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Ambrose Bierce Describes Swinburne

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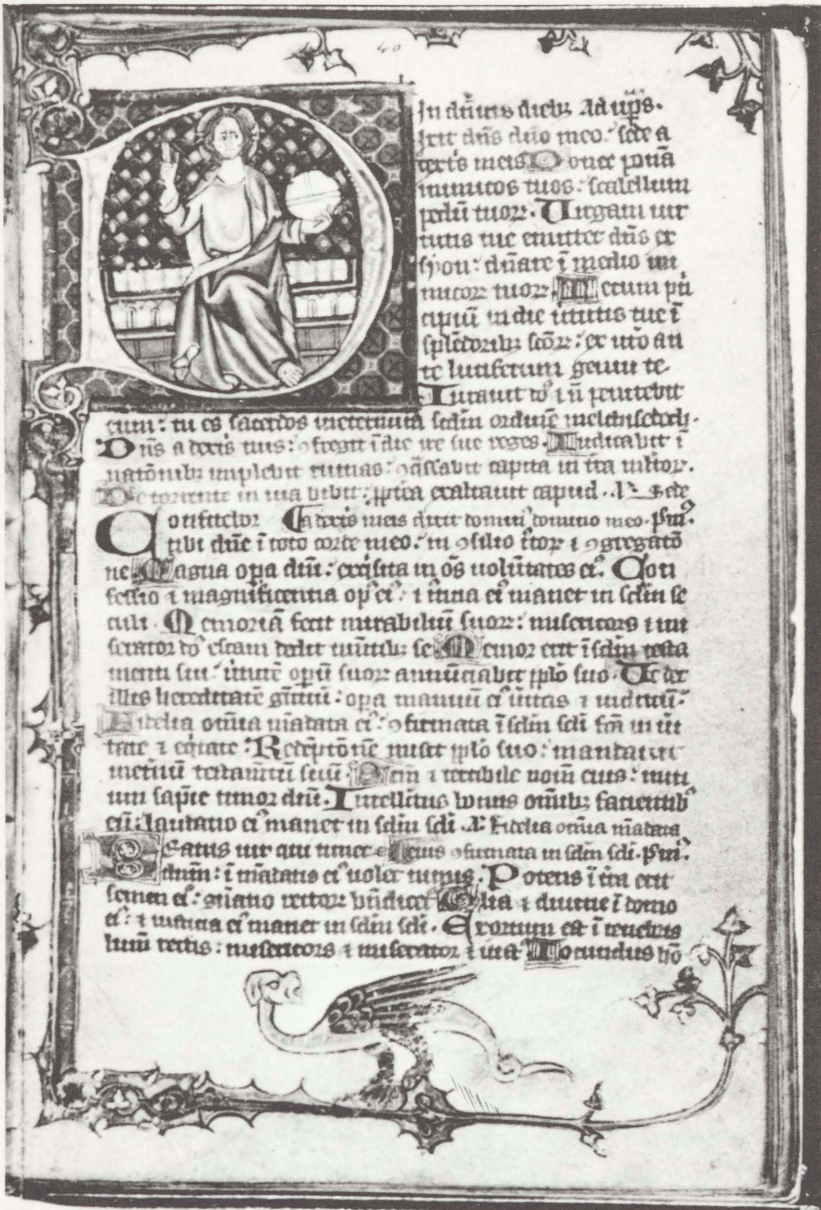


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Psalm 109 initial. Syracuse, Syracuse University,
George Arents Library, Uncat. MS 1, f. 40v.

THE COURIER

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Once a Week.]

[March 23. 1872.

“A TRUE POET.”

THE POET SWINBURNE ABOUT THE TIME AMBROSE BIERCE SAW HIM
A caricature by Frederick W. Waddy, published in London, 23 March 1872, in *Once a Week*, edited by James Rice. Photograph courtesy of Mr. John S. Mayfield.

Ambrose Bierce Describes Swinburne

by M. E. Grenander

Significant holdings of both Ambrose Bierce and Algernon Charles Swinburne are in the George Arents Research Library for Special Collections at Syracuse University (thanks in large part to John S. Mayfield). It is of particular interest when information about the two together is discovered in a single contemporary source.

During his tenure as editor of *The San Francisco News Letter and California Advertiser*, Bierce had published a poem by Swinburne on Christmas Day, 1869. After his marriage, two years later, the American satirist sailed to England with his young wife, where he lived from 1872 to 1875. His first three books, all of which appeared under the pseudonym "Dod Grile," were published in London: *The Fiend's Delight*, in 1873, by John Camden Hotten; *Nuggets and Dust*, also in 1873, by Chatto and Windus; and *Cobwebs from an Empty Skull*, in 1874, by George Routledge and Sons. Both Hotten and Andrew Chatto were also Swinburne's publishers.

In the autumn of 1873, a junketing Californian foreign correspondent, Helen Burrell ("Olive Harper"), wrote scurrilous and fallacious journalistic accounts of both Bierce and Swinburne which appeared in American newspapers. The victims each knew Joaquin Miller, whose fertile imagination was suspected of being the source of Olive Harper's stories, since she and Miller were friends.

Hence, although Bierce did not know Swinburne well, he had connections with him. The two met on at least one occasion, and Bierce left a record of his impressions of Swinburne. Because the English writer's physical appearance and manner were unusual, contemporary accounts of him are especially rewarding. I do not know when the encounter between them

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occurred. According to a chronology of Swinburne's schedule furnished me by Mr. Mayfield, Swinburne attended only one evening social affair in London in the early part of 1872, on March 12. It seems unlikely that Bierce was in London, however, before May. I am therefore inclined to think that he met Swinburne—possibly through Hotten or Miller—between July 4 and 6, or between August 28 and September 1.

In any event, on September 1, 1872, Bierce wrote a "Letter from London" to the San Francisco *Daily Alta California* which was published on October 26; it reappeared in the *Weekly Alta California* on November 2. In it, Bierce included the following description of Swinburne:

I have met a multitude of notables over here, whom I am dying to describe to your readers. As soon as I shall get fairly out of the country I shall begin to unbosom. I may as well do up Algernon Charles Swinburne now; he isn't big enough to hurt me.

The man is extremely small—no, that doesn't give [the] proper idea; he is very little. His face is not without a certain refinement, but it is the refinement of weakness. A large aquiline nose, the mouth of a suckling babe; thin, straggling, blonde beard; eyes—well, Mr. Swinburne never looks you in the face; his eyes may be liver-and-white. There is said to be a man in London who can make him stand still. I should suppose not, and I don't see that it is desirable he should stand still; it can't make much difference. He is set upon spiral springs, I think. In talking to him one feels like taking him up between the thumb and finger of the left hand and pulling the string which works his arms and legs. I caught myself looking for this string as Mr. Swinburne danced across the room. I thought he must be dragging it behind him, and by stepping on it I could produce an astonishing gyration.

Mr. Swinburne has brains, or he could not write the verse he does; he is insane, or he would not.

Unflattering as this description sounds, one must keep in mind that crudeness was expected of American authors resident in England. Moreover, Bierce reveals his admiration for Swinburne's verse at the same time that he recognizes its unconventional quality. The final clause must be evaluated in the light of his definition of *Mad* in *The Devil's Dictionary*: "Affected with a high degree of intellectual independence; not conforming to standards of thought, speech and action derived by the conformants from study of themselves; at odds with the majority; in short, unusual."¹

¹*The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce* (New York and Washington: The Neale Publishing Company, 1911), VII, 207.