English in origin. His admiration was genuine and his attitude towards democracy, although influenced by his personal bias, was especially the attitude of an Englishman."

It is unclear what McWilliams meant by an English attitude toward democracy. It is clear that Bierce was given to embrace British culture, and was particularly receptive to the aristocratic tradition and structure of British institutions. The conservative implications of
this was suggested by a pupil and close friend of Bierce's, Herman Scheffauer, who recalled Bierce "had assumed during his short stay in England, many English, even Tory externals." Several of Bierce's definitions reflect the impressions of McWilliams and Scheffauer:


Aristocracy, n. Government by the best men. (In this sense the word is obsolete; so is that kind of government.)

Republic, n. A nation in which, the thing governing and the thing governed being the same, there is only permitted authority to enforce an optional obedience . . . There are many kinds of republic as there are graduations between the despotism whence they came and the anarchy wither they lead.

Ambrose Bierce would have remained in England indefinitely had he not been summoned back to California by Mollie after she experienced complications during pregnancy while visiting family. The Bierces had two sons while in London, Day and Leigh, and Ambrose had established himself as a capable editorialist abroad which contributed to his stature at home.

Upon returning to San Francisco in October 1875, Bierce wrote briefly for Frank Pixley's newly established journal, The Argonaut, but having fallen into disfavor with Pixley, he decided to try something entirely new. Bierce had been propositioned by Sherburne Blake Eaton, an old friend from Civil War and Reconstruction days, and soon he was off to the Black Hills of South Dakota to try his hand in gold mining. Evidently, Bierce had an interest in mining in the area--the last big strike in the U.S.--and having had engineering experience acquired in the service, he was to head up a foundering project to build a giant
flume to carry water to a gold mine. The enterprise failed, and as a result, he spent months sorting out the legal consequences of the project. In a letter to Eaton, Bierce said he was "baited and badgered . . . by creditors, lawyers, warrants, piratical bankers, and investigators." Doubtless, it was these legal annoyances which inspired him to define a Lawyer as one, "schooled in circumventing the law," and Lawful as, "being compatible with the will of a judge having jurisdiction." In January 1881, less than a year after he began the project, Bierce was back in San Francisco looking for a job.

Hopes of resuming "The Prattler" in Frank Pixley's Argonaut were dashed by Pixley, but fortunately Bierce landed the editorship of the first colored magazine in the country, The Wasp. More importantly, he began "Prattle" which appeared weekly on the editorial page from 1881 to 1886, while resuming, in his words, "hating hypocrisy, cant, and all sham." The publication provided Bierce a means with which to scrutinize, among others, the powerful Southern Pacific Railroad, the California legislature, and corrupt politicians. The "railrogue" Leland Stanford became "Leland $tanford" or "Steland Landford," and Frank Pixley, "Frank Pigsley" of the "Haugonaut." It was in this column Bierce published the short story, What I Saw at Shiloh, and attained quite a reputation for his literature and journalism. He was praised in E. L. Godkin's Nation, in various journals in England, and as far away as Australia, but his reputation was advanced considerably further when he was hired by William Randolf Hearst for the San Francisco Examiner.

Ambrose Bierce began writing his column "Prattle" for the Examiner in the spring of 1887, and continued writing the weekly copy
intermittently until 1906. With the resumption of "Prattle" in the *Examiner*, his influence and fame were secure; however, about this time a series of personal tragedies affected him deeply. Apparently Bierce had found some innocuous letters an admirer had written Mollie during one of his many absences; he stormed out; and they soon informally separated. Meanwhile, the family remained in the small house in St. Helena, a sleepy farming community 30 miles north of San Francisco, and Ambrose continued to move about the Bay Area. For most of his adult life he lived in remote hotels and retreats surrounding the bay in Northern California. Having sought solitude for writing and arid climate for his asthma, Bierce chose to live in Santa Cruz, Livermore, Los Gatos, Angwin, and a host of obscure residences. In these outlying hills he received friends, admirers, and his "pupils" for whom he tutored and discussed literature, as well as philosophical issues of the day.

Shortly after separating from Mollie, Bierce received news his sixteen year old son Day was killed in a gunfight, apparently over the affections of a woman. Both men were killed and the girl narrowly escaped. It was in this climate of tragedy Bierce produced a series of short stories upon which his literary reputation rests today. In less than three years he published *One of the Missing; A son of the Gods; A Tough Tussle; Chickamauga; One Officer, One Man; A Horseman in the Sky; The Suitable Surroundings; The Affair at Coulter's Notch; A Watcher by the Dead; The Man and the Snake; and An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*. As M. E. Grenander suggests, the composition of these stories in such a short period of time must have been "in some sense a cathartic activity for Bierce."
Bierce buried himself in his work. He focused on the defeat of the "Funding Bill" which had been recently introduced as legislation before the House in Washington, D.C. The bill would have virtually eliminated a $130 million debt owed largely to the federal government by the Southern Pacific Railroad. In opposition to the legislation, Hearst sent Bierce to Washington to head a lobbying team where he was instrumental in the bill's defeat. In 1898, the Spanish-American War began, and given his penchant for examining military strategies and battles, Bierce enjoyed concentrating the column on the war and American interests overseas. He changed his by-line to "War Topics," and was often critical of the American role in the war and expansion abroad.

By the turn of the century Bierce made plans to leave California and settle permanently in Washington, D.C. He had been well received while on assignment with the Examiner in the nation's capital, but because of changing public perceptions and tastes, Bierce's column was not as well received as it once had been, and his popularity as a journalist was fading by the time he arrived on December 12, 1899. In the East, his format and style of journalism began to change from miscellaneous observation to short philosophical tracts about man and the social unrest of the 1890s. Bierce lost interest in publishing short stories and concentrated on writing brief sketches under a variety of bylines: "The Views of the Melancholy Author," "The Curmudgeon Philosopher," and "The Passing Show." The show was passing. M. E. Grenander summed up the last decade of his life this way: "Bierce's last thirteen years saw the consolidation of his literary position, increased nostalgia for his Civil War days, the refinement of his
stoicism to a serene philosophy of detachment, and his mysterious disappearance—the most dramatic departure from life of any man of letters."

Once completing the task of compiling twelve volumes of *Collected Works*, Bierce began to make final preparations:

My plan, so far as I have one, is to go through Mexico to one of the Pacific ports, if I can get through without being stood up against a wall and shot as an American. Thence, I hope to sail for some port in South America. Thence, go across the Andes and perhaps across the continent... Naturally, it is possible—even probable—that I shall not return. These be "strange countries," in which things happen; that is why I am going. And I am seventy-one!  

Why he went to Mexico is anyone's guess; perhaps it was the action of the Revolution or the near certainty he would be killed during the fighting. In one of his last letters Bierce closed with these words, 

If you hear of my being stood up against a wall and shot to rags please know that I think that a pretty good way to depart this life. It beats old age, disease, or falling down the cellar stairs. To be a Gringo in Mexico -- ah, that is euthanasia!

Shortly thereafter, he crossed the Mexican-American border from El Paso to Juarez and headed south to Chihuahua. His last letter, dated December 26, 1913, mentioned an intention to go to Ojinaga the following day. Not long after receiving permission to accompany Villa's army, he was probably killed during the battle of Ojinaga, January 11, 1914. One of Villa's officers recalled seeing "an old gringo" riding into the midst of battle at Ojinaga, but despite efforts to confirm his demise or whereabouts, Ambrose Bierce was never seen, nor heard from again.

The preceding sketch of Bierce's life has focused on general
influences and behavior that may be considered the basis of his political thought. Though Bierce rebelled against his rigid Puritan childhood, it seems reasonable to argue, as Paul Fatout does, that Bierce was partly influenced by the conservative tenets of Calvinism. In much the same vein, Carey McWilliams supports this contention by concluding that Bierce was a moralist who reacted critically to the lost ideals of the Civil War and the seamy side of American democracy during the Gilded Age. Finally, M. E. Grenander points out the influence of British culture which shaped Bierce’s aristocratic disposition.

Although Bierce did not participate in the political process, the conclusions reached by his best biographers and the general observations made in this chapter suggest Bierce was ideologically a conservative. To what degree he was a conservative, and moreover, how his conservatism compared to other conservatives of his day, need to be explored to better grasp his political outlook.
ENDNOTES

Chapter I


3. Ibid., 160.


7. Despite the relative lack of major issues, the highest turnout of voters in American history--78.5 percent of eligible voters--occurred during the 1878-1896 period. See Morton Keller, Affairs of State: Public Life in Late Nineteenth Century America (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977), 243, 533.


11. These were conservative reforms in that they suggest a return to free trade laws and gold backed currency.

12. Biographers have focused on Bierce's unique personality and have rarely endeavored to characterize his philosophical or political disposition. While most have made reference to Bierce's critical outlook, skepticism, and cynicism, to my knowledge, no study, biographical or literary, has referred to Ambrose Bierce as conservative or as a conservative.


Elsewhere, Bierce described what he considered to be the inability of biographer's to adequately reconstruct the view of, "a man of thought". See his *Collected Works* New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1911), X, 28. Hereafter cited as Works.


Ibid., 258


Quoted by Paul Fatout in, *Ambrose Bierce*, 78.

Berkove mentions the library in his dissertation: "the implication is that Bierce availed himself of the library, but it is conjecture which cannot be verified." Laurence Berkove, 10. It is verified here as a result of this unpublished letter to James Tufts, Esq., July 27, 1897, The Bancroft Library.


Ambrose Bierce, *San Francisco Examiner*, November 13, 1898.

The contention that the battle of Shiloh was instrumental in determining Bierce's outlook is strongly made by Laurence Berkove in his dissertation *Ambrose Bierce's Concern With Mind and Man* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Pennsylvania, 1962), Chap. II.


Quoted by Carey McWilliams, *Ambrose Bierce*, 59.


33. Ibid., 138.


35. In what may be deemed the politics of historiography, the traditional interpretation of the Gilded Age has undergone a shift in emphasis. For example, Ari Hoogenboom in "Civil Service Reform and Public Morality" in *The Gilded Age*, ed. H. Wayne Morgan (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1970), argues that the typical historian who "has exaggerated the corruption of the Gilded Age" "is usually liberal, more often than not a Democrat". The liberal historians have, according to Hoogenboom, sensationalized corruption "to enliven lectures, and writings." Similarly, H. Wayne Morgan argues, "Few if any people chose to see that generation [Gilded Age] by its own lights. And historians, who are usually liberal Democrats, dismissed a supposedly Republican era without examining labels", Ibid., 2.


44. Ibid., 74.

45. Letter to Lora Bierce, October 1, 1913.
CHAPTER II

The generally conservative outlook of Ambrose Bierce was reflective of a growing conservative drift in the United States following the Civil War. After reunification of the nation and constitutional recognition of the freedmen, public support for a more ambitious reconstruction policy faded. Well before 1877, when the Hayes-Tilden compromise signaled the formal withdrawal from the South, Americans looked toward the postwar decades for more stability and less state and federal intervention. Ultimately, it was this conservative reaction that determined the outcome of the Presidential election of 1884, when the thoroughly conservative candidate, Grover Cleveland, returned the Democrats to the White House after nearly three decades of absence.

The conservative shift was above all, the result of a complex mixture of situational, economic, and cultural forces. Spurred by the war's appeal to nationalism and patriotism, as well as the demonstrated abilities of a strong central government, liberal and radical Republicans had sought a larger State role in assuring civil rights and expanding social and economic programs. But many of these demands were checked by conservative cultural forces of localism, nativism, and racism. Additionally, with the rapid expansion of industry during and immediately following the Civil War, political debate centered around the right and capacity of government to regulate business enterprise in
the general interest of the community. But, as with civil rights, the outcome of this debate was largely determined by the influence of conservative cultural traditions of individualism, laissez-faire economic theory, developing materialism, and a history of hostility toward government. Finally, postwar conservatism was reinforced by the conservative implications of Darwinian biology and Herbert Spencer's highly influential philosophic application of these theories to man and society.4

While the United States remained largely conservative throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, it appears Ambrose Bierce subscribed to a more narrow, "philosophical conservatism" held by few Americans. Clinton Rossiter characterized this "tiny but articulate minority" consisting of several academicians, editors, and gifted journalists:

To them the rosy promises of Carnegie seemed as ridiculous as the rosy promises of Eugene V. Debs, the absolution of Sumner as distasteful as the absolution of Edward Bellamy. They refused to put faith in predictions of inevitable progress or take delight in the marks of "progress" all about them. To the contrary, they were revolted by the decline in public morality, decay of manners, and the vulgarity of the . . . rich.

They cared no more for the fruits of democracy than for those of industrialism. They could not bring themselves now, in the days of Blaine and Tweed, to believe that plain men could make wise choices and govern themselves effectively and honestly. In their hearts they still carried the dream of government by gentlemen. They too were elitists, but their ideal elite was an aristocracy of virtue, intelligence, . . . and manners. Their ideal man, like the man of American tradition, was honest, hard working, and self reliant, but he was also charitable, sensitive, and cooperative.5
Rossiter's sketch suggests some men tried to achieve a more impartial or balanced view of American life during an age marked by the confrontation of rapid economic change and blind conservatism. While most American conservatives lauded the benefits and personal reward created by industrialization, others became alarmed over the potential disastrous effects on mankind. This, Rossiter alluded to above and elsewhere: "In the rugged wilderness of laissez-faire conservatism a few voices still cried out from the Right against industrialism, materialism, plutocracy, and individualism, in short, the whole course of American history." 6

There are several indications that Ambrose Bierce was among these "few voices". In order to gain a better understanding of Bierce's unique political philosophy, and his views on specific issues, it is useful to outline his thought as it coincides and differs from that of other "philosophical conservatives." This will be undertaken by first considering general personal and philosophical characteristics, and then comparing views on more specific issues and events that dominated political discourse during the late 1800s.

The "philosophical conservatives" were a small group of intellectually-oriented men of letters who became highly critical of the postwar political environment. Largely from the Northeast—Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania—the core of the group numbered as few as a dozen, and was comprised of such influential writers as Charles Eliot Norton, E. L. Godkin, George William Curtis, James Russell Lowell, and Henry and Brooks Adams. According to Vernon Parrington, it was their literature and journalism that sparked the
beginning of "critical realism" in late nineteenth century political discourse.

These philosophically conservative postwar critics had hoped to affect the minds and behavior of their readers by exposing the sordid nature of American politics. By the turn of the century, however, it became clear their efforts to reform America through the critical examination of the Gilded Age had gone largely ignored, and their detached criticism became preoccupied with doubt and despair. As the twentieth century neared, along with the end of their careers, many of these critics prophesied rapid decline for the United States. They became, as one historian held, "the gloom and doom generation" of American letters. Ambrose Bierce spoke for a generation when he observed:

An end of the century horse is doubtless pretty much the same as a horse of another period, but is there not in literature, art, politics and in intellectual and moral matters generally, an element, a spirit peculiar to the time and not altogether discernable to observation--a something which, not hitherto noted, or at least not so noticeable, now pervades and animates the whole? It seems to me that there is. Precisely what is its nature? That is not easy to answer; the thing is felt rather than observed. It is subtle, elusive, addressing, perhaps, only those sensibilities for whose needs of expression our English vocabulary makes little provision. I should with some misgiving call it the note of despair, or, more accurately, desperation.

The basis of despair among this "handful of alienated American intellectuals" was what they considered to be the compromise of the ideals of the Civil War. Far from the more honorable American statesman, the war precipitated a deceitful politician whose machines played upon the unstudied notions of a war-weary populace. The war too
had created greed and limitless materialism through special interests, high tariffs, and exploitation, all of which were now sanctioned through the new "Gospel of Wealth." The war had also spurred such state activism, that many felt it had weakened American individualism by encouraging reliance on government, unionism, and society, rather than on oneself. Still others bemoaned the forgotten, yet paramount, moral imperative of the war. James Russell Lowell believed that slavery was "the single disturbing element" in achieving the goals of American democracy. Similarly, Ambrose Bierce held "Freedom" to be the overriding issue of the war, and was willing "to engage in a four years' battle for its promotion." Many Americans, including Bierce, had left the battlefield with "a hollowness of heart," as Whitman put it, and while Lowell and the other conservatives had not participated directly in the war, they soon acquired this disposition once witnessing the shortcomings of a decade of Reconstruction policy, the ineptness and corruption of the Grant administration, and the social unrest commonplace during the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

Documentation of a direct connection between Bierce and other conservative postwar critics is scarce, though reviews in E. L. Godkin's Nation--the most influential conduit for this group--occasionally complimented Bierce's journalism and prose. It has been noted that Godkin had personally followed much of Bierce's work with enthusiasm, and Bierce wrote that "Mr. E. L. Godkin, editor of the Nation, is in point of ability the foremost journalist in America . . . " Not given to gratuitous recognition, this was indeed high praise from Ambrose Bierce.
Though Bierce was certainly the most geographically removed of this group of writers, few of these men were closely associated with one another, and "no one of them was intimately acquainted with the rest." While there are other accounts of Bierce's appreciation of these writers, especially James Russell Lowell, his association was not personal, but one of shared disposition and ideas.

In a cursory way, Bierce can be placed among other conservative reformers by noting a likeness in some personal characteristics. For example, historian Geoffrey Blodgett was surprised by the "geographic mobility" of the reformers and "the ease with which they moved from one career to another . . ." Bierce had been a professional soldier, editor, engineer, journalist, and accomplished prose writer. His versatility in the short forms—poems, short stories, fables, epigrams, and definitions—affirms the flexibility of his literature. Secondly, the geographic mobility of Bierce led biographer Paul Fatout to conclude he "was an escapist," after noting dozens of residences in and around the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as the numerous trips Bierce made across the continent.

Additionally, Blodgett observed that these men of letters "selected their friendships with precision and did not mix kindly with strangers." Like these men, Bierce was socially independent. He was known to break off friendships over seemingly insignificant differences and had occasion to publicly explain why "men of letters are not usually hot to make acquaintances . . ." In one such essay he argued "a man of thought, has convictions not commonly entertained by 'persons whom one meets'—when one must. He is likely . . . to hold in scant esteem the
institutions, faith, laws, customs, habits, morals, and manners that are the natural outgrowth of our barbarous race; the enactments of God's governing majority, the rogues and the fools."

The conservative postwar critics were not exceptionally wealthy, but were aristocratic men of inherited wealth. Most were highly educated and few, if any, were self-made men. Rather, they were sons of established families who had followed their fathers into business and various professions. Bierce was not well-born and was entirely self-made, yet he shared many of these genteel qualities. Judging from his definition of *Genteel*, he was not opposed to such an association:

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Genteel, adj. Refined, after the fashion of a gent.
Observe with care, my son, the distinction I reveal: A gentleman is gentle and a gent genteel. Heed not the definitions your "Unabridged" presents, for dictionary makers are generally gents.
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Even in the rough and tumble world of Northern California during the late 1800s, Bierce was always a gentleman in dress, manners, and demeanor. So much so, acquaintances had thought he was an English aristocrat.

The New England gentry were often derided for their cultivation and manners, and various critics called them, among other things, the "namby-pamby, goody-goody gentlemen who sip cold tea [and] were deficient in masculinity." Even Bierce had occasion to call William Dean Howells and Henry James, "Miss Nancy Howells" and "Miss Nancy James," for their literary subject matter and style. Though no one could call Bierce a teetotaler, his genteel quality was clear to biographer Carey McWilliams: "I shall have occasion again and again to
emphasize the sensitiveness which bordered on the pathologic in the course of time. In time too, came a gruff exterior... but beneath that exterior the man was almost feminine in his vibrant perception of values."

Unlike the New England gentry who had received the nation's best education, Bierce had managed to get a suitable education on his own. Also, while the New England aristocrats were home or abroad during the war, Bierce was a distinguished officer during some of the war's bloodiest battles. In this respect, yet in a limited way, Bierce was not unlike Theodore Roosevelt; both were aristocratic conservative reformers, and yet, both were, as some might say, "a man's man." Or more accurately still, Bierce's aristocratic nature was more closely allied with that of Oliver Wendell Holmes, as Carey McWilliams made clear in his biographical comparison of Holmes to Bierce. Finally, Bierce was, as literary critic Van Wyck Brooks observed, "a natural aristocrat and he developed a rudimentary philosophy of aristocracy which, under happier circumstances, might have made him a great figure in the world of American thought."

Depending upon the study, this assembly of postwar critics has been called "genteel reformers," "conservative reformers," "patriarchal reformers," and "liberal reformers." Though the authors of these studies have chosen apparently contradictory designations, (which will be addressed shortly), they all refer to the same small group of late nineteenth century American writers. Common to all of these studies is the tag "reformer." Here again, Bierce expressed many similar views on the issue of reform.
By and large, Ambrose Bierce gave most liberal reform measures a cool reception, but to conclude "reform was anathema to Bierce," overlooks the larger picture. To be sure, Bierce found most liberal reform measures "rainbow chasing" and "ancient delusions," privately, however, he was less circumspect. In a letter to a friend, Percival Pollard, he admitted, "I wish the world was different, but knowing what it is I've no right to expect it to pay me much for trying to reform it." Elsewhere, a contemporary called Bierce a "sly reformer in a cynic's guise," while Paul Fatout perceptively observed: "All that may appear surprising from a man disclaiming kindly intentions toward humanity, and alleging contempt for reform, yet it could be that Ambrose Bierce was a more earnest reformer--even humanitarian, as it were--than he admitted or knew." For Bierce, liberal reform measures were indeed "anathema," conservative reform was, on the other hand, worth his consideration and calculated support.

The term liberal in the context of "liberal reformers" refers to classical liberalism which, by the standards of the early 1900s, was a conservative ideology emphasizing individualism, classical economics, and elitism. Traditional or classical liberalism opposed the new or modern liberal school which adopted progressive demands for government regulation of the economy and state-sponsored social programs. Once these measures were gradually enacted, the foundation of the modern welfare state was established. Therefore, as one political historian notes, compared to modern liberals, these "liberal reformers" were conservatives: "Indeed, by the turn of the century, the use of the term liberal by this group of thinkers was only perpetuating a confusion over
the nature of liberalism in American thought. On most issues these men opposed reform and were, in effect, arch-conservatives. Twenty-four Liberal demands for federally-funded education, prison reform, and legislation designed to reduce poverty were severely criticized by Bierce and other conservative reformers. Similarly, regulation of the economy, through mandatory arbitration, anti-monopoly legislation, protectionism, and currency inflation, was met with equal disdain. Having opposed most populist and labor reform initiatives, or what Eric Goldman has called, "reform from the bottom up," aristocratically-minded, "patrician reformers," tried to effect change from "the top down." Twenty-five Yet in a sense, the philosophic conservative emphasized both. For example, their fundamental approach to reform rested on the belief that government would be far more practical if it were staffed by America's "best men." The extent to which conservatives pursued civil service reform, combined with their anti-democratic sentiment, supports Goldman's patrician reform thesis. However, these conservatives also emphasized the need for individual moral reform. That American society, especially during The Gilded Age, needed to be morally restored, was intrinsic to conservative reform as well. Bierce advocated both of these conservative reform measures by emphasizing his preference for the "best men" in public office and individual moral reform.

Conservative reformers stressed the notion that the nation could be placed on track if "honest men"—men of education and proven ability—were to occupy public office. Henry Adams wrote his brother during the war, "We want a national set of young men like ourselves or better, to start new influences not only in politics, but in literature, in law,
in society, and throughout the whole organism of the country . . . 
Harpers Weekly called for an elite trained "in the laws which regulate human society," to rule firmly, unlike the "happy go lucky view of society, which laughs at political economy and sneers at intelligence and thought."\(^{26}\)

The position that the independently-minded "best men" should occupy public office was shared by Bierce. Much like Edmund Burke, Bierce held:

A man holding office from and for the people is in conscience and honor bound to do what seems to his best judgement best for the general welfare, respectfully regardless of any and all other considerations. This is especially true of legislators, to whom such specific "instructions" as constituents sometimes send are an impertinence and an insult. Pushed to its logical conclusion, the 'delegate' policy would remove all necessity of electing men of brains and judgement; one man properly connected with his constituents by telegraph would make as good a legislator as another.\(^{27}\)

As late as 1906 Bierce was still arguing for the best men in Civil Service by declaring, "I don't believe in the greatest good to the greatest number--it seems to be perfect rot. I believe in the greatest good to the best men. And I would sacrifice a thousand incapable men to educate one really great man."\(^{28}\) He defined Brain by observing: "In our civilization, and under our republican form of government, brain is so highly honored that it is rewarded by exemption from the cares of office." The "Civilization" Bierce turned to for an example of better government was always "the mother country," England:
I do not hold that the political and social system that creates an aristocracy of leisure is the best possible kind of human organization; I perceive its disadvantages, clearly enough. But I do hold that a system under which most public trusts, political and professional, civil and military, ecclesiastical and secular, are held by educated men—that is, men of trained faculties and disciplined judgment—is not an altogether faulty system.29

Though his support for aristocracy was less than overwhelming, Bierce believed that all governments were frail devices destined to eventually fall. "I am no contestant for forms of Government—no believer in either their practical value or [their] permanence."30 Rarely supportive of a particular theory of government, Bierce often expressed his dislike for democratic or republican forms of governance. Not that democracy was impossible, it was an undesirable system of government determined by an inherently inadequate common man.

According to David Spitz, there are two basic categories of anti-democratic sentiment: the impossibility of democracy and the undesirability of democracy. Those who find democracy undesirable, as did Bierce, base their argument on four positions. They are largely aristocratic doctrines founded on the necessity of the best men; the incompetence of the average man; the concept of biological disparity; and the notion of racial inequality. Bierce supported the first three.31

"If history teaches us anything," Bierce wrote, "it teaches that the majority of mankind is neither good nor wise. When government is founded on the public conscience and public intelligence the stability of the states is a dream."32 For Bierce self-government was "monstrous nonsense! He who governs himself needs no government, has no governor,
is not governed. If government means anything it means restraint of the many by the few—the subordination of numbers to brains." While Bierce never described at length his preference for any one form of government, it is clear he favored an aristocracy of some kind, and like other conservative reformers, he felt government would be more efficient if men of "brains" were to hold office. "That a body of men can be wiser than its wisest member seems to the modern understanding so obvious and puerile an error that it is inconceivable that any people, even the most primitive, could have entertained it . . . ." Though he was not a "contestant for forms," his anti-democratic thought was grounded in his perception of the average man:

Surely "the average man," as every one knows him, is not very wise, not very learned, not very good; how is it that his views of so intricate and difficult matters as those on which public opinion makes pronouncement through him are entitled to so great respect? It seems to me the average man is very much a fool, and something of a rogue as well. He has only a smattering of education, knows virtually nothing of political history, nor history of any kind, is incapable of logical, that is to say clear thinking, is subject to the suasion of base and silly prejudices, and selfish beyond expression.

By founding his anti-democratic argument on the mediocrity of "that immortal ass, the average man," Bierce, it may be concluded, necessarily advocated an aristocracy. Thus, according to Spitz, "This indictment of democracy has a unique claim to prominence not merely because it is fundamental to other anti-democratic doctrines which build upon it, but also because it is advanced in a lesser or greater degree, and without a full awareness or acceptance of the aristocratic or acceptance of the aristocratic or authoritarian corollaries . . ."
In addition to supporting the aristocratic notion of the best men based on an inability of the average man to make wise decisions, Bierce felt an inherent flaw in popular government was perpetuated by heredity. In the *Examiner* he once declared "That all men are born free and equal is the best and highest sense of the phrase, I hold, not as I observe it held by others, but as a living faith."\(^{37}\) This declaration has led some to conclude he was "an egalitarian American."\(^{38}\) Yet the preponderance of evidence suggests nearly the opposite is true. For example, four years following the declaration of equality among all men, he wrote in the same journal, "There are certain of the poor--including the habitual criminal class--with whom unthrift is hereditary and incurable."\(^{39}\) He felt strongly enough about the subject to include the essay "The Ancestral Bond" in his *Collected Works* which restates his hereditarian beliefs:

> The phenomenon of heredity seems to me to have been inattentively noted, its laws imperfectly understood, even by Herbert Spencer and the prophets. 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 birth. His environment with all its varied suasions, its agencies of good and evil; breeding, training interest, experiences 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.\(^{40}\)

In arguing that man’s nature is largely fixed from birth, Bierce preempts the liberal contention that differences in men are the result of environmental inequities and therefore subject to improvement through societal intervention.

While conservative reformers emphasized the inherent evils of man,
which necessarily precluded "good government" and the effectiveness of most social programs, they lauded the benefit of self help through moral rejuvenation. As John G. Sproat observed in his study, *The Best Men: Liberal Reformers in the Gilded Age*: "But in the minds of most reformers, all of these pronouncements and devices were secondary as instruments of reform to the power of moral persuasion." The importance Bierce placed upon public and private morality was the central theme in Carey McWilliam's biography of Bierce. "Ambrose Bierce was a great moral force . . . it came to be the paramount value of his life." Like Sproat, Richard Hofstadter has observed that the "moral reformers" "struck the Yankee note, one must add, of self confidence and self righteousness; most of the genteel reformers were certain of their own moral purity." Again, this was typical of Bierce who once assured his readers, "I will . . . promote your understanding by instruction and your morality by example." According to Hofstadter, "Those [reformers] whose religious affiliations can be determined belonged (aside from a few independents and skeptics) to the upper class denominations, especially . . . Congregationalists, Unitarians, and Episcopalians." Though Bierce was an "independent and skeptic," he was influenced by his devout Congregational parents. This was the central theme of Paul Fatout's biography of Bierce. Thus, he was above all "a moralist," as were all conservative reformers, though interestingly enough, most were unaware of their preoccupation with morality. In *A Genteel Endeavor*, John Tomisich has observed: "To give the tangible world a moral framework, the genteel reformer did as by second nature" . . . It was second nature to Bierce:
Another of my critics, as introduction to his dissenting view, courteously "assumes" that I am honestly endeavoring "to promote good morals, good government and better conditions." My purpose is to interest and entertain the readers of this paper. That, as I understand the matter, is about what I am employed to do. Having permission to choose my methods, I have chosen (rather unconsciously) those that are natural to me.47

It is clear that Bierce subscribed to the general tenets of conservative reform. Though he doubted the effectiveness of social and civil service reform, he supported the conservative proposition that "the best men" should occupy public office. The aristocratic nature of this argument is consistent with Bierce’s conception of the average man and the fixed nature of man’s intelligence, character, and moral disposition. Finally, the overt and subconscious inclination of conservatives to urge self help through individual morality was intrinsic to Bierce’s message.

In reviewing these broad views of Ambrose Bierce, one is struck by an inherent ambivalence. Liberal reform was anathema to Bierce, yet he was a kind of reformer; Bierce was reluctant to express a preference for any one form of government, though he clearly favored an aristocracy of sorts; finally, he was an atheist who advocated Protestant individual morality. A more consistent and specific picture of Bierce’s political views, and his proximity to other philosophical conservatives, can be drawn by examining his position on several major political issues during the late nineteenth century. Among the most important are party politics versus political independence, as well as views on the tariff debate, monetary policy, the labor question, and American foreign policy.
Politically, this band of conservatives was uncomfortable with either party. They were largely opportunists who vacillated between the Republicans and Democrats, depending upon the party's closeness to their views. Prior to the Civil War, the Republicans' stand on slavery and nationalism had fostered the perception that it best represented morality and responsibility which endeared conservatively-minded men to the GOP. These men were among a diverse and uneasy coalition of groups aligned with the Republican Party during and following the war as well. Though Bierce rarely associated himself with either party, like other conservatives, he was a moderate who favored Lincoln's, and later Johnson's, lenient reconstruction policy. Having accomplished reunification and abolition, they sought restoration, not reconstruction, and conservatives like Bierce, rejected radical Republican efforts to make over and punish the South.

Although these men were in the Republican camp, they quickly became disillusioned with Grant's coziness with big business, his vacillation toward "sound currency," and the sensational corruption infecting his cabinet. But above all, it was the administration's inability to quickly settle the reconstruction issue that led conservatives to finally abandon the GOP all together.

As early as 1872 conservative reformers had established the Liberal Republican Party which, according to Henry Adams, "was the party of the center." By and large, it was really the party of the right, having favored decentralization, states' rights, free trade, and hard currency. This liberal, or more accurately, conservative Republican wing held views that were largely consistent with the pre-war Democratic
party, minus the stigma of the Civil War and its association with the "lower," urban immigrant classes.\footnote{48}

The Liberal Republican Party had fared so poorly during the election of 1872, that its candidate, Horace Greeley, confessed he was not sure whether he was running for, "the Presidency or the Penitentiary."\footnote{49} Having combined Grant's popularity in the North and Negro support in the South, with "bloody shirt" rhetoric and Greeley's somewhat comical manner, Republicans determined the outcome of the race before it had begun. But despite their overwhelming defeat, conservatives argued that Americans were, at the very least, given a real choice in the election. Conservative allegations that the parties were indistinguishable were mostly accurate,\footnote{50} and Bierce sided with the conservatives. "If one were to declare himself a Democrat or a Republican," he argued, "and the claim should be contested he would find it a difficult one to prove . . . 'party lines' are as terribly confused as parallels of latitude and longitude after a twisting earthquake, or those aimless lines representing competing railroads on a map published by a company operating 'the only direct route'."\footnote{51}

The inadequacies of the American party system had led the conservative reformers to establish an independent party. Their alienation from party politics has been characterized as a tradition among intellectuals or an "ethic" of political independence among sensitive and educated men.\footnote{52} It has also been suggested the reformers become highly critical of party politics only after their private political ambitions had been thwarted.\footnote{53} Herein lies a distinct difference between Bierce and other conservative reformers. While
Charles Eliot Norton, George William Curtis, Henry Adams, and others had sought public office and were fairly active in politics, Bierce was independent of politics. According to John G. Sproat in The Best Men: "Admirably complimenting this interpretation of true public spirit was the concept of the independent man in politics...[but] few liberal reformers in the late nineteenth century were authentic independents." Bierce was about as "authentic" as one could be, short of taking no political position at all. Although it is difficult to say with certainty, his political independence may have been part of a philosophical school which chooses to withdraw from politics for a variety of reasons. As William Levi has observed:

But there is an alternative doctrine which sees the matter more as one of active choice, where the artist or thinker chooses or refuses to choose political themes for his treatment, rejects or embraces the values to which his nation is committed, advances into the political arena as a spokesman for its tenets, or withdraws into a private world where art is autonomous and self-contained. This theory too does not deny the lure of the political, but it often sees it as an overwhelmingly destructive force to be resisted—the moth of culture and the flame of politics...  

To get Ambrose Bierce to endorse a candidate was a difficult task indeed. When he had decided to write a column about a campaign and attendant political issues, he always began by indicating his unwillingness to do so. This was in keeping with his political independence, but it was also partly by design. His independent nature enticed readers to find out what he had to say. For example, in the Examiner he begins: "A number of curious correspondents will be content with nothing less than an avowal of my choice for Governor. They will
have to remain in the shadow: the man of my choice is not a candidate; and it will serve no purpose to mention his name. The man of my choice for any office never is a candidate; his name is never put before a convention, nor even 'prominently mentioned' in the newspapers. As to the men who are 'running' . . . "56. After considerable digression, which includes discussion of several political issues, Bierce concludes the column, "To make Maquire Governor is the only way to keep him out of Congress." On another occasion, Bierce began his column, "An ingenuous reader of this paper has made the discovery that . . . I have never made a distinct and definitive declaration of my 'political faith'. This very observant man is correct.57 As always, Bierce goes on to address a variety of political topics including voting, tariffs, campaign corruption, and the few differences between Democrats and Republicans. During the Cleveland-Harrison campaign of 1888, Bierce used the same device:

Do you really expect me, my friends, to engage in this squabble? Would you like to see your devoted Prattler making a triumphal process of himself, headed by a brass band to convince the erring, his mouth venting an upcast draft of hoarse voices in sets of three? Would you wish to see him in the character of an army with banners, gun-powdering and tar-barreling and Roman-candling his political faith?58

True to form, Bierce reluctantly opted for a candidate; this time, as in the Presidential contest of 1884, he supported the darling of conservative reformers, Grover Cleveland.

Cleveland's successful candidacy represented the culmination of a series of victories for the Democratic Party. As early as the off-year elections of 1867, the Republicans had lost or suffered reduced
majorities in Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, and California. The Democrats, moreover, won a majority in the House of Representatives in 1874, the popular vote for the presidency in 1876, and a substantial majority in the Senate in 1878. Only the White House eluded them. This was due to Republican exploitation of the Civil War, lack of finances, and a strong Democratic personality to effectively present issues of national scope. Fortunately for Cleveland's candidacy, the contest was not decided on charismatic leadership or issues, but on the basis of moral concerns fostered by the growing conservative mood of the nation.

The presidential campaign of 1884 was above all distinguished by personalities and moral concerns, not issues. Though conservatives were receptive to Cleveland's support for the old panaceas--sound money, free trade, and strict governmental economy--it was also their perception of his uncompromising integrity that cemented their support. Conversely, conservative reformers viewed James G. Blaine as the quintessential Gilded Age politician, which moved the politically independent conservatives or "Mugwumps," to "consider it a 'moral necessity' to prevent Blaine from reaching the highest office in the land." Bierce concurred: "Democrats are good for something, after all: They prevented [the] infliction of a great wrong [in defeating] Mr. Blaine. Let us reward them with a Postoffice each."  

The political balance of power which developed out of the "Civil War System" was finally upset by conservative reformers or Mugwumps during the election of 1884. Two decades of Republican "bloody shirt" rhetoric that warned of the dangers of "rebel rule" became less convincing to independents, and though the independently-minded, more
uncommon philopshic conservatives were reluctant to embrace the "party of treason," the traditionally conservative nature of the Democratic Party, combined with the moral imperative of the election, persuaded them to completely abandon the GOP. And, "as in 1872, journalists--who keenly felt the replacement of a politics of ideology by a politics of organization--were conspicuous in the movement."\(^{62}\)

When California Republicans attacked E. L. Godkin of the *Nation* for alleging Blaine "had wallowed in the spoils like a rhinoceros in an African pool," Bierce defended him\(^{63}\), and along with the other conservatives, he emphasized the importance of morality as an issue in the upcoming election:

> I was a Mugwump because I thought Mr. Blaine no more than a thief . . . On the whole, I am for Cleveland and Thurman--not because of their imminent services but because of their imminence, which enables us to judge. There was no secret sneaking into the darkness to drag out a man whom nobody could say he would not make a good President . . . They [Democrats] had the honesty to give us a man concerning whose opinions, principles and works there are abundant and accessible data.\(^{64}\)

The Mugwumps hailed Cleveland's victory as the greatest triumph "since the fall of Richmond," and though Blaine had lost the race as much as Cleveland had won it, Mugwumps became hopeful the independent voters could now upset the political balance of power. For Bierce, however, his association with the Mugwumps was simply a reaffirmation of political independence:

> Mugwump, n. In politics one afflicted with self respect and addicted to the vice of independence.

While the campaign of 1884 dwelt on the moral and personal character of
the contestants, the lingering issues of trade, currency and foreign policy came to the forefront of debate during the next campaign.

President Cleveland's third State of the Union address in December 1887 signaled the beginning of the "great tariff debate." Devoting his entire message to the tariff question, Cleveland underscored the importance of trade as a political and economic issue. He called Republican protectionism, "a vicious, inequitable and illogical source of unnecessary taxation . . .," and vowed to pursue, "safe, careful, and deliberate reform."

Tariff rhetoric had a remarkably pliable quality. Republicans claimed tariffs meant less imports which insured domestic jobs competing against "pauper labor." Democrats countered by holding that the country would prosper by reducing tariffs to facilitate the flow of exports and lower the price of goods. PoBierce and other conservative reformers, the natural laws of classical economic theory determined their insistence on free trade. According to Sidney Fine in Laissez Faire and the General-Welfare State, their dogged adherence to this fundamental component of laissez-faire economic theory placed them "foursquare against the protective tariff. Free trade was in a sense the cornerstone of their whole system." Almost to a man, conservative reformers considered the high tariff as the root cause of monopolies. In the first essay of his Collected Works, Ambrose Bierce thought the "monstrous political practice known as 'Protection to American Industries'" would assure the "failure of self government" in the United States. Similarly, in the Examiner he held, as other conservative reformers had, that big business was unfairly the chief recipient of
Republican trade policies:

It is the misfortune of the Republican party to have secured the allegiance of most of those men who believe their great wealth to be a creation of the laws—men who believe they would not prosper, and know they would not prosper as well, if the Government did not supply them with customers by compelling other men to purchase their wares... That their fortunes erected upon a schedule of import duties have a sandy and shifting foundation is a truth ever present to their apprehension, and they see in the Democratic demand for lower duties an encroaching and menacing the stability of their structures.70

The tariff question had become the Democrat’s first real issue since Reconstruction, and by 1888 the party was perceived by a rapidly growing constituency as the defender of the people through a low tariff. Having sensed the potential gravity of this and other inroads made by the Democratic party, the Republicans sought ways of challenging the perception that free trade would revive a faltering economy through expansion of foreign markets. Taking advantage of rising anti-British nationalism, which peaked during the late nineteenth century,71 Republican protectionists charged that Cleveland’s proposed across-the-board reductions of tariff duties was playing directly into the hands of imperialist England. In effect, the protectionists had raised a new "bloody shirt" in attacking the low tariff as pro-British policy.

The heightened anglophobia and Cleveland’s inept campaign assured the outcome of his re-election bid, but it was not so much Cleveland’s defeat that concerned Bierce as it was the political strategy used by the Republican party. Always an ardent supporter of "the mother country," Bierce’s defense of England notably increased as anti-British sentiment rose during the 1890s. His distaste for Cleveland’s
successor, Benjamin Harrison, became more pronounced as well. When newly-elected President Harrison’s national tour reached San Francisco, Bierce wrote in the *Examiner*:

> His going about the country in gorgeous state and barbaric splendor as the guest of a thieving corporation, but at our expense—shining and dining and swining—unsouling himself of clotted nonsense in pickled platitudes calculated for the meridian of Coon Hollow, Indiana, but ingeniously adapted to each water tank on the line of his absurd progress does not prove it, and the presumption of his "great office" is against him . . . Men who believed before that Mr. Harrison was a small minded vulgarian, imperfectly intelligent, profoundly selfish and conspicuously ill-bred, the willing servitor of robber corporations and political adventurers, believe so still.\(^7\)

It has been noted by historians that "the social and economic strains incident to industrialism reached a political flash point in the 1890s."\(^7\) As early as April 6, 1890, Bierce seemed aware of the impending turmoil by prophetically observing, "we are in the preliminary stage of social and political changes profounder than any ever foreshadowed in the dreams of imagination—changes no more astonishing for their audacity of their prediction then the rapidity of their evolution . . ."\(^7\) The evolution of the profound social and political changes was hastened by the severe depression of 1893. The third depression in as many decades had a devastating effect throughout the economy, but nowhere was the effect more apparent than in the relationship between capital and labor. The Haymarket Square Riot, the Homestead strike, and the nationwide Pullman strike of 1894 were notable examples of hundreds of labor disputes that swept across the country during the late 1880s and early 1890s.
Fanned by the nation's press, there developed a hysteria in the country which precipitated the belief that the "dangerous classes" would "rise up" and destroy property and all that was valued in American culture. To an extent, Bierce's column reflected that growing fear. "Already 'industrial discontent' has attained the magnitude of war," he wrote in the Examiner, while alleging elsewhere that "thousands--tens of thousands of armed men are drilling all over the country. I tell you good god, majority means mischief." Much like other conservative reformers, Bierce prophesied a cataclysmic end for the United States. "The end must come soon," he observed during the Pullman strike, "and its beginning is upon us. Here in this country it will probably come first."

Because of their aversion to liberal reform measures and their insistence on individual moral reform, most conservative reformers advocated self help through hard work. Like all conservative reformers, Bierce felt strongly about the work ethic. In response to a local critic, Bierce suggested, "If you were of the industrious class, instead of the 'industrial class,' you would, I fear, have less leisure for traveling around and parroting such glib phrases as 'oppression of labor', 'slavery' and the rest of it." For Bierce, "the worthiest and most effective labor movement ... is that of a man at work."

Some conservative reformers lauded the possible benefits of public education; Bierce did not. "Popular education is good for a lot of things: it is not good for the stability of the states." He thought education bred "discontent" by making the "masses" aware of their condition which invariably led to violence and crime. Violence in any
form was unacceptable to Bierce and other conservative reformers. He urged swift and merciless punishment for those convicted of crime and argued against liberal penal reform measures whose remedies were nothing more than "Rosewater penology" resulting in more crime and violence.®® Though harsh, Bierce argued for equally severe punishment for the "criminal of the higher class" as early as 1870 in his first column, "The Town Crier," in the California Advertiser. He believed the state should not only put criminals to death but the diseased as well.®®

Many conservative reformers had felt there existed a correlation between rising labor unrest and increased immigration. Though not necessarily nativistic, they "concluded, European immigrant 'agitators were behind most of the violence and disaffection among American workers and farmers."®® Along with these men, Bierce observed, "The labor leaders, the socialists, the anarchists, all get their inspiration from abroad," while holding "that the great body of the American workingmen are altogether misrepresented by those who find profit in misleading them . . . [the] vicious foreign demagogues by whom their organizations are mainly officered . . ."®® Conservatives located most of the fault with the labor unions, and their solutions to labor unrest reflected this.

Conservative reformers supported a variety of measures designed to counter the growing antipathy between management and workingmen. Fearful of the growing "trusts", some were supportive of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890; most were not. Though nearly all reformers felt strongly about federal regulation of the railroads, many argued that the right of working men to unionize necessarily created the correlative
rights of industry to combine. They insisted that the "trusts were a natural and inevitable product of the industrial progress and source of benefit to the community." Bierce supported this notion. In his short essay, "In the infancy of Trusts," he asserts the development of combination "is the dominant phenomenon of our time. Labor combines into 'unions' capital into trusts . . . " Such combination would reduce prices, increase "stability of employment", and overall "the task of regulating them will be greatly simplified."

The antitrust legislation of 1890 was neither seriously intended nor seriously enforced, and ironically, it was used by those it was meant to regulate as a means to convince the courts to legally find for the injunction. Another measure designed to bring labor and management to the table was mandatory arbitration. Though many conservatives supported the idea, Bierce opposed Cleveland's legislation calling for compulsory state boards of arbitration. "This talk of 'compulsory arbitration' is the maddest nonsense that the industrial situation has yet evolved," he wrote, for ultimately, arbitration "of labor disputes means compromise with the unions," which was unfair to the corporations. To his credit, he proposed what he thought to be a more equitable solution. In the Examiner he asked, "how to break up this regime of strikes and boycotts and lockouts . . . ? Make a breach of labor contract by either party to a criminal offence punishable by imprisonment. 'Fine or imprisonment' will not do--the employee unable to pay the fine would commonly go to jail, the employer seldom." The proposal suggests a lack of understanding of the complexities of labor relations, but it also demonstrates a sense of balance and fairness.
It has been observed that conservative reformers, "claimed to detest the crude businessmen who run the great corporations in postwar America. Yet they ultimately became staunch supporters of these men... Their fears and shortsighted view of these conflicts in America prevented them from realizing they need not have taken sides at all, that their self-proclaimed role as independent reformers fitted them best to serve as impartial arbiters between the extremes." There is enough evidence to conclude Bierce equally condemned both the trusts and labor unions. Whether his condemnation favored capital or labor is hard to say. But, by holding as biographers have, that Bierce was able to approximate a balance of sorts, it may be suggested further he had an independent nature few conservative reformers achieved. In his essay "Industrial Discontent," Bierce argues, "Our no government has broken down at every point..." The reasons cited for the breakdown are indicative of his objectivity:

If asked my opinion as to the results of our own [government], I should point to Homestead, to Wardner, to Buffalo, to Coal Creek, to the interminable tale of unpunished murders by individuals and mobs, to legislatures and courts unspeakably corrupt and executives of criminal cowardice, to the prevalence and unanimity of plundering trust and corporations and the multiplication of unhappy millionaires. I should invite attention to the abuses... of Republican and Democratic "Houses"--a plague o' them both! If addressing Democrats only, I should mention the protective tariff; if Republican, the hill tribe clamor for free coinage of silver... I should say: Behold the outcome of hardly more than a century government by the people!

The successful businessman was a kind of cultural hero in the late nineteenth century and, like many Americans, Bierce respected corporate
leaders for their resourcefulness, especially those who had risen from an impoverished environment as he had. But Bierce rejected the "Gospel of Wealth," or "the trusteeship of wealth" as he called it, as he had disapproved of its corollary, "the brotherhood of man." He found "Mr. Andrew Carnegie" to be a "holy hypocrite" whose public endowments were merely "conscience money." "They should not pay back as charity any percentage of what they take as loot."

Though willing to concede the necessity of regulating the railroads, most conservative reformers were unwilling to permit the government to regulate the economy or provide for social programs. As John G. Sproat concluded, "with their doctrinaire view of the world and its problems, the adherents of orthodoxy rejected the efforts of the new reformers and ethical economists to reintroduce the element of humanitarianism in middle class reform. Indeed, they labeled such efforts to aid the underprivileged as 'socialism'."

Ambrose Bierce was wary of the "ists" as well, but unlike some of his contemporaries, he was a humanitarian of a sort. The most conspicuous example of his compassion for the disaffected, and his distinction among other conservative reformers, was his position on state employment, private ownership of land, and some regulation of wealth through graduated taxation. He summed up these and other proposals in the San Francisco Examiner, March 11, 1894:

"The poor are many and the rich are few" is a truth which, used as an incitement to bloodshed and plunder, is used injudiciously, for it states a condition of things making violence needless. The poor are so many that by a simple combination, whenever they shall have learned the trick of selecting leaders who will not betray them, they can have any kind of
government they desire and have it administered by themselves. If they deem it right (as I do) to abolish private ownership of land they can do so. If they think (as I do) that the importation of labor, commonly called immigration, should cease they can cause it to cease. If they believe (as I do) that some check should be put upon the control of property by the dead who have done with it, they can alter the laws of succession and inheritance to suit. If they should hold (as I do) that it is the first duty of the State to prevent want by providing work for every person able and willing to work yet unable to find private employment they can have it so. If they consider it expedient (as I consider it expedient) by cumulative taxation or otherwise to limit private fortunes what is to forbid? [But], the advocate of revolution by violence in this country under the present conditions of absolute obedience to political majorities is not only a rogue but a dunce.96

When Bierce unveiled these ideas he received a flood of correspondence praising or condemning his "wild scheme." Whether for or against, most were rather surprised, since there had not been much previous indication that he favored such far reaching reforms like state intervention on behalf of the unemployed or state-held land for farmers. Critics charged that these measures socialist. Bierce argued they were simply "a safe and benign extension of Socialism," quite in keeping with what he believed to be the fundamental principles of republican government.97 He cited numerous examples of public works projects and city work programs which provided employment during times of depression and natural disaster throughout the U. S. and in the city of San Francisco. He was careful to point out that his socialistic ideas were "not the robber socialism of the beer cellars, nor the rainbow socialism of the lecture halls, but a socialism naturally and slowly evolved from the altering conditions of modern life--a socialism not of 'principle'
but of expediency." For Bierce, the right to employment was synonymous with "the right to earn bread--a right that needs no better logical basis than the denial of the right to steal it." Thus, the state must provide basic needs to assure the viability of the community and therefore the state itself. To do less would most certainly sew the seeds of anarchy.

With the exception of his essay, "The Right to Work", in Works, and several brief references to state-assisted work programs in columns of "Prattle," the ideas presented in Bierce's social scheme were never detailed; they were simply an outline of his thought. The notion of the state curtailing private ownership of land was not explained either, with one telling exception: "As to that--the right of private ownership in land--the sons of dissent are a trifle needy of argument: Herbert Spencer has left them nothing to say." Bierce was only half right. In Spencer's first publication of Social Statics in 1851, he argued that privately-held land should be restricted. But because this most likely offended laissez-faire conservatives (i.e. classical liberals) who had championed Spencer's extreme laissez faire position, Spencer quietly dropped the brief chapter on land reform when Social Statics was republished.

There can be little doubt that Bierce was influenced by Spencer, but then many Americans were. Spencer's application of Darwin's theory of the evolution of human society was so well received in the United States during the late nineteenth century that he came to be considered the single most influential philosopher of the postwar years. To what degree Bierce accepted social Darwinism is a matter of some
debate; nonetheless, many of Spencer's ideas regarding man's relationship to government are expressed by Bierce. For example, Spencer was against all "poor laws" and public health measures; Bierce was against most. Spencer thought, as did Bierce, that the state should not provide public education; both were opposed to tariffs, altering the gold standard, and all anti-monopoly legislation as well. Aside from national security and the most basic needs, Spencer would not allow the state to provide for anything (not even postal service), which is where he and Bierce part company. Indeed, the comparatively vast powers Bierce would afford the government strongly suggest his conservatism was quite apart from the more common laissez faire conservatism so thoroughly embraced by Spencer and most American conservatives of the postwar decades.\textsuperscript{103}

The political climate common to the postwar years through the 1880s changed during the last decade of the century. Locally organized "machine politics" were replaced with national, corporate-backed political campaigns, and the political balance demonstrated by the razor close elections during these years became races decided by landslides. During the presidential election of 1892, for example, Cleveland was returned to office by the largest margin of electoral votes since Lincoln's re-election in 1864. But the untimely depression of 1893 and Cleveland's implacable conservatism led even the most stalwart Democrat to withdraw support. Additionally, the return of third party politics challenged the administration and further divided the Democratic party. Once the Democrats incorporated the Populist Party by nominating Nebraska's "boy orator," William Jennings Bryan, on a free silver,
labor-backed platform, the more uncommon, responsible conservative like Bierce, found himself largely unrepresented again.

Most independents found William McKinley, like Blaine, one more in a long line of scoundrel politicians. Bierce thought even less of Bryan whom he dubbed a "presidential peril." Though one historian came to characterize the Senator's "Cross of Gold" speech during the Democratic National Convention of 1876 as "possibly the most dramatic moment in the history of American Conventions," Bierce argued otherwise:

A week before the convention of 1896 William J. Bryan had never heard of himself; upon his natural obscurity was superposed the opacity of a congressional service that effaced him from the memory of even his faithful dog, and made him immune to dunning. A week afterward he was pinnacled upon the summit of the tallest political distinction, gasping in the thin atmosphere of his unfamiliar environment and fitly astonished by the mischance. To the dizzy elevation of his candidacy he was hoisted out of the shadow of his own tongue, the longest and liveliest in Christendom. Had he held it—which he could not have done with a blacksmith's tongs--there had been no Bryan. His creation was the unstudied act of his own larynx: it said, "Let there be Bryan," and there was Bryan.105

Bierce thought William McKinley similarly distasteful, but his critical comments about the popular President took a curious twist. After McKinley was assassinated shortly after reelection, someone dug up a rhyme written by Bierce, precipitated by the shooting of Governor Goebel of Kentucky, the year before:

The bullet that pierced Goebel's breast can not be found in all the West. Good reason: it is speeding here to stretch McKinley on the bier.106

Bierce's prophetic verse was not intended in a hateful way; it was
innocuous speculation based on his perception that violent crime was on the rise. But the press, and especially William Randolf Hearst's political competition, made the most of it. Though Hearst's name overshadowed the author's throughout the affair, both men were more concerned with events unfolding around the globe.

The extent to which Bierce became absorbed in foreign affairs was reflected in the change he made in his column by-line. "Prattle" became "War Topics." One week following the beginning of the Spanish-American War, Bierce adapted his journalism to focus on several major international events which had reached crisis stage during the years 1898-1901. Chief among them was the Spanish-American War and attendant hostilities in the Philippines, the Boer War, the Boxer rebellion, and the heated canal negotiations with Britain.

Having settled in Washington, D.C. in the early 1900s, Bierce regularly contributed pieces to several of Hearst's journals on foreign events. He was in the Congressional gallery when Senator Beveridge delivered his famous "Manifest Destiny" speech. Though he found some strengths in the argument for expansion, by and large, Bierce was highly critical of those who advocated an aggressive expansionist policy. He urged his readers not to make an impulsive choice, but to consider matters rationally, and to avoid the emotionalism created by the sensational press so common to the Hearst and Pulitzer newspapers.

Many of Bierce's criticisms of emerging American foreign policy were similar to those advanced by the same small group of conservatives with whom he shared so many of his domestic views. In Twelve Against Empire: The Anti-Imperialists, 1898-1900, Robert L. Beisner found the
"American Mugwump" conspicuous opponents of expansionism.\textsuperscript{107} Although their emphasis varied there was "broad unity" in the objections raised by the conservative critics.\textsuperscript{108} They doubted the constitutionality of expansion, as well as the moral, economic, political, racial, historical, and strategic justifications for foreign intervention. Though Bierce touched upon all of these, he focused largely on the strategic and moral.

Unlike the sensational accounts of the "raging battles" presented by the press, Bierce's column represented a more subdued, objective account. He was often critical of what he called the "Commodores and Rear-Admirals of the press" who "give us so many glorious victories".\textsuperscript{109} For example, Bierce argued that America's War with Spain in Cuba and the Philippines was really "to promote the larger scheme." It was "not a purely military war: like most wars it is partly political and sentimental." Bierce believed that the administration was pursuing a course or "larger national policy which will give us rank among the robber powers engaged in partition of the world."\textsuperscript{110} But to engage in imperialism meant maintaining that which is acquired, and Bierce thought this more difficult than the initial gains. The administration's widening interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine, to include southeast Asia, entailed "incalculable responsibilities." Thus, "if eager to grasp we must be strong to keep."\textsuperscript{111} But "to keep" that which was nearly 5000 miles away, Bierce argued, was strategically impossible to do.

With the beginning of hostilities with Spain, Bierce cautioned that "if we are to have war with Spain, let us not commit the customary
error of underrating the enemy." "History is full of instances," he wrote, "of unpaid, ragged and ill-shod armies cutting out more work for their full-fed antagonists than the latter were able to perform."

Elsewhere, Bierce implored his readers not to delude themselves with convictions of an easy victory, for "altogether, we are less well 'prepared for war' than we have the happiness to think ourselves." The U.S. Navy had not switched to the newer smokeless powder which allowed the Spanish fleet to easily spot American ships. Also, Bierce vehemently criticized the poor equipment provided to the volunteers. To have sent American servicemen to the tropics clothed in wool was inexcusable, but to have allowed such poor sanitary conditions in America's military encampments to breed ailments that ultimately increased war-related casualties ten times greater than those received on the battle field, was criminal. Bierce thought General Shafter's success during the brief war, "a fools luck." Moreover, Dewey's "easy victory over the floating tubs" guarding Manila, was unfortunately supporting the unstudied arguments of the imperialists.

Although the "anti-imperialists" in Beisner's study based a good share of their arguments on questionable constitutionality, Bierce maintained either side could easily shape the text of the document to justify claims for expansion or isolation. On the other hand, along with other conservatives, Bierce emphasized the American Declaration of Independence as a moral guide which more clearly brought into question the arguments of those who maintained "the white man's burden," and the notion that emerging international developments necessarily created "new responsibilities" for the United States abroad. Indeed, before the U.S.
disposes the native peoples of Hawaii and the Philippines, Bierce suggested Americans "recollect a certain state paper, once held in no small repute, in which it was explained why governments are instituted among men and how they derive their authority and power--the consent of the governed, if memory serves. The paper was known, I think, as the Declaration of Independence."\textsuperscript{115}

During the protracted diplomatic exchanges with Spain, prior to the declaration of war in April 1898, Bierce felt the U.S. had failed miserably to gain the diplomatic and moral high ground. He argued "Spain was outwitting us in the game as diplomacy," "but morally he [the Spaniard] has taken us to camp and is making a show of us."\textsuperscript{116} Having made numerous demands on the Spanish, which were largely met, the Americans demonstrated to the world "we were spoiling for a fight." Moreover, the United States had intentionally taken weeks to determine the cause of the sinking of the U.S. battleship Maine in Havana Harbor in hopes of creating a false sense of moderation and restraint. Bierce argued the U.S. had intended to go to war with Spain all along, and by allowing weeks to pass without taking action, had thereby lost the moral momentum. The U.S. should not seek revenge, but should have clearly stated its demands, and if not met satisfactorily, then have acted decisively, armed additionally with the moral understanding our "... claim is based upon the murder of our seamen in the harbor of Havana."\textsuperscript{117} As for the Philippines: "I think myself they would make a very appropriate present to the inhabitants. I think the gratitude of eight or nine millions of human beings rejoicing in their freedom from centuries of misrule would be worth having."\textsuperscript{118}
Though Bierce's commentary on American foreign policy during an era of rapidly unfolding international events was considerable, the preceding outline of his criticism is additional evidence to suggest Bierce was closely allied with other philosophical conservatives of his generation. Indeed, in nearly every major aspect his views closely followed those expressed by these contemporaries. Bierce shared basic personal characteristics of social independence, mobility, and aristocratic disposition. He closely followed their views on reform and on the average man; and like these conservatives, he had little faith in democratic institutions.

Ambrose Bierce was more politically independent than other conservatives, but like these men, he characterized himself a Mugwump. Accordingly, he supported their leading candidate of the postwar decades, Grover Cleveland. Bierce agreed that political patronage must be eliminated through civil service reform, and American tariff policy should be removed while the gold standard reinstated. Like other conservatives, Bierce was often critical of the labor movement, though he advised a more humanitarian approach to meet the needs of the working class during economic crisis.

To what extent there was a typical conservative personality or group of "philosophic conservatives" during the late nineteenth century is difficult to say. Some studies have argued there were so many real differences among this small group of men that they cannot be considered a distinct part of American political culture. Furthermore, there is considerable debate as to whether American political culture has ever shown signs of traditional or philosophical conservatism like that found
in British society. In this respect John G. Sproat makes an interesting observation:

Burkean conservatism . . . went down with the Old South and suffered a long eclipse; and certainly the blunt pragmatism of the business community in general, until the 1890s at least, was a far thing from traditional conservatism. Unless one chose to preach one's cause to a select few in a secluded drawing room, it was difficult to be a traditional conservative in those years—difficult—that is, if one wished to play a meaningful role in society and politics.¹¹⁹

It will be recalled that Bierce enjoyed his "meaningful role" as an influential journalist and literary critic, but was thoroughly independent of politics, unlike the small group of conservatives he was very much like. To determine if Bierce was a true philosophical conservative in the tradition of Edmund Burke, it is important to distinguish this most unusual political thought.
Chapter II

1. Though the period reflected industrial and continental expansion, the political disposition of the United States from the Civil War through the 1890s was largely conservative. For a characterization of the United States during the latter half of the nineteenth century as conservative, see, for example, Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 1-14; Alan Pendleton Grimes, *American Political Thought* (New York: University Press of America, 1983), 312; Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), Chap. V; Morton Keller, *Affairs of State: Public Life in Late Nineteenth Century America* (London: Harvard University Press, 1977), the conservative reaction to Civil War and Reconstruction inspired state activism is central to the entire study.

2. The conservative mandate was reconfirmed in 1892 when Cleveland won by a landslide.


5. Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 155. Philosophical conservatism is a complex concept which will be dealt with at length in the following chapter. Rossiter has chosen to call these postwar writers "philosophical conservatives" who comprise only a part of a philosophically conservative tradition in American political history. The same group of writers are considered philosophical conservatives in Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Chicago: Regency Books, 1986), 337-366. Depending upon the study, these postwar critics or conservatives are called Conservative Reformers, Genteel Reformers, Patrician Reformers, and Liberal Reformers. This will be made more clear in the following pages.

6. Ibid., 160.


15. Ibid, XII, 114.

16. Bierce's aristocratic temperament was well documented in Chap. I. It is emphasized here again to demonstrate his proximity to other philosophic conservatives and to meet what one historian maintains is "The most important element in the Conservative temper." See, Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America*, 48.


42. Carey McWilliams, *Biography*, XVIII.


47. Ambrose Bierce, *Examiner*, date unknown.


58. Ibid.

59. John G. Sproat, *The Best Men*, 113. "Mugwump" is an Algonquian word meaning "big chief" which was pinned on them in derision by Charles Dana of the New York *Sun*.


61. The "System" had developed out of the Civil War. The Republicans dominated the northern states and the Democrats, the southern and border states.


74. Ambrose Bierce, *Examiner*, April 6, 1890.


Ambrose Bierce, Works, IX, 91.

Ambrose Bierce, Works, XI, 133.

Ambrose Bierce, Examiner.


On Bierce's sense of balance, see, for example, Carey McWilliams, Biography, 115; Van Wyck Brooks, Emerson and Others, 154; Percy H. Boynton, More Contemporary Americans, 83.


Ambrose Bierce, Works, X, 282.

Ambrose Bierce, Examiner.


Ambrose Bierce, Examiner, August 3, 1903.

Ambrose Bierce, Examiner, July 21, 1895.

Ibid.

Ambrose Bierce, Examiner, December 31, 1893.

See, for example, Sidney Fine, Laissez Faire and the General-Welfare State, Chap. II.

See, for example, Lawrence Berkove, Skepticism and Dissent: Selected Journalism from 1898-1901 (Ann Arbor: Delmas Books, 1980), XV.

Though Bierce had occasion to praise Henry George's, Progress and Poverty, he wasn't overly fond of his ideas. Yet it must be noted that Bierce held similar views in regards to private ownership of land, and the need for some revision of the tax structure.

Francis Russell, The Confident Years, 291.

Ambrose Bierce, Works, XI, 75.

Ambrose Bierce, Works, XII, 308.

Robert L. Beisner, *Twelve Against Empire*, 270.

Ambrose Bierce, *Examiner*, May 1, 1898; *Examiner*, May 15, 1898.

Various quotes from Ambrose Bierce, *Examiner*, May 19, 1898.


Various quotes from Ambrose Bierce, *Examiner*, April 10, 1898; *Examiner*, April 17, 1898.


Ambrose Bierce, *Examiner*, April 17, 1898.

Ibid.


CHAPTER III

Everywhere is a wild welter of action and thought, a cutting loose from all that is conservative and restraining, a "carnival of crime," a reign of unreason.

Ambrose Bierce, Works, IX

As it is with many political ideas, their expression often surfaces in the words of writers responding to the events of an era. Ambrose Bierce thought "an author's work is usually the product of his environment. He collaborates with his era; his coworkers are time and place." Like many of his generation, Bierce was sensitive to the pervasive change of the times, and as suggested, he reacted conservatively toward much of that in transition during the age of industry. Similarly, a century before, the "father" of modern conservative thought, Edmund Burke, was moved by British industrialism and revolution in France to pen a bundle of ideas considered to be the fundamental principles of philosophical conservatism.

While the distance between Ambrose Bierce and Edmund Burke is considerable, biographers have noted that Bierce recommended Burke's literature to friends. On occasion, Bierce mentioned the eighteenth century British statesman in his column as well. In The Wasp, for example, he wrote that civilizations have at times produced "... great men. England had her Fox and Burke." But beyond similar one line references, the connection ends. Still, at first glance, it appears they shared many views. The two were raised in strict Protestant homes,
and having placed many of their views in a moral context based on
natural law, biographers have characterized both as "moralists." Though Bierce and Burke were anglophiles, they were born outside of
England and came to admire the nation later in life. Both opposed what
they considered to be extreme forms of government--Democracy and
Monarchy--and were similarly critical of theoretical conceptions of the
state. As a result, neither expressed an interest in, nor wrote of,
political theory. They were not well-born, but each possessed a strong
aristocratic disposition, and accordingly favored government by the
"best men" while doubting the value of much popular participation. To
some, their views were inconsistent and "paradoxical," while others
thought them "reformers" and "fascists." Though these analogies are
superficial, when taken along with other similarities, it seems
reasonable to study the philosophical side of Bierce's conservatism as
it compares to the established and more widely studied conservative
philosophy of Edmund Burke.

The basis of the school of thought known variously as Burkean
conservatism, traditional conservatism, classical conservatism, and
philosophical conservatism, is a collection of ideas about man and
government most often attributed to Edmund Burke. But because of the
loose nature of these ideas, Burkean conservatism remains a clouded
concept. Some have argued, for example, that conservatism is a
thorough philosophy of a sort; others have found it an ideology or
"system of ideas." It is argued elsewhere that conservatism is simply a
mood or disposition, and thus, R. J. White has written that conservatism
is "not so much a body of intellectually oriented principles as a number
82

Similarly, Michael Oakshott considered the conservative "disposition" as that which advances "the familiar to the unknown, the tried to the untried, the actual to the possible ..." 

Still others have found conservatism to be a more concrete concept:

All conservatives share a collectivist orientation toward family, friends, community and, usually the nation. Each has a greater sense of discipline, order and duty than is found among liberals. All assert man's imperfectability and have reservations about the likelihood of social progress; at best human nature is ambivalent, possessing the power for great evil as well as considerable good. And each prefers established authority to mass rule ... 

While the meaning of conservatism remains disputed, political scientists have overcome differences in definition to focus on correlative interests in a wide variety of research. For example, behaviorists like Adorno, McClosky, Lipset, and Raab have concentrated their research on uncovering the basis of a "conservative personality." In his classic study, Karl Mannheim sought to account for the growth of a conservative temperament among social classes or strata when reacting to a historical situation. Mannheim limited the occurrence of social conservatism to one particular time frame and social environment--roughly the period of European feudalism common to Burke's era and before. Similarly, Samuel Huntington and Hans Schumann studied the presence of conservative thought among large groups or classes, but unlike Mannheim, they argued that conservatism arises in response to historical situations that reoccur throughout time. Conversely, other research has focused on the philosophical nature of conservatism by emphasizing timeless fundamental "principles" that
conservatives have continually relied upon when considering man, society, and government. These studies stress notions of universal conservative values of justice, order, authority, duty, and moderation.

It is this application that lends itself to study Bierce's sense of conservatism for two reasons. Bierce did not live during the feudal period emphasized by Mannheim and especially Louis Hartz, though some have suggested the antebellum South approximated one. Secondly, and more importantly, Bierce's conservative disposition, as suggested earlier, was unlike the more prevalent laissez faire conservatism of the postwar decades. This suggests there is a conservatism that is not necessarily bound up in any particular historical situation. Rather than an abstract desire to maintain the status quo of one's era, or return to an imagined golden past, there may be in Bierce's conservatism additional evidence to support the claims of those who hold there exists a timeless, philosophically principled conservatism.

Common to all studies that maintain conservatism to be a complex, universal philosophy of a kind, are checklists of principles. Sixty-odd years ago, F. J. C. Hearnshaw introduced twelve "general principles of conservatism." At mid-century, Russell Kirk formulated "six canons of conservative thought," and in 1971, prolific Clinton Rossiter offered no fewer than twenty-one "points of the Conservative tradition." More recently, Anthony Quinton, in *The Politics of Imperfection*, narrowed conservatism to three broad principles—*traditionalism, organicism, and political skepticism*. Though Bierce's conservative views would meet the requirements set by the other studies, Quinton's approach provides a more manageable framework to study the political views of Bierce as they
compare to the fundamental conservative ideas in the tradition of Burke and others.

Although the second and third principles in Anthony Quinton's study—organicism and political skepticism—are important components of conservative theory because they build upon ideas established by the first, Quinton suggests traditionalism is the most important of the three. For example, the traditional or historically-proven component in the principle of organicism is found in the conservative view of the state as an organic living whole, which has over time, slowly evolved into interrelated institutions according to the social needs of man. The traditional, or historically-based component in political skepticism lies in the conservative view that good political ideas and decisions are not derived from impulsive individual speculation, but only through the slow process of historically accumulated knowledge acquired through the political experiences of the community. Therefore, traditionalism is the principle upon which the study of conservative thought must begin:

The first of these specific principles is that of traditionalism, expressed in the conservatives attachment to, or reverence for, established customs and institutions. The other side of it is his hostility to sudden, precipitate and, a fortiori, revolutionary change. A historically evolved social order incorporates the accumulated practical wisdom of the community, it is a collective product, the outcome of innumerable adjustments and modifications made by politically experienced individuals in circumstances of responsible political decision.¹⁶

For Edmund Burke and others, conservatism is often expressed as a defense of established political traditions. Because traditional
institutions of aristocracy, strong central authority, and minimal popular participation have endured historically, conservatives argue these traditions, among others, are more rational than new schemes of governance proposed by contemporary thinkers. Rather than entertain new, and therefore, abstract, untried, and unproven political ideas, Burke urged colleagues to, "follow our ancestors, men not without a rationale, though without an exclusive confidence in themselves . . ."17

Though Burke appealed to tradition as that which is historically justifiable, he did not advance a formal theory of history. Rather, he possessed what has been called a "historical sense"16, and accordingly, Burke found support in the words of Aristotle who advised contemporaries to heed "the experience of the ages." Similarly, in the essay, "Actors and Acting," Ambrose Bierce urged readers to consider "the virtues of Socrates, the wisdom of Aristotle . . . to catch the law that they deliver." In the brief essay, "To Train a Writer," Bierce advised prospective writers to "read the ancients: Plato, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca and the lot--custodians of what is worth knowing." On many occasions, Burke found support for his conservative views in the words of these men. These views, moreover, are often supported by the principle of traditionalism or that which is historically sound.

The historical sense, or the notion that the world cannot be fully understood apart from a "stream of history" and the lessons therein, was popular in Burke's time, but has been considered to be, "one of the most distinctive features of nineteenth century thought" as well.19 In keeping with this fundamental principle of conservatism, Bierce often appealed to history in support of tradition. He frequently evoked what
he once called "the historical method of ascertaining truth" in condemning "the hideous and imbecile progeny of experiment":20:

For nearly all that is good in our American civilization we are indebted to the Old World; the errors and mischiefs are of our own creation. We have originated little, because there is little to originate, but we have unconsciously reproduced many of the discredited systems of former ages and other countries—receiving them at second hand, but making them ours by the sheer strength and immobility of the national belief in their novelty. Novelty! Why, it is not possible to make an experiment in government, in art, in literature, in sociology, or in morals, that has not been made over, and over, and over again.21

In "Actors and Acting," Bierce observed, "At no time has the devil been idle, but his freshest work few eyes are gifted with the faculty to discover. We trace him where the centuries have hardened his tracks in history, but round about us his noiseless footfalls awaken no sense of his near activity." Interestingly enough, Bierce found the devil's "tracks in history" to be the very same ones so often observed by Edmund Burke.

Political historians have located the fundamental tenets of Burke’s conservatism in his critical accounts of the unfolding French Revolution, and similarly, Bierce advised readers to consider the lessons gained by the very same event Burke repeatedly condemned a century before. For example, during an informal debate between Bierce and two prominent socialists, Morris Hillquit and Robert Hunter, Bierce mentioned the likelihood of revolution recurring in the U.S., as was the "tendency of republican government. Undoubtedly we have to go over the whole Paris regime again and again."22 This thought is repeated in an article in "Prattle," June 17, 1894, which also reconfirms Bierce’s
sense of traditionalism based on the lessons of history in general and the French Revolution in particular. The column was written in response to the Populist Party having adopted a free silver plank on the official party platform:

Thus all the old political and social heresies, crusted with the contumely of a thousand historical failures, are made to squeak and gibber with the ghastly semblance of a new and nasty life. There the slovenly, unhandsome corpses of financial expedients, dug up out of the past, where under the ridicule of centuries, they have reposed in the sure and certain hope of a blessed resurrection by the mobocratic spade, are set up and articulated with wires for adoration of the unread. If these people knew what it is, obvious that they do not know, namely, that every possible experiment in government and governmental methods has been made over and over and over again, and that we have fairly complete records of the results, in historical times, they would, with reference to many of their hoary "reforms" spare themselves the trouble of demanding a new trial--another discrediting by the damning demonstration of infutility. They think the world began yesterday. Of their leaders ninety-nine in a hundred are absolutely unaware of the profitable political lessons contained in the histories (for example) of the Grecian, Italian and French republics.

While the objective of much of Burke's literature was intended to counter the claims of those who advocated revolution in France, a good share of his attention was given to opposing the liberal ideas of Jeremy Bentham. Bentham's utilitarianism, or Principle of Utility, was a psychologically oriented theory which held all human behavior to the product of pain and pleasure. The abstract equations formulated by Bentham supported his conclusion that good government was that which legislated measures increasing the happiness of the community, and legislation which did not was deemed inappropriate. Thus, the end of
government, according to Bentham and later James Mill, is to secure "the greatest good to the greatest number." Much like Burke, Bierce was highly critical of what he considered to be abstract schemes of governing, and like Burke, Bierce had occasion to criticize the notions advanced by Bentham and Mills. In the Argonaut, for example, Bierce argued, "the republic has the lowest aim of all forms of government; it proposes to accomplish only that modest Benthamite Utopia 'the greatest good to the greatest number'; and it is with reference to this un-exacting standard that it must be judged--and judged to have failed." Having tended to equate utilitarianism with socialism, Bierce wrote, "For the others, I don't care a rap whether they are kept down. I don't believe in the greatest good to the greatest number--it seems to me perfect rot. I believe in the greatest good to the best men."

In keeping with Quinton's first principle of traditionalism, and its emphasis on historically-evolved, inherited institutions, Bierce believed that those who advocated methods of managing society through economic systems of socialism (i.e., utilitarianism) had been repeatedly proven wrong. To resurrect "Platonic republics" outside of the stream of tradition and historical continuity was to do so in complete disregard for the instruction provided by correct examination of the past. But as economic conditions worsened in the 1870s, and especially the 1890s, demands for greater social planning became increasingly vocal. These expressions often found their way into much of the popular literature of the period, and a good share of Bierce's sense of traditionalism can be found among the objections he raised toward the new utopianism conveyed in this literature.
In what Vernon Parrington has characterized as "the literary quest for utopia," during the 1890s and early 1900s there occurred a literary movement which extolled the potential benefits derived from greater central planning, more cooperation, and less competition. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*; Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*; and William Dean Howells' *A Traveller from Alturia* are all notable examples of this literary genre. The distaste Bierce held for this utopian literature was two-fold. First, he did not care for the literary medium through which utopian thought was primarily conveyed during the late 1800s--the novel. To Bierce, novels were superficial "padded short-stories." They were inherently faulty accounts having no "permanent place in literature." Novels were really "a diluted story--a story cumbered with trivialities and nonessentials" whose ephemeral accounts were written, "in the shifting sand; the only age that understands [the] work is that which has not forgotten the social conditions environing [the] characters:" Thus, a novel tended to remove that which it centers upon from the larger picture of human experience and historical continuity:

Among the other reasons why the novel is both inartistic and impermanent is this--it is mere reporting. True the reporter creates his plots, incidents and characters, but that itself is a fault, putting the work on a plane distinctly inferior to that of history. Attention is not long engaged by what could, but did not, occur to individuals; and it is a canon of the trade that nothing is to go into the novel that might have occurred.

Because one must respect tradition and use history in judging ideas, to inaccurately "report" conditions and events of individuals (i.e., history), necessarily undermines man's ability to ascertain truth and
understanding.

Undaunted by conservative criticism of the utopian themes, several groups attempted to transfer these ideas into practical terms by constructing communities modeled after the popular novels. Several sprang up in Northern California between 1880 and 1900, and Bierce's criticism of these communes represents the second aspect of his anti-utopianism.

William Dean Howells' 1894 utopian novel, *A Traveller from Alturia*, inspired Mark West in Sonoma County; socialist Laurence Gronlund's *Cooperative Commonwealth* (1884) prompted the Kaweah Cooperative Commonwealth in Tulare County, and following the failure of Kaweah, the Evolution Club. Once these colonies began to be built, Bierce was quick to point out that the lessons of the past conclusively suggest eminent failure. For example, in assessing the faults and what he considered the certain demise of Kaweah and the Evolution Club, on March 10, 1895, in the San Francisco *Examiner*, Bierce wrote:

In the world's history there was never a period when their predecessors in folly were not hard at it, hailing with a diligent assiduity that self-same dawn... It is impossible to make it appear to the person unacquainted with history... that his is not a "transition period" big with changes of stupendous importance. He sees about him all the old, old ruck of solvent and formative forces, unbuilding and rebuilding, destroying today the work of yesterday, only to set it up again to-morrow, and he thinks, poor fool, all this is something new under the sun.

As history has demonstrated, "Bellamyland" was impossible because man's nature and subsequent social system are largely competitive and not cooperative.
Two months following the March column, Bierce used another argument in support of his claim that the utopian cooperatives were doomed from conception because they relied too heavily on cooperation among their members:

In short, the golden dreams of these amiable asses is in process of dispulsion in the regular, legitimate and immemorial way. They are going to the worms, just as I told them they would. Again, and for the ten thousandth time, competition and force are shown to be the only possible foundations of social stability. The weaker must go to the wall--that is the law of Evolution; and under no conditions can it be repealed or suspended. Make your social machinery what you will, those whom it is designed to protect will not gain control of it; set up such a political system as you can; it is ever the strong that will seize and direct it--mainly to their own advantage.31

Here, Bierce refers to "the law of Evolution," and in doing so, he grounds his argument in nature, the second principle of conservatism in Anthony Quinton's study:

The second principle is that of organicism, which takes society to be a unitary, natural growth, an organized living whole, not a mechanical aggregate. It is not composed of bare abstract individuals but of social beings, related to one another within a texture of inherited customs and institutions which endow them with their specific social nature. The institutions of society are thus not external, disposable devices, of interest to men only by reason of the individual purposes they serve; they are rather, constitutive of the social identity of men.32

Within the second principle of organicism there are two points to consider; and, though they are interrelated, they are largely distinct. The first point asserts that society should be considered as a "natural growth, an organized living whole;" the second point avers that within
and a part of the growth, are individuals who are not "abstract individuals, but social beings." The first is concerned with viewing the state as a "living whole;" the second stresses the component, or an individual's relationship to that whole--the community.

In various ways, the two ideas emphasized in organicism have been traditional concerns for many Americans. To view man's society as something similar to that which can be found in the natural world, like a plant or tree, is an ancient idea that surfaced in the philosophy of Aristotle, the Stoics, and in more recent political theory as well. It found expression during the Enlightenment, and as Maurice Mendelbaum has observed, "it tended to dominate all of nineteenth century thought." The organic analogy was used often by Burke, and it gained wider acceptance in the United States during the late 1800s due to the interest in, and eventual incorporation of, Darwinism. To view the origin and development of the species, including man, as having slowly evolved, largely appealed to the conservative mind, and this view in turn tended to validate the organic view of society. But neither Bierce nor Burke used the notion in an ideal or philosophic way. As with the principle of Traditionalism, the organic analogy was simply a practical means of considering society and man's relationship to his community.

That all men have their own identity and an inclination toward preserving that individuality is one of the most cherished values in American culture. Whether derived from Protestant individualism, the frontier heritage, Darwinian biology, or the competitive nature of capitalism, there has always been a premium placed on individualism in
American thought. To a large extent Ambrose Bierce shared this reverence for the self-reliant man. He was privately proud of his rise from boyhood poverty in the outer-reaches of Ohio to successful journalist and prose writer. Similar to the ancient Stoics who had admired self-sufficiency, Bierce wrote, "If a man have a broad foot, a staunch leg, a strong spine, and a talent for equilibrium, there is no good reason why he should not stand alone... A mind that is right side up does not need to lean on others: it is sufficient unto itself. The curse of our civilization is that the 'association' is become the unit, and the individual is merged into the mass."

Reflecting the growing concern of many of his generation, Bierce had become alarmed over the swelling immigrant population and the vanishing American frontier during the late 1800s. There was a sense of uncertainty about the fate of the self in an era of American history when demands for social needs seemed to overshadow those of the individual. But Bierce was equally troubled by what he called the "liberty-drunk rabble" which had created the social unrest of the 1870s and 90s. To Bierce, those who parroted "such meaningless abstractions as 'liberty and equality'" were threatening the rights of others. He argued that these rights had gradually evolved through traditions within "the social system, which is the slow outgrowth of human nature--of all human nature's good and bad--which has its roots in the veritable 'sense and substance of things'."

While Bierce's sense of individualism has been noted by at least one biographer, there are many instances where he expressed a more narrow interpretation of individual prerogatives in relation to the
needs of the "social system." Individualism was important, but not at
the expense of the community. As Quinton's principle stresses, society
"is not composed of bare abstract individuals but of social beings" and
this is what Edmund Burke was alluding to when he argued "abstract
liberty, like other mere abstractions, is not to be found." Bierce
echoed the great parliamentarian when he wrote in the Examiner on
December 17, 1893:

... Liberty is of slight efficacy in disarming
the lunatic brandishing a bomb. Liberty,
indeed! The murderous wretch loves it a deal
better than we, and wants more of it. Liberty!--
one almost sickens of the word, so quick and
glib it is on every lip--so destitute of sense!
There is no such thing as liberty. If you ask
me, "Do you favor liberty?" I reply, "Liberty
for whom to do what?" Abstract liberty is
unthinkable.

Many of Bierce's authoritarian-like judgments were motivated by
the social turmoil of the era, yet he expressed similar views as
timeless truths. He contended for example that "Jefferson's dictum that
governments are instituted among men to secure them in 'life, liberty,
and the pursuit of happiness' is luminous nonsense. Governments are not
instituted: They grow." To hold that governments "grow" confirms
Bierce held an organic conception of the state, but of equal importance
here is his contention that "governments are not instituted." This
suggests that like Burke, Bierce opposed the liberal notion of contract
theory.

Contractualists argued governments were instituted by arrangements
or contracts by popular consent. Men consented to be governed for
purposes of preserving their individual "natural rights" held prior to
the state, and for purposes of securing additional rights as well.
Contrary to this idea, Bierce felt that man and society had always existed, naturally or organically. Man is a social being who had always recognized the importance of government for securing the means of his development by providing security and organization based on law. This view is expressed by the narrator in one of Bierce's short stories entitled, *The Stranger*. "A man is like a tree: in a forest of his fellows he will grow straight as his generic and individual nature permits; alone in the open, he yields to the deforming stresses and tortions which environ him." Bierce observed, "Society is then essential to man, and has remained so from the beginning of his existence.

Although Bierce was a humanist who necessarily held conservative views of man and those institutions he devised, many of his ideas were premised on an overriding concern for mankind. In one of his last published essays, "Nature as Reformer," Bierce observed, "No it is not a good world, but neither is it so bad as it seems to a delinquent attention, or one unduly concerned with a single detail, the fate of the individual. The whole is superior to its parts: What should engage our chief interest is not men, but Man." This priority of community over the individual is reiterated by Bierce in a private letter written to friend and poet, George Sterling. Bierce implores Sterling to view "The individual man as nothing, as a single star is nothing. If this earth were to take fire you would smile to think how little it mattered in the scheme of the universe." Along with the view that man's sense of individuality was secondary to the needs of the community, Bierce, as did Burke, took the Stoic and Calvinist position that man, as necessarily a social being who
enjoyed the benefits the state provides, had social obligations or duties toward that fundamental institution which permitted him to realize his true nature. The rewards derived from doing one's duty, as well as the penalties for neglecting it, are explored by Bierce in the short story, "Haita The Shepard". Because of its explicit philosophical nature and simplicity, this short story is entirely uncharacteristic of Bierce's literature. It is, however, representative of a didactic tale emphasizing duty. Defined as "emotionalized arguments, in which the details of the plot, character, and setting are simply devices for enforcing a unifying dialectic", the didactic tale is a literary device intended to persuade the reader of a particular message. The thesis of Haita reflects Bierce's belief that one should not allow the pursuit of abstract notions of happiness to dominate one's life. Rather, happiness will come to those who are "truthful and dutiful," often without realizing it.

The story focuses on the simple life of a shepherd boy who is happy with what little he possesses, both materially and intellectually. Though "happiness may come if not sought, but if looked for will never come," Haita becomes preoccupied with understanding his condition through "more abstraction," and begins to neglect his duties. "He relaxed his vigilance" and many sheep are "lost" or "become lean and ill." But when a god-like vision appears before the startled boy, she implores Haita to be "truthful and dutiful," and if done, "I will abide with thee." Eventually, he is rewarded by the return of happiness, "'Because,' she said, 'thou didst thy duty by the flock' . . . ."

Ambrose Bierce sought to balance man's obligation to himself as an
individual along with the requirements of the community which he needs equally. This was made clear when Bierce, despite the pervasive individualism of his era, called for state-provided work programs for the unemployed, progressive taxation, and some reduction in privately-held property. This sense of community and provision for its continuation are the basis by which Bierce could argue sincerely, though with certainty of criticism by the more prevalent laissez faire conservatives of his era: "I am something of a socialist myself; most of the best features of our present system are purely socialist, and the trend of events is toward their extension." Reiterating this claim, he wrote, "The slave-owner has an interest in the life and health of his slave, as of his horse. Unhappily, the wage-payer has seldom an interest in the life and health of his employee. But the community's interest for the life and health of all wage-workers is deep, direct and continuous--an interest which hitherto it has stupidly refused to promote." Like Edmund Burke, who thought society should provide "ordered liberty," Ambrose Bierce called limitations of individual rights, "rational liberty," and was significantly opposed to what John Diggins has called "the first Right in history to turn against the constructive powers of the state." Though Bierce was able to approximate a balance between societal and individual needs, or in the words of Burke, "That which is good for the community and good for every individual in it," the by-words of social-darwinism occasionally surfaced in Bierce's journalism. Along with Spencer and Sumner, and their notion of "the survival of the fittest," Bierce thought "the
weaker must go to the wall—that's the law of Evolution . . ."\(^5\) In his short essay, "Nature as a Reformer," Bierce contended, "through all her works and ways 'one increasing purpose runs'; to 'weed out' the incompetent, the unthrifty, and alas! the luckless—all the 'unfit'."

While Bierce quotes the catch-words of the Social Darwinists, personally he was too much a humanitarian of a sort to fully embrace Herbert Spencer's adaptation of Darwinian biology to human existence. This school had become, Bierce thought, too convenient for those who would counter all demands for much needed regulation of business and some redistribution of wealth through taxation. Bierce also rejected Spencer's Doctrine of Progress, which was contrary to his own conception of organicism.

To consider man's social system as a "unitary, natural growth, an organized living whole" is the second component of organicism. Though this aspect of organicism emphasizes growth, which signals a higher, better, progressively developing connotation, this is not necessarily the case. For Burke, Bierce, and even Darwin, evolution or growth merely means change, not the notion that man was slowly but steadily developing into a higher being. This was an interpretation of Darwin's theory that Herbert Spencer proffered later in an essay entitled, "Progress: Its Law and Cause." Though progressive development was exceedingly slow, according to Spencer, it was nonetheless certain.

Although Bierce commonly used Spencer's terms in support of his own traditional idea of organicism, he explicitly rejected Spencer's notion of progress: "He who in view of this amazing folly can believe in a constant, even slow, progress of the human race toward perfection
ought to be happy. He has a mind whose Olympian heights are inaccessible—the Titans of fact can never scale them to storm its ancient, solitary reign. While Burke had rejected the idea of progressive development prior to the observations of Darwin, Darwin had not intended to suggest that to evolve meant to progress toward a higher state either. This was a false interpretation of Darwin's having thought of the evolution of new species as something comparable to a great branching tree, or as he put it, "the great tree life." As Maurice Mendelbaum suggests in History, Man, and Reason, it is more accurate to view Darwin's conception of the evolutionary process "as having been like the spread of ground cover from a single original plant, which had sent shoots in all directions, some shoots having taken new root, others having withered and died, and some others barely surviving." This interpretation is identical to Bierce's organic conception of evolution. In "Ashes of The Beacon" Bierce wrote, "The brief and imperfect record which we call History is like that traveling vine of India which, taking new root as it advances, decays at one end while it grows at the other, and so is constantly perishing . . ." Bierce follows Darwin's view closely, which he bases on the instruction gained by a conservative interpretation of the "record which we call History." For Bierce, history was largely cyclical, and as such, progressive development unlikely. This interpretation is restated in a letter to George Sterling:

I think "the present system" is not "frightful." It is all right—a natural outgrowth of human needs, limitations and capacities, instinct with possibilities of growth in goodness, elastic, and progressively better. 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. If this earth were to take fire you would smile to think how little it mattered in the scheme of the universe; all the wailing of the egoist mob would not affect you. Then why do you squirm at the minute catastrophe of a few thousand or millions of pimeires crushed under the wheels of an evolution. Must the new heavens and the new earth of prophecy and science come in your little instant of life in order that you may not go howling and damning with Jack London up and down the earth that we happen to have? Nay, Nay, read history to get the long, large view to learn to think in centuries and cycles.

This note reaffirms Bierce’s view of a world which had not progressed, as history demonstrates a cyclical process rather than a developmental one. It also alludes to a force, or the notion of a determined world similar to the Stoic conception of a universal community or organism. This Bierce called "the scheme of the universe."

There can be little doubt that Bierce was influenced by the later Stoics. Several critics have made passing references to his Stoic nature and Lawrence Berkove has elaborated this theme. As suggested earlier, Bierce mentioned the Stoics while advising friends to read "the ancients: Plato, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, and the lot—custodians of most of what is worth knowing." One could learn "from Epictetus how to be a worthy guest at the table of the Gods . . ." Elsewhere, Bierce held, "The virtues of Socrates, the wisdom of Aristotle, the examples of Marcus Aurelius and Jesus Christ are enough to engage my admiration and rebuke my life." And in consoling a troubled friend, Bierce wrote this letter in 1899:
When I’m in trouble and distress I read Epictetus, and can recommend that plan to you. It does not cure, but it helps one’s endurance of the ill. I go to Epictetus with my mental malady—and misfortunes themselves are nothing except in so far as they affect us mentally. For we of our class do not suffer hunger and cold, and the like, from our failures and mischances—only dejection. And dejection is unreasonable."\(^{63}\)

Unlike the Darwinian concept of man which stressed a disordered evolution having resulted in chance developments and countless failures and successes as species struggled to exist by adapting themselves to a harsh environment that in turn shaped their nature, Bierce held the Stoic conception of a "scheme of the universe" which he implored George Sterling to adopt. For the Stoics there was design and order in the world that was fundamental to its operation, which in turn largely determined man’s world. An example of this determinism is found in Bierce’s short story, "One of the Missing."

. . . but it was decreed from the beginning of time that Private Searing was not to murder anybody that bright summer morning, nor was the Confederate retreat to be announced by him. For countless ages events had been so matching themselves together in that wondrous mosaic to some parts of which, dimly discernable, we give the name of history, that the acts which he had in will would have marred the harmony of the pattern . . . [but] nothing had been neglected—at every step in the progress of both of these men’s lives, and in the lives of their contemporaries and ancestors, the right thing had been done to bring about the desired result.

That man’s course "was decreed from the beginning of time" is a common thread to several of Bierce’s short stories. What he called "The immutable law underlying coincidence" was determined by "forces" throughout the universe, not by divine decree.\(^{64}\) His was a pre-
Christian, yet spiritually-controlled, organically-derived Stoic universe. The notion of a God was simply "a proposition that the wise are neither concerned to deny nor hot to affirm." But what is crucial to his brand of determinism, or in his words, those "occurrence[s] due to the action of immutable natural laws," is to understand the source of Bierce's determinism was spiritual and uppermost, largely beyond man's natural and immediate environment. Consequently, the basis of many of Bierce's views were not, as recent research has concluded, founded solely upon "an empirical turn of mind" and "the scientist's Nature." Nor was the source of his determinism "precisely the secular one held by the naturalists." Rather, it hinged on "forces" which shaped "the scheme of the universe." To make this point clear is crucial to Bierce's conservative thought. Because, to hold that the course of human events is controlled by one's environment, suggests that ultimately man can alter that environment and his condition. Conservatives, conversely, argue that man's existence is fixed by virtue of his determined world which is spiritually directed by God or, in Bierce's case, the Stoic conception of the universe. To illustrate this point there are numerous instances in Bierce's writings which call into question the conclusions reached by the studies cited above.

To be sure, Bierce did possess a unique ability to observe that which was unfolding around him. The attention he gave to the most intricate detail in his short stories, which is crucial to the literary form, has received wide recognition. His ability to characterize and comment on daily events was equally important to his primary trade of
journalism as well. But to conclude that Bierce "prided himself on an empirical turn of mind and accordingly founded his conclusions about life solely upon his observations of it," and that Bierce felt "that natural causes can afford sufficient explanation of phenomena and can probably afford a final explanation as well," is wholly untenable. For Bierce, the "scientist's nature" provided man with tools of insight which could be used for his benefit. This was welcomed by Bierce, especially in "an age of unreason," as he described it, where, fortunately and objectively, "stands science, inaccessible to its malign influence and ineffectable by the tumult." But, as M. E. Grenander has perceptively observed, "Bierce's views on science may be summarized as a conservative reluctance to embrace it unthinkingly on faith." In support of this she cites Bierce's definitions of Gravitation, Molecule, Zoology, and this dialogue from Epigrams:

"Whose dead body is that?"
"Credulity's."
"By whom was he slain?"
"Credulity."
"Ah, suicide."
"No, surfeit. He dined at the table of Science, and swallowed all that was set before him."

In the letter written to George Sterling cited above, Bierce criticized "the new earth of prophecy and science" because he thought the empirical, or that upon which all scientific inquiry and conclusion is based, could not offer absolute answers. As for the conclusions, reached by comparatively recent research alleging "that natural causes can [for Bierce] afford a sufficient explanation of phenomenon and can probably afford a final explanation as well" Bierce would have responded:
Probability? Nothing is so improbable as what is true. It is the unexpected that occurs; but that is not saying enough; it is also the unlikely—one might almost say the impossible.\textsuperscript{72}

Indeed, dozens of his short stories turn on the unlikely, the mysterious, and, as he put it "The unfailing signs of the supernatural."\textsuperscript{73} Accordingly, Bierce's literature has been described as impressionistic and quite apart from the literature of naturalism and realism which pervaded the American scene in the late 1800s. The impressionists held that a verifiable description of reality is relative because "reality" is only that which man perceives, or frequently, misperceives.\textsuperscript{74} The empirical or the natural world is only part of that which man experiences and influences his life, as several selections from The Devil's Dictionary, amply affirm:

- **White**, adj. Black.
- **Actually**, adj. Perhaps; possibly.
- **Reality**, n. The dream of a mad philosopher.
- **Positivism**, n. A philosophy that denies our knowledge of the Real and affirms our ignorance of the Apparent.

As previously noted, it has been observed that Bierce's "brand of determinism was precisely the secular one held by the naturalists: he believed that all human events were necessarily controlled by ancestry and environment."\textsuperscript{75} This conclusion is only half right, and it is important to Bierce's political thought to make this clear also.

Having questioned the validity of the scientific methods of empiricism and positivism, Bierce necessarily objected to the basis upon which the literacy movement was based. He thought the artistic quality
of naturalism had all the charm "of depicting nature as it is seen by toads," but more importantly, Bierce was repelled by the emphasis the naturalists placed upon science and the determinism of the natural world. For example, when criticizing the literary medium through which naturalism was conveyed--the novel--Bierce argued the naturalistic novelist "has not a speaking acquaintance with Nature (by which he means, in a vague general way, the vegetable kingdom) and can no more find Her secret meaning in her deeds than he can discern and expound the immutable law underlying coincidence." Additionaly, unlike Bierce, Emile Zola, who has long been considered the "fountainhead of naturalism" and a key "source of naturalistic theory," eagerly anticipated the role of science in the new literature:

The idea of a new art based on science, in opposition to the art of the old world that was based on imagination, an art that should explain all things and embrace modern life in its entirety, in its endless ramifications, be, as it were, a new creed in a new civilization, filled me with wonder, and I stood dumb before the vastness of the conception, and the towering height of the ambition.78

Ambrose Bierce was squarely set against "an art that should explain all things," because all things were often beyond explanation. He was dead set against the "new art based on science, in opposition to the art of the old world that was based on imagination," because, according to Bierce, "the first three essentials of literary art are imagination, imagination, and imagination."79 Moreover, as Charles Walcott has concluded, naturalism is founded upon "the conviction that scientific knowledge can release man from superstition, from fear, from the tyranny of tradition, from physical ailments, and from poverty--
release him into an era of personal enrichment and fulfillment beyond anything the world has seen." Bierce held firmly to tradition and that which history has revealed. Furthermore, he refused to consider the naturalistic "conviction that scientific knowledge could release man from superstition and fear," because these emotions were hereditarily ingrained in men. The largely fixed nature of mankind through heredity, combined with the metaphysical notion of "the scheme of the universe" is the source of Bierce's determinism, not through experience and environment—the source for the naturalists. This was reiterated by Bierce when he made his position clear during the great nature versus nurture debate which dominated late nineteenth century discourse:

The phenomena of heredity seem to me to have been inattentively noted, its laws imperfectly understood, even by Herbert Spencer and the prophets. My own small study of this amazing field convinces me that man is the sum of his ancestors; that his character, moral and intellectual, is determined before his birth. His environment with all its varied suasion, 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.

Bierce felt so strongly about hereditarily-transmitted traits that the notion is mentioned in numerous short stories, including, "Beyond the Wall," "One of Twins," "John Bartine's Watch," "The Death of Halpin Frayser," "The Secret of Macarger's Gulch," and "A Watcher by the Dead." The hereditarians agreed that human nature was fixed from birth and as a result, they denied liberal arguments which held man's existence to be dependent upon environmental influences which could be changed. Supporting this notion, in his column dated June 20, 1895, Bierce
argued, "There are certain of the poor—including the habitual criminal
class—with whom unthrift is hereditary and incurable. They are deaf
alike to the admonitions of experiences and the invitations of hope." This same argument is made dozens of times by Bierce in his journalism
and literature because ultimately, to hold that man's nature was
determined by environment, as did the naturalists, was to leave oneself
vulnerable to those who held man's nature was not rigidly determined at
all. But through education, social programs, and extended government
efforts to uplift society by altering the social environment, one could
change man's existence. It is this notion that conservatives have
opposed for centuries.

Bierce considered man's existence as one largely determined by the
forces of the universe. He also emphasized the constancy of man's
nature. This does not, however, preclude all exercise of choice or free
will, because to hold otherwise, is to conclude man is ultimately
unaccountable for his actions. Bierce alludes to this dilemma of
determinism in his volume of Epigrams: "If Man knew his insignificance
in the scheme of things he would not think it worth while to rise from
barbarity to enlightenment. But it is only through enlightenment he can
know." Man could affect some will over the forces that govern his
world and nature through enlightenment, or his ability to reason. But
man's powers of reason are highly suspect, especially when applied to
the complicated affairs of state. This view is consistent with the
third and final principle of conservatism:

The third principle is that of political
skepticism, the belief that political wisdom,
the kind of knowledge that is needed for the
successful management of human affairs, is not
to be found in the theoretical speculation of isolated thinkers but is the historically accumulated social experience of the community as a whole. It is embodied, above all, in the deposit of traditional customs and institutions that have survived and become established and also in those people who, in one way or another, have acquired extensive practical experience of politics. A society is something altogether too complex to lend itself to theoretical simplification. The knowledge that is required to maintain it successfully is at once dispersed among men, often more or less inarticulate in its possessors and principally incarnated in objective and impersonal social forms.

To be skeptical of new political ideas because doubtful of the political wisdom of those who construct and advise them, is primarily an interpretation of human nature, and central to Quinton's study, *The Politics of Imperfection*:

The main point I want to make about the theoretical interpretation of conservatism is, then, that in both its forms, religious and secular, it rests on a belief in the imperfection of human nature. This imperfection is both intellectual and moral . . . But of the two imperfections it is the intellectual one that is specifically emphasized by conservatism.

Bierce's emphasis on man's "moral imperfection," as Quinton calls it, has been seen throughout this study. This was especially true of his journalism. But as Quinton observed above, man's imperfect nature "is both intellectual and moral" though "it is the intellectual one that is specifically emphasized by conservatism." Bierce repeatedly stressed both sides of man's imperfect nature. In the short essay, "Industrial Discontent," he suggested that Americans lacked "virtue and intelligence" because they were unable to "put wise and good men into power." He suggested further, "... we are unfit to be citizens of
a republic, undeserving of peace, prosperity and liberty, and have no right to rise against conditions due to our moral and intellectual delinquency." While it is clear Bierce emphasized man's moral delinquency through his journalism, he illustrated man's "intellectual delinquency" primarily through his short stories.

Within the lengthy description of political skepticism, Quinton emphasized, "Political wisdom . . . is above all, in the deposit of traditional customs and institutions . . ." Accordingly, Bierce urged his readers to "try to keep henceforth, a little closer to the ancient landmarks of reason and common sense. Political wisdom was not born on the fourth of July, 1776. It is older than that."88 Like all other philosophical conservatives, Bierce thought sound political judgement was unlikely to be exercised by average men. Rather, it is product of a collective (organic), gradual and continued (tradition) process. Political decisions must be based in accordance with the ancient concept of "right reason," or as Bierce advised a friend, "to feel rightly, one must think and know rightly."89 But, as several epigrams point out, such thinking is difficult to attain:

Logic, n. The art of thinking and reasoning in strict accordance with the limitations and incapacities of the human misunderstanding.

Rational, adj. Devoid of all delusions save those of observation, experience, and reflection.

Reason, v.i. To weigh probabilities in the scale of desire.

Reason, n. Propensity of prejudice.

The conservative notion of "right reason" is of ancient origins, developed cumulatively from classicism, Stoicism, and Medieval
The idea that sound political judgment was unlikely to derive from the mind of the average man has always appealed to conservatives. A century before Bierce's time, Burke spoke for the conservatives of his generation by holding: "We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small . . ." Bierce felt the same way, but characteristically expressed the view in stronger terms:

Yet certain philosophers hold that the human race--at least the male half of it--is manifestly guided by the light of reason; that it can climb to the bright upward and eminence of thought, and, overlooking the surprising fogs that freak the underworld of prejudice and feeling, discern the true lay of the land. There are those, in short, who believe that the human intellect, obviously superior to that of a cow, is equal to that of a machine for making nails. May the good lord deliver them from that error, for assuredly observation and experience will not.

Burke argued that man's stock of reason is small in countering the claims of those who, during "the age of reason" or enlightenment, had celebrated the uniqueness of potential of human intellect. This was sufficient, they argued, to permit most men to participate in more liberal, popular political institutions. Burke led the "counter-enlightenment," or what Louis Hartz called the "reactionary-enlightenment," which moved beyond his generation and into the nineteenth century as well.

Spurred by the progressive implication of Darwin's theory, several studies suggested man's ability to reason was improving due to evolving sensory perception and human understanding. These notions were opposed by conservatives whose views represented a counter movement.
during the latter half of the 1800s. In what Maurice Mendelbaum in
*History, Man, and Reason* has described as "the rebellion against
reason," there developed a school of thought that emphasized the limits
of man's reason due to faulty sensory perception and the manner in which
the mind organizes that which it is presented and stored. It is upon
this notion that a good share of Bierce's literature rests.

Though literary studies vary on the classification of the nearly
one-hundred short stories written by Bierce, a few have pointed out that
some of his finest examine the effects of sensory perception, heredity,
intuition, instinct, feeling, and language, and on behavior that is
ultimately determined by the mind. In a typical story of this kind,
Bierce places a protagonist alone in an empty building or forest where a
variety of stimuli conspire to direct events that often result in sudden
death. Man's decision making processes are so encumbered by illusion,
superstition, and emotions of fear, he cannot possibly overcome, Bierce
wrote, "so monstrous an alliance." The subject is often a reasonable
and intelligent professional struggling to maintain composure and
rationality during crisis. As the story unfolds, these pretenses are
removed during the struggle as the narrator reveals the universal
intellectual inadequacies of all men. While there are dozens of
Bierce's stories that explore the limitations of the mind, three are
especially representative, "The Damned Thing"; "A Tough Tussle"; and
"The Man and the Snake."

"The Damned Thing" begins with the narrator establishing the
nature and surroundings of a coroner's inquest. The coroner is a man
"of the world, worldly, albeit there was that in his attire which
attested a certain fellowship with the organisms of his environment".
The proceedings, taking place in the deceased's secluded cabin, were
momentarily interrupted by a young reporter, William Harker, who had
been with Hugh Morgan the afternoon of his unusual demise. The coroner
resumes the inquiry by asking the late arrival about his role:

"How did this happen--your presence I mean?"
"I was visiting him at this place to shoot and fish.
A part of my purpose, however, was to study him and
his odd, solitary way of life. He seemed a good model
for a character in fiction. I sometime write
stories."
"I sometimes read them."
"Thank you."
"Stories in general--not yours."

As the amateur writer recounts the events of that "unaccountable
phenomenon," he observes: "We so rely upon the orderly operation of
familiar natural laws that any suspension of them is noted as a menace
to our safety, a warning of unthinkable calamity." The "warning" was
the sound of something approaching the men as they stumbled through the
dense brush. The pair suddenly heard, but could not see, "some animal
thrashing about in the bushes." Morgan, who "had a reputation for
exceptional coolness, even in moments of sudden and imminent peril",
knew "That Damned Thing" had returned, and feared for his life. Harker
having not previously experienced the phenomenon, and more importantly,
unable to see the "thing", Harker didn't reason rightly, and was "unable
to recall any sense of fear." Though fear he should: "I could
hardly credit my senses when I saw him suddenly throw his gun to his
shoulder and fire both barrels at the agitated grain!" Before the smoke
cleared, Morgan lay dead.

William Harker's account of Morgan's death is corroborated by the
deceased diary, of which "certain interesting entries having, possibly, a scientific value . . ." In Morgan's last entry, which concludes the story, the perpetrator is revealed, as is the underlying message of the story:

"As with sounds, so with colors. At each end of the solar spectrum the chemist can detect the presence of what are known as 'active' rays. They represent colors--integral colors in the composition of light--which we are unable to discern. The human eye is an imperfect instrument; its range is but a few octaves of the real 'chromatic scale'. I am not mad; there are colors that we cannot see."

"And, God help me! The Damned Thing is of such a color!"

In "A Tough Tussle," like most of Bierce's stories, a narrator describes the surroundings in which the protagonist finds himself. "One night in the autumn of 1861," he begins, "a man sat alone in the heart of a forest in western Virginia. The region was one of the wildest on the continent--the Cheat Mountain country." Second-Lieutenant Brainerd Byring was on guard duty in "a quiet enough spot," though the rest of his company wasn't too distant. A "brave and efficient" union soldier, Byring was also "a brave and intelligent man." But soon, all alone in "The heart of the forest" he begins "philosophizing" about those who lay dead among the trees and brush surrounding him. "He felt toward them a kind of reasonless antipathy that has something more than the physical and spiritual repugnance to us all." The narrator suggests this was a "feeling" due to "acute sensibilities."

Having taken his duty seriously, Byring "seated himself on a log, and with senses all alert began his vigil," while searching for any "visible" sign of the enemy. In doing so, Byring came across a dead
confederate soldier. "He saw that it was a dead body" and the
unmistakable certainty of the man being dead gave the guard "a sense of
relief." But soon, an "indefinable feeling" overcomes the Lieutenant.
"It was not fear but rather a sense of the super-natural in which he did
not at all believe." In an effort to forestall a runaway imagination,
the intelligent and brave officer attempts to analyze the source of
man's aversion to a dead body:

"I have inherited it," he said to himself.
"I suppose it will require a thousand ages--
perhaps ten thousand--for humanity to outgrow
this feeling. When did it originate? A way
back, probably, in what is called the cradle of
the human race--the plains of Central Asia.
What we inherit as a superstition our barbarous
ancestors must have held as a reasonable
conviction. Doubtless, they believed themselves
justified by facts whose nature we cannot even
conjecture in thinking a dead body a malign
thing endowed with some strange power of
mischief, with perhaps a will and a purpose to
exert it."

Soon Byring's eye fell again upon the corpse. This sets in motion
thoughts that influence his senses. Unlike the previous story where the
protagonist could not see the danger and behaves unmindful, and
therefore, un-fearful of that which he should greatly fear, this story
is premised on the opposite. Byring's mind having been influenced with
inherited notions, influences the senses which in turn affirms the
superstition. Soon he hears things and then, "One sole conviction now
had the man in possession: the body had moved . . . The horrible thing
was visibly moving!" A struggle ensues and later he is found dead.
"The officer had died of a sword-thrust through the heart." He had
killed himself with his own sword.

Finally, in "The Man and the Snake," Bierce combines man's
unreliable senses with intellectual imperfection that governs behavior resulting once again in abrupt death. The central character in this story is Harker Brayton, "a man of thought," "a scholar, idler and something of an athlete," who was invited to stay at the home of the "distinguished scientist," Dr. Druring:

It was here that the doctor indulged the scientific side of his nature in the study of such forms of animal life as engaged his interest and comforted his taste—which, it must be confessed, ran rather to the lower types. For one of the higher nimbly and sweetly to recommend itself unto his gentle senses it had at least to retain certain rudimentary characteristics allying it to such "dragons of the prime" as toads and snakes.

Dr. Druring collected exotic snakes in a remote wing of the house he called his "Snakery". A taxidermed variety had somehow been placed under the bed of Harker Brayton which initiates a sequence of events leading to his demise. While reading late that night, "he saw, in the shadow under his bed, two small points of light, apparently about an inch apart. They may have been reflections of the gas jet above him, in metal nail heads; he gave them but little thought and resumed his reading." Soon they "seemed to have become brighter than before" and Brayton found "The eyes were no longer merely luminous points; they looked into his own with a meaning, a malign significance." His senses initiate age old superstitions about snakes. His mind precipitates feeling and fear as "The snake's eyes burned with a more pitiless malevolence than before." Senses and the imagination of the mind conspire to prompt actions resulting in death:

The thoughts shaped themselves with greater or less definition in Brayton's mind and begot action. The process is what we call
consideration and decision. It is thus that we are wise and unwise. It is thus that the withered leaf in an autumn breeze shows greater or less intelligence than its fellows, falling upon the land or upon the lake. The secret of human action is an open one; something contracts our muscles. Does it matter if we give to the preparatory molecular changes the name of will?

The story concludes with the two other occupants discovering poor Brayton. "'Died in a fit', said the scientist, bending his knee and placing his hand upon the heart." Here Bierce makes fun of the "distinguished scientist's" unscientific conclusion, while alluding to the nature of the incident as that of heartfelt emotions having won over the intellect. While these stories amply illustrate Bierce's political skepticism based on man's intellectual imperfection, certain passages of the last two allude to another aspect of his conservative thought—the will of man.

While man's nature is mostly determined by the forces of the universe, and his ability to reason is severely hampered by faulty sense perception, superstition, and hereditary transmission of these imperfections, man has a measure of freedom through will. In the short story discussed above, "The Man and The Snake," Bierce wrote, "The secret of human action is an open one" given "the name of will." For Bierce, man had a small degree of latitude in directing the affairs of his life, which could be good or bad, and Bierce was fond of pointing out the bad. For example, in the short story cited above, "A Tough Tussle", Bierce observed there was among men, a "strange power of mischief, with perhaps a will and a purpose to exert it." While he continued to believe strongly in the Stoic pre-determined world, as he grew older, Bierce gave the notion of free-will more consideration:
Tolstoi, following a philosophy that had great vogue in the time of Mill . . . [thought man] moved in obedience to some blind impulse inscrutable to observation--just as a floating chip is pushed by invisible currents. I was once of that philosophy myself, but I now incline to the belief that in this world's affairs the Individual Will is of so controlling potency that in many cases it may profitably be counter-checked by a rope around the Individual throat.  

By acknowledging some sense of freedom in the lives of men, whether a negative or positive interpretation, Bierce was able to partly defuse what has been called the "Christian Paradox." This issue had become a major dilemma for Calvinists, for example, because ultimately, they could not preach salvation and morality in a world entirely determined by God's eternal plan. Without a modicum of freedom, men could not be held responsible for their actions because their behavior was not of their choosing. For conservative men like Ambrose Bierce and Edmund Burke, who were moralists, the significance of freedom of choice was as crucial to their thought as it was for the Calvinist theologian, Jonathan Edwards. To try and accommodate the inherently contradictory notions of freedom of will and God's pre-determined world, was the difficult goal of his monumental work, The Freedom of Will.

Bierce differed from Burke in this respect. Bierce was an atheist; Burke revered God. Burke appealed to both God's plan and the Stoic conception of the universe, where as Bierce held firm to the latter. But ultimately their notions of freedom of will were similar. As Paul Fussell has noted in, The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism: Ethics and Imagery from Swift to Burke, however degenerate man is, through free will, "man yet possesses the means for partial, if largely
secular, redemption." Fussell ends his chapter, The Redemptive Will," by observing that freedom of will, while often considered in a Christian context, can be thought of as deriving from the Christian and the secular:

All the way from Swift to Burke the humanist sense of absolute freedom of the will as the basis for ethics seems to oscillate between Christian and Stoical poles. But however close it moves to one pole or the other, the effect is largely the same.96

As with all other significant ideas or principles of conservatism, Bierce followed closely on the heels of Burke. Bierce’s notion of traditionalism was supported by the same "historical sense" used by the British statesman. Both were similarly critical of popular government because history had shown the average man was not able to conduct the complicated affairs of state. The lessons of the past had irrefutably shown governments to be frail devices that must be balanced but strong. Power corrupts both citizens and kings, and therefore, must be placed in the hands of the most capable administrators, but followed closely. Governments must move conservatively, while ruling firmly but humanely.

Bierce and Burke viewed man’s social environment as something akin to the plant world. Society was like a sprawling vine, advancing here, contracting there. Progress, to both men, was at best an ambivalent concept. In real terms, progress had eluded mankind because man’s measure of human happiness had not really increased. As the middle class grew, men became more independent, but this they thought, had given men the illusion of possessing more liberties and rights by falsely freeing them from responsibilities to the greater community—the community of man. Finally, though man’s nature is flawed both morally
and intellectually, he had some freedom to direct his affairs. The state could provide in time of need, but man must use "right reason" to provide for himself, and ultimately his community. Although Ambrose Bierce and Edmund Burke confronted different issues of differing centuries and place, in their search for answers and explanations, they significantly chose the same principles as the basis with which to view man, government, and the world around them.
Chapter III


2. Whether or not conservatism is a political philosophy or theory is a matter of some debate and somewhat of a paradox. That is, a theory of government which is highly skeptical of all political speculation seems self defeating.

3. See, for example, Paul Fatout, Ambrose Bierce, 75; Van Wyck Brooks, Emerson and Others, 55.


5. The moral basis of Bierce's ideas has been emphasized throughout this study and was, as mentioned, the central theme of McWilliams' biography. The moral foundation of Burke's view is mentioned in most studies. See, for example, Gerald W. Chapman, Edmund Burke: The Practical Imagination (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 194-210; Francis Canavan, Edmund Burke: Prescription and Providence (Durham: Carolina Academic Press 1987), Chapter Three; and especially, Charles Parkin, The Moral Basis of Burke's Political Thought (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968).

6. The apparent inconsistency of Bierce's views was noted by Paul Fatout in his biography of Bierce on pages: 58, 254, 274, 301, and 317. Fatout refers to Bierce as a "paradox" throughout these pages, as does Edmund Wilson in Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1962), 628-632. For Burke as paradoxical, or having apparently contradictory views, see George H. Nash, The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 170; Stephen J. Tonsor, "Disputed Heritage of Burke," National Review, 10 (June 17, 1961), 390; Burleigh Taylor Wilkins, The Problem of Burke's Political Philosophy (Oxford: Claredon Press, 967). For Burke as "reformer" see Brian R. Nelson, Western Political Thought (Englewood-Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982), 228. Bierce as reformer was basis of Chapter II of this study. For Burke as "fascist" see Clinton Rossiter, Conservatism in America, 18, and also, Gerald Chapman, Edmund Burke, 127, 138. Bierce as "fascist" see Edmund Wilson, Patriotic Gore, 678-632.

Quoted by Rod Preece, "On The Concept of Conservatism, Modern Age (Spring, 1982), 191.

Ibid.

Ibid., 192.


Ibid. 16.

Francis Canavan, Edmund Burke, 13.


Ibid., 41.

Ambrose Bierce, Argonaut, April 8, 1877.

Ambrose Bierce, Works, XI, 54.


29. Ibid., 37.


41. See, for example, M. E. Grenander, *Ambrose Bierce*, 33.


43. Bierce repeats this narrow view of liberty on many occasions. See, for example, *Examiner*, June 26, 1898; *Works*, XI, 24.


Ambrose Bierce, *Examiner*, date unknown.


Lawrence Berkove, "The Heart Has Its Reasons," 140. Edmund Burke was also very much influenced by the Stoics, especially Epictetus. See, for example, Peter V. Stanlis, Edmund Burke and The Natural Law (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1958), 187.


Ambrose Bierce, The Wasp, March 17, 1883.

Ambrose Bierce, The Devil's Dictionary, 17

As it was for Edmund Burke, see, for example, Peter J. Stanlis, Edmund Burke and The Natural Law (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1958). Bierce's determinism was the Stoic version which approximates the Christian, and as such, led Paul Fatout to erroneously attribute it solely to Calvinism. For discussion on similarities, see, for example, Otto Gierke, Natural Law and the Theory of Society (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 205-207; Brian R. Nelson, Western Political Thought (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1982), 72; George H. Sabine, A History of Political Theory (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1950), 159-161.


Lawrence Berkove, Ambrose Bierce's Concern With Mind and Man, 55-56.

Ambrose Bierce, Works, IX, 141.

Lawrence Berkove, Ambrose Bierce's Concern With Mind and Man, 56. My italics.

Ambrose Bierce, Works, X, 247.


ibid., 30.

Ambrose Bierce, Works, X, 245.

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Ibid., 13.


Although I am unsure of the precise date of this column, it was written for the *Examiner*, probably in the mid-1890s.

Bierce to Percival Pollard, July 29, 1911. Quoted in M. E. Grenander’s, "Bierce’s Turn of the Screw: Tales of Ironical Terror." *Western Humanities Review* 11 (Summer 1957), 260.


Ambrose Bierce, *Examiner*, November 6, 1892.

An account of these studies is offered in Richard Hofstadter’s *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (New York: George Braziller Inc., 1955), Chapter X.

All stories discussed in the foregoing are from, *The Complete Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce*. All italics in these stories are mine.

Ambrose Bierce, *Examiner*, June 28, 1894. This sentiment is repeated in *Works*, X, 163.
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