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Conversation Across a Century

The War Stories of Ambrose Bierce and Tim O'Brien

There is a certain brotherhood of warriors, a commonality of experience, that transcends time and the differences between individual wars. The decision of whether to go to war or to avoid it, the task of conducting oneself appropriately in situations that have no parallels in peace, the frustrations that result from beholding waste and stupidity and death at close range, and the difficult transition to civilian life (provided one survives) are some of the principal elements that distinguish this fraternity.[1] Frequently, members of this brotherhood will recount their experiences in memoirs or histories, but these accounts tend to be specific, personal, and dated—rooted in and limited by their attempt to recount factual truths. Rarely, however, a former soldier becomes a genuine *writer*—someone capable of translating his mundane reality into a transcendent fiction—someone who understands Tim O'Brien's dictum that "story-truth is truer sometimes than happening truth" (O'Brien 203). Two such men, separated in time by the passage of a century, but linked by their experiences and the art those experiences produced, are Ambrose Bierce and Tim O'Brien.

Their wars and their armies could hardly have been more different. The American Civil War, though it has been called the first modern war (largely for the scale of its destruction and bloodshed), was also the last of an-

other age in its battlefield tactics and organization. The same man who would be dubbed "The King of Spades" for his employment of trench warfare in the defense of Richmond would also order the last Napoleonic charge at Gettysburg. The massed movement of troops in formation on an open field of battle bore little resemblance to the campaign of ambush, containment, and pacification that would be waged in tropical jungles, tunnels, and villages a century later. The largely volunteer army, in which men who had grown up in the same state if not the same town fought side by side on native ground against former countrymen and sometimes still blood kin, was markedly different from the melting pot of largely reluctant draftees that found itself engaged halfway around the world against an enemy as "other" to them as any on earth. Yet, in the literature of these two men, similarities of theme and treatment exist that bridge those differences and more yet to be conceived, and that attest to the universality of the soldier's experience. Likewise, differences of tone and meaning in the tales of each tell us more about contrasts between the philosophies of their authors than the dissimilarities of their wars or times.

The first decision that faces many a fit young man in a time of war is whether or not he will fight. In Bierce's day, that question was sometimes made all the more difficult by the necessity, in choosing to fight, of also choosing a side. Indeed, an unwillingness to fight against one's blood kin or former friends was doubtless a factor in many decisions to avoid military service. The decision to fight, however, was apparently an easy one for Bierce. On 19 April 1861, "Bierce became the second man in Elkhart County [Indiana] to enlist in the Union army" (Morris 19). Indeed, in the most recent contribution to Bierce biography, Roy Morris Jr. covers Bierce's young life before the beginning of the war in a swift

nineteen pages, but one gets the sense that had the rest of his family enlisted on the side of the South, Bierce might have been the *first* in his county to join the Union cause. Thus, Bierce's own life holds no parallel to the soul-searching of O'Brien's "On the Rainy River," where the semi-fictional[2] first-person protagonist of *The Things They Carried* must come to grips with his draft notice.

But for many of Bierce's peers, the decision was not so easy. As Morris points out, William Dean Howells, Henry James Jr., Henry Adams, Walt Whitman, and Samuel Clemens all found ways to serve that did not involve putting themselves in harm's way. Or else they avoided the conflict entirely, heading west to the territories or east to Europe, leaving "less gifted, less learned, but physically braver Ambrose Bierce" as "the only one to make anything approaching great art out of the looming national calamity" (23).

Empathy is the strength of the writer, however, and though Bierce did not seem to face any trying decisions about whether to fight or on which side, he could appreciate the dilemma of those who did, as he demonstrated in his story, "A Horseman in the Sky." At the core of this story, Bierce no doubt had Robert E. Lee's momentous decision in mind. A man with absolutely no enthusiasm for secession, Lee was offered command of the Union Army, but when his home state seceded, he could not escape what he felt was a higher obligation to Virginia. The protagonist of Bierce's story, a Virginian named Carter Druse, made the opposite decision, announcing one morning at breakfast, "Father, a Union regiment has arrived at Grafton. I am going to join it" (79).[3] In the scene which follows, one can almost imagine the dialogue with self, the internal war of words that Lee must have waged as he paced the floor all night before his resignation from the Army of the United States. "The father lifted his leonine head, looked at the son a moment

in silence, and replied: 'Well, go, sir, and whatever may occur do what you conceive to be your duty. Virginia, to which you are a traitor, must get on without you'" (79). Those citizens of the South whose consciences directed them to take arms against their home states faced a lose-lose decision. A choice to fight on either side left them traitors to either their consciences or their homelands. Likely, many whose sentiments lay with Union or with Abolition ended up fighting on the Southern side, because, as O'Brien puts it in "On the Rainy River," they were cowards. Facing his own demons, O'Brien's narrator explains,

> It was a kind of schizophrenia. A moral split. I couldn't make up my mind. I feared the war, yes, but I also feared exile. I was afraid of walking away from my own life, my friends and my family, my whole history, everything that mattered to me. I feared losing the respect of my parents. . . . I feared ridicule and censure. My hometown was a conservative little spot on the prairie, a place where tradition counted, and it was easy to imagine people sitting around a table down at the old Gobbler Café on Main Street, coffee cups poised, the conversation slowly zeroing in on the young O'Brien kid, how the damned sissy had taken off for Canada. (48)

Substitute "traitor" and "the North" for "sissy" and "Canada" and you have the dilemma of the Southerner whose heart and conscience are with the Union cause. Follow O'Brien's story to its conclusion, and you find a modern parallel for the Confederate soldier who fights not for The Cause, but to save face. With the Canadian shore in sight, O'Brien's narrator faces a bitter truth:

> Right then . . . I understood that I would not do what I should do. I would not swim away from my hometown and my country and my life. I would not be brave. . . . It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that's all it was. . . . I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to. (59-62)

In general, Bierce gives more attention to the opposite side of this dilemma. Rather than exploring the issue of moral cowardice and its role in filling the ranks of the army, Bierce chooses to focus on the price of moral bravery. For O'Brien's narrator the imagined costs of such a choice are overwhelming. He caves. He fights for a cause he does not believe in. At least two of Bierce's stories take as their themes the very real paradoxical costs of moral bravery that can only arise in a *civil* war.

One such story is the already mentioned "A Horseman in the Sky." Bierce continues,

> So Carter Druse, bowing reverently to his father, who returned the salute with a stately courtesy that masked a breaking heart, left the home of his childhood to go soldiering. By conscience and courage, by deeds of devotion and daring, he soon commended himself to his fellows and his officers; and it was to these qualities and to some knowledge of the country that he owed his selection for his present perilous duty at the extreme outpost. (79)

There is no hint of cowardice here, no irony in Bierce's description of Druse's "brave, compassionate heart" (81). Neither human frailty nor malice form the themes of this

story. Rather, the courage to do one's duty and the tremendous cost of that courage in such a war as this drive Bierce's themes. When forced by military necessity to take the life of a Confederate scout who has detected a Union march, the success of which depends on surprise, Druse does so. He pauses, it is true, but finally, "The duty of a soldier was plain: the man must be shot dead. . . . In his memory, as if they were a divine mandate, rang the words of his father at their parting: 'Whatever may occur, do what you conceive to be your duty.'. . . He fired" (81-82). The Confederate scout is, of course, the elder Druse. Duty is Carter Druse's curse and his salvation. Duty demanded he fight in opposition to his homeland and his family, but it is duty which enables him to live with the consequences. He finds resolution and solace in his father's mandate. "He was calm now. . . . Duty had conquered; the spirit said to the body: 'Peace, be still'" (82). The reader may be outraged, but at whom can the outrage be directed? If there is Biercean irony in this story, it is in the final remark of the shocked sergeant as he walks away from the patricide, "Good God!" (85).

An equally illuminating study is "The Affair at Coulter's Notch," a story which takes the dilemma of having chosen the side of conscience still a step further. An artillery officer with the Union Army, Captain Coulter is ordered to silence a Confederate battery positioned near a plantation house. The reader familiar with Bierce's style can see the story's ending coming from the moment a young adjutant remarks to Coulter's colonel that, "there is something wrong in all this. Do you happen to know that Captain Coulter is from the South?" (147). The general who has ordered Coulter to engage the Confederate guns has been insulted by Coulter's "red-hot Secessionist" wife at some earlier date when the division was encamped near Coulter's home. The plan-

tation house is, of course, Coulter's, and the story ends with a fiendishly powder-grimed, bloody, and tear-streaked Coulter cradling his dead wife and child and revealing this truth to the colonel.

The most important theme of "The Affair at Coulter's Notch," however, is not the dilemma of the Southerner fighting against the South. Rather, the central issue of this story is the perfidy of the general who orders Coulter to the task, knowing the house to be Coulter's, expecting Coulter's family to be there, and hoping to dispatch Coulter, wife, and child in a single demonic engagement to assuage his own damaged pride. At one point, the militarily sound option of silencing the Confederate guns with more effective if less destructive fire from Federal infantry snipers is refused. The colonel's answer that "the general's orders for the infantry not to fire are still in force" (147) makes clear the nature of the engagement as a private vendetta. This sacrifice of human life on the altar of selfish pride is perhaps the bitterest theme of Bierce's war stories. It is one he repeats, even more explicitly in "One Kind of Officer."

Bierce's title invites judgment and demands discrimination. What kind of officer is this? It is the same kind as the general whose wounded pride finds balm in the destruction of the Coulter family. In fact, it is, in some ways, a reversal of that story, and one with a more poetically just outcome. In "One Kind of Officer," it is the subordinate artillerist, Captain Ransome, whose pride is wounded by General Cameron and who seeks revenge by following orders to the letter—orders which result in the senseless slaughter of hundreds of men on his own side. The discriminating factor in determining what *kind* of officer this is, is not whether or not he blindly follows orders. Both Captain Ransome and his subordinate, Lieutenant Price, follow their orders to the letter, and neither does so blindly. Yet one is justified by

the outcome and the other is clearly not. Rather, the discriminator here, if there is one, is whether the officers follow their conscience. Informed that he is firing on his own men, Ransome does not cease. At the height of his madness, the captain himself dispatches a Union color bearer with a pistol shot. That Lieutenant Price's "I know nothing" results in the eventual and just execution of Ransome, however, does not make the lieutenant a better officer; it merely demonstrates that his vengeance is better aimed. One mustn't forget that the lieutenant also knew of the mistake and informed the captain of it, and received precisely the same insult that the captain had suffered from the general, "It is not permitted to you to know *anything*. It is sufficient that you obey my orders" (202). Clearly the lieutenant, in informing the captain of his battery's mistaken "friendly fire" (an oxymoron even more profound than "civil war") expected the captain to give the order to cease fire. When the captain did not, that responsibility devolved upon the lieutenant. Though the firing did end almost immediately thereafter, Bierce's simple comment, "The lieutenant went to his post," gives no indication that he was any more likely to countermand an insulting and immoral order and stop the slaughter than was the captain. Thus, his complicity in this crime is only slightly less than the captain's, and if he escapes a firing squad in the end, it is more a comment on the unequal fortunes of war than on his quality as an officer. In these men who follow orders in direct contradiction to the simplest standards of decency, Bierce's tale foreshadows the pleas of the Nazi SS tried in the aftermath of World War II.

Though few reach Captain Ransome's level of heinousness, the role of officers is a frequent theme in Bierce's war fiction. Like many in the Union Army, Bierce blamed the protraction of the war and the profusion of the bloodshed largely on poor leadership. In "An Affair

of Outposts" he minces no words in attributing to Grant's "manifest incompetence" (174) the slaughter and near Union disaster that was Shiloh. If Bierce were given the task of writing the Officer's Field Manual, one might gather from his fiction that his first rule would be simply: "Do no harm." The harm that poor officership can and does cause is all too evident in both Bierce's stories and his memoirs. On May 27, 1864, Bierce was present when Generals Wood and Howard sent

> a weak brigade of fifteen hundred men, with masses of idle troops behind in the character of audience, [marching] a quarter-mile uphill through almost impassable tangles of underwood, along and across precipitous ravines, [to] attack breastworks constructed at leisure and manned with two divisions of troops as good as themselves. (42)

Bierce labels the act a "criminal blunder" and titles his account of it "The Crime at Pickett's Mill."

If Bierce's proscriptive rule would be "do no harm," his prescriptive corollary would condense Robert E. Lee's sublime ruminations on the subject[4] to simply: "Do your duty." Furthermore, Bierce has great disdain for those who expect praise for doing no more than what is necessary and expected, and equal disdain for those willing to heap it on them. The following excerpt from Bierce's commentary in the Sunday, July 31, 1898, San Francisco *Examiner* may be his most thorough expression of this philosophy outside his fiction:

> I venture to submit that the enthusiastic young gentlemen who send us military news from the several war-centers are a trifle too repetitive in their praise of "coolness." In

> every engagement on sea or land they are profoundly affected by the tranquil self-possession of our officers in the "hail of shot and shell" or "storm of bullets." It would be interesting to know how these admiring scribes think that an officer might naturally be expected to act. Do they look for him to gnash his teeth, tear his hair, roll his eyes and stamp like a beeherder that has mistaken his vocation? Would it be more in accordance with the laws of nature and the fitness of things for him to pass the few precious moments of actual fighting in dodging bullets and yelling unintelligible warnings to the men whose work he has undertaken to direct and supervise? Possibly the correspondents have not learned that the first and most elementary duty of an officer in action is to keep his head on straight and his heart out of his mouth. For doing so he is entitled to the same praise that is the due of any man who does rather well the work the [sic] he has in hand and to no more. Let us have a rest from the apotheosis of "coolness." (*Skepticism* 88-89)

Still, though coolness may be what is expected, even Bierce knew too well that men's courage frequently falls short of their own expectations. In "One Officer, One Man," Captain Graffenried, an officer heretofore condemned to safe but inglorious duty at higher headquarters, finally has a chance at combat. "He was in a state of mental exaltation and scarcely could endure the enemy's tardiness in advancing to the attack. To him this was opportunity. . . . Victory or defeat . . . in one or in the other he should prove himself a soldier and a hero" (208). In

the end, he thrusts his own sword through his heart, unable to bear the suspense of waiting for an attack that never comes.

O'Brien, too, takes up the theme of how men handle the awesome fear of combat, extending his theory of how they ended up there to begin with in the chapter from which the larger work takes its name. Among the things men carried in Vietnam, O'Brien lists,

> the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down, it required perfect balance and perfect posture. They carried their reputations. They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place. . . . They were too frightened to be cowards. (20-21)

This issue of pride masquerading as courage is one of the points of Bierce's "Killed at Resaca." Lieutenant Herman Brayle is eventually shot and killed, largely because he will never take cover under fire, and as Bierce observes dryly, "He who ignores the law of probabilities challenges an adversary that is seldom beaten" (136). When the narrator of the story, who has come into possession of Brayle's personal effects, finds in them a letter and reads it a year after the war, he finds the reason for Brayle's foolhardy displays of "bravery." The letter, from Brayle's beloved, Miss Marian Mendenhall, reads:

> Mr. Winters, whom I shall always hate for it, has been telling that at some battle in Vir-

> ginia, where he got his hurt, you were seen crouching behind a tree. I think he wants to injure you in my regard, which he knows the story would do if I believed it. I could bear to hear of my soldier lover's death, but not of his cowardice. (140)

Brayle has carried his reputation and Miss Mendenhall's letter (later returned to her stained with his blood) to his death. As a whole, however, Bierce's tale is more a misogynistic indictment of those who would incite such vanity of courage rather than an empathetic portrayal of those who display it. The letter carried by Brayle expresses sentiments nearly the opposite of those in letters carried by O'Brien's Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, in which "Martha had never mentioned the war, except to say, Jimmy, take care of yourself" (23).

Lieutenant Cross forms O'Brien's principal treatment of the weight of responsibility that rests on the shoulders of line officers. In general, O'Brien is gentler on the human race as a whole than is "Bitter Bierce," and his portrayal of officers is no exception. We have seen Bierce's attitude toward the treachery of officers who spend the lives of their men for their own private gain or vendettas, and we have seen how clearly Bierce put the blame for most of the Union defeats on failures of leadership. O'Brien's presentation of Cross is far more sympathetic than almost anything in Bierce. When Cross makes costly mistakes, they haunt him terribly, but he learns from them. Similarly, there are no examples in *The Things They Carried* of anyone to match Bierce's Captain Ransome, or the general at Coulter's Notch. These Biercean characters are willful perpetrators—calculating and unremorseful. It may be evidence of another hundred years of progress toward the egalitarian American ideal that O'Brien's officers seem equally victimized by the

war as do their men. Speaking of officers in Vietnam, O'Brien has said, "The enlisted men—the common grunts—preferred an officer who put the emphasis of man over mission" (McNerney 6). Accordingly, O'Brien's Cross is another example of how his preference to offer the positive model contrasts with Bierce's satirist's preference for portraying the opposite.

After any war short of total annihilation, a society faces the task of reintegration of the survivors. It is only in the last twenty years, in the aftermath of Vietnam, that the difficulty of this task has begun to receive widespread acknowledgment. Terms such as "post-traumatic stress syndrome" have made their way from the psychiatrist's office into the general vocabulary. O'Brien addresses this theme specifically in "Speaking of Courage" and in "Notes." In the former, Norman Bowker spends an entire day driving around a lake near his hometown. "The war was over and there was no place in particular to go" (157). Bowker is burdened with memories of the war, with stories, with tortured feelings of personal failure, and has no one to share them with. Like Bierce, who according to Morris, held "an often-stated belief that part of himself had died in the war" (51), Bowker complains to the narrator of "Notes," "It's almost like I got killed over in Nam . . . Hard to describe" (178). In "Notes," we learn that Bowker eventually hanged himself. We also learn from "Notes" something of, if not the motivation, at least the value of writing about one's war experiences:

> I did not look on my work as therapy, and still don't. Yet . . . it occurred to me that the act of writing had led me through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse. By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain

> truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened . . . and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain. (179-80)

Although both men spent time as journalists after their respective wars, O'Brien began to publish stories of Vietnam before the war was even fully over and left journalism to write full time following the publication of his memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973). Bierce, on the other hand, spent over a quarter of a century as a journalist and was perhaps the best known satirist of his day by the time he published his first collection of stories, *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, in 1892. This marked difference in the two men's careers may account, at least in part, for some of the differences in their fictions.

There is certainly, however, one remarkable parallel in both their lives and their fiction, and that is their visits to their old battlefields after their wars have passed, and the fictional accounts which preceded each. Bierce's "A Resumed Identity" and O'Brien's "Field Trip" bear remarkable similarities in both theme and action, but the differences in their meaning and outcome are perhaps as good a contrast of these men's philosophies as can be found. Both penned these pieces in anticipation of their actual visits to the ground. Bierce's visit would not come until the year before his mysterious disappearance, when, en route from Washington to Mexico, he made a tour of his old battlefields (Morris 251), including that of the Battle of Stones River, the setting for the short story. O'Brien's similar return to the fields of Vietnam would not occur until 1994 (McNerney 2), four years after the publication of "Field Trip" in *The Things They Carried.*

In a 1994 interview, O'Brien remarks that, "in a large way, the feeling of going back to Vietnam was exactly the way I'd imagined it. That's the power of human imagination. That's why I think we love stories so much. They are future predictors" (4). One must wonder if perhaps it is Bierce's story O'Brien has in mind, for it predicts a significant aspect of O'Brien's experience. Bierce opens his tale with an old man watching an army of ghostly soldiers move silently through the landscape before him. O'Brien does not use ghosts to create his story-truth in "Field Trip," but they were very much a part of his happening-truth when it finally came. Barely a month after his return to the States, O'Brien said of his visit:

> There's nothing left on my firebase in terms of barbed wire or buildings, not a scrap. But the outline of the hills on which the firebase was placed is the outline as it was a long time ago, minus all the buildings. In a spooky way, it looks as if ghosts are inhabiting the place now. . . . The ghosts are still there. It's as if you close your eyes, you can see the paddies and villages and firebases and so on; you can almost hear the soldiers laughing and drinking. It makes you believe in a spirit world. (2-3)

In O'Brien's story itself, the parallels with Bierce's, if coincidental, are uncanny. Each story takes place long after the battles have passed. In each, the land and its people have once again returned to agriculture. In Bierce, once the ghost soldiers have passed away and the day begins to dawn, the protagonist surveys the scene before him:

> On every side lay cultivated fields showing no sign of war and war's ravages. From the chimneys of the farmhouses thin ascensions of blue smoke signaled preparations for a day's peaceful toil. . . . A Negro . . . prefixing a team of mules to the plow, was flatting and sharping contentedly at his task. (241-42)

Compare this to the description O'Brien's protagonist gives when, revisiting Vietnam, he arrives at the site of what is the central traumatic event of *The Things They Carried*, the death of Kiowa:

> No ghosts—just a flat grassy field. The place was at peace. There were yellow butterflies. There was a breeze and a wide blue sky. Along the river two old farmers stood in ankle-deep water, repairing the same narrow dike where we had laid out Kiowa's body after pulling him from the muck. . . . One of the farmers looked up and shaded his eyes, staring across the field at us, then after a time he wiped his forehead and went back to work. (207)

When Bierce's protagonist thinks himself deaf because he cannot hear the passing troops, he "said so, and heard his own voice, although it had an unfamiliar quality that almost alarmed him" (240). Having spoken in the midst of the field, the fictional O'Brien remarks, "My voice surprised me. It had a rough, chalky sound, full of things I did not know were there" (212).

The parallels seem too extensive to be coincidental, and one could hardly want them to be. The already healing and optimistic conclusion of O'Brien's tale becomes even more so with Bierce's darker finish as a foil.

The old Civil War veteran, for he is both old and amnesiac, eventually finds his way to Hazen's monument on the Stones River battlefield. There, faced finally with the reality of a lost lifetime, the old man beholds his reflection in a pool of clear water, and horrified, falls face downward into it and dies. Bierce's old man is the Civil War equivalent of Norman Bowker. But such is not the fate of O'Brien's narrator. Nearly everything is reversed. The fictional O'Brien of the story comes not to find a monument, but to leave one, Kiowa's moccasins, in the field. The pool is not clear; it is sewage. O'Brien does not fall face first in it and die; instead, he sits in it and slaps hands with the water like a child in a bathtub, and feels, "something go shut in my heart, while something else swung open." Finally, he arises to go on with life, telling his daughter at last, "All that's finished" (213).

By this point, it should be clear that whatever the similarities of war that both Bierce and O'Brien beheld, the tinting of the spectacles through which they viewed them was vastly different. It is not without reason that Bierce was nicknamed "Bitter Bierce." The difference in their perceptions is evident throughout their works.

In O'Brien's, there is no less waste of life and potential, but it results from the sheer dumb luck of war. When Kiowa slips under the mud in "Speaking of Courage" and "In the Field," Lieutenant Cross eventually rationalizes that "it was one of those freak things, and the war was full of freaks, and nothing could ever change it anyway" (198). In contrast, Bierce's stories, more often than not, revolve around clearly human agency in the perpetration of disaster. Even when there is human agency in O'Brien, as in Cross's choice to set up on the shit field into which Kiowa sinks, the agency is that of stupidity, mistake, or oversight. The key is that it lacks volition. In Bierce the agency is more often human malevolence.

Part of this difference is accounted for by each author's philosophy of fiction. Clearly, Bierce has a moral in mind, something to teach, a judgment to make. For O'Brien, didacticism has no place in a war story. "I pretty much believe," he says in the interview with McNerney, "that war stories don't carry morals. You should keep them as close to the bone as possible without embroidery, without much but the facts" (8-9). This different approach to the purpose of fiction helps to account, as much as the passage of a century, for the marked difference in tone between the works of these two authors. The difference between Bierce's fiction and O'Brien's is the difference between a lesson and the test. O'Brien goes on to say,

> All stories have at their heart an essential moral function, which isn't only to put yourself into someone's shoes, but to go beyond that and put yourself into someone else's moral framework. How would *you* behave in that world? What is the moral thing to do and not to do? . . .
>
> Fiction in general, and war stories in particular, serve a moral function, but not to give you lessons, not to tell you how to act. Rather, they present you with philosophical problems, then ask you to try to adjudicate them in some way or another. (10)

This attitude accounts for one of the most significant differences in these stories. O'Brien's evoke sympathy. They evoke understanding. One may be overwhelmed with awe at the circumstances O'Brien's characters endured, and though the reader may occasionally feel an urge to pass judgment, it is seldom because O'Brien has invited it. Bierce, on the other hand, is in the business of

judgment. The earlier author's greatest successes came not in the field of fiction, but as a journalistic satirist, as one whose daily task was to point out fault, stupidity, corruption, dishonesty, hypocrisy, and all the infinite mundane vices that have plagued the human race from time immemorial. Sympathy was hardly ever Bierce's goal, except when sympathy for the victim of some offense would serve to intensify the condemnation of its perpetrator. Thus, the purpose of Captain Armisted's death in "An Affair of Outposts," his life having been sacrificed in order to save the Governor's, is not meant to evoke sadness at his death so much as to add something like the sin of murder to the Governor's already significant burden of adultery and deceit. Like Carter Druse, who sacrifices his own father, and Captain Coulter, who sacrifices his home, wife, and child, Captain Armisted, who by this point in the story is aware that it is the Governor who has seduced Armisted's wife, sacrifices himself to a sense of duty.

A key to the focus of Bierce's fictions is where credibility lies, and that focus, again, is not on noble sacrifice, but on selfish frailty. It is with some difficulty that the reader accepts the actions of these noble protagonists. Few would be willing or able to make these same decisions, or take these same actions. Few in Carter Druse's position would sacrifice their father. Most in Captain Coulter's position would train their guns on those of the Confederates not so near the house. And most, if not all, with Armisted's knowledge of the Governor's very personal betrayal, would delight in sacrificing him to the grim reaper of war, given half an opportunity to do so. Perhaps this tendency of Bierce's to cause his characters to act in ways contrary to all intuition and most human nature explains his fondness for, even dependence on, the surprise ending. In many cases, his stories would work no other way. The reader would simply reject the

actions of his characters as unbelievable at too early a stage in the story for Bierce to make his point. By withholding an essential portion of the truth, Bierce lulls his readers into accepting the story's action before they have reason to question its plausibility.

This failure to evoke lasting empathy in the mind of the reader may explain why of all Bierce's Civil War short stories only "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" has garnered significant acclaim. Although this story employs the typical Biercean surprise ending, that ending, in this case, does not destroy the credibility of the action. Rather, the reader's identification with the protagonist is actually increased by the revelation of the truth. Whereas Peyton Farquhar's miraculous and heroic escape might stretch credibility for a short while, the final realization that it has all taken place in his mind leaves the reader with a heightened sense of reality and identification. This is in sharp contrast with the typical Biercean ending, which may occasionally achieve surprise (though only if the reader is new to Bierce), but at the cost of shattering identification, credibility, and catharsis.

Quite the opposite is typical of O'Brien. While treating many of the same themes, O'Brien does so in a manner realistic and simple, without depending on trick endings and without being didactic. The result is an identification with his characters that is lasting. This vicarious immersion in a character is explicitly one of O'Brien's goals as a writer. O'Brien finds great satisfaction in the letters he receives from readers, especially women, who say, "Thank you for writing this book because now I feel something in terms of identification, and in terms of participation that I didn't feel before. My husband can't talk about it, but now I sort of understand why he doesn't, why he can't" (McNerney 24). "The whole creative joy," says O'Brien, "is to touch the hearts

of people whose hearts otherwise wouldn't be touched" (25).

In the end, it is their contrasting approaches to fiction, more than the passage of a century, which distinguishes Ambrose Bierce and Tim O'Brien. The goal of the satirist—and it was this role that Bierce was never able to fully escape—is to reform the heart, gaining access through the mind. The goal of a writer like O'Brien is to inform the mind, gaining access through the heart. To borrow a phrase from war, the latter campaign is waged on better ground. ❑

Notes

1. Though we continue to move toward erasing the gender distinction of our warriors, we are not there yet, and for the purposes of this essay, the choice of such gendered terms is conscious. As O'Brien himself notes, "One fact we live with . . . is that women don't serve in combat in western societies, much" (McNerney 18).
2. The copyright page of *The Things They Carried* contains the following disclaimer: "This is a work of fiction. Except for a few details regarding the author's own life, all the incidents, names, and characters are imaginary." I use the term "semi-fictional" here because part of the genius of *The Things They Carried* is the impossibility of knowing with certainty where those "few details" leave off and "story-truth" picks up.
3. All page references to Bierce's stories are from McCann's 1956 collection.
4. Memorization of Lee's quote is required of every entering class at the United States' military academies: "Duty then is the sublimest word in the English language. You should do your duty in all things. You can never do more. You should never wish to do less."

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