

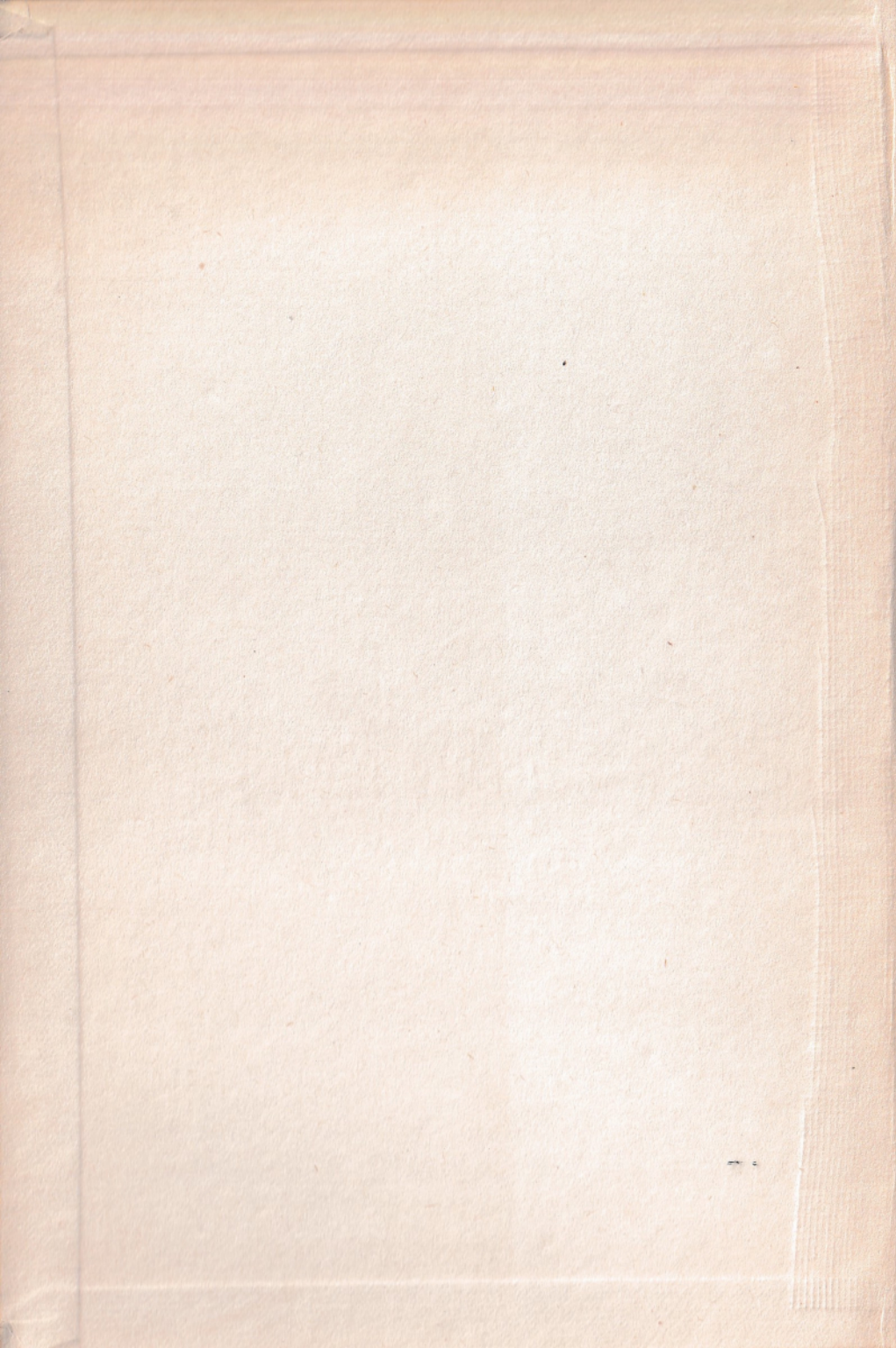


THE HERMAPHRODITE

A POEM

BY

SAMUEL LOVEMAN



THE HISTORY OF THE

1790

1790

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WITH A PREFACE BY BENJAMIN DE CASSERES

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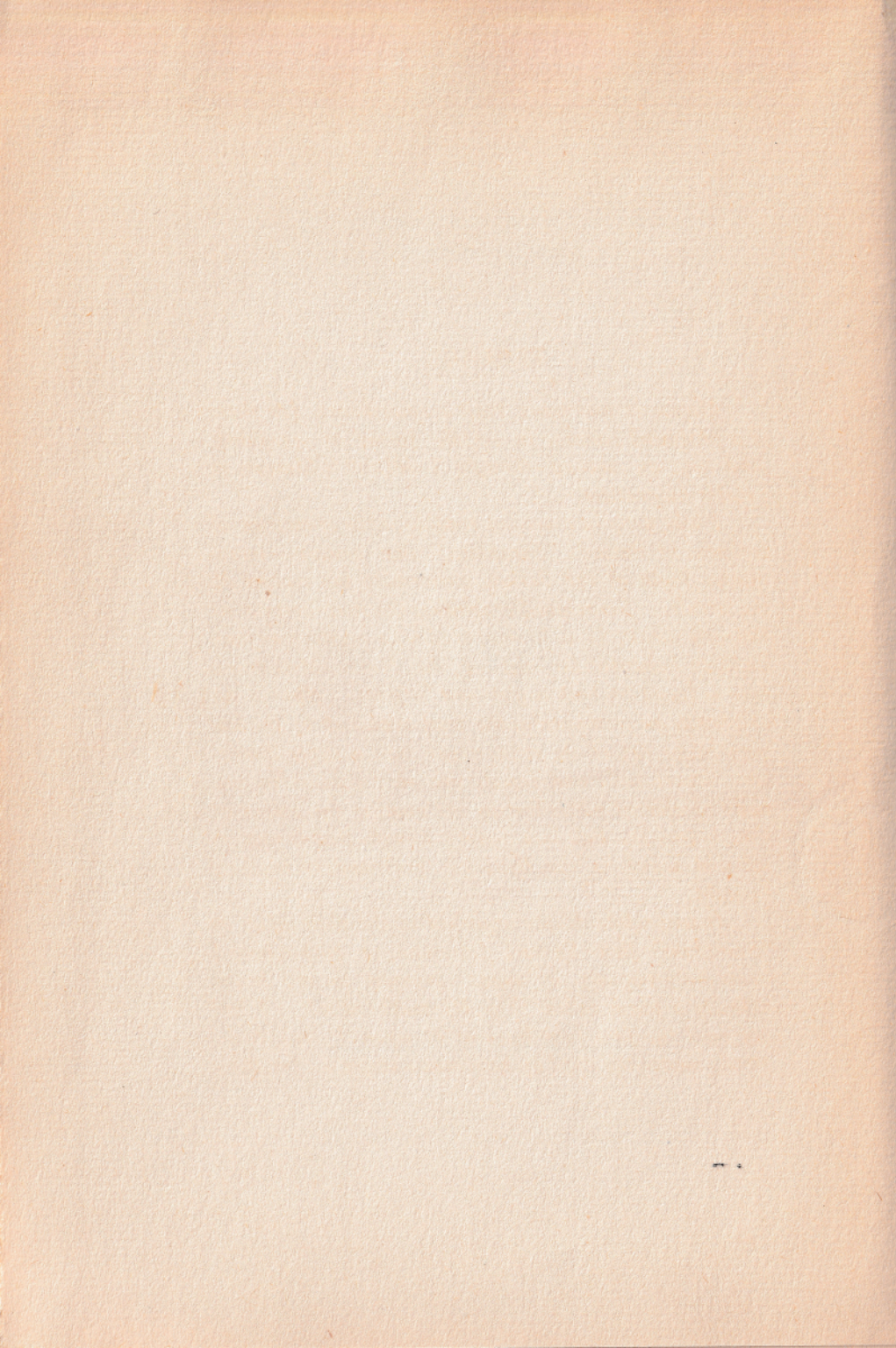
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To
G. K.



PREFACE

Maybe it was more than a coincidence, for there is a profound courage in certain forms of credulity. And so, on second thought, I will call it literary, or psychic magnetism.

I was deep in a second reading, after a quarter of century, of Balzac's "Seraphita," that amazing imaginative flight of the French writer into the realms of the occult. Seraphita-Seraphitus, the hero-heroine of Balzac's book, is a hermaphrodite, a mysterious and divinely beautiful boy-girl of the Norse Mountains, who is loved by both a girl and a man. She is an epiphany, an incarnation, the final evolution of the human being before its evanescence into a super-dimension, where male and female are one, a union in one body of eternal mates lost to one another for kalpas of time before the Fall into duality, a myth that is universal and which is the basis of profoundest mystical thought.

It was while deeply absorbed in the philosophy of "Seraphita" that Samuel Loveman, a poet whom I knew only vaguely by name, brought to my house casually a poem called "The Hermaphrodite." I had not read the first four lines of it when I was completely under the spell of Loveman's magic — for there

is in this poem a magic as authentic as Keats and a contained and sustained lyrical frenzy for the "Supreme Loveliness" that sets it apart from all other poetic fads, fancies and transparent fakery that is yowled and yawped abroad as the "Ultra Modern note."

No, there is quite another "note" in Loveman's "The Hermaphrodite." It is the note of the Eternal. There is in his work the breath of Ineffable Beauty that soars and shudders and flashes and blazes in the souls of Spenser, Herrick, Marlowe, Keats, Swinburne, Baudelaire, Poe and Verlaine. The footprints of the phantom Helena are in every line of "The Hermaphrodite."

Passion, sensuousness and spontaneity are inherent in this poem. In art there cannot be illusion without spontaneity. It is implicit. Because of this spontaneousness — this unfettered parade of vision and image from brain to paper — I received this rare blessing (rare in poetry nowadays) of perfect illusion. Samuel Loveman is Prospero.

His style is simple and chaste. One can easily see he is not a poet by profession. He is a poet by election, "whose footfall loosed Olympian splendour."

BENJAMIN DE CASSERES.

THE HERMAPHRODITE

THE HERMAPHRODITE

Out of the deep, immortal night
Came to me the Hermaphrodite,
Moonlight-breasted, pale, antique,
He spoke to me in deathless Greek:
"Brother of mine, it has been thus
Since I came forth from Anthemus.
Before the Satyrs' gate of gold
I stood with wingèd eyes grown bold,
Fire on my lips, music, light—
The unfathomable Hermaphrodite.
'Whither goest thou—whence?' they prayed.
Then to their laurelled priests I said:
'Behold me, who of gods am wrought,
Burning desire and profound thought;
I, where the star-brimmed evening falls,
Would follow my folk, the Bacchanals,
To Phrixæ, then to Sybaris,
Where their still-flowery worship is,
Then on and on to Pergamon,
A marble city in the sun.

Long have I tarried, yet to me cries
The flame that follows the flame that dies;
I pass — but worship me, hold me still,
Body and soul inseparable. . . . ”

I asked: “Didst thou then find thy bliss
In Phrixæ or at Sybaris?”

He moaned, “Not there. . . .not there! I found
A god arisen, blithe and crowned,
Beautiful, on a fadeless plinth
Of poppy-flowers and hyacinth;
And as I passed the city wall
One on a tower began to call:
‘Lo, an impostor comes to us,
The Lydian Dionysius,
Bound as with vines, his eyelids gold,
God-like and marvellous to behold.
Beware! The sculptured cities dim
That sang and bowed and burned for him,
They, that in shadowy, silver spring
Uprose with moth-like murmuring
To obscure lust, to inverse night,
They knew him. . . .this Hermaphrodite!’ ”

I said: “He lied unto them then.
For thou hast ever been to men
That which with unsustained despair

They seek, but find not anywhere;
The supreme loveliness that lies
In all men's souls, on all men's eyes!"

He cried: "There was no rest for me,
I could not bear their mockery;
So, in the sapphire-coloured day,
I passed my lonely antique way
With halcyon feet by seas of rose,
Against whose foam the ilex grows,
To Nyssa, where with golden strings
Bacchus his laden leopard flings.
Crying and drunk with secret dread
Lest joy be disinherited,
Upon the temple-steps they fall,
God, Mænad, Faun, and Bacchanal;
Vases and urns that on their brink
Once lured each loveliness to drink,
Vine-leaves and laurel, ivy, grapes—
Over their still, enamoured shapes—
But in the moonlight, green and cold,
The world seemed suddenly grown old...."

I questioned: "Was it ever young
Save in the songs that men have sung?"

"Listen!" he murmured, "then there came
A remote voice that called a name:

'Bacchus, awake, awake!' it said,
'The whole world mourns thee doomed or dead;
Take up thy burden, wild and sweet,
Tyrannic joy on flower-like feet;
Arouse thy brethren from their dreams,
The low moon pales, Orion gleams;
Bid thy Bacchantes, white and still,
The wine-cups from their beakers fill;
Thy Fauns stir from their rose-hung bed
That slumber in the dawning red—
O passionate, wayward, loving son,
Make thou thy way to Pergamon! "

I said: "Good fortune favoured thee,
For thou didst join their company."

He answered: "Yes, but in that space
A light fell on the fair god's face.
'Evoe! Evoe!' he cried. 'Again
Truth fires our lips, wine floods our brain—
Come with me ere your souls grow dim!
The young Fauns laughed, 'We go with him!
One sang and danced, while one, half mute,
Blew music on an ivory flute;
The Mænads in the crimson glow
Called: 'Come with us— go whither we go!
This day we leave with stained faces,
Forever, our ancestral places;

If with much grief thine eyes are wet,
Do as we do. . . . forgive, forget. . . .'
And shivering, swaying, crying on,
I followed them to Pergamon!"

"Like the fine purple Bacchic frieze
In our museum, where one sees
That pagan, vinous rout!" I cried,
"And there thou passest wonder-eyed;
Something that earth could not annul,
Lonely and brief and beautiful,
Yet saddened, O Hermaphrodite!"

Tears glistened in his eyes like light;
Then, with a pale hand poised, he
Said in archaic melody:
"Before the luminous city-wall
Bacchus spoke: 'Hearken to me, all!
In my youth, lovelier than the day,
I wandered o'er Ionia;
Here, outcast, mutable and graven,
They spurned me who besought them haven,
But I, who glimmered many a spring,
Violet-wreathed in wayfaring,
Drunken with wine and beauty yet,
In all those years could not forget. . . .
Don yourselves robes of pallid lawn
And enter in their gates at dawn,

But underneath your veiled dress
Divinely leave your nakedness,
And still upon your hooded hair
Bind the dim cirque of vine-leaves there.
When in the marble streets I cry
The name my mother knew me by,
Then shall you lose all fear and cast
Mantle and raiment free at last;
But to the wintry hearts of men
Something long lost shall come again,
And one shall give the cry that thrills
The Mænads in their clustered hills,
Strange joys and weeping betwixt laughter,
Ere, with my thyrse, I follow after. . . . ’ ”

“Mankind,” I said, “O lovely friend,
Is hopeless in the bitter end,
Hast thou not heard of two that died,
One poisoned and one crucified,
And still another, who with blood
Forswore his life to brotherhood?
Their name is legion in the wind,
Betrayed, misunderstood, maligned,
But they sleep well — the ones who bled,
Mysteriously comforted,
Or those, that even in derision
Pursued one hope and saw one vision.
And thou, beloved Hellenic face,

Carven of coloured dreams and grace,
Surely beneath the fervid sun
Thou foundest joy in Pergamon?"

"O no! no! no!" he answered, "There
I found a dreamless sepulchre
In a chryselephantine house,
Oblivion after my carouse,
But not forever . . . The tale is told
On urns and saffron altars old,
Where mouth meets mouth, and grave boys make
Soft melody on lyres that ache
In the elusive marble still,
Charred, broken, yet imperishable!
Thou, too, hast seen them . . ."

I nodded on.

"At dawn we entered Pergamon:
But in a tower against the sky
A watchman cried: 'Whence pass ye by?
Speak! if for good or ill it be . . .'
And one said: 'Priests to Cybele,
Sombre and vowed against the sun,
We seek her shrine in Sarpedon.
There, in Lycia, we are told
Men worship her even as of old,
There, turreted by forests deep,

The elder gods in exile sleep,
Row beside row, uplift in space,
With stars upon each placid face,
Dreaming before their lustrous spheres
The happiness that once was theirs.
Thither we go, but here we would
Take counsel with our brotherhood.
Then to the city azure-walled
He swung his lamp of emerald:
'Pass on — pass on, O holy men!
I, that am eld, remember when
On such an eve, in such a flame,
Bacchus from farthest Phrygia came.
Lo, on that very spot are ye
Where the god stood in ecstasy!
Alas! we knew it not that night,
But ere the morrow came a blight,
Duress and famine, pale and bold,
Bare silences in every fold,
Save in the vineyards — there alone
The grapes hung purple, every one,
And from each laden stem there fell
Wine, gushing as a miracle,
While in a reddened mist unseen
The cry came: "Drink! here have I been!"
But if one drank—the gods forbid!
That thing became a Bassarid,
Ravening in the drooping feast,

Cry of a bird, soul of a beast ;
Until in all the city wide
There was no heart unpacified.
Only before Apollo's shrine,
From the lit mouth there came forth wine,
Wine and more wine — and yet more ills ;
But far upon the terrene hills,
Beneath the moonlight one arose
And said : "Too long have we been foes ;
The moaning and the madness past,
Let holiness return at last " ' ' "

I mused : "The frenzy that one sees,
Or reads of in Euripides,
Is like. Of Agavè, who slew
Her son, not knowing what she knew ;
And on Cithæron, wild and dim,
The horror took her, even as him ;
I felt it once . . . but thou, my friend,
Didst not partake of such an end !"

He answered : "I, who had been shy,
Laughed with their joy, wept with their cry,
Knew this alone, in me was come
Rapture a long time tranced and dumb ;
Beneath the vine-leaves and my dress
Burned still a hidden loveliness,
As a flower sways in sleep and light,

So shook I, the Hermaphrodite. . . .
Then in the blinding dædal dawn
The god cried 'Eleutherion!'

"His signal for the crew?" I asked.

He said: "No longer were we masked.
In me a madness rose and fell,
Beauty and lust made visible.
At the god's beck, at the god's side,
Where whoso drank was deified,
And by the wine-press, circling round,
The Mænads drank without a sound.
Flowers on their breasts, grapes in their hair,
But from each mouth a wild despair;
Yet secret — for we dared not cry,
Lest the still city waken by,
And underneath the serene sun
They slay us ere our task be done. . . ."

"Glaucou," I said, "of Æacus,
Writes that in Glisas there came thus
At evening in the slanted light
A naked youth, a stricken wight,
And far as islets in mid-sea,
Followed him bands of minstrelsy.
Then he, compassionate and bowed,
'O beautiful ghosts,' called forth aloud,

'Abide with me!' But uttering cries,
They fled to ghastly melodies...."

"He saw my brethren flee," he said,
"And some they buried with the dead.
Others in pillared colonnade
They scourged and crucified and flayed!"

I murmured: "For three-thousand years
Is that tale done, yet bitter tears
Come to me now — to clasp and close
The delicate ecstasy of those
That vanished by no fault of mine.
Radiant, remote, these friends of thine,
So long ago! Another says
That in Pieria many days
The vintage through an autumn mist
Shone purple amid amethyst,
While in their vines one eve of gold
The tortured god walked as of old,
Bacchus, no doubt."

He swayed in grief:
"They perished through my misbelief.
A young priest in the temple called:
'Lo you! this city is enthralled!
From Asia, in the wine-red dawn,
These revellers come hither drawn.

Be not misled, though their god wear
Light in his Dionysian hair.
Flushed are their garlands, poison-scent,
Sanguineous is their blandishment;
From Pythia, enaisled and riven,
Strangely exalted were they driven;
But by each lintel, coloured flame,
Whithersoever their feet came,
In every city, dim and deep,
Waked from a lotus-lidded sleep,
Men laughed, fought, wept, with hearts afire,
Snared by the music of their lyre
Back to your portals — fast there, pray
Until this curse be passed away!
They hearkened to him. I, the least—
I, O my brother, slew their priest!"

"And yet," I said, "thy hands are white,
Not bloody, O Hermaphrodite!
Innocent are those eyes that keep
Vigil, a thousand years asleep.
It may be in the peakèd earth
Some dream found agonizing birth,
Until, intestine, there was wrought
The vision prophesying thought—
Beauty is thine, and pagan praise,
Forgotten in these evil days,

When life's a hideous thing at best,
And better rid!"

He beat his breast:
"O horror! horror! I heard a cry,
'For that one slain, their host must die!
Be merciless! Be to their ease
Colossal winged Eumenides!
Blind and convulse, torment, assault,
Redden the dayspring's golden vault,
So they remember!' This was their token:
Beautiful bodies, white and broken,
Fauns that still held the cup of drouth
Pressed wearily pale mouth to mouth,
Bacchant and Satyr, chill in death,
The Mænads moaning a last breath,
Their spears with arbute-blossoms pied,
Plunged in each stark and bleeding side;
But those that fled wailed as the leaves
Some vast autumnal spirit grieves,
When in the nadir, sick with light,
A ponderous wind proclaims the night. . . .
I only—I, whom none forgave,
They buried living in a grave,
Swathed me in silver talc and thrust,
Saying, 'Here ends thy frozen lust!
Though thou shouldst in the mystic night
Awaken, O Hermaphrodite,

Æons and æons passed and gone,
Unheeded by no mortal one,
And hear a cry from burning lips :
“Come with us to our painted ships,
Come with us who have loved thee ever ;”
Thou shalt abide inurned forever’
O brother — I, who loved the sun,
They left me to oblivion !”

“Not that !” I sadly interposed,
“Say rather thy fleet house was closed,
The lights were veiled, the vestments hid,
And dusk fell on thy pyramid ;
But life, unleashed with misery,
Ceased not in turmoil over thee,
Prophets were stoned while evil fed,
Mute pestilence inherited,
The wise made ensign to the knave,
Beauty a jest, with truth a slave,
And if, among the multitude
One arose fearlessly and good,
They swept him recreant from their sight,
As thou, beloved Hermaphrodite !”

He said : “Upon me, stilled of moan,
Lay the first silence I had known
Since long ago in Anthemus
The goddess whispered : ‘Born to us

Mild gods that gave thee birth, a flower—
Sundering sorrows mark thine hour!
Thou shalt appear in many places,
Love shalt thou love, but not fair faces,
Yet before each soul must thou falter,
And seek a still diviner altar;
Fierier, fiercer, shalt thou give
Thy piteous, brave prerogative,
Forewarn, forget, remember, stay
The inevitable, narrowing day,
Unbare to Love's infuriate might
Thy bosom and thy limbs of light,
Then under starred and moon-hung skies
Bow pale-checked to men's blasphemies....'
But in my heart there seemed to creep
Something of marble, more of sleep;
Dust on the eyelids, fringed and low,
And on the mouth, curved like a bow,
And on the breasts where no breath stirred,
To flutter like a Grecian bird;
But in the silence my lips spake
And said: 'I died for Beauty's sake;
I perished so that men might give,
Strange, fleeting, poignant, fugitive,
Voice to their vision;' — all things else,
Save silence weaving miracles,
I had forgotten. Under me
The dead lay still eternally,

With masks of gold, with leaves of bronze,
The pallidest of myrmidons,
Where low and lordly slept the same ;
But not my spirit, drenched in flame,
Was vanquished. Overhead
Something moaned long rememberèd,
The sound of water that abides,
Refluent with the curving tides,
Clasped and caressed me as a gem
Effaced upon a diadem . . .
It was the sea ! Where dusk had been,
The water filtered blue and green ;
Then I began to cry and stir,
Unveiled in fronds of gossamer,
And called my mother's name aloud,
Lightless in her liquescent shroud.
But where the dolphins of the deep
Passed me on azure chasms of sleep,
I felt the imminent years that bring
The tyrannous leash, the broken wing,
Till white upon my whitening grave
Swung me the low, sequestered wave ;
Sibilant, sheer and huge to cover,
Exultant, the disdaining lover.
But in the flower-heavy bounds,
Memory and memory of sounds,
Music that fell from lyres long-passed
Came with the sleep that comes at last,

Drifted and blown and unsubdued,
To all our lonely brotherhood
That waits the cry none cares to give,
Heartening the perished to live,
As I then hearkened, marble-pale,
Omniscient to the phantom wail,
Unbroken in the silence."

"Death was this,
No snow-like metamorphosis,"
I vouchsafed to him, "Hadst thou lain
Until upon this earth again
The golden age delirious
Her shawms and cymbals rang to us—
The whole of heaven filled with birds,
Leaping articulate to words,
Had joined thee then. But One there was,
Since thy long sleep had come to pass,
Who drove the antique fiery mirth
Forth from this mute and dreaming earth ;
Who, crowned with thorns and soft as air,
Bade the Elysian world despair ;
Hopeless and bitter, dusk and brief,
With great eyes brooding on his grief,
And vast heart burdened by such things,
Unknown to thy imaginings ;—
He conjured Hell!"

He said: "Not these,
But up the level, jacinth seas
Something I could not still nor stay
Brought me into the light of day;
A galley, oared and Cyprian-green,
On waters traced with topaz keen,
By islands in the evening light,
Wine-coloured or with malachite,
A world from shards and chaos grown,
Unlike the wonder I had known;
Cities of opal, halls of jade,
Pinnacle, tower, balustrade,
Where, in the blue and crystal dawn,
One hand aloft and one withdrawn,
The people gathered to me thence,
Strangely, in all my eminence,
And whispered, 'Shall we worship him?
Behold! our other gods are dim.
Hath he not beauty? Where shall we
Find ever his supremacy?
Comes he from Sardis, hath he way
From flower-fragrant Syria?
Those elder gods that men have made
Are grey and old and disarrayed;
But he that to this image prays,
And to those lips his own mouth lays,
And to those eyes o'erbrimmed with wine
Treads the year's vintage for his shrine,

Or where the sleepy garlands fall
Over the purple pedestal,
From the still-locked, ambrosial hair
Where violets and jonquils fare,
Down to the hyacinthine limbs,
By tears of joy, by chaunt of hymns,
Takes to his soul the Bacchic riot—
Never again shall he be quiet,
But in his brain there shall be ever
The violence and joy of fever,
Colour and perfume, sound and sight,
And a great world fulfilled with light;
A noise of singing, a cry, a sway,
Shelterless through the blinded day;
This is our new god, this is he
Who gives us immortality!
O ye, that fear the night to follow,
Dead is our Zeus, dead is Apollo;
There was a silence and a wind
That perished with their dreaming kind,
A suspiration of our faith
Crying to each transfigured wraith;
But here is he that comes again,
Beauty, in guise of man to men,
Clear, alternate, unveiled to view,
Hidden by none but free to sue
As a god greatly! They worshipped me,
Beatific in my sovranity,

And to this ancient heart of mine
Libation poured from urns of wine;
By day and night in the lulled streets
They drank upon their marble seats;
The milk-white oxen bound with bays
Entered from steepy mountain ways,
While on the pavements, pale and still,
The vintage ran, a rosy rill,
And where the red horizons are
I heard a revel from afar,
But could not break and dared not stir
To where the drunken minstrels were;
Where lowly in an April sky
Blossoms and branches fluttered by,
With grapes uptossed and garments rent,
And joy in the whole firmament."

"Their world," I said, "was darkling night
Until thou cam'st, Hermaphrodite;
Somewhere thy heart grew great, I think,
To liberate our souls by drink,
Even as on thy pagan tresses
Men yearned in sleep for thy caresses,
Or from their beakers drank to slake
The thirst that made their fury wake,
But by the first divine oblation
Kindled to love an incantation,
Unquenched since then."

He nodded slowly :

"My way was ever dim and lowly.
At night and by the torches' fall
I glimpsed their moving Bacchanal,
Saw in the shadows lit and drear
The ghost of Bacchus hover near,
Then heard the shrill procession cry,
'We, that were slaughtered once, draw nigh!
Peace dost thou seek and joy to bind,
Thou, that art kith and of our kind;
But never to this dancing mirth,
And never on the wild green earth,
And never under natal sun
Shalt thou find rest, O wearied One;
Deeper than the descending sea
Is grown thy immortality,
More solitary than the stone
That marks the city Pergamon,
Or the disquiet star that moves
Alone forever, and unloved, loves! "

"This was a frenzy of thy brain;
There are no spectres, is no stain,
But what we make of good or ill
Holds us in fantasy until
We deem it such," I comforted.

He bowed his moonlit, pagan head :
"There was a murmur in their flight

That made more luminous the night;
A long breath and an endless wail
That gathered in the burning gale;
But far beyond the city's length
They swept, mænadic in their strength,
And farther in their molten troth,
Shadeless or like a faint-veined moth,
Where delicate domes and legion spires
Kindled and shook as waves with lyres,
Each one a crimson fire to trace
In the last light on the last face,
I saw them pass and disappear,
The roseal host, their charioteer . . .
Then by my side from everywhere
The city's folk assembled there,
With hands upheld as though to pray
All night, divinely into day,
From lips that once again dared speak
In lovely, dead, enamoured Greek,
Each bringing for my marble thirst
Flagons to break and grapes to burst;
And now it seemed as though, a stone,
I tried to stir — I strove to moan,
While the calm eyelids, curved to cling,
Trembled as if awakening,
And saw the crescent moon that spills
Silver upon the hollow hills,
And heard one voice above them all,

Crying: 'The city is to fall!
' This is an evil god that stays
Upon our temple's precinct ways;
Not to the new-starred age came thus
The vine-girt Dionysius.
Nor where the youths and maidens sing,
Stooped he to flame and ruining,
Beautiful was this god and tender,
Whose footfall loosed Olympian splendour,
Where on the golden hair were set
Windflowers for a coronet.
And never in those dusk eyes broods
The fury of the multitudes,
Nor on the petalled mouth dares stray
The lightning's quick, revengeful ray. . . . ' "

I said: "O never should it be
Twice to endure this agony;
Even as when, in light steeped thus,
Rain ravages the Caucasus,
Or on the cleft Hydaspien walls
Thunder with sleet and darkness falls;
But in some garden green, where deep,
Hours shine and glitter and fall asleep,
White and eternal, mild and still,
When evening comes with stars that fill
Night with her prescience — thou shalt stand
With the gold apple in thy hand,

And on that crocus-coloured brow
Cherish the truth men disavow
In all the insatiate lust and strife
Of restless movement and roaring life,
Burning a beacon to deliver,
Beauty, to hands that stone the giver
Or slay the soul."

He dreamed a space :

"In all the press I saw one face,
I saw one face alone that drew
Mine, as the sunlight drinks the dew,
Mine, as when in the domed night glows
A fiery star on fierier snows ;
Brief as the curvèd evening wind
When the horned ivory moon swings blind,
And faint nectareous roses each
Climb to the sun they dare not reach . . .
I heard him cry with eyes of light,
'Be frozen, O Hermaphrodite !
May to thy veiled and living veins,
Whither this fever floods and rains,
Nothing but chill and silence come ;
Let now thy singing lips grow dumb.
Henceforth be marble and be free,
Save in thine antique agony,
When in this bitter, murmuring gyve
Thou dreamest that thou still dost live.

Yet ere the votive music fades
By far blue seas and quiet glades,
Faint and yet fainter hope shall dart
Possessive to thy sleepless heart ;
Loveliest thou of those that found
Life broken, futile and unsound,
That in thine ageless searching saw
Flower-meshed change and fettered law,
And in the wayward weft of feet
Passed fearlessly and bright, but fleet.
Close, marble lids, on gentian eyes,
Wiser than those that made thee wise ;
Cease, silken breasts, to moan and stir,
Beauty takes back a dream to her,
Fragile and shining, pale and proud,
Beyond the vigil of the crowd,
To the utmost, endless, inset shrine
Where all things are, and all divine.' "

He paused, he smiled, he faced the night
And faded, the Hermaphrodite.

THE END



