

The Three Sphinxes

By George Sylvester Viereck

Before the image older than the world,
Or ill or good,
By Titan hand into the desert hurled,
In the Egyptian sunset musing stood—
Long having travelled by fantastic roads
Where in deep sands the tremulous footstep sinks—
The oldest and the youngest of the gods,
Saying:
“Upon my life has fallen thy shadow,
O Sphinx!”

Replied the Sphinx: “O son of Aphrodite,
Shall wisdom teach thee how the soul is won,
Or the hot sands be balsam on thy lids?
Behold approach from Thebes and Babylon,
Huge birds grotesque against the falling gloom,
My far-come younger sisters.” And a mighty
Thunder of pinions shook the pyramids,
And made the mummies mumble in their tomb.

The three stern sisters of the mystery
Enduring and miraculously wrought
In granite and in porphyry,
Then, holding concourse in the desert, spake
With the great sound of billows on the sea
That rumble as they break:
“Thou, Eros, art the eternal riddle, we
Are but in stone the semblance of thy thought.”

Limbed like the panther, featured like a man,
The wisest of the Sphinxes thus began,
That still had waited where the river steams
And winds the caravan:
“In my brain’s cavern seven cubits span
Dwell visions splendorous
Of the great lords of song and thought and might,
Who in the large eyes of Antinous
Have read the Deeper Light.
Upon my lashes gleams
Still Shakespeare’s rhythmic tear;

Here Plato musing dreamed his dreams
Of spirit-passion; David here
In the long night-watch sang of Jonathan.”

Then rose the winged Theban, figure dual
Of maid and lion strangely wed;
“I am the blood that tingles, and the jewel
Of all the world’s desire adorns my head—
The lithe-limbed youths that fell for Helen’s sake
Have died for me,
The lads that wake
To ripeness curse me as they ache
Beneath my tyranny.
My mandates sweet and cruel
Nor prayer nor penance shall revoke:
I am the flame, men’s bodies are the fuel,
Men’s souls the smoke.”

The pinioned Sphinx of Babylon,
Human in naught, Lord Eros thus addressed:
“Wherever men have spat thy face upon
Or sought strange pleasure in unholy quest,
My breath had made them mad.
I am the dream that Nero’s mother had
Ere burned his natal star.
I am the ghastly vision of de Sade:
Astarte and Priapus wage
War for my beauty monstrous, barren, bare;
The Cretan knew me and from far
My image fell upon the crimson page
Of Swinburne and of Baudelaire.”

The silence shivered as in tearless woe
When they had done, the Foam-begotten broke
Across his knee the sceptre and the bow:
“The empyrean is beyond your reach,
Your substance earth of earth,
And even she that called on Plato’s name
Bears soilure of a mortal birth
The triple mirror are you of my shame
Half-beast are two, one wholly beast, in each
Is something bestial, and your wings’ winds choke
Within my heart the unadulterate flame.”

But the three Sphinxes mighty murmuring
Thus answer made: “O Love,

Turn thou thy wrath above,
Where round God's throne the cosmic sunsets fling
The light that shall not fade.
Beneath his feet the countless tons roll,
His slow relentless purpose knows the goal
Of things, and joining flesh and spirit made
A beast the mansion of the soul."

And lo, the spring's breath faded from Love's charm,
The sunshine from his hair,
And in his arm
The arrows turned to rods.
He heeded not the silent years that crawl
Like uncouth spiders. Weary, cynical,
Self-conscious, disenchanted stood he there,
The oldest and the saddest of the gods.