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Two Impossible Dreams: Ambrose Bierce On Utopia And America

By LAWRENCE I. BERKOVE

AMBROSE BIERCE'S REPUTATION as a short story writer and wit is now securely established; much less adequately appreciated are his accomplishments as a journalist and social critic. Almost totally overlooked is the fact that he spent approximately forty years of his life, from 1867 to 1909, in journalism. During the last twenty he was perhaps the only independent and certainly one of the most talented and influential of the journalists on the Hearst staff. Writing columns once or twice a week on topics which interested him, he became a social critic of impressive acumen. Over the years, he typically chose to be skeptical of the moods and fads of the times and earned the respect of his readers by not contenting himself with satirical blasts at his targets but by also arguing sensibly and effectively for his opinions. Those targets were many and varied but some obviously interested him more than others for he returned to them periodically. Of these, utopian thought was one of the most important. He was interested in and knowledgeable about utopian theory and familiar with several utopian experiments in California. Between 1888 and 1905 he wrote several prose satires that sum up his criticisms of utopian theories.¹ While it is possible to read these works as only cranky animadversions upon disliked political and social theories, they are of considerably greater significance. Utopian thought touched Bierce deeply; he regarded it as a paradigm of American principles and practices. His criticisms of it reflect not just his social opinions but also his views on American democracy and, even more basically, his fundamental philosophy of human nature.

One of Bierce's earliest contacts with a utopian experiment was the Kaweah Co-operative Commonwealth. It was begun in the late 1880s near Mt. Whitney in Tulare County, about 200 miles southeast of San Francisco in what is now Sequoia National Park. Kaweah was founded by Burnette G. Haskell and James J. Martin, West Coast labor leaders

¹Four such satires are to be found in Volume I of the *Collected Works*. They are *Ashes of the Beacon*; *The Land Beyond the Blow*; *For the Ahkoond*; and *John Smith, Liberator*. *The Land Beyond the Blow* is a collection and revision of at least ten short satires published in the *San Francisco Examiner* between 1888 and 1899. Bierce apparently conflated them for an original publication in the *Collected Works*. *Ashes of the Beacon* was first published in the *Examiner* on Feb. 26, 1905, and sub-titled "An Historical Monograph Written in 3940." Internal evidence dates a revision as occurring at least in 1907.

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who had been inspired by Laurence Gronlund's adaptation of Marxist theory to American conditions, *Co-operative Commonwealth*. But Kaweah was more eclectic than Marxist. It was not an ideological encampment but primarily a haven for fugitives from the competitive capitalist system. The strong influence of Bellamy in particular is evident in Haskell's tract "What Nationalism Is," published in 1889.² In it he affirmed two main beliefs: that human nature is not wicked and that evolution (i.e. Nature) will eventually kill competition and enforce cooperation. Nature, he wrote, was being temporarily thwarted by trusts and syndicates and Nature's ultimate rectification of its system would be violent unless man prevented a cataclysm by his forthwith adherence to Love and Science.

Kaweah's life was quite short. An account of its failure was published in the San Francisco *Examiner* of November 29, 1891.³ The article, written by Haskell himself, is an unusually full and frank explanation of what went wrong. Kaweah ran into opposition from lumber interests, newspapers, and the federal government, which was distrustful of the socialistic nature of the community and anxious to get control of the land which the settlers claimed. These factors certainly caused problems for the colony, but Haskell unambiguously placed the main blame for Kaweah's demise upon the settlers themselves. Bierce noticed the article. I cannot say whether or not it was the only such report he read, but when he finally responded to it, several years later, it is clear that he recollected it accurately. In the interval his ideas on utopia matured and it is likely that Haskell's account of the end of Kaweah, which is interesting in itself, influenced Bierce's thought.

Kaweah, according to Haskell, was founded upon the opinion that "the abolition of poverty . . . meant the happiness of the people. When answered, that 'human nature' itself was the gate that shut out heaven, we retorted, in our pride, that this selfish nature was but the product of conditions, and that when these were altered human disposition would change. We believed our species sufficiently civilized to change environment at once, readapt our selves without delay to new forces and conquer the subtle spell of heredity in one generation." Haskell found, however, that those who joined Kaweah could not conquer their little foibles, much less alter their dispositions. He found gossip, for example, more difficult to eradicate and more serious than he originally thought. "The tendency to gossip appears to be inherent in human nature and

²*Pacific Nationalist Tract No. 1*. A copy of this tract is in the Haskell Archive of the Bancroft Library of the University of California.

³The article was reprinted in *Out West*, XVII (Sept., 1902). For a more favorable view of Kaweah, see Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field* (Boston, 1939) rpt. (n.p.: Archon, 1969) 39-47.

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otherwise good people seem to take a delight in finding flaws in their neighbors." It grew so unbearable that he concluded that "these little pin-pricks were what killed the noble purpose and enthusiasm of the enterprise and slowly drained its life away." Haskell also noted that the colony's educational system was undermined by parents and students alike, who "removed from the restraints of the competitive world . . . were unable to distinguish between liberty and license."

There was near chaos in education and complete chaos in Kaweah's politics and business. Organized as a social democracy ruled only by the people, Kaweah emphasized the legislative function at the expense of the executive. An elected officer "had no power to compel obedience, and no remedy against insubordination except his own resignation." Haskell charged that almost every man who came to Kaweah considered himself the victim of a capitalist conspiracy in the outside world. If his expectations were not met at Kaweah he assumed he was still being victimized, "went to the General Meeting for redress, and generally got it." Haskell further complained that one meeting's decisions would ordinarily be rescinded at the next meeting, destroying purpose and stability. "In the outside world all of us had been mere citizens not charged with the management of affairs; here we were the State and running the machine ourselves. The conditions were entirely novel. To have managed them successfully we should have had a good supply of Caesars, Cromwells and Jeffersons; instead, we had the average man. The result was anarchy [*sic*] tempered by occasional streaks of despotism." Haskell continues with the details of the practical breakdown of the colony's effectiveness; how a ditch and water-powered mill were constructed so that water would not flow to them; how a sawmill with a daily capacity of 20,000 feet instead averaged a daily cut of 198 feet; and how three successive bookkeepers each used a different system of entry.

Haskell's narrative described the absolute failure of the Kaweah experiment, but not of the dream. But although he conceded that "we were not fit to survive and we died," he also believed, hoped, and trusted that Kaweah's mistakes would not be wasted and that future similar enterprises would benefit by them.

Bierce read the pathetic account of Kaweah's demise. Three years later, in the October 25, 1894 issue of the *Examiner*, he had occasion to refer to it while discussing another utopian experiment, Sonoma County's Mark West, which took its inspiration from William Dean Howells' 1894 utopian novel, *A Traveller from Altruria*.⁴ Bierce's comments are

⁴The colony was also known as "Altruria." For its history, see Robert V. Hine, *California's Utopian Colonies* (New Haven, 1966) Ch. 6. In the *Examiner* of Aug. 5, 1894, Bierce also was critical of yet another Utopian experiment, the year-old "Co-operative Brotherhood of Winters Island," located in Suisun Bay about 30 miles east of San Francisco. He tagged it "Altruria of the Sloughs." For its short, ill-fated career, see Hine, 142-4.

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worth quoting at length, for they bear not only upon Mark West and Kaweah, but upon the larger issue of utopia as well:

Of the amiable asses who have founded the "Altrurian" colony at Mark West it ought to be sufficient to explain that their scheme is based upon the intellectual diversions of such humorists as Plato, More, Fourier, Bellamy and Howells. That assures the ludicrous fizzle of the enterprise. To this evidence of doom, however, we have the added testimony of their official organ. "Cash," says this unearthly sheet, "is what we want to eliminate from the minds of men"—the initiation fee is fifty dollars. "Compensation for a reward must be wiped out. We want co-operation for a larger life, for a better development, and we cannot have that on a cash basis." It will be observed by those who attach meaning to words that this is the familiar jargon of the customary and ever recurrent fool who cometh up as a flower of reform, gorgeous, exuberant and ephemeral

If the Sonoma county Altrurians have read all they care to of Plato, More, Bellamy & Co., I hope they will find leisure to read Haskell—Burnette G. Haskell. This author's work is of uneven excellence; most of it belongs to the literature of "agitation," Mr. Haskell being, or having been, in his quiet mischievous way, a "leader" of the workingmen, and, like their other leaders, not himself greatly addicted to labor. His only literary work to which I would divert the altruist attention from devout but profitless contemplation of the altruist navel is his interesting and admirably written account of the Kaweah colony, of which himself was chief promoter. It appeared in this paper about three years ago—the exact date I am unable to give. It is a true story of a lot of earnest men and women who, tiring of "the established order of things," betook themselves, with all their beautiful faith in human goodness and their other belongings, to the most charming spot in all the world, and there, under conditions as favorable as they could have demanded, set up a reign of righteousness with a law of love. Co-operation was the word—every one was to do his share and do it without compulsion. Nobody was to be compelled even to do as he pleased.

Into the details of this ghastly folly and its predestined failure I do not propose to enter. Deprived of the stimulus of gain, inaccessible to the benign menace of competition and immune from the authority of law, these admirable persons addressed their powers and opportunities to the promotion and nurture of their indolence, their conceit, their rancor, their general selfishness and the other vices which it is chief service of the established order so to hold in restraint that their possessor is unaware of the extent of his possessions. Nobody would work. Everybody wanted to direct the work of the rest. Gossip and slander and all uncharitableness held high carnival. The fire of public spirit burnt itself out upon the altar of altruism, and from its ashes the Phoenix of egoism sprang in full plumage. When all was over at Kaweah, and Mr. Haskell had related it with pitiless candor, he made his moan as follows:

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And is there no remedy, then, for the evils that oppress the poor?
And is there no surety that the day is coming when justice and right
shall reign on earth?

Mr. Haskell's despair is a *non sequitur*: because disaster overtakes the incapables and impossibles of the "communities"—intellectual estrays and social gregarines—it does not follow that there is "no remedy for the evils that oppress the poor." Mr. Haskell would himself administer a remedy of limited efficacy if he would let the poor alone and go to work. And there is a greater—slow in its effects and of precarious continuity as a remedy, but offering, withal, that "larger hope" which under another name was "faintly trusted" by the author of *In Memoriam*. While awaiting the completed work of this great specific the poor, and the rich too, can seek temporary relief and desultory consolation in the prospect of death.

In this article we can identify some of Bierce's main objections to utopian thought. The first of these is his disagreement with the concept that human nature is either basically good or tractable to social conditioning. Along with this explicit difference is the implied position that human society, imperfect and unpleasant though it may be, has its basis in human needs and human nature, and not *vice versa*. Second is Bierce's belief in the desirability of the "benign menace" of competition and the authority of law. Competition and law are not good in themselves, but even though they may oppress they function as needful disciplines and impart some measure of protection against endemic natural vices. Finally Bierce holds the serious belief, stated humorously, that it is futile to seek a remedy for human ills or the evils of existence. He suggests that work at least would help alleviate poverty and alludes to Tennyson's faint trust in a Deity, which he then undercuts with an ironic recommendation of death as an interim analgesic while one waits for God to cure all. In point of fact, Bierce was skeptical of any significant measure of hope for humanity. He saw life as something to be endured, beyond man's ability to reclaim, shape, or govern. There were only variously unsatisfactory ways of coping with it. Because utopian thought was founded on wishful thinking and contrary to fact it was one of the more unsatisfactory. It is clear from his reference to the "humorists," going back to Plato, who proposed it, that he saw the concept of Utopia as an old, old dream. Most probably, he would have understood Plato's *Republic* and More's *Utopia* as theoretical fictions. (Elsewhere in his works he refers to Plato with respect.) But he had only scorn and anger for serious utopians, and references in his journalism to their theories, especially to those of Howells, are always negative.

Bierce's contact with Burnette Haskell was not to be a one-time event. Recovering from the failure of Kaweah, Haskell helped in 1895 to

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found "the Evolution Club," dedicated to carrying out the reformist ideas of Laurence Gronlund. Remarkably, considering Bierce's well-known antipathy to all reformist schemes whether political, economic, or social, but especially religious, Haskell invited Bierce to join the Club. Bierce's open declination of the invitation appears in his *Examiner* column of March 10, 1895. It is full of elaborate sarcasms about Gronlund and his theories. A distinguishing characteristic of Bierce, however, is that he ultimately aimed his writing at his readers' minds rather than at their emotions. This is most clearly seen in his journalism. Rarely did he take a strong stand without supplying his reasons and making manifest his logic. His reply to Haskell, despite its jocularity, shows his thoughtful analysis of the Club's prospectus.

First he ironically disqualifies himself from membership on the grounds that he has not the mental equipment to take Gronlund's theories seriously. Growing more serious, Bierce then attacks Gronlund's socialistic insistence that the present order be replaced by a new one. He advances upon Gronlund analogically, arguing that inasmuch as we do not shoot a horse that has gone lame, or throw away a watch that begins to lose time, or divorce a wife who scolds, it is unreasonable to reject utterly an existing social system. "But 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,' he would, forsooth, sweep away because it is no better than its creators. And in order to secure the effective working of the flawless system that he would substitute he would make the race that is mostly scoundrels to-day all angels to-morrow."

Not satisfied with this attack upon Gronlund, Bierce is finally moved to reveal the philosophical basis for his opposition. In one paragraph he lays bare the reasons for his refusal to countenance a belief in Utopia or any other reformist theory:

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. But even if Socialism were carried out as nearly to its ultimate implication and logical conclusion as is compatible with individual identity we should be no happier than we are at present, for we should be no better. Any system that human ingenuity can devise human ingenuity can pervert to selfish ends. In order to spare the system of his dream the derision due to its absurd impracticability in a world of sinners Mr. Gronlund is compelled to people his cis-Stygian Elysium with a race of bright impossibles, the whelpage of his afterthinker.

The heart of the matter for Bierce is, therefore, the classical position that in order for a Utopia to exist, a race of Utopians must first be creat-

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ed. Convinced of the imperfectibility of human nature, Bierce personally rejected any theories which either depended upon perfected human beings or promised to perfect them. Bierce's contacts with Haskell, although insignificant in themselves, did draw Bierce into a discussion of utopian theory and obliged him to clarify the issues in his own mind. The larger significance of this clarification may now be pursued.

Although Bierce took time to analyze and criticize utopian theory, he really did not take the utopian experiments themselves very seriously. He was confident that any society founded purely on utopian theory would soon fail. Suffering would be limited to those misguided souls who either were duped or duped themselves into believing a patent absurdity. There was one manifestation of utopian thought, however, which Bierce considered so fraught with peril that he spent most of his journalistic career attempting to expose its fallacies. This manifestation was republican government. Especially in its Jeffersonian tradition of belief in the basic goodness of man; in man's capability, in the right environment, of bettering his nature to the point of perfection; and in popular democracy, Bierce regarded it as essentially identical to the main substance of utopian theory. He considered republican government as insidiously, rather than blatantly, utopian because he understood that his countrymen were gradually converting what had begun as a limited political system for fallible humans into a universal panacea for a race now believed basically good to begin with and rapidly approaching perfection. Bierce's inferred position may be expressed as a logical function: if utopian government, which is founded upon false premises, is impracticable, then republican government, which is founded upon the same premises, is also impracticable.

Bierce violently opposed the doctrine of *vox populi, vox dei* and he never had a good word for any politician or leader, whether local, national, or international who flattered people into believing in their own omniscience or benevolence. Not to understand this is to miss the basic thrust of Bierce's entire public career as a journalist. Because republican government did not openly describe itself as utopian but nevertheless incorporated utopian assumptions and goals, Bierce regarded it as deceitful, sought to expose it, and fought it at every opportunity. This opposition is so ubiquitous it is a distinguishing characteristic of Bierce's journalism. In his fiction it constitutes the main idea of several extended satires which take up the major part of the *Collected Works*, Volume I. Two of these satires contain the essence of Bierce's deliberations on the values shared by utopian theory and republican government.

The first, *Ashes of the Beacon*, purports to be "An Historical Mono-

graph Written in 4930." Its theme is clearly set out in its first sentence: "Of the many causes that conspired to bring about the lamentable failure of 'self-government' in ancient America the most general and comprehensive was, of course, the impracticable nature of the system itself."⁵ A scholarly narrator traces, from the few records that remain, the probable steps that first made America a mighty nation which was, nevertheless, ultimately destined to destroy itself. Significantly, the narrator begins by identifying the divinities of ancient Americans. Their minor gods, he says, were "Gufferson, Jaxon, and Lincon" and their tutelary deity was Washington, "the Founder and Preserver of republican institutions." The narrator observes, however, that if Washington really did impart the "malign secret" of representative government to the Americans, he "denied that of its maintenance" (20-21).

We may discern points of similarity in the Haskell-Bierce exchange and the narrator's stated causes for the cataclysmic downfall of America. One of the main causes, for example, was the American infatuation with self-government: "When men perceive that nothing is restraining them but their consent to be restrained, then at last there is nothing to obstruct the free play of that selfishness which is the dominant characteristic and fundamental motive of human nature and human action respectively" (18). From self-government, says the narrator, it was but a short step to the consequences of being ruled by the majority, "that is to say. . . the ignorant, restless and reckless" (19). In ancient America government merely expressed the shifting desires and ephemeral caprices of the majority thereby unwittingly encouraging the people to revert to an undisciplined and lawless state ruled by whims, appetites, primitive instincts, and passions.

Almost every feature of culture which the ancient Americans deemed a virtue, the narrator reports, eventually proved a vice. Their extravagant pride in the right of free speech enabled their enemies, the anarchists and malcontents who preached socialism and reform, to recruit so many supporters from "the ranks of the idle, the vicious, the unsuccessful," that a disastrous insurrection resulted. The people were rich only in material possessions. They were uncultured and without the "capacity of rational enjoyment" (33). Inevitably, "by crushing out of their natures every sentiment and aspiration unconnected with accumulation of property, these civilized savages and commercial barbarians" (34) made morality into a flexible word which could always be misconstrued to serve the strong, the wealthy, and the oppressor. Their judicial system turned out to be a sham. Jurors were selected increas-

⁵Ambrose Bierce, *Ashes of the Beacon* in *The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce*, I (New York, 1909) rpt. (New York, 1966) 17. All subsequent quotations will be followed by parenthetical page references from this text.

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ingly not for superior or even average intelligence but for less than average intelligence. Judges, who ran for election, tended to favor the interests of litigants who could retain them in office. By the time trial by jury was abolished in ancient America, it had already “sapped the whole nation’s respect for all law” (46) and provoked anarchy. “An inherent weakness in republican government was that it assumed the honesty and intelligence of the majority, ‘the masses,’ who were neither honest nor intelligent” (61). Majorities, instead of being simply regarded as the most powerful parties, were invested, the narrator maintains, with the moral sanction of the proverb, “the voice of the people is the voice of God.” The narrator’s comment on this is self-explanatory: “And this hideous blasphemy was as glib upon the lips of those who, without change of mind, were defeated at the polls year after year as upon those of the victors” (63).

As the narrator proceeds at length to detail what he regards as the sentimental and mendacious idiocies that finally brought down the American republic, he reinforces his thesis that the philosophical bases of American republican democracy were contrary to fact. Hence, at the end, when he says “against stupidity the gods themselves are powerless” (81) he sums up an experiment which doomed itself to failure by the folly of its fundamental assumptions.

The second of Bierce’s satires is a narrative written “after the manner of Swift” entitled *The Land Beyond the Blow*. A compilation and revision of at least nine articles written between 1888 and 1899 this work, like *Gulliver’s Travels*, is an inverted picture of the narrator’s native land. The narrator, transported to a distant region by a blow on the head, moves from country to country, learning the languages of each new land and reacting to each new set of customs from his own perspective. *Ashes of the Beacon* is more a satire of utopian theory and republican government than *The Land Beyond the Blow* which is aimed more specifically at the values and customs of the United States. From Bierce’s point of view, however, a satire on American customs and republican government has fairly direct implications for utopian theory.

The main theme of *The Land Beyond the Blow* appears to be that despite the different customs, religions, and the political creeds of disparate cultures, they all share an essential similarity in reflecting a common human nature. In every one of his voyages the narrator encounters values and national habits so utterly distinct from his own that they suggest a different kind of human being. But in every one of his voyages the narrator observes the same gaps between theory and practice that he did at home, the only difference being that in America he was habituated to his own contradictions, hypocrisies, and rationalizations. On his visit to the land of Tamtonia, for example, which occasions

Bierce's most direct satire on republican ideals, the narrator finds a people who have made their government as inefficient as possible and whose conventions of election favor mediocrity. Their private lives are sane but public office is the preserve of fools and ignoramuses. Bierce's clear point is that the only difference between them and us is that they are frank and open. Their candor, however, does not outweigh the disadvantages of their government—an objection which also applies to utopian experiments. In the land of Tortirra the narrator again touches on a point which cuts equally American and utopian values. The Tortirrans are enamored of the phrase "Principles, not men." The narrator's explanation of it is pithy: "In the last analysis this is seen to mean that it is better to be governed by scoundrels professing one set of principles than by good men holding another" (181). The skepticism of theory implicit in this view is repeated also in the contrast of Tortirran values with those of another country, Gokeetle-Guk. In Tortirra competition is favored as a way to keep prices low and quality high. In Gokeetle-Guk it is condemned as causing strife and wastefulness. Bierce's resolution of this apparent contradiction is that both of these economic theories have equal validity. The real issue is not economics so much as human nature. Trusts, justly administered, are more efficient than competitive businesses; poorly administered, they are worse. Utopians, therefore, are self-deluded if they think capitalism *per se* is evil; Americans are self-deluded if they think capitalism *per se* is good. Both systems have strengths and limitations, both are imperfect, and it is sheer self-delusion for man to look to any theory he can create as the salvation from his earthly woes.

In retrospect, we may mark the essential similarity between Bierce's reaction to utopian experiments and his response to the republican democracy that had evolved in America. But there were also important differences of degree. The outright utopian communities he considered foolish; republican democracy he thought insidiously dangerous. Neither, he believed, had much of a chance in the hostile world we inhabit. A utopian community would perish first because it was less practical but the republican democracy's demise was more likely to be cataclysmic and cause infinitely more suffering. "Whom the gods would destroy," runs an old proverb, "they first make mad." To Bierce, indulgence in utopian schemes was the irrationality of folly but belief in the tenets of republican democracy was the madness of hubris.