

***AMBROSE  
BIERCE***



***THE SHADOW  
ON THE DIAL,  
AND OTHER  
ESSAYS***

**Ambrose Bierce**

# **The Shadow On The Dial, and Other Essays**

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# PREFACE

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THE note of prophecy! It sounds sharp and clear in many a vibrant line, in many a sonorous sentence of the essays herein collected for the first time. Written for various Californian journals and periodicals and extending over a period of more than a quarter of a century, these opinions and reflections express the refined judgment of one who has seen, not as through a glass darkly, the trend of events. And having seen the portentous effigy that we are making of the Liberty our fathers created, he has written of it in English that is the despair of those who, thinking less clearly, escape not the pitfalls of diffuseness and obscurity. For Mr. Bierce, as did Flaubert, holds that the right word is necessary for the conveyance of the right thought and his sense of word values rarely betrays him into error. But with an odd—I might almost say perverse—indifference to his own reputation, he has allowed these writings to lie fallow in the old files of papers, while others, possessing the knack of publicity, years later tilled the soil with some degree of success. President Hadley, of Yale University, before the Candlelight Club of Denver, January 8, 1900, advanced, as novel and original, ostracism as an effective punishment of social highwaymen. This address attracted widespread attention, and though Professor Hadley's remedy has not been generally adopted it is regarded as his own. Mr. Bierce wrote in "The Examiner," January 20, 1895, as follows: "We are plundered because we have no particular aversion to plunderers."

The 'predatory rich' (to use Mr. Stead's felicitous term) put their hands into our pockets because they know that, virtually, none of us will refuse to take their hands in our own afterwards, in friendly salutation. If notorious rascality entailed social outlawry the only rascals would be those properly—and proudly—belonging to the 'criminal class.'

Again, Edwin Markham has attracted to himself no little attention by advocating the application of the Golden Rule in temporal affairs as a cure for evils arising from industrial discontent. In this he, too, has been anticipated. Mr. Bierce, writing in "The Examiner," March 25, 1894, said: "When a people would avert want and strife, or having them, would restore plenty and peace, this noble commandment offers the only means—all other plans for safety and relief are as vain as dreams, and as empty as the crooning of fools. And, behold, here it is: 'All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.'"

Rev. Charles M. Sheldon created a nine days' wonder, or rather a seven, by conducting for a week a newspaper as he conceived Christ would have done. Some years previously, June 28, 1896, to be exact, the author of these essays wrote: "That is my ultimate and determining test of right—'What, under the circumstances, would Christ have done?'—the Christ of the New Testament, not the Christ of the commentators, theologians, priests and parsons."

I am sure that Mr. Bierce does not begrudge any of these gentlemen the acclaim they have received by enunciating his ideas, and I mention the instances here merely to forestall the filing of any other claim to priority.

The essays cover a wide range of subjects, embracing among other things government, dreams, writers of dialect, and dogs, and always the author's point of view is fresh, original and non-Philistine. Whether one cares to agree with him or not, one will find vast entertainment in his wit that illuminates with lightning flashes all he touches. Other qualities I forbear allusion to, having already encroached too much upon the time of the reader.

S. O. HOWES.

# **THE SHADOW ON THE DIAL**

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## **I.**

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THERE is a deal of confusion and uncertainty in the use of the words "Socialist," "Anarchist," and "Nihilist." Even the '1st himself commonly knows with as little accuracy what he is as the rest of us know why he is. The Socialist believes that most human affairs should be regulated and managed by the State—the Government—that is to say, the majority. Our own system has many Socialistic features and the trend



of republican government is all that way. The Anarchist is the kind of lunatic who believes that all crime is the effect of laws forbidding it—as the pig that breaks into the kitchen garden is created by the dog that chews its ear! The Anarchist favors abolition of all law and frequently belongs to an organization that secures his allegiance by solemn oaths and dreadful penalties. "Nihilism" is a name given by Turgenieff to the general body of Russian discontent which finds expression in antagonizing authority and killing authorities. Constructive politics would seem, as yet, to be a cut above the Nihilist's intelligence; he is essentially a destructionary. He is so diligently engaged in unweeding the soil that he has not given a thought to what he will grow there. Nihilism may be described as a policy of assassination tempered by reflections upon Siberia. American sympathy with it is the offspring of an unholy union between the tongue of a liar and the ear of a dupe.

Upon examination it will be seen that political dissent, when it takes any form more coherent than the mere brute dissatisfaction of a mind that does not know what it wants to want, finds expression in one of but two ways—in Socialism or in Anarchism. Whatever methods one may think will best substitute for a system gradually evolved from our needs and our natures a system existing only in the minds of dreamers, one is bound to choose between these two dreams. Yet such is the intellectual delinquency of many who most strenuously denounce the system that we have that we not infrequently find the same man advocating in one breath, Socialism, in the next, Anarchism. Indeed, few of these sons of darkness know that even as coherent

dreams the two are incompatible. With Anarchy triumphant the Socialist would be a thousand years further from realization of his hope than he is today. Set up Socialism on a Monday and on Tuesday the country would be *en fête*, gaily hunting down Anarchists. There would be little difficulty in trailing them, for they have not so much sense as a deer, which, running down the wind, sends its tell-tale fragrance on before.

Socialism and Anarchism are the two extremes of political thought; they are parts of the same dung, in the sense that the terminal points of a road are parts of the same road. Between them, about midway, lies the system that we have the happiness to endure. It is a "blend" of Socialism and Anarchism in about equal parts: all that is not one is the other. Everything serving the common interest, or looking to the welfare of the whole people, is socialistic in the strictest sense of the word as understood by the Socialist. Whatever tends to private advantage or advances an individual or class interest at the expense of a public one, is anarchistic. Cooperation is Socialism; competition is Anarchism. Competition carried to its logical conclusion (which only cooperation prevents or can prevent) would leave no law in force no property possible no life secure.

Of course the words "cooperation" and "competition" are not here used in a merely industrial and commercial sense; they are intended to cover the whole field of human activity. Two voices singing a duet—that is cooperation—Socialism. Two voices singing each a different tune and trying to drown each other—that is competition—Anarchism: each is a law unto itself—that is to say, it is lawless. Everything that

ought to be done the Socialist hopes to do by associated endeavor, as an army wins battles; Anarchism is socialistic in its means only: by cooperation it tries to render cooperation impossible—combines to kill combination. Its method says to its purpose: "Thou fool!"

## II.

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Everything foretells the doom of authority. The killing of kings is no new industry; it is as ancient as the race. Always and everywhere persons in high place have been the assassin's prey. We have ourselves lost three Presidents by murder, and will doubtless lose many another before the book of American history is closed. If anything is new in this activity of the regicide it is found in the choice of victims. The contemporary "avenger" slays, not the merely great, but the good and the inoffensive—an American President who had struck the chains from millions of slaves; a Russian Czar who against the will and work of his own powerful nobles had freed their serfs; a French President from whom the French people had received nothing but good; a powerless Austrian Empress, whose weight of sorrows touched the world to tears; a blameless Italian King beloved of his people; such is a part of the recent record of the regicide whose every entry is a tale of infamy unrelieved by one circumstance of justice, decency or good intention.

And the great Brazilian liberator died in exile.

This recent uniformity of malevolence in the choice of victims is not without significance. It points unmistakably to two facts: first, that the selections are made, not by the assassins themselves, but by some central control inaccessible to individual preference and unaffected by the fortunes of its instruments; second, that there is a constant purpose to manifest an antagonism, not to any individual ruler, but to rulers; not to any system of government, but to Government. It is a war, not upon those in authority, but upon Authority. The issue is defined, the alignment made, the battle set: Chaos against Order, Anarchy against Law.

M. Vaillant, the French gentleman who lacked a "good opinion of the law," but was singularly rich in the faith that by means of gunpowder and flying nails humanity could be brought into a nearer relation with reason, righteousness and the will of God, is said to have been nearly devoid of a nose. Of this affliction M. Vaillant made but slight account, as was natural, seeing that but for a brief season did he need even so much of nose as remained to him. Yet before its effacement by premature disruption of his own petard it must have had a certain value to him—he would not wantonly have renounced it; and had he foreseen its extinction by the bomb the iron views of that controversial device would probably have been denied expression. Albeit (so say the scientists) doomed to eventual elimination from the scheme of being, and to the Anarchist even now something of an accusing conscience, the nose is indubitably an excellent thing in man.

This brings us to consideration of the human nose as a measure of human happiness—not the size of it, but its numbers; its frequent or infrequent occurrence upon the human face. We have grown so accustomed to the presence of this feature that we take it as a matter of course; its absence is one of the most notable phenomena of our observation—"an occasion long to be remembered," as the society reporter hath it Yet "abundant testimony showeth" that but two or three centuries ago noseless men and women were so common all over Europe as to provoke but little comment when seen and (in their disagreeable way) heard They abounded in all the various walks of life: there were honored burgomasters without noses, wealthy merchants, great scholars, artists, teachers. Amongst the humbler classes nasal destitution was almost as frequent as pecuniary—in the humblest of all the most common of all. Writing in the thirteenth century, Salsius mentions the retainers and servants of certain Suabian noblemen as having hardly a whole ear among them—for until a comparatively recent period man's tenure of his ears was even more precarious than that of his nose. In 1436, when a Bavarian woman, Agnes Bemaurian, wife of Duke Albert the Pious, was dropped off the bridge at Prague, she persisted in rising to the surface and trying to escape; so the executioner gave himself the trouble to put a long pole into her hair and hold her under. A contemporary account of the matter hints that her disorderly behavior at so solemn a moment was due to the pain caused by removal of her nose; but as her execution was by order of her own father it seems more probable that "the extreme penalty of the law"

was not imposed. Without a doubt, though, possession of a nose was an uncommon (and rather barren) distinction in those days among "persons designated to assist the executioner," as the condemned were civilly called. Nor, as already said, was it any too common among persons not as yet consecrated to that service: "Few," says Salsius, "have two noses, and many have none."

Man's firmer grasp upon his nose in this our day and generation is not altogether due to invention of the handkerchief. The genesis and development of his right to his own nose have been accompanied with a corresponding advance in the possessory rights all along the line of his belongings—his ears, his fingers and toes, his skin, his bones, his wife and her young, his clothes and his labor—everything that is (and that once was not) his. In Europe and America today these things can not be taken away from even the humblest and poorest without somebody wanting to "know the reason why." In every decade the nation that is most powerful upon the seas incurs voluntarily a vast expense of blood and treasure in suppressing a slave trade which in no way is injurious to her interests, nor to the interests of any but the slaves.

So "Freedom broadens slowly down," and today even the lowliest incapable of all Nature's aborted has a nose that he dares to call his own and bite off at his own sweet will. Unfortunately, with an unthinkable fatuity we permit him to be told that but for the very agencies that have put him in possession he could successfully assert a God-given and world-old right to the noses of others. At present the honest fellow is mainly engaged in refreshing himself upon his own

nose, consuming that comestible with avidity and precision; but the Vaillants, Ravechols, Mosts and Willeys are pointing his appetite to other snouts than his, and inspiring him with rhinophagic ambition. Meantime the rest of us are using those imperiled organs to snore with.

'Tis a fine, resonant and melodious snore, but it is not going to last: there is to be a rude awakening. We shall one day get our eyes open to the fact that scoundrels like Vaillant are neither few nor distant. We shall learn that our blind dependence upon the magic of words is a fatuous error; that the fortuitous arrangement of consonants and vowels which we worship as Liberty is of slight efficacy in disarming the lunatic brandishing a bomb. Liberty, indeed! The murderous wretch loves it a deal better than we, and wants more of it. Liberty! one almost sickens of the word, so quick and glib it is on every lip—so destitute of meaning.

There is no such thing as abstract liberty; it is not even thinkable. If you ask me, "Do you favor liberty?" I reply, "Liberty for whom to do what? Just now I distinctly favor the liberty of the law to cut off the noses of anarchists caught red-handed or red-tongued. If they go in for mutilation let them feel what it is like. If they are not satisfied with the way that things have been going on since the wife of Duke Albert the Pious was held under water with a pole, and since the servitors of the Suabian nobleman cherished their vestigial ears, it is to be presumed that they favor reversion to that happy state. There is grave objection, but if we must we will. Let us begin (with moderation) by reverting *them*."

I favor mutilation for anarchists convicted of killing or inciting to kill—mutilation followed by death. For those who

merely deny the right and expediency of law, plain mutilation—which might advantageously take the form of removal of the tongue.

Why not? Where is the injustice? Surely he who denies men's right to make laws will not invoke the laws that they have wickedly made! That were to say that they must not protect themselves, yet are bound to protect him. What! if I beat him will he call the useless and mischievous constabulary? If I draw out his tongue shall he (in the sign-language) demand it back, and failing of restitution (for surely I should cut it clean away) shall he have the law on me—the naughty law, instrument of the oppressor? Why? that "goes neare to be fonny!"

Two human beings can not live together in peace without laws—laws innumerable. Everything that either, in consideration of the other's wish or welfare, abstains from is inhibited by law, tacit or expressed. If there were in all the world none but they—if neither had come with any sense of obligation toward the other, both clean from creation, with nothing but brains to direct their conduct—every hour would evolve an understanding, that is to say, a law; every act would suggest one. They would have to agree not to kill nor harm each other. They must arrange their work and all their activities to secure the best advantage. These arrangements, agreements, understandings—what are they but laws? To live without law is to live alone. Every family is a miniature State with a complicate system of laws, a supreme authority and subordinate authorities down to the latest babe. And as he who is loudest in demanding liberty for himself is sternest in denying it to others, you may



confidently go to the Maison Vaillant, or the Mosthaus, for a flawless example of the iron hand.

Laws of the State are as faulty and as faultily administered as those of the Family. Most of them have to be speedily and repeatedly "amended," many repealed, and of those permitted to stand, the greater number fall into disuse and are forgotten. Those who have to be entrusted with the duty of administering them have all the limitations of intelligence and defects of character by which the rest of us also are distinguished from the angels. In the wise governor, the just judge, the honest sheriff or the patient constable we have as rare a phenomenon as the faultless father. The good God has not given us a special kind of men upon whom to devolve the duty of seeing to the observance of the understandings that we call laws. Like all else that men do, this work is badly done. The best that we can hope for through all the failures, the injustice, the disheartening damage to individual rights and interests, is a fairly good general result, enabling us to walk abroad among our fellows unafraid, to meet even the tribesmen from another valley without too imminent peril of braining and evisceration. Of that small security the Anarchist would deprive us. But without that nothing is of value and we shall be willing to renounce all. Let us begin by depriving ourselves of the Anarchist.

Our system of civilization being the natural outgrowth of our wretched moral and intellectual natures, is open to criticism and subject to revision. Our laws, being of human origin, are faulty and their application is disappointing. Dissent, dissatisfaction, deprecation, proposals for a better

system fortified with better laws more intelligently administered—these are permissible and should be welcome. The Socialist (when he is not carried away by zeal to pool issues with the Anarchist) has that in him which it does us good to hear. He may be wrong by all else, yet right in showing us wherein we ourselves are wrong. Anyhow, his mission is amendment, and so long as his paths are peace he has the right to walk therein, exhorting as he goes. The French Communist who does not preach Petroleum and It rectified is to be regarded with more than amusement, more than compassion. There is room for him and his fad; there are hospitable ears for his boast that Jesus Christ would have been a Communist if there had been Communes. They really did not "know everything down in Judee." But for the Anarchist, whose aim is not amendment, but destruction—not welfare to the race, but mischief to a part of it—not happiness for the future, but revenge for the past—for that animal there should be no close season, for that savage, no reservation. Society has not the right to grant life to one who denies the right to live. The protagonist of reversion to the regime of lacking noses should lack a nose.

It is difficult to say if the bomb-thrower, actual or potential, is greater as scoundrel or fool. Suppose his aim is to compel concession by terror. Can not the brute observe at each of his exploits a tightening of "the reins of power?" Through the necessity of guarding against him the mildest governments are becoming despotic, the most despotic more despotic. Does he suppose that "the rulers of the earth" are silly enough to make concessions that will not insure their safety? Can *he* give them security?

### III.

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Of all the wild asses that roam the plain, the wildest wild ass that roams the plain is indubitably the one that lifts his voice and heel against that socialism known as "public ownership of public utilities," on the ground of "principle." There may be honest, and in some degree intelligent, opposition on the ground of expediency. Many persons whom it is a pleasure to respect believe that a Government railway, for example, would be less efficiently managed than the same railway in private hands, and that political dangers lurk in the proposal so enormously to increase the number of Federal employes as Government ownership of railways would entail. They think, in other words, that the policy is inexpedient. It is a duty to reason with them, which, as a rule, one can do without being insulted. But the chap who greets the proposal with a howl of derision as "Socialism!" is not a respectable opponent. Eyes he has, but he sees not; ears—oh! very abundant ears—but he hears not the still, small voice of history nor the still smaller voice of common sense.

Obviously to those who, having eyes, do see, public ownership of anything is a step in the direction of Socialism, for perfect Socialism means public ownership of everything. But "principle" has nothing to do with it. The principle of

public ownership is already accepted and established. It has no visible opponents except in the camp of the Anarchists, and fewer of them are visible there than soap and water would reveal. Antagonists of the *principle* of Socialism lost their fight when the first human government held the dedicatory exercises of a Cave of Legislation. Since then the only question about the matter has been how far the *extension* of Socialism is expedient. Some would draw the limiting line at one place, some at another; but only a fool thinks there can be government without it, or good government without a great deal of it (The fact that we have always had a great deal of it yet never had good government affirms nothing that it is worth while to consider.) The word-worn example of our Postal Department is only one of a thousand instances of pure Socialism. If it did not exist how bitter an opposition a proposal to establish it would evoke from Adversaries of the Red Rag! The Government builds and operates bridges with general assent; but as the late General Walker pointed out, it might under some circumstances be more economical, or better otherwise, to build and operate a ferry boat, which is a floating bridge. But that would be opposed as rank Socialism.

The truth is that the men and women of principle are a pretty dangerous class, generally speaking—and they are generally speaking. It is they that hamper us in every war. It is they who, preventing concentration and regulation of unabolishable evils, promote their distribution and liberty. Moral principles are pretty good things—for the young and those not well grounded in goodness. If one have an

impediment in his thought, or is otherwise unequal to emergencies as they arise, it is safest to be provided beforehand with something to refer to in order that a right decision may be made without taking thought. But "spirits of a purer fire" prefer to decide each question as it comes up, and to act upon the merits of the case, unbound and unpledged. With a quick intelligence, a capable conscience and a habit of doing right automatically one has little need to burden one's mind and memory with a set of solemn principles formulated by owlish philosophers who do not happen to know that what is right is merely what, in the long run and with regard to the greater number of cases, is expedient. Principle is not always an infallible guide. For illustration, it is not always expedient—that is, for the good of all concerned—to tell the truth, to be entirely just or merciful, to pay a debt. I can conceive a case in which it would be right to assassinate one's neighbor. Suppose him to be a desperate scoundrel of a chemist who has devised a means of setting the atmosphere afire. The man who should go through life on an inflexible line of principle would border his path with a havoc of human happiness.

What one may think perfect one may not always think desirable. By "perfect" one may mean merely complete, and the word was so used in my reference to Socialism. I am not myself an advocate of "perfect Socialism," but as to Government ownership of railways, there is doubtless a good deal to be said on both sides. One argument in its favor appears decisive; under a system subject to popular control the law of gravitation would be shorn of its preeminence as a means of removing personal property

from the baggage car, and so far as it is applicable to that work might even be repealed.

## **IV.**

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When M. Casimir-Perier resigned the French Presidency there were those who regarded the act as weak, cowardly, undutiful and otherwise censurable. It seems to me the act, not of a feeble man, but of a strong one—not that of a coward, but that of a gentleman. Indeed, I hardly know where to look in history for an act more entirely gratifying to my sense of "the fitness of things" than this dignified notification to mankind that in consenting to serve one's country one does not relinquish the right to decent treatment—to immunity from factious opposition and abuse—to at least as much civil consideration as is due from the Church to the Devil.

M. Casimir-Perier did not seek the Presidency of the French Republic; it was thrust upon him against his protestations by an apparently almost unanimous mandate of the French people in an emergency which it was thought that he was the best man to meet. That he met it with modesty and courage was testified without dissent. That he afterward did anything to forfeit the confidence and respect that he then inspired is not true, and nobody believes it true. Yet in his letter of resignation he said, and said truly: