

Fall 1977

Postscriptum

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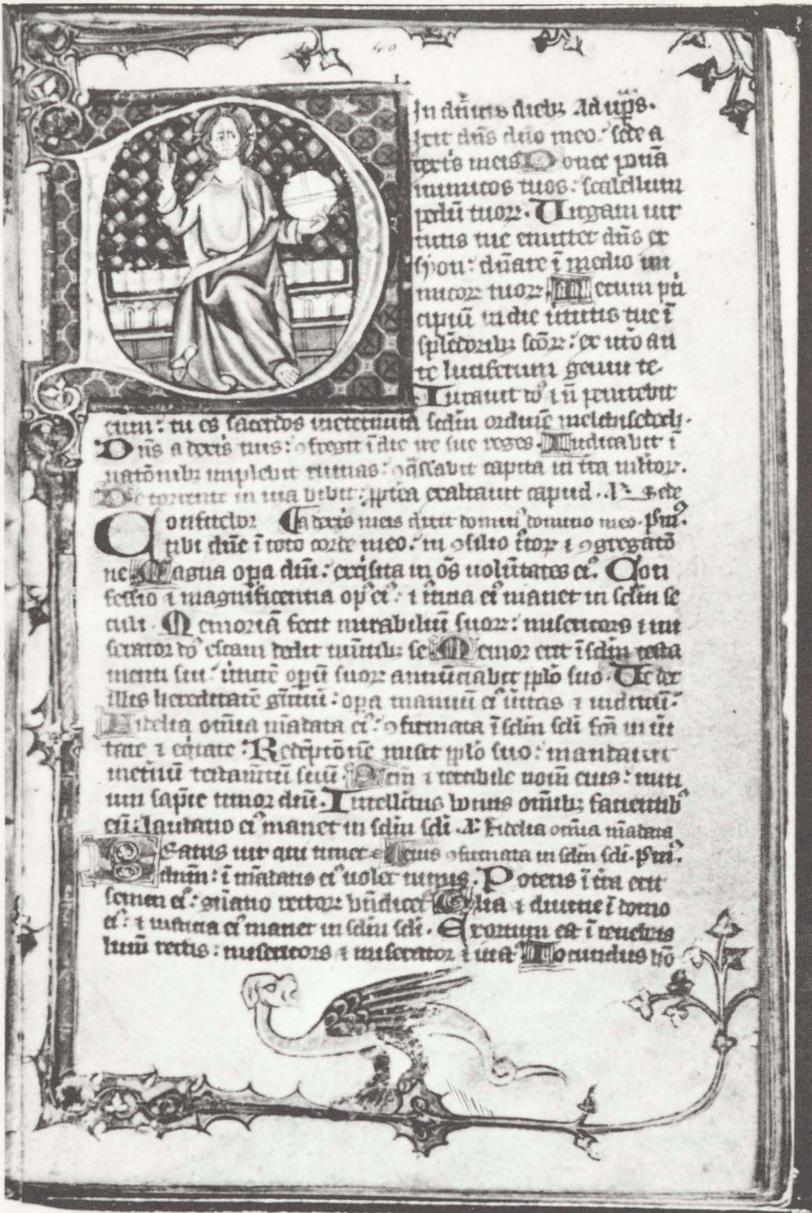


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Psalm 109 initial. Syracuse, Syracuse University,
 George Arents Library, Uncat. MS 1, f. 40v.

THE COURIER

Table of Contents

	Fall 1977
	Page
The Illumination of an English Psalter: A Preliminary Assessment by Bruce Watson	3
Ambrose Bierce Describes Swinburne by M. E. Grenander	23
<i>Postscriptum</i> by John S. Mayfield	27
News of the Library and Library Associates	

When Ambrose Bierce, aged 29 plus, was married in California on Christmas Day, 1871, the bride's father gave the pair an unusual wedding present: an all-expense paid honeymoon to and an extended visit in England. They went and stayed three years.

The sojourn abroad was pleasantly profitable and eventful, despite the fact that about a year after their arrival, the bride's father, overwhelmed with generosity and for good measure, sent Bierce's mother-in-law. She came to help her daughter care for the Bierce's first child and did not leave until a year later, after the birth of the Bierce's second son. Except for a few months at the end of 1873, she lived with her daughter and son-in-law. (It is no wonder the man came to be dubbed "Bitter Bierce.")

In London Bierce was readily accepted by the journalistic coterie of Fleet Street, and had no difficulty in obtaining employment to his liking. He wrote articles and essays for various newspapers and periodicals and occasionally would send off London letters to the *San Francisco Alta California*.

One of these, which Professor Grenander has resurrected, included a characterization of the poet Swinburne. This is unrecorded in any of the Swinburne bibliographies, and somehow or other has escaped the attention of the poet's several biographers. Professor Grenander is indeed to be congratulated upon her discovery, and *The Courier* is to be commended on the publication here of this bit of *Swinburneiana*.

One has no quarrel with Bierce's description of the thirty-five-year-old literary figure, already noted for his *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865), his famous (or infamous) *Poems and Ballads* (1866), *A Song of Italy* (1867), his critical essay on *William Blake* (1868), and his popular volume of *Songs Before Sunrise* (1871). Bierce's slight vignette is clever, and depicts Swinburne just about the way he was, and that's the way his closest friends knew him, some of whom were even semi- or pseudo-seriously concerned about his public behavior and his physical welfare; but short of a complete incapacitation, there was nothing to deter or restrain the fiery poet in London in 1872. He worked hard, and he played hard.

So many of the facts and facets of Swinburne's adult life have been ferreted out, dug up, exposed, laid bare, researched, and recorded that there is hardly any new revelation of movement, action, deed, misdeed, almost any thought, which cannot be pegged as to time and place, and surrounding circumstances. With very few exceptions, nearly every daylight hour has been documented in one way or another. (Also, some nocturnal peregrinations have been pusillanimously recorded.)

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One then wonders whether the time and place of the occasion can be fairly bracketed when Bierce and Swinburne were thrown together, albeit casually and apparently for only a few moments of close contact. In Swinburne's published letters there is nothing to indicate that any correspondence passed between the two men, nor is Bierce even mentioned by Swinburne when he was writing to other people. Bierce's "Letter from London" was dated 1 September 1872, which means, of course, that the meeting took place prior to that time, and that is just about the extent to which one may be certain. Prof. Grenander's inclination to date the meeting during the first week of July or the last week of August is logical from known facts and is the closest one may come without exact documentation. Precisely when and where Bierce caught a glimpse of Swinburne will have to wait until further evidence is detected and uncovered.

I think no one could really gild the lily of Prof. Grenander's presentation by any addition of *facts* at this time. While this is hardly possible, conjectures are not. There is no evidence yet available that Swinburne ever read or knew about Bierce's published remarks. If he had, one may surmise what might then have transpired.

Swinburne may have disregarded Bierce's little word picture altogether as he was quite capable of doing. On the other hand, if he had been not amused, diminutive Swinburne would not have been deterred in the least by Bierce's claim that "he isn't big enough to hurt me," for the staunch little fellow was well accustomed to jousting with giants, physical or mental, or both. If his ire had been irritated or his anger agitated, Swinburne, whose invective was second to none, might well have been disposed to compose something along the line of the following doggerel, or worse:

Here comes a Yankee scribbler named Bierce,
Who thinks his words are quite fierce;
He likes to write with tincture of gall,
He's a fiend's delight, but that's not all:
Down lower than Styx he seems to have gotten,
By playing tricks with that odious Hotten!
Now, one asks, could a dogbolt be more rotten?