A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

AMBROSE BIERCE AND "MOXON'S MASTER"

By Edna Kenton

AMBROSE BIERCE has been called a "formula" story teller, but I do not recall that his master recipe for the short story has ever been stated in scientific terms. Neither do I recall that any critic has picked out from the whole of his work the master story that keys all the others. "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", "A Horseman in the Sky", "The Boarded Window", "The Man and the Snake" are frequently cited examples of his so-called formula tales whose fame has depended on the effect of the first surprise, and, frequently, on their having been read as single stories and not in relation to others. "Formulas", it may be said, are not discovered so easily as this.

For Bierce has been read generally, by those who have read him at all, in isolated purple patches; seldom or never in the mass. There has been reason for this: his books, since 1872, have appeared sporadically, unheralded, under varying imprints. In 1909 his "Collected Works" were issued, but the man's fame, after almost half a century of extraordinary output, was still so underground that none but devotees were likely to indulge in the twelve volume set.

Four of these twelve volumes are now accessible to the general reader in the American Library, published by Albert and Charles Boni — that series whose editors avowedly pass by American "classics" for the half forgotten, unprocurable, or but lately appreciated American writers who, by newer standards, played a gallant rôle in our young cultural development. And the reading at a sitting, so to say, of "In the Midst of Life", "Can Such Things Be?", "The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter" (which includes the "Fantastic Fables"), and "The Devil's Dictionary", is highly recommended for an idle week end trip. We emerge from such continuous communing with an author, carrying away impressions quite other than those received from a mere desultory reading; and to live in such fashion for a few days with Ambrose Bierce is to uncover, not a perfunctory formula, but his whole attitude to "ghost" and to "man". One of the interesting revelations that attends the mass reading of these four volumes is that "The Devil's Dictionary" gives away the attitude, as the stories and fables give away "The Devil's Dictionary". And, as a curious result, some of the "famous" stories drift imperceptibly to second place, and others far less known move to first; "Moxon's Master", for instance.

Bierce's thoughtful provision of a glossary to his works offers two definitions that may be quoted at just this point: "*Ghost.* The outward and visible sign of an inward fear; *Intention.* The mind's sense of the prevalence of one set of influences over another set, an effect whose cause is the imminence, immediate or remote, of the performance of an involuntary act." "Moxon's Master" is not one of the frequently cited examples of Bierce's art and artfulness, and, at first glance, may seem to hold no commerce with either "ghost" or "intention"; for Moxon's

master was no floating wraith, and Moxon's intention is never stated. But Bierce's whole conception of man and his fears lies in this tale and illumines all the others.

The story begins with a question from the first person narrator: "Are you serious — do you really believe that a machine thinks?" And presently Moxon answers:

"What is a machine? The word has been variously defined. Here is one definition from a popular dictionary: 'Any instrument or organization by which power is applied and made effective, or a desired effect produced.' Well, then, is not man a machine? And you will admit he thinks — or thinks he thinks. . . . I do believe that a machine thinks about the work that it is doing."

The rest, just short of the bitter end, is discussion, broken by Moxon's frequent disappearances into his machine shop, where none but he may enter. And the end: Moxon, in his shop, sitting across a chessboard, facing his antagonist. This antagonist not more than five feet in height, "with proportions suggesting those of a gorilla", the shoulders disproportionately broad, the arms disproportionately long — Moxon's "machine", an automaton chess player which, as Moxon uttered a triumphant "Checkmate!", began to whirr. "A slight but continuous convulsion appeared to have possession of it. In body and head it shook like a man with the palsy or ague, and the motion augmented every moment until the entire figure was in violent agitation." Suddenly it leaped to its feet and lunged forward across the table. "Moxon tried to throw himself backward out of reach, but he was too late; I saw the horrible thing's hands close upon his throat, his own clutch its wrists. . . . " Read "Moxon's Master", and then, in its light, reread "The Man and the Snake", "A Horseman in the Sky", "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", even "The Boarded Window". You will not repeat the shock of the first surprise, but you will have the finer delight of seeing Harker Braynton's intentions and fears in presence of the Snake, his master; Carter Druse's "performance of an involuntary act" before the horseman in the sky; Peyton Farquehar on Owl Creek Bridge in the veritable act of "running down"; Murlock, in "The Boarded Window", rushing too swiftly upon his fear and then retreating from it, only to meet the ultimate horror.

For always, in the multiplied works, there is a "key" story that unlocks the others, and, above all, the door to the author's "intention", if ever he has one. It is doubtful that Bierce himself saw his subject inevitably determined by the prevalence of one set of influences over another set. But we cannot call him the great exception to his own view of man. If man is a machine set in motion by fear, and Bierce saw him so, he must write about him so. And in the seventy tales of "In the Midst of Life" and "Can Such Things Be?" he most surely does.

"The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter" is another affair altogether, being a short novel done in collaboration with Dr. Gustave Adolf Danziger, from a reputed German original by Richard Voss. Mr. Vincent Starrett calls it, perhaps a little enthusiastically, "that great prose poem". Bierce's preface to this work suggests that the intentions of everyone concerned in it were a little blurred. For he "Englished" a translated tale not precisely Biercesque.

But "The Devil's Dictionary" is Bierce. We have most of it in the tales;

but, on the other hand, we find most of the tales in "The Devil's Dictionary". Read together, as they should be, they are perceived to perform an extraordinary contra dance which is quite worthy of attention.

The Devil's Dictionary; The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter — Fantastic Fables; In the Midst of Life — Tales of Soldiers and Civilians; Can Such Things Be? By Ambrose Bierce. Albert and Charles Boni.