

# THE CALL

The Magazine of the Jack London Society



- Jack London Society Symposium this November in Sonoma Valley • Elissa Stancil on the Jack London State Park 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration • Lawrence I. Berkove's Jack London and Ambrose Bierce: Unrecognized Allies

# 2010 Jack London Symposium in Sonoma

November 4-6, 2010

Hyatt Vineyard Creek Hotel and Spa Sonoma County  
170 Railroad Street  
Santa Rosa, CA 95401  
(707) 284-1234

**The Symposium returns** this fall to Sonoma Valley to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Society. The Hyatt Vineyard Creek is offering a discounted room rate of \$160 double or single. **Reservations should be made by calling 1-800-233-1234 before the cut-off date of October 1, 2010.** Be sure to mention that you are with the Jack London Symposium. The Symposium registration will be \$125, \$85 retiree, and \$50 graduate student. Events will include:

- **A cocktail reception on Thursday evening**
- **Sessions: papers, roundtables, and films**
- **A picnic and tour of the Jack London Ranch**
- **A visit to Kenwood or Benziger Winery**
- **A luncheon on Saturday**

The Mediterranean-style Hyatt Vineyard Creek is a five-star luxury hotel on 9 acres along the banks of Santa Rosa Creek; historic Railroad Square is 1 block away, downtown is a 3-block stroll, and Sonoma County wineries are within 6 miles. The restaurant at Hyatt Vineyard Creek Hotel & Spa spotlights fresh seafood with a country French influence. The spa offers Sonoma-inspired treatments, and the garden complex features a lap pool and a water-wall fountain. In the spacious guestrooms, beds are topped with fluffy duvets and partial canopies, and bathrooms are marble.

Symposium attendees should plan to rent cars to travel to the Jack London Ranch and wineries. On Friday, November 5, participants should meet at the Hyatt Vineyard Creek at 11:30 a.m. to caravan to the Ranch. We will first arrive at the picnic grounds just inside the gate to the right at the Jack London State Historic Park. A good place to pick up a sandwich for lunch is the deli inside the Glen Ellen Village Market just at the base of Jack London Ranch Road on Arnold Drive.

## The Jack London Society

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*The Call* is produced twice yearly at the Savannah College of Art and Design, Department of Liberal Arts, ([www.scad.edu](http://www.scad.edu)). Members are encouraged to send their London related items to Kenneth K. Brandt via e-mail at [kbrandt@scad.edu](mailto:kbrandt@scad.edu).

ISSN: 1083-6799

# MOONLIGHT ADVENTURE at JACK'S

**The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of  
Jack London State Historic Park Celebration**

**With Featured Speaker  
Sue Hodson**

Curator of Literary Manuscripts,  
Huntington Library

By Elisa Stancil

## BEAUTY RANCH CAME TO LIFE

**ONCE AGAIN** as 100 guests gathered on July 24<sup>th</sup> to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jack London State Historic Park. An electric tram transported visitors to the small wood frame cottage where London wrote many books and stories and managed his ranch operations.

Beside the giant oak a rustic bar offered ginger fizz cocktails, inspired by *Little Lady of the Big House*. Inside the cottage rarely seen artifacts such as charts from the *Snark* voyage and a check to Sinclair Lewis (to purchase story ideas) and actual pawn tickets similar to the three mentioned in *Martin Eden* were displayed in London's office. The cottage garden was in full bloom and guests could walk through the house and into the garden, a treat not possible for most visitors due to security concerns. The stone dining room and kitchen tours captivated visitors as they saw the bohemian furnishings and fascinating decorative objects the Londons collected on their travels.

Straw and lavender carpeted the yard and tables were arranged so all could hear the special presentation by Sue Hodson, curator of the London papers at the Huntington Library, as she addressed the crowd from the cottage porch. As darkness fell and the moon rose, Hodson read from London's letter to George Brett, about Beauty Ranch:

"There are 130 acres in the place, and they are 130 acres of the most beautiful, primitive land to be found anywhere in California. There are great redwoods on it, some of them thousands of years old—in fact, the redwoods are as fine and magnificent as any to be found anywhere outside the tourist groves. Also there



are great firs, tan-bark oaks, maples, live-oaks, white-oaks, black-oaks, madrone and manzanita galore. There are canyons, several streams of water, many springs, etc., etc. In fact, it is impossible to really describe the place. All I can say is this—I have been over California off and on all my life, for the last two months I have been riding all over these hills, looking for just such a place, and I must say that I have never seen anything like it."

Guests were riveted by Hodson's account of the many accomplishments of London the rancher, aided by his step sister, Eliza Shepard. As Hodson stated, "His letters to step-sister Eliza London Shepard, who acted as ranch superintendent during his absences, clearly show that he expected her energies to be without limit, as well. The more than 80 letters exchanged between them reveal prodigious attention to the details of operating and improving the ranch. In Jack's letter of January 26, 1915, for example, he poses no fewer than 31 instructions or questions to be dealt with, and Eliza has noted her answers or actions for many of them, ranging from the best type of flooring to be used in the milking-barn, to the best feed balance, the desirable number of bulls, cows, etc., and the most efficient way to spread manure. Jack's livestock won awards, and one of his proudest achievements was the "pig palace," a sort of porcine condo development of his own design that operated with high standards of sanitation and efficiency."

The music, catered dinner, and period lanterns set the mood for bidders and the silent auction—focusing on romance, adventure and history—completely sold out. Over \$20,000 was raised. So taken were they by the chance to enjoy the ranch after hours, many guests requested the event be held annually.

# Jack London and Ambrose Bierce: Unrecognized Allies

Lawrence I. Berkove

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Like two equally authentic but contrasting elements of American culture, the revolutionary spirit of Tom Paine and the conservative impulse of the Federalist Papers, Jack London and Ambrose Bierce shared some common values and goals, but co-existed uneasily.

**Edmund Wilson's magisterial tome *The Shock of Recognition* (1955) devotes itself to supporting Melville's assertion that "For genius, all over the world, stands hand in hand, and one shock of recognition runs the whole world round." Wilson's collection of corroborating documents is extensive and impressive, yet another book, at least as long, might be compiled that illustrates the contrary position, that genius often does not recognize itself when it appears in other people, even when it occurs in the same time and place. The relationship of Jack London and Ambrose Bierce could be cited as an example.**

The obvious way to assess their relationship would be to examine editions of their correspondence and check London's references to Bierce and Bierce's to London. Though obvious it would be unsatisfactory. All it would show would be their personal attitudes toward each other. That can be summed up briefly: in general they were not fond of each other. There are some reasons why this is so, but they cast almost no light on the much more significant and interesting subject of the relationship of their respective writings. When we pursue this approach we will find that they could easily have been friends for although there were real differences in their basic beliefs and outlooks, they were more often than not unrecognized allies in what they were trying to accomplish.

The two men crossed paths in the first decade of the twentieth century. Bierce was the older and more established writer. His short stories made him the best-known and most respected author on the West Coast. Although most readers did not know how to read them—thought them intellectual but heartless<sup>1</sup>—they were recognized as extraordinary and raised the bar for the next generation of writers. His weekly column of wittily biting commentary and opinion in the *San Francisco Examiner* made him very influential, in some respects a literary dictator. London was an up-and-coming author whose following was rapidly growing. To many, his youthful energy, tales of raw adventure in the Northland, and spirited advocacy of socialism earned him the reputation of being on the crest of the wave of the future. London and Bierce knew many of the same people and even had close friends in common, especially the poet George Sterling. Inevitably they were asked to comment on each other's works. Actually, neither was a main concern of the other, but insofar as they gave thought to the matter both expressed a grudging and limited respect for the other.

The two men had much in common—they both were sharp critics of society and government and scornful of gentility and superficiality, both were deeply influenced by Darwinism, both hated war, both aspired to rationality but despite evincing hostility toward organized religion throughout much of their careers both toward the end of their lives displayed some inclinations toward mysticism and the supernatural, and both wrote in the then popular mode of realism. These together were reasons why it might be expected that their writing would show resemblances. However, a comparison/contrast of their work uncovers important uniquenesses within apparent similarities. It was more than the older one objecting to the investigative career of the younger, and the younger feeling that the older was superannuated. Although the two engaged in an undeclared competition for personal influ-

ence over their mutual friend, the poet George Sterling, it was also deeper than that. Despite their original similarities and subsequent ones which kept emerging over the years, the two men thought differently, and even when they arrived at similar conclusions, arrived at them by significantly different paths.

Like two equally authentic but contrasting elements of American culture, the revolutionary spirit of Tom Paine and the conservative impulse of the Federalist Papers, Jack London and Ambrose Bierce shared some common values and goals, but co-existed uneasily. While London (at least until the latter years of his life) looked forward to an egalitarian society, believed in a better future under socialism that could be achieved if human beings developed their potentiality, and was willing to undertake revolutionary action toward bringing these things to pass, Bierce was profoundly skeptical of anything that participated in the character of Utopian thought. A classicist in outlook and admittedly a fan of the "Queen Anne's men" (*SF Examiner* January 1, 1892), he was in basic agreement with John Dryden's famous couplet in "Absalom and Achitophel": "All other errors but disturb a state;/ But innovation is the blow of fate" (ll. 799-800). To Bierce, occasional admirable individual cases to the contrary notwithstanding, human nature was unchangeably imperfect. Therefore, such progress as was possible in human affairs could only be effected by means which passed the test of time and by human nature as it is and not as it might be. Progress was therefore best served by empirical measures instead of idealistic innovations: the following of guides that checked and directed ambition instead of advocating radical change.

The standard facts about their relationship from the perspective of their correspondence may be stated if only so that their limitations become obvious. Bierce's comments on London are few but well known. *The Son of the Wolf* (1900) he called "clever" and added "The general impression that remains with me is that it is always winter and always night in Alaska."<sup>2</sup> The put-down is witty, but the fact is that Bierce did not see below the surface of London's fiction. More famous is his comment on *The Sea-Wolf* (1904). He criticized it stylistically for being a "perfect welter of disagreeable incidents," and for having the protagonists accomplish physically incredible feats. He confessed also "to an overwhelming contempt for both



**Ambrose Bierce**

was able to rise above personal bias and judge perceptively and handsomely.

the sexless lovers"--in itself a somewhat advanced observation. On the other hand, he expressed great admiration for characterization. "But the great thing—and it is among the greatest of things—is that tremendous creation, Wolf Larsen. If that is not a permanent addition to literature it is at least a permanent figure in the memory of the reader. You 'can't lose' Wolf Larsen. He will be with you to the end. So it does not really matter how London has hammered him into you. You may quarrel with the methods, but the result is almost incomparable. The hewing out and setting up of such a figure is enough for a man to do in one life-time. I have hardly words to impart my good judgment of *that* work."<sup>3</sup> Although Bierce did not like London, this one judgment, repeated almost routinely in London scholarship, shows that Bierce was more typical of his basic attitude toward London is a comment he made to Herman Scheffauer in a letter of Sept. 30, 1907: "I detest Jack London. He has a lot of brains, but neither honesty nor shame. According to his own conf—no, boasting, he is a tramp, a thief, a liar and a general all-around criminal. I'll put it another way when convinced that leopards change their spots. I know nothing of his character except what he has himself related in his disgusting *Cosmopolitan* articles. He stinks" (*Misunderstood* 166). The *Cosmopolitan* articles referred to were a series of autobiographical accounts London wrote for the magazine between May 1907 and March 1908 about his experiences as a hobo that were collected and published in 1907 as *The Road*. Earlier, when London had merely advocated socialism, Bierce could overlook the "error of his ways" and praise him as an artist. But in these articles London admitted to actions on the wrong side of the law. Today, those acts seem pretty tame but *The Road* occasioned critical complaints about its lack of "wholesomeness,"<sup>4</sup> and Bierce had an even more extreme reaction. To him, crime—even petty crimes—that injured individuals were despicable and something no honorable person would do. He thought it as wrong for London to deceive and steal, for example, and then turn the experiences to profitable literary purposes, as it was for Leland Stanford to deceive and steal from the public and become wealthy enough to become a philanthropist; the means did not justify the ends. To

Bierce the respective crimes were the same in kind and differed only in order of magnitude. Crimes done in the cause of art were real crimes and made the artist a criminal.

Word of Bierce's hostility towards London leaked out and journalists sought out opportunities for more titillating encounters. One almost occurred in the summer of 1910 when both men, along with George Sterling, attended a meeting of the Bohemian Club at its outdoor site in a rural grove. Years earlier Bierce had helped found the club but dropped out when he began to think of bohemianism as sophomoric. (In 1908 he described Bohemia as "the tap-room of a wayside inn on the road from Boeotia to Philistia."<sup>5</sup>) According to Bierce biographer Carey McWilliams, Sterling had reported with exaggeration Bierce's bad opinion of *The Road to London*, hoping for a "lively encounter of wits" (McWilliams 284), so the meeting in the Bohemian grove gave rise to an expectancy which, however, never developed. In a 1911 letter to Sterling, Bierce denied that London had "done him up" whereas, according to Bierce, "in fact London and I had not a word of argument on Socialism, nor on anything. You could hardly fail to observe that I said as little to him as possible."<sup>6</sup>

But London on his part did not allow himself to be baited into open controversy. McWilliams reports that he instead adjured Sterling: "don't you quarrel with Ambrose about me. He's too splendid a man to be diminished because he has lacked access to a later generation of science. He crystallized before you and I were born, and it is too magnificent a crystallization to quarrel with." McWilliams then quotes again from a subsequent letter to Sterling: "[Bierce] stopped growing a generation ago. Of course, he keeps up with the newspapers, but his criteria crystallized 30 odd years ago. Had he been born a generation later he'd have been a socialist, and, more likely, an anarchist. He never reads books that aren't something like a hundred years old, and he glories in the fact!" (McWilliams 285). London was fundamentally wrong in all his details. Bierce knew more about astronomy, engineering, military equipment, and mathematics than London had any idea about, and in addition to having read many classic authors that London had not read also had read and reviewed many contemporary authors, as divergent as Darwin, Tolstoy, Anatole France, John Galsworthy, Omar Khayyam, William Dean Howells, James Whitcomb Riley, Edward Bellamy, and Mary Austin. In

**Bierce had also risen from poverty and educated himself. But he had gone through the Civil War from the start almost to the finish, and the Reconstruction, and knew first-hand what violent consequences revolution entailed. He had also seen grand idealism replaced by sordid venality, the unworthy and incompetent rewarded with honors and positions of power, and the system hardly improved by hyped changes that had little practical effect.**

sum, only reading London and Bierce about each other is an unsatisfactory way to get at the real situation. They had regrettable misconceptions about each other and allowed their personal biases to blind them to the common causes they shared and block them from becoming the natural allies they might have been.

London's revolutionary zeal was motivated in no small measure by his own experience of being born poor and his awareness that the unbridled capitalism of his age favored the wealthy and exploited the indigent and needy. He was angry at the unequal system and the hypocrisy of those in power and in charge of the law and, not believing that patience and humil-

ity would bring improvement, he became a socialist and frankly warned the upper class that the laboring masses were ready to take power from it.<sup>7</sup> Bierce was *not* at the opposite end of the spectrum from London. Anyone who spends an hour or two with his weekly columns in the *San Francisco Examiner* will quickly see that most of them are devoted to excoriating with almost recklessly fearless wit the scoundrels, liars, cheats, and insolent power-mongers of society. Bierce had also risen from poverty and educated himself. But he had gone through the Civil War from the start almost to the finish, and the Reconstruction, and knew first-hand what violent consequences revolution entailed. He had also seen grand idealism replaced by sordid venality, the unworthy and incompetent rewarded with honors and positions of power, and the system hardly improved by hyped changes that had little practical effect. As a reporter in San Francisco he had seen how easily and frequently common people could be organized into mindless mobs which struck out blindly or, worse, served demagogues, and how affluent benefactors could be rewarded by ingratitude. He became skeptical of lofty-sounding principles that were supposedly universal and infallible and once jested that "I unload a 'principle' every little while, and shall soon be flying light" (*Skepticism* 288). In short, given that Bierce usually thought through his unpopular stands much more thoroughly and carefully than London gave him credit for doing, it is far more likely that London indulged somewhat in romantic illusions than that Bierce had "crystallized" in the past.

On the matter of socialism, for example, London's writings and lectures on its behalf are abundant. Here now is the essence of Bierce's position on it, in his criti-

cism of the reformist ideas of the contemporary socialist Laurence Gronland:

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 impracticality 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. (*SF Examiner*, March 10, 1895).

For those who consider Bierce a thoughtlessly reactionary opponent of socialism, this ought to open their eyes. In essence, Bierce takes the classical position that a race of Utopians must first be created in order for a Utopia to exist; the human race in its present state consisting largely of imperfect sinners would pervert the finest system the human mind could devise. It is possible, however, to adopt some beneficial features of socialist thought without totally converting to it. This is not a foolish or a shallow position. London himself ultimately approached Bierce's skepticism of idealism in his 1912 novella *The Scarlet Plague* (also a refutation of Social Darwinism) when one of the few educated survivors of the plague admits to his semi-barbaric grandsons: "In the midst of our civilization, down in our slums and labor-ghettos, we [the upper and cultured classes] had bred a race of barbarians, of savages; and now, in the time of our calamity, they turned upon us like the wild beasts they were and destroyed us. And they destroyed themselves as well" (*Plague* 105-06). Behind this admission is London's disappointed recognition that there never was, was not now, and never would be an egalitarian, totally classless society in which everybody would be high-minded and no segment of it remain regressive and subordinate.

On March 7, 1916, London formally took the next logical step and resigned from the Socialist Labor Party. He concluded his letter of resignation with these words:

If races and classes cannot rise up and by their own strength of brain and brawn wrest from the world liberty, freedom, and independence, they never, in time, can come to these royal possessions—and if such royal things are kindly presented to them by superior individuals, on silver platters, they will know not what to do with them, will fail to make use of them, and will be what they have always been in the past—inferior races and inferior classes.<sup>8</sup>

Is not this objection essentially the same that Bierce had all along, including the distinction between the ideal and

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those who professed to follow it? In addition Bierce had identified happiness (the Founding Fathers valorized "the pursuit of happiness") as the ultimate standard of success in life, but tied it to morality. Again, this is neither thoughtless nor shallow. In the final analysis, how different was London's practice from that?

When they were not sniping at each other both were actually working on the same side. They both hated injustice, hypocrisy, and arrogance, and attacked them. It may appear as a difference that London generally sided with the poor and oppressed, whereas Bierce took the position that the poor were intrinsically no better than the rich, and the masses no better than the classes, but in practice the difference was not extreme. One of the reasons his columns were controversial was that he drubbed rascality and stupidity wherever he found them, and he found them among the lower and middle classes as well as the upper class. London also displays some disdain of the "commonplace souls of the commonplace population"<sup>9</sup> and especially in his later works some aversion to mobs and prejudiced and unthinking expressions of the general population. In the case of popular religion he was critical of the missionaries he saw in Hawaii and the lack of Christian ethics and charity he saw abroad in society. But London's opposition to organized religion was almost benign compared to Bierce's long-standing open war against what seemed to him its hypocrisy, narrowness, and cause of sporadic violence. He was familiar with the Bible and always referred to Christ with respect but observed that "in the matter of width the gulf between Christianity and Christ is no floor-crack" (*SF Examiner* December 25, 1898).

Practically speaking, however, although Bierce attacked all classes his most frequent and famous targets were among the rich and powerful and in government. His 1896 journalistic exposé of Collis Huntington in the Central Pacific Railroad scandal essentially caused the defeat of the corrupt railroad refunding bill in Congress and forced Huntington to pay the government monies he expected to get away with. And in 1898, when newspapers all across the country capitulated to the public demand for war against Spain, Bierce was prominent among the very small handful of public figures who outspokenly opposed the war and the imperialism it entailed.<sup>10</sup>

Both men generally opposed war, London latterly, after his advocacy of revolution. In the case of Bierce, this was first noted publicly by Vincent Starrett when he wrote in 1923 that the war tales were "enduring peace tracts" (60). It is true that Bierce never became a pacifist; he recognized that there were times, such as occasions of self-defense, when wars might be necessary, but he regarded

them as terrible and tragic at best and was outspokenly and sharply critical of those who resorted to them for petty reasons or of incompetent or imperious officers who conducted them in a way that needlessly consumed human life. London approached Bierce's position in his insufficiently known story, "War" (1910). Short and tightly constructed, it brilliantly allegorizes war in the tragic killing of a young cavalryman by a rifleman on the other side who was unaware that the cavalryman had earlier mercifully refrained from killing him when he had a chance. And earlier, in "The Unparalleled Invasion" (1907), London depicted a situation in which the white nations of the West wiped out the entire population of China with germ warfare before resuming their ancient quarrels with each other.<sup>11</sup> In "The Inevitable White Man" (1908) London created Saxtorph, a man with no ability but marksmanship who killed remorselessly, like a machine. In London's magnificent late story, "The Red One" (1916) the "civilized" English scientist, Bassett, expressed a willingness to destroy the entire native population of Guadalcanal in the pursuit of his scientific interest in the origin of a "heavenly" sound (*Complete Stories* 2314). London thus reveals his sense of how thin is the veneer of civilization that separates such as Bassett from the primitive savages he scorns. This is almost a routine position in Bierce's works.

Both men were Darwinians committed to evolution, but while this linked them superficially it paradoxically caused them to diverge on a deeper level. Bierce was always mindful of humanity's origins in, and continued debasing connections to, the animal kingdom,<sup>12</sup> whereas London was attracted to uplift and progress. Bierce's view of evolution was summed up by the phrase "survival of the fittest." He, however, did not attach any moral quality to "fitness." Whatever was simply stronger, more intellectually advanced, and more focused on domination was for him "fittest." Hence the peoples derived from white Europe were not better but in practice "fitter" than

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the nations of colored peoples; the Anglo-Saxon "race" was not better but "fitter" than the Slavic or Mediterranean races; and America was not better but "fitter" than any European country. The fitter peoples were demonstrably stronger and abler than the others so they dominated because they could. But, in the scheme of things, other peoples or races or nations would sooner or later become "fitter" than today's leaders and rise and subju-

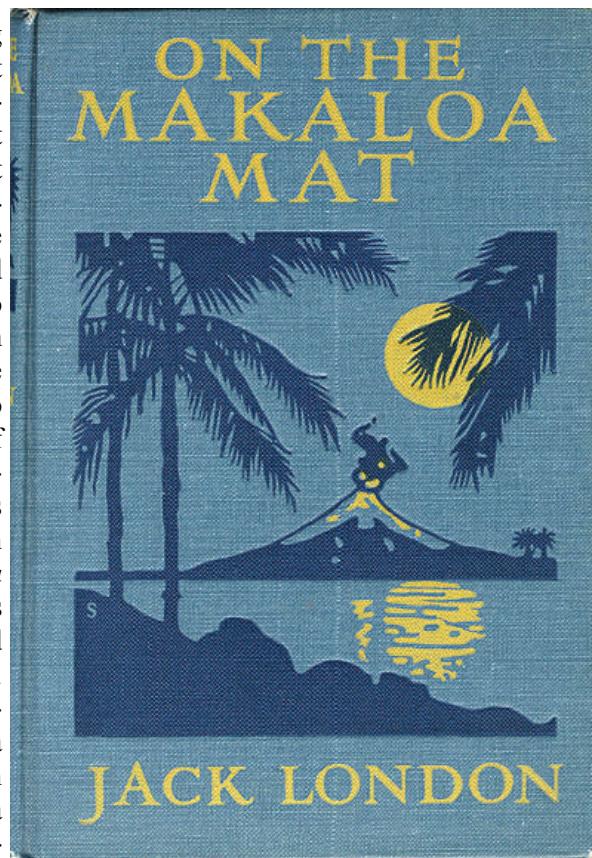
gate or wipe them out. In a series of "future histories" Bierce repeatedly projected the collapse of the dominant cultures of his day and so complete an eradication that future historians would be unable to reconstruct from few and scattered artifacts even a basic conception of them.<sup>13</sup> (Possibly significant is the fact that "The Unparalleled Invasion" is a future history.)

London had a more varied and complex reaction to Darwinism. He began, as most of his contemporaries did, with Herbert Spencer's "survival of the fittest" conception of evolution and the associative interpretation of that phrase as implying moral as well as physical progress. However, because of London's devotion to socialism he found himself supporting the lower classes and the underdogs—neither generally regarded as the fittest elements of society. Further, as a writer he was concerned with individuals but, as his character Koskoosh summed up the process of evolution, "[Nature] had no concern for that concrete thing called the individual. Her interest lay in the species, the race" ("Law of Life," 447). Eventually, as London thought about it, he began to abandon the problematic Spencerian formulation "survival of the fittest" for the position advocated by Thomas Huxley, that in order to be worthy of the designation of "humane" it is incumbent upon human beings to adhere to the goal "the end of which is not the survival of those who happen to be the fittest, in respect of the whole of the conditions which obtain, but of those who are ethically the best." In other words, mere physical survival would not be meaningful by itself and represent an advancement in the civilization of the race. No, "the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process [of evolution], still less in running away from it, but in combating it."<sup>14</sup> London's shift to the Stoical Huxleyan view did not occur overnight, but was accomplished in stages, sometimes two steps forward and one backward,<sup>15</sup> until by the end of his life he glimpsed a way to reconcile Darwinian evolution with humanitarian values.

It was his discovery of Jung in 1916, the last year of his life, that inspired London to discern an in-born pattern to human development that offered hope for the race. Just as Darwin had revealed that evolution drove mutation from a single and simple life form to more and more complex species, Jung, to London, had revealed that within human beings was a natural impulse in their collective unconscious to advance toward an ideal state of wholeness and fulfillment. His affirmation of this new insight was embodied in the surge of the seven Hawaiian stories of *On the Makaloa Mat*. The Jungian revelation was somewhat mystical in that it could be felt and admitted but not proven. Similarly, Bierce, too, in a last, remarkable expression of passion in a handful of tales written between 1905 and 1909 was attracted to a mystical, possibly supernatural, dimension to human life. All

throughout his career Bierce had ridiculed the ideas of ghosts and an afterlife, but a lifetime of recalling the many dead he had known and wondering what the purpose of their lives had been led him at last not to definite belief but to the contemplation of spirit surviving the death of the body and the possibility of a peace beyond death that passed human understanding. Stories such as "A Man with Two Lives," "A Baffled Ambuscade," and "A Resumed Identity" belong to this group. The spectral lawman of "The Arrest" is convincing as a projection of a guilty conscience but like its counterpart of Macbeth's "dagger of the mind" also participates in the supernatural as well as the psychological realm. Additionally, Bierce's reflections on his separation and divorce from a wife he cared for and who did not cease loving him, brought him at last in the underrated, possibly autobiographical, story "Beyond the Wall" to the remorseful insight that he had allowed misunderstandings and pride to unnecessarily sever a relationship that brought him love and happiness, qualities which were otherwise in short supply in his life. Consequently, in these few, very short tales he wrote at the end of his career, tales which have hitherto been generally but mistakenly regarded as slight, the theme which unites them is a longing for post-mortem existence in which wrongs may be rectified and reconciliations take place.

This overview of the relationship between the two authors is but an introduction to the subject, hitting some of the high points, but perhaps enough to encourage further investigation. The scholarship of the past few



decades has clarified the life and burnished the critical standing of London, and most of his writings are available. Almost all of Bierce's fiction is also now available,<sup>16</sup> but the rich trove of his journalism in microfilm archives of the newspapers for which he wrote constitutes a virtual autobiography of his intellectual and spiritual life but has been only slightly exploited, and only by a few scholars. Scholarship is now in place for a re-evaluation of his place in the literary record but to date the process has only begun.<sup>17</sup> The best biography of Bierce, McWilliams's, was written in 1929 and has some deficiencies, and though subsequent biographies have added some useful new information they all suffer from the seriously erroneous view of him as "bitter" or as indulging a gratuitous taste for shock and horror. Properly understood Bierce can be seen, like London, as one of the outstanding, moral, and humane American authors of his time, as well as a crucial figure in the history of realism.

The quotation from Melville at the beginning of this essay appears to overlook the phenomenon of uniqueness, which every author worth his salt has. It would be convenient to believe that all geniuses recognize each other, but they don't; uniqueness gets in the way. It is expressed not only in genuine differences of opinion or style, but even by the wide range of possible differences within similarities. This is most easily seen in our analysis of the fundamental differences between London and Bierce on their supposedly common ground of Darwinism. Pigeonholing authors with general classifications is a guaranteed way of blurring their all-important uniquenesses.

It would be erring in the opposite direction, however, to suggest that comparisons have no value. On the contrary, this essay has endeavored to demonstrate grounds for distinguishing London and Bierce as standing out from most of their contemporaries. Although the critical fortunes of both men have varied greatly, they are masters of styles which even a hundred years later are still being analyzed because understanding of them yields valuable new insights. The authors parallel each other in their unconventional stands on social criticism, patriotism, and democracy; both were acute students of human nature and psychology; both were skeptical of organized religion but moralists nevertheless; both possessed a profound intellectual honesty which they employed not only to examine life but also their own beliefs. And, lastly, though both

were exponents of reason and logic, they addressed themselves at the ends of their careers to questions of connections between mind and spirit, and this life and a larger dimension. In some yet unwritten study of American literature and culture at the turning point of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though they themselves did not recognize it, London and Bierce should loom up together as allies.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> London was one of those readers. See his letter to Cloude-sley Johns of March 30, 1899. *Letters*, vol. 1, 58-59.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to George Sterling (Sept. 12, 1903), *A Much Misunderstood Man*, 110.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to George Sterling (Feb. 18, 1905). *Misunderstood*, 131.

<sup>4</sup> King Hendricks, "Introduction," *The Road*, xv.

<sup>5</sup> *Cosmopolitan* 45:4 (September 1908), 445.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Sterling (Feb. 15, 1911). *Misunderstood* 2208.

<sup>7</sup> The threat appears in his lecture "Revolution" which he delivered in 1905-06 on his cross-country tour. Ernest Everhard also uses it in Chapter 5 of *The Iron Heel*.

<sup>8</sup> *The Portable Jack London*, ed. Earle Labor, 555.

<sup>9</sup> "First Aid to Rising Authors," *Portable Jack London*, 436.

<sup>10</sup> See *Skepticism and Dissent* for the newspaper record of Bierce's commentaries on the Spanish-American and other wars that occurred between 1898 and 1901.

<sup>11</sup> See Berkove's "A Parallax Correction" for an interpretation of "The Unparalleled Invasion" that differs with the usual reading of it as reflecting a fear of "the yellow peril."

<sup>12</sup> One of his epigrams sardonically recommends that "Persons who are horrified by what they believe to be Darwin's theory of the descent of Man from the Ape may find comfort in the hope of his return" (*Collected Works*, vol. 8, 357).

<sup>13</sup> See "Ashes of the Beacon," vol. 3, *Comprehensive Edition of the Short Fiction of Ambrose Bierce and The Fall of the Republic* for examples, and Berkove, "Two Impossible Dreams" for discussion.

<sup>14</sup> Berkove, "Jack London and Evolution," 246.

<sup>15</sup> In "Jack London's 'Second Thoughts,'" Berkove describes London's characteristic way of revisiting and modifying in his later fiction earlier stands he had taken.

<sup>16</sup> The *Comprehensive Edition*, the most recent, complete, and accurate annotated collection of Bierce's short fiction, is now the standard edition.

<sup>17</sup> Since 1998, the team of S. T. Joshi and David Schultz has played a major role in preparing necessary components for a re-evaluation. Among its works are *A Sole Survivor: Bits of Autobiography*; *An Annotated Bibliography of Primary Sources*; *The Fall of the Republic and Other Political Satires*; *The Unabridged Devil's Dictionary*; and the edition of letters *A Much Misunderstood Man*. Joshi by himself edited *The Collected Fables of Ambrose Bierce*. Joshi, Berkove, and Schultz edited *The Short Fiction of Ambrose Bierce: A Comprehensive Edition*, 3 vols. And Bierce's fiction has been closely interpreted in Berkove, *A Prescription for Adversity*.

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