

The Intellectual Ecstasy

"Hinc Stygias ebrinus hausit aquas"

DIOGENES LAERTIUS

I

OF Epicurus it is told
That growing weak and faint and cold,
And falling towards that frigid state
By doctors held as desperate,
He drowned his senses in a flood
Of th' ancient vine's ebullient blood,
Ingurgitating draughts of fire
To lull his fear and his desire.

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II

But was he sober when he died?—
Whereto an epigram replied:
"He was too drunk to taste or care
How bitter Stygian waters were;
Blest was he therefore." Can we draw
A sweetness from this cynic saw,
Or of this mithridate distil
An antidote for life's long ill?

III

Perchance: since, as we linger thus,
'Twixt dawn and dark swung pendulous,
Supported through our irksome state
By fond illusions of past date,
The mind within itself retires,
And there inspects its dead desires—
A soothsayer, revolving thrice
Around the ambiguous sacrifice.

IV

In vain we toil to waken flame
Where once without a breath it came;
In vain old auguries invoke
Of swarming bees and stricken oak;

The Venture

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The spirit feels no secret stir
O' the exquisite remembrancer,
And into depths, unsealed in vain,
Drop hollow-sounding tears like rain.

V

But still, in philosophic sense,
A purple cluster glows intense,
And from an intellectual vine
Rich madness gushes, half divine;
Droops the dull vein in chill eclipse?
A heavenly beaker slakes our lips,
And cups of thrilling freshness lend
Fantastic aid as we descend.

VI

So, drunk with knowledge, only fed
With rapture from the fountain-head,
Until the bells of God shall call
The flush'd, insatiate bacchanal,
Let her go smiling toward her rest
On tottering footsteps, faintly blest,
And, in that fair delirium dight,
Walk down to darkness in great light.

EDMUND GOSSE