

DEATH

O DEATH, in thee we reach life's consummation :
In thee we shall find peace ; in thee our woes,
Anxieties and struggles will be past.
Thou art our best, our truest friend ! Thou holdest
The anodyne that cureth every ill.

Thou lookest stern, O Death ; the living fear thee ;
Thy grim, cold countenance inspireth awe,
And creatures shrink from thee as their worst foe.
They know thee not, for they believe that thou
Takest delight in agony and horror,
Disease and pain. The host of all these ills
Precedes thee often, but thou brook'st them not.

'Tis life that is replete with suffering,
Not thou, O refuge of the unfortunate,
For thou com'st as surcease of pain ; thou grantest
Release from torture, and thy sweetest boon
Is peace eternal. So I call thee friend
And will proclaim thy gift as greatest blessing.

Death is the twin of birth : he blotteth out
The past but to provide for life's renewal
All life on earth is one continuous flow
Which death and birth cut up in single lives
Of individual existences
So as to keep life ever new and fresh.

Oblivious of the day that moulded us,
We enter life with virgin expectations ;
Traditions of parental past are we,
Handing the gain of our expanding souls
Down to succeeding ages which we build.
The lives of predecessors live in us
And we continue in the race to come.
Thus in the Eleusinian Mysteries
A burning torch was passed from hand to hand,
And every hand was needed in the chain

To keep the holy flame aglow — the symbol
Of spirit-life, of higher aspirations.

'Tis not desirable to eke out life
Into eternity, world without end.
Far better 'tis to live in fresh renewals,
Far better to remain within time's limits.
Our fate is to be born, to grow, to learn,
To tread life's stage; and when our time has come
There is no choice but to depart resigned.
Again and evermore again, life starteth
In each new birth a fresh new consciousness
With larger tasks, new quickened interests.
And with life's worn-out problems all renewed.
But we must work the work while it is day,
For thou, O Death, wilt hush life's turbulence
And then the night will come to stay our work.

When we have tasted of the zests of life,
Breathed in the bracing air of comprehension,
Enjoyed the pleasures of accomplishment,
When we have felt the glow of happiness,
The thrill of love, of friendship, of endeavor,
When we have borne the heat of day and sweated
Under the burden of our tasks, we shall,
Wearied of life's long drudgery, be glad
To sink into the arms of sleep, to rest
From all our labors, while our work lives on.
As at the end of day we greet the night,
So we shall tire of duties, pains and joys
And gladly quaff the draught of Lethe's cup.

Wilt thou be kind to me, O Death, then spare me
The time to do my duties, to complete
My lifework ere I die. Let me accomplish
The most important tasks that lie before me,
So when I die I have not lived in vain.
But has my purpose grown beyond myself,
I shall be satisfied and welcome thee.
Kinder thou art than thou appearest, Death!

Peace-bringer, healer of life's malady,
Thou lullest us into unconsciousness.
Thine eye, well do I know it, solves the transient
Into mere dust; but thou discriminatest,
Thou provest all, O just and unbribed judge,
Appli'st the touchstone of eternal worth
And so preservest the enduring gold.
Thou settest free the slave, soothest all anguish,
Grantest an amnesty for trespasses,
Abolishest responsibilities,
Ordainest the cessation of the ills
That harass life. Withal thou simply closest
A chapter in time's fascinating book,
There to remain as we have written it,
And so thou dost no harm. Happy is he
Who neither feareth nor inviteth thee.

I honor thee, great sanctifier Death,
Lord of the realm of no return — High Priest
Of the unchangeable, thou consecratest
Our souls when gathering them unto their fathers
In their eternal home; I honor thee,
Yet will not seek thee! I am here to live
And so will bide until the summons come
To enter on my Sabbath eve of life.
But neither shall I shrink from thee, for truly
I see no cause why I should face thee not.
Thou dost not doom me to annihilation,
Thou wipest out my trace of life as little
As any deed can ever be annulled.
Indeed, thou comest to immortalize,
To finish, to complete, to consummate,
To sanctify what I have been and done.
Therefore, I shall be ready at thy call
And deem the common destiny of all
Meet for myself, so when thou beckonest,
Friend Death, grant me thy sweet enduring rest.

PAUL CARUS.