



HAL
open science

”An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge:” The Mask, the Law, the Printed Word

Denis Gauer

► **To cite this version:**

Denis Gauer. ”An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge:” The Mask, the Law, the Printed Word. Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion, 1994, CAPES Curriculum and Other Essays, 07, pp.55-65. hal-02350350

HAL Id: hal-02350350

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02350350v1>

Submitted on 6 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge:"
The Mask, the Law, the Printed Word

Denis Gauer

Université de La Réunion ¹

Ambrose Bierce had dreamed of emulating his masters, Hawthorne and Poe. The judgement of posterity, however, has not vindicated this ambition: Bierce today is deemed, at best, a minor writer of war and ghost stories, or else remembered for his flamboyant cynicism (*The Devil's Dictionary*) and his very mysterious demise. And yet his war tale "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" legitimately deserves to be ranked among the best. Not so much in respect to its anecdote: it is after all, as the title pointedly proclaims, but a mere *occurrence* — and what does one more or less casualty weigh against the backdrop of the whole murderous Civil War? Nor even in regard to its very original narrative technique. Clifton Fadiman, for instance, in his introduction to Bierce's *Collected Writings*,² dismisses it as a mere narrative "trick" without much interest or even relevance, and sees in this story a "heart-freezing" metaphor for the formidable power of the

¹. Université de La Réunion, Faculté des Lettres & Sciences Humaines, 15 avenue René Cassin, B. P. 7151, 97715 Saint-Denis Messag Cédex 9 (France).

². Ambrose Bierce, *The Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce, With an Introduction by Clifton Fadiman* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1946). All page references are to this edition.

survival instinct in man.³ Indeed, this story has generally been misunderstood as an antiwar pamphlet denouncing the absurdity, the cruelty, the inhuman horror of war by a man who had been through it and hence knew what he was writing about. But this is to conveniently ignore Bierce's ferocious irony, which figures prominently in this tale and is here given full rein. The narrative technique is not to be so lightly dismissed either: it is crucial to the whole economy of the text, and part of its underlying strategy, which ultimately aims at questioning various aspects of the literary text — or of any text for that matter, be they historical, political or journalistic (Bierce, it may be remembered, was by profession a journalist in a time when journalism more or less spelled politics). In short, what is finally at stake here is the power, legitimacy and even truth (or truthfulness) of the printed word, not least, in its relation to the realm of actual experience.

At the same time, this is in every sense a *trapped* narrative, very reminiscent of Melville's short story "Benito Cereno." Which is to say that the narration here plays against both the reader (whose credulity must be at the same time pandered to and challenged) and itself (for the very same reasons: the text must not give itself away, so to speak, too soon). Hence the narrative is at the same time a kind of balancing act as well as a hermeneutical game of concealing and revealing. This already evokes another "game" in the story, one we shall examine later: precisely the deadly *wargame* into which the protagonist lets himself be drawn and that will prove his undoing. The basic rule of this "game" is laid down in the commandant's ubiquitous order that declares that "any civilian caught interfering with the railroad, its bridges, tunnels or trains will be summarily hanged" (12). In other words: if you are a civilian, you may tamper with the railroad structures and equipment as much as you wish — so long as you are not found out, that is, caught. The whole point, therefore, is to get away with it: with sabotaging a bridge at the diegetic level, with fooling the reader at the narrative one. Or yet: with fooling the Yanks in one case, with bringing down the prestige of the printed word, and of the text as icon, in the other.

Narration and diegesis do not coincide in this story: section 2, encased between the two others, should chronologically precede section 1. Thus thrust at the very heart of the text, does its central position suggest it contains its secret?

³ The text actually suggests, in section 3, a death wish embedded deep inside the protagonist's psyche: "he knew that he was rising toward the surface — knew it with reluctance, for he was now very comfortable" (13), and again later: "He had no wish to perfect his escape — was content to remain in that enchanting spot until retaken" (16). So much, it would seem, for the formidable survival instinct. Indeed, ultimately a death wish in the protagonist may be arguable.

At the very least, it implies that narration here is foremost — and hence raises the question of the narrator's standing and authority.

The narration is at first strictly objective, merely describing from the outside a particular event: the preparations for a hanging. The narrator is fastidious and obviously knowledgeable about army life and codes. However, at the end of the third paragraph the tone changes: "The liberal military code makes provision for hanging many kinds of persons, and gentlemen are not excluded" (10). This constitutes a first, precious clue: through sarcasm, the narrator lets on that he's not so objective after all, or at least not neutral, and that he's ready to dissociate himself from his narrative. Soon after, the narration turns subjective, getting us into the doomed man's mind and recording his last thoughts. So that the first section already expounds what will be throughout a basic series of oppositions: outside/inside, objective/subjective, real/imaginary. The conclusion of this section provides the reader with another interesting clue:

As these thoughts, which have here to be set down in words, were flashed into the doomed man's brain rather than evolved from it, the captain nodded to the sergeant.
(11)

Here the two opposite dimensions, inside/outside, etc., mingle. But more revealing still is the fact that the text here, as a verbal construction, explicitly records a non-verbal process, a mental flash: this is to admit that words (discourse, narrative) do not automatically coincide with actual experience — in other words, this is to confess, nay to flaunt the basically *fictional* character of the narrative. At the same time, of course, it already offers a clue as to the true nature of the "escape" of section 3. One may also wonder, in passing, at this passive construction: "were flashed." For it begs the question of an agent: flashed by what, or whom? It could be, of course, the protagonist's subconscious mind, or unconscious (in other words, the survival instinct again). Or could it be, more simply, the narrator himself? The ambiguity here is deep and rich: for these last "thoughts" precisely lay out the exact "program" of section 3, the very structure of the "escape" as it will unfold. So that it may be deemed, after all, that the survival instinct (if that is indeed what it is all about here) works in eerie harmony with the overall narrative strategy.

The second section sheds light, in retrospect, on the doomed man's background and on the circumstances that led him to his dire situation. So far the narrator has shown himself as an ambiguous figure to say the least: objective yet sarcastic, straightforward yet disingenuous. The opening of section 2 is such a

monument of duplicity, perverse irony and blatant cynicism that it is worth quoting somewhat extensively:

Peyton Farquhar was a well-to-do planter, of an old and highly respected Alabama family. Being a slave owner and like other slave owners a politician he was naturally an original secessionist and ardently devoted to the Southern cause. Circumstances of an imperious nature, which it is unnecessary to relate here, had prevented him from taking service with the gallant army that had fought the disastrous campaigns ending with the fall of Corinth. (11-2)

The first sentence is objective enough, even with a slight bias in favour of the South. Therefore the contrast is all the more striking in what follows. The next sentence through its crooked logic shows a high degree of prejudice, as might have been found in the rhetorics of Northern bigotry: all slave owners are politicians, and hence secessionists. Now this may have been true: but the sentence gives it a strong ideological twist — this is not history, this is blatant propaganda. The anti-South bias is even more conspicuous in the reference to the Mississippi Valley campaigns. There again, we are fed a half truth, for the narrator very conveniently omits one episode:

In April, 1862, [the Southern troops] delivered a blow which came near routing Grant. By a swift attack they caught his army unprepared at Pittsburgh Landing on the Tennessee River, its back to the swollen stream, its front unfortified. The sudden onslaught almost overwhelmed the Union Forces. Just in time Grant was reinforced, while the Confederates lost their brilliant General Johnston. The result was that the Confederates fell into confusion and withdrew to Corinth in Mississippi.⁴

Bierce the man had fought in the Civil War (and no doubt let it be widely known around him). Bierce the writer, on the other hand, wrote for a Northern public — for the victors that is. And he knew it. This gross instance of “revisionism” may be viewed, therefore, as a piece of cynical pandering to the victors’ self-righteousness. Yet let us keep in mind that previous sarcasm about the “liberal military code”, and consequently not underestimate Bierce’s capacity for ferocious irony. Admittedly, through Farquhar’s pathetic figure he certainly does not spare the South. But let us not put it beyond “Bitter Bierce” to scathe and scald his own compatriots at the same time — if indeed what is known of him is true. Through this heavy piece of propaganda, its highly prejudiced and ideologically charged tone, through this gross historical inaccuracy, maybe he

⁴. Allan Nevins & Henry Steele Commager, *A Pocket History of the United States* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), p. 220-22.

sarcastically holds up a very unflattering portrait to his (probably unsuspecting) Northern readers. And after all, who could blame him? After all, the narrator has already manifested his capacity for dissociation. More important still, such exercise in perverse irony constitutes a damning statement about the printed word: for it discreetly reminds us that ultimately it is the victors who write history (while diligently and ruthlessly hanging the vanquished — but that is merely the rule of the game), and therefore that no text can claim to be innocent. For the printed word also fulfils an ideological function: being in itself a form of power (as the commandant's order will show), it is always put into the service of those who wield power. Hence, in the story, the mention of Corinth and the complete silence about Pittsburgh Landing: similarly, an "Austerlitz Station" is not to be looked for in Britain, nor a "Gare de Waterloo" in Paris. This sort of things simply won't do.

But the narrator gives himself away in still another respect: what about those "circumstances of an imperious nature," which are at once so flippantly discarded with such narratorial aplomb, thus suggesting that the narrator is himself no stranger to arbitrariness and bad faith? For concerning such a "fire eater" as Farquhar, those circumstances must be imperious indeed. And yet: they need only pertain to the text's economy. For in order to be hanged (that is to fall under the sway of the commandant's order) Farquhar has to remain a civilian — or, more generally, simply for the story to be possible, being a civilian is a prerequisite: so that ultimately the narrative points to its own laws and its own logic. Here again, we are discreetly reminded that basically a story (a fiction, a text) is self-contained, with no "real" outside reference apart from itself or other texts. And this in turn suggests a mirror structure: a fiction (a narrative) on fiction (the literary text) about a fiction (an imaginary escape). Apparently, all here is but illusion. Or is it?

Again, the narrative point of view becomes purely external when it comes to the encounter between Farquhar and the grey-clad soldier (the passage is mostly dialogue anyway). The chafing planter of course is eager for news from the front. The dusty horseman readily tells him about Owl Creek bridge, then mentions the order issued by the commandant. This order, we remarked before, can be construed as the basic rule of the wargame Farquhar is soon to enter. But since it conveys a death sentence, we shall also, and for the time being, call it the *Law*. For, to begin with, it has all the trappings of the Law: issued by the military hierarchy, it is ubiquitous ("posted everywhere") and, as we are to suppose, in print. Down at the other end of the chain of command, it will be carried out by a

man, "a sergeant who in civil life may have been a deputy sheriff" (9), therefore a man who is himself closely associated with the law. So that here again we encounter the printed word, not, this time, in connection with fiction but with death and the Law. Not that we are actually presented with the poster and its content. The reader (and the protagonist himself for that matter) confront it only in a roundabout way, through the testimony of the soldier: just as, in a sort of inverted parallel, Farquhar's non verbal thoughts were conveyed through the medium of printed words. So that the question may be here logically hinted at: is the Law too, perhaps, a fiction? In the same perspective, the third section may be interpreted as a questioning of the Law: can the Law be gainsaid — can Farquhar effectively cheat? Which latter question in turn comes to bear upon the text itself: does the narrative aim at scuttling itself, by gainsaying its own rules — or laws? What does the printed word ultimately stand for: the Law, or mere fiction?

Of course the end of the narrative will vindicate the Law, its own rules, its claim to reality and the truth, as well as the basic sterling value, of the printed word — what else? But let us already note that this vindication will have operated once again in a roundabout way (the "escape"). Also, that this very vindication means that a doubt has been cast, and a serious question raised (about the Law, the narrative, the printed word). Indeed, those will have the last word — but at a price.

This second section closes on a revelation: the grey-clad soldier, so obliging with his information, was actually a "Federal scout" (13) — in other words, a Northern spy. But what is exactly the import of this revelation? Of course, the reader may assume that the spy dutifully notified his superiors of Farquhar's intentions, thus dooming his project from the start — and this then would explain his subsequent capture and hanging. Yet, on the other hand, we may trust the planter's own (and systematically emphasized) amateurishness (he has kept his planter's clothes during his ill-fated raid, thus suggesting that Southerners truly go to war as to a ball) to land him into trouble.

More to the point, the revelation about the spy introduces the theme of the *mask* (in a fratricidal war, the uniform is sufficient). After all Farquhar himself (very ineptly it turns out) is said to assent to the machiavellian "villainous dictum that all is fair in love and war" (12). This would imply that in a war, treachery is the rule, and chivalry a myth, or else sheer folly. The narrative presents us with other instances of the mask. The commandant hides, so to speak, and disappears behind his ubiquitous order-poster (for the Law by essence is beyond one man's words, be they printed: it has to be anonymous, a pure, disembodied voice). Also, is not this elaborate hanging ritual a kind of disguise, meant to *mask*, precisely,

what finally amounts to cold-blooded murder (one may here recall Kant's reflection about formal execution filling with horror any soul that harbours a belief in human rights)? And doesn't Farquhar's terrified mind mask the inescapability of death behind a pathetic fantasy of glorious escape? Or, for that matter, didn't the narrator himself mask a historical truth behind cynical propaganda? Does not the Law itself take the guise of the "liberal military code" to hang people, or otherwise mask behind a deputy sheriff's badge? Everyone here, or so it seems, is wearing a mask — that is, except for the protagonist (who is also the only one with a name, in other words a form of personal identity): and because of this he will ultimately die. Then again, it may be argued that Bierce here slyly castigates the Southern chivalrous ethos, with the underlying implication that those people deserved indeed to lose the war: however, the North with its cynical and brutal *Realpolitik* hardly seems to receive a better treatment.

And yet. If we consider the figure of the spy, it seems that basically he told the truth in what information he imparted: about the bridge, about the order. His only lie is one by omission: naturally enough, he kept silent about where he belonged, and did not care to expatiate on the real meaning and value of his personal testimony — "I saw the order . . . I was there a month ago" (12). Does Bierce wish here to illustrate a fine point in journalistic ethics, namely that any given chronicler must reveal his sources? This would be highly ironical indeed, considering the journalistic practices and ethical standards of the period, when Bierce himself worked for the Hearst press, of excellent reputation as all know. On the other hand, we may note that the narrator will proceed exactly as the spy: he will report an escape while omitting to indicate its origin (the doomed man's mind). Ultimately, the spy's case may simply imply this: that truth belongs to no side in particular, that it stands by itself, whatever the colours it flies. Thus the spy could be likened to the *Logos* of the ancient Greeks, which was deemed to say nothing, conceal nothing — just *signify*. What does the spy signify then? Nothing more than the Law itself, the rule of the deadly game. And so though the spy Farquhar has been forewarned — and so has the reader.

Another intriguing aspect of the mask theme is its relation to the Law, and therefore to death. From what we said above, it would seem that the text suggests that the Law cannot speak but from behind a mask (the ubiquitous poster, the grey-clad spy) or (what actually amounts to the same thing really) through a fiction — the narrative itself, but also the *detour* of the imaginary escape. While death can only be confronted through a mask: of ritual, respect and deference (where the hanging is concerned), of illusion and fantasy (in the protagonist's case). Does it mean that the Law is purely a mask for death — a *death mask*? On

the other hand, in order to survive, one has to wear a mask: the enemy uniform in the spy's case, the blue Northern uniform — as opposed to Farquhar's civilian clothes — in the case of the Yankee soldiers in the first section, not to mention, once again, the illusory mask of escape donned by the protagonist's subconscious. So that what the reader is presented with, finally, is a sort of duel of masks: the masks of survival (which fool the Law, so to speak) against the masks of the Law (which entails death): here again, the whole point is to *get away with it*. In such a game, of course, the protagonist did not stand a chance. On the other hand this may qualify the narrator's cynicism at the beginning of section 2: being in "enemy" territory, he chooses to wear the mask of the prevalent ideology, only the better to tell some unsavoury truths. Or who knows? Like the spy, like the ancient *Logos* itself, in order to signify, merely. What exactly shall have to be determined.

At this point it may be argued that the third section is but superfluous, pointless play: after all, it does not tell the reader anything new, except perhaps about Farquhar's vanity, even in death, or about Bierce's obsession with the evil of spooky forms of life and, more to the point, about the futility of any notion of cheating with an open face. The Law here is spectacularly vindicated (laws of war, laws of the narrative — the text indeed knows all the ropes, the hanging variety included), as well as the stature of the printed word: the text ultimately merges with the commandant's order (which in a certain way is then actualized as the text itself — or, if one prefers, appears as a "*mise en abyme*" of the latter), and therefore sides with truth against fiction. In this process the narration emerges as the spy's double: he did not lie, he simply omitted to *situate* himself, to indicate his sources — no hanging crime after all: Farquhar's fate indeed shows that, in a world where dissembling is the rule, it is rather the other way round. Conversely the reader is pinned down as the protagonist's double, as the presumptuous dupe who could be led to believe that the Law can be defeated.

The last section would be just that: a detour, not a shirking of the truth (of death as the ultimate reality of the Law). But such a detour is far from innocent, since it has the effect of tainting the narrative (and hence the printed word) with ambiguity (to say the least). There are unpleasant, ideological overtones here, as we have shown. The text cannot help but suggest that the South deserved defeat: just as Farquhar's undertaking, the whole Civil War was a foregone conclusion — which in turn cannot help but imply that the North was right and thus fully justified (historically at least). On another plane, another cynical implication is that gullible readers who fall for deceptive narratives merely deserve the literature

and authors (or for that matter the press and journalists) they get. But at the same time this sardonic reflection on the manipulative power of the printed word questions the legitimacy of the Law, by pointing to its true origin: it is based solely on force, it is the triumphant word of the victor — the Northern army, the North as master of official history, the writer and the journalist who have access to the printing press and the whole publishing structure. So that after all the vindication of the printed word appears strained, it cannot restore its full presupposed legitimacy: not only do not words automatically coincide with reality and experience, but they can be used to convey lies or distorted truths — while on the other hand an enemy, a vulgar spy, can be shown to speak the truth: what discourse, then, is to proclaim itself innocent?

What is then the relationship between the Law and the printed word? The printed word makes up the Law, brings it into the world, objectifies it and embodies it, as it were — that is the commandant's order. At the same time the Law injects its power into the printed word, suffuses it with its own terrible majesty, turns it into an icon, Medusa-like. In other words they cannot function one without the other: the Law for its very existence, the printed word for its status, that is its legitimacy — its very justification, or right to exist, it could be said. Yet, we must admit that any discussion in this case is bound to be somewhat feckless: for the simple reason that what we called "the Law" in the first place does not possess any real, ontological foundation whatsoever. Strictly speaking, what we called the *Law* does not exist. What we have here — in the text — is not an essence, nor a principle, but a mere process, a system — a fabrication. And what is more, a fabrication shown to us in all of its stages: the Northern army took hold of a bridge in enemy territory, one of their commanding officers (probably acting on instructions or at least permission from his superiors) issued a certain "dissuasive" order that was then duplicated and posted everywhere across the area. A "mechanism" was thus set up that would prove unstoppable: any straying civilian within the reach of the order (for of course the order is valid only within the bridge area) would ultimately find himself dangling at the end of a rope. So that what we encounter here, not very surprisingly, is simply another *structure*: the bridge is a structure, the hanging ritual, the military system and code are structures, and so too the war and the text itself — and so, after all, that which we called "the Law."

But the structure is always secondary: it is always *produced*. Hence the need to buttress its lack of foundation — to inject it with, in Derrida's words, a *supplement of origin*. In other words, the structure so to speak always *overdoes* it so as to mask its very want, which is simply its essential *contingency*: the hanging

ceremony, for instance, has no other function. Thus Farquhar is ultimately crushed by *the* structure, he who set out to destroy *a* structure. Of course we could also muse here on the connection between his desire (apparently for glory) and “the Law,” but that would be a rather Freudian slip, if only because what are termed “desire” and “the Law” are but effects of the structure: they would not (could not) exist outside it (just as the structure would not exist without them), and thus always bear (just as they are meant to) witness to it — in a sense, all three amount to the same thing. Farquhar’s dreams of vainglory are products of the war, by and large, exactly in the same way as the commandant’s order is.

The “Law,” therefore, is simply a means to an end: the meeting for a given purpose between raw power and the printed word — or, more simply still, between raw power and the structure (since the printed word in any case always harks back to the latter). But the structure in turn points to power — and power itself is a matter of structure. Typically, through such perpetual shifts, the Law as such is nowhere to be found. And this may be what the text ultimately wishes to signify: that the Law, basically, is a cheat — and so too the printed word, in so far as it (inevitably) colludes with the fraud.⁵

The printed word itself then turns out to be a mask. Beyond which of course (in this narrative at least — but possibly in all others as well) there is nothing, no revelation of any kind, no ultimate meaning but only death, which neither unveils nor says anything: “then all is darkness and silence!” (18) — needless to say that this statement is another instance of the printed word, and hence belongs this side of death. Does this constitute the only *Logos*-like signifying act of the whole narrative: namely that in wartime the only law, the sole meaning, is death? A disappointing message then, since it is but a trite repetition of what the commandant’s order (relayed by his messenger, the spy) had already posited. A mere tautology then would emerge: the Law is the Law (the Law is death, death is the Law). Besides, the printed word would appear marked by death — as a kind of death mask too.⁶

⁵. Of course, denouncing the Law as a fraud does not in any way vindicate Farquhar or turn him into a victim: he had been fairly warned. Besides, he himself chooses to fall for the structure: simply, he fails to realize he is going for the wrong instance, that is, the one without power to back it. Farquhar — at least in the narrator’s perspective — is not a victim but a laughable, romantic fool: in other words, a loser. Also, a Sartrean perspective could be invoked here: every man chooses his life and his destiny because he chooses a certain structure and makes it his — or at least he imagines he does: for of course it is the other way round, as Orwell in *1984* had perfectly understood.

⁶. See, for instance, Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967), p. 100: “Tout graphème est d’ordre testamentaire.”

From this (not so superfluous) demonstration nobody escapes untouched or unscathed, South and North, reader, narrator or narrative (text, printed word): all end up as casualties to some degree or other of a dubious game between truth and lies, between "the Law" and the masks. Through this demonstration, too, Bierce manages to break the Law: not through transgression (which would only vindicate it) but *subversion* — by showing its real origin and status. At the same time he desecrates the icon of the printed word, by showing that a text, any text, is a strategic or ideological fabrication, that a discourse (any discourse), far from being innocent or straightforward, is basically manipulative. One figure only seems to escape scot-free: the spy. But after all it is his trade. Also, from behind his mask, *Logos*-like, he simply signifies: could it be, then, that he is meant as the epitome of the perfect reporter, ever-ready to accomplish his duty, that is to *report*, no matter to which patron?

If the narrator, therefore, is a cynic, the cynicism is not his own: but rather, in W. Golding's pointed formula, the infinite cynicism of adult life. Only a Southern planter, it seems, could believe that beating such a system was mere child's play: for he of course was the child in the play — and hence all Southerners by implication. The narrator also transcends that cynicism by finally de-constructing it, as it were, and this is precisely why, in the end, we cannot judge him, no more so than his double the spy: because both literally are nobody, they claim no personal identity and take no sides. The narrator is, so to speak, nowhere to be found, since he is without any personal or ideological *topos*. The Civil War was not his own, nor its defeats and victories. Not to mention its laws — or the Law for that matter.

