

Totentanz

Text: Aphorisms by Angelus Silesius from *The Cherubic Pilgrim*; dialogue texts by Johannes Klöckling after the Lübeck Dance of Death; English translation by Stephen Shaver.

Erster Spruch:

Laß alles, was du hast, auf daß du alles nimmst!
Verschmäh die Welt, daß du sie tausendfach bekömmst!
Im Himmel ist der Tag, im Abgrund ist die Nacht.
Hier ist die Dämmerung: wohl dem, der's recht betracht!

First Aphorism:

Leave all that you have, that you may receive all!
Forsake the world, that you may get it back a thousandfold!
In heaven it is day, in the abyss it is night.
Here it is twilight: blessed is the one who considers this well!

Death:

To the dance, to the dance I call you all:
Merchant, bishop, farmer, king;
Poor and rich and great and small:
Come on! Regrets help not a thing.
How blest are those who used the time
To do well while they had the chance,
To cast away all sin and crime—
Step lively! Now you join my dance!

Zweiter Spruch:

Mensch, die Figur der Welt vergehet mit der Zeit.
Was trotz'st du dann so viel auf ihre Herrlichkeit?

Second Aphorism:

Man, the image of the world disappears with time.
Why, then, do you glory in its splendor so?

Emperor:

O Death, you unexpected sight!
Your coming chills my bones with fright.
Once prince and noble, duke and king
Would come to me and tribute bring.
And now must I indeed become
Like you—a thing of slime and scum?
Must I, who was the nations' lord,
Now serve as food for worms abhorred?

Death:

Lord Emperor, of high degree:
Come now and lead the dance with me!
You should have borne the righteous sword
Of justice as the nations' lord;
But power blinded you within,

In glory you forgot your sin.
Does my call stun you? What a shame!
—Lord Bishop! Now I call your name!

Dritter Spruch:
Wann du willst gradeswegs ins ew'ge Leben gehn,
so laß die Welt und dich zur linken Seite stehn!

Third Aphorism:
If you want to go straight to eternal life,
Then leave the world, and yourself, by the side of the road!

Bishop:
O Lord, how can I flee away,
In earth or heaven to escape this day?
Before, behind, above, beneath,
Your presence haunts me, O grim Death.
My lofty state is all for naught—
My earthly treasures all must rot—
I piled them high, but now am found,
And perish like a stinking hound.

Death:
That all must die, O lofty priest,
You surely should have known at least!
Successor to the apostles great,
You chose to live in high estate.
In earthly riches here you reigned—
But spiritual wealth you never gained!
Your pomp and pride now turns to fear.
—O Nobleman! Your time draws near!

Vierter Spruch:
O Sünder, wann du wohl bedächtst das kurze Nun,
und dann die Ewigkeit: du würdest nicht Böses tun!

Fourth Aphorism:
O sinner, if you truly contemplated the short Now
and then Eternity, you would do no evil!

Nobleman:
I beg you, wait, O fearful Death!
Grant me more time to draw a breath!
I never planned to face this day,
But idly whiled my life away.
In drink and sport I spent my treasure,
Abused my servants, lived for pleasure.
Now, all unwilling, I must go—
And where? O Death, how can I know?

Death:

Your lack of confidence is just:
In wealth alone you placed your trust.
Those riches would have served you more
If you had used them for the poor!
Far from all hardship, you sat free,
Prepared for all—but not for me!
So now you grieve, sad and perplexed.
—Physician, come! I call you next!

Fünfter Spruch:

Dein bester Freund, dein Leib, der ist dein ärgster Feind,
er bind't und hält dich auf: dein bester Freund, so gut er's immer meint!

Fifth Aphorism:

Your best friend, your body, is your worst enemy:
It binds you and holds you back; your best friend, though it always means well!

Physician:

O Death, I fought you with my skill:
I helped the weak and cured the ill.
Plagues and diseases once I healed;
And yet to you I still must yield.
My skill and art you now disdain:
I feel my pulse, but all in vain . . .
My strength begins to dissipate.
Which judgment, Death, will be my fate?

Death:

Your judgment will be true and fair
For all the works that you did here.
God knows your deeds to friend and stranger:
How many lives you did endanger!
Your prices high, your boasting bold,
You gouged the poor and fleeced the old.
So now your judgment you must face.
—O Merchant! Come and take your place!

Sechster Spruch:

Der Reiche dieser Welt, was hat er für Gewinn,
daß er muß mit Verlust von seinem Reichtum ziehn?

Sixth Aphorism:

The rich man in this world, what profit does he have,
That he must let his riches go at a loss?

Merchant:

But Death, for this I'd hardly planned!
I'm rich in gold and flush in land,

My fields are full of ripened corn,
My wares to far off lands are borne . . .
I've traveled far to sell and trade,
But such a trip I've never made!
If all my books were tallied clear
I would not meet you with such fear.

Death:

A merchant, to reach Paradise,
Must set a fair and honest price.
For only those whose trade is just
Can stand before the Judge with trust.
If all your numbers add up well,
You need not fear the woes of hell.
If not, then *caveat emptor!*
—I call you next, O man of war!

Siebenter Spruch:

Freund, Streiten ist nicht g'nug, du mußt auch überwinden,
wo du willst ew'ge Ruh und ew'gen Frieden finden!

Seventh Aphorism:

Friend, fighting is not enough, you must also overcome,
If you want to find eternal rest and eternal peace!

Mercenary:

The voice of Death—that voice I know:
I sent him many a bleeding foe!
My sword was swift to strike and slay,
But Death's sword falls on me today.
Is no one here to show me grace?
Death, grant me but a moment's space
To turn to God, whom I forgot
through all the years I marched and fought!

Death:

Up, soldier! Bear the heavy pack
Of all your deeds on your own back.
That burden only you can bear;
From judgment there is none to spare.
Your heavenly reward proceeds
From what is good in all your deeds—
From what is evil, punishment.
—O Sailor! Now your time is spent!

Achter Spruch:

Die Welt ist deine See, der Schiffmann Gottes Geist,
das Schiff dein Leib, die Seel ist's, die nach Hause reist.

Eighth Aphorism:

The world is your sea, the sailor God's Spirit,
the ship your body; the soul is the one journeying home.

Mariner:

O Death, when I was out at sea
I often saw you close to me,
Yet once my ship was safe in port
My good intents dissolved in sport.
In Adam's nature, lewd and base,
I wandered, wanton, far from grace.
Now for my sins I face the price.
O help me through your death, Lord Christ!

Death:

If from your youth you had been wise
And kept God's Word before your eyes
And followed it upon your way,
Then you would have no fear today.
You saw me often on the sea—
Too late now, then, to lodge a plea!
So furl your sails and stow your gear.
—Now, Hermit, join our dancing here!

Neunter Spruch:

Das überlichte Licht schaut man in diesem Leben
nicht anders, als wenn man schier ins Dunkle sich begeben.

Ninth Aphorism:

The light beyond light can only be seen in this life
By going completely into the darkness.

Hermit:

Death, I would face you calm and sure
If only all my thoughts were pure!
But even in my isolation
I often faced severe temptation.
The flesh is weak; I must confess
That though I long for holiness
I often fall. Dear Lord, forgive
In this last hour I have to live!

Death:

You need not fear; come dance in bliss,
Your holy life has won you this.
Your prayers are heard, your sins forgiven,
And you shall rise again in heaven.
If others followed in your path
They too would be secure from wrath;
But only few can bear such toil.
—Your turn! Dance, farmer of the soil!

Zehnter Spruch:

Freund, wer in jener Welt will lauter Rosen brechen,
den müssen z'vor allhier die Dornen g'nugsam stechen.

Tenth Aphorism:

Friend, whoever wants to pick only roses in that other world
Must first be pricked enough here by thorns.

Farmer:

Come dance? I never did learn how.
I spent my life behind a plow.
I toiled and labored in the field
To harvest what the land would yield.
I've had to scrape for every cent
To pay the tithe and make the rent.
A peasant farmer's life is such:
I never pondered dying much.

Death:

When I survey your soul, good neighbor,
I see a life of honest labor.
Such labor God does not reject,
But numbers you with the elect.
For all your troubles here, the Lord
Will grant in heaven a good reward.
So have no fear, and come along.
—Fair Maiden! Come dance to my song!

Elfter Spruch:

Auf, auf, der Bräut'gam kömmt: man geht mit ihm nicht ein,
wo man des Augenblicks nicht kann bereitet sein.

Eleventh Aphorism:

Up, up: the bridegroom comes! No one will go in with him
who is not prepared for the moment.

Maiden:

But, Death, I'm not at your disposal—
I must turn down your dance proposal!
To leave now would be such a pity;
Just let me stay here, young and pretty.
The world's delights I long to taste;
You've snared me early: such a waste!
Oh, let me live my full days out—
In my old age, I'll turn devout!

Death:

My coming startles you with grief:
I come as sudden as a thief!

The young must mind their souls' condition
Before I come on my grim mission.
Desire is fickle; all too quickly
The world's delights turn pale and sickly.
Prepare to dance, then, while you can.
—Your time has come at last, Old Man!

Zwölfter Spruch:
Mensch, wenn dir auf der Welt zu lang wird Weil und Zeit
so kehr dich nur zu Gott ins Nun der Ewigkeit.

Twelfth Aphorism:
Man, if your stay and time in the world become too long,
Just turn to God in the Now of Eternity.

Old Man:
O Death, at last I hear your song!
My waiting has been all too long,
With many years of pain behind me.
Where were you, Death? Could you not find me?
My body aches, my bones are sore;
The world fares ill with plague and war;
I leave it gladly. God, take pity,
And guide me to your heavenly city!

Death:
Come here, Old Man, and take my hand
To travel to that heavenly land.
Forget the painful way you've trod
And sit down at the feet of God.
There angels' songs will fill your ears
As grief and sorrow disappears
And strife resolves in harmony.
—Child, leave your cradle; follow me!

Dreizehnter Spruch:
Die Seele, welche hier noch kleiner ist als klein,
wird in dem Himmelreich der schönste Engel sein.

Thirteenth Aphorism:
The soul that is smaller than small here
Will be the most beautiful angel in the kingdom of heaven.

Child:
What can this mean, O Death? You talk
of dance before I learn to walk.
What credit to you can this give,
That I should die before I live,
Depart when I have hardly come,
And leave bereft a loving home?

My mother's tears shall mourn my birth.
O, give me back unto the earth!

Death:

God only knows why I am sent
To guilty or to innocent;
Why some must stay and some must go
Is left for God alone to know.
I pipe for peace, I pipe for sorrow;
For some today, for some tomorrow.
I pipe you to God's heavenly hall—
Who turns to God? Who heeds my call?

Vierzehnter Spruch:

Die Seele, weil sie ist geboren zur Ewigkeit,
hat keine wahre Ruh in Dingen dieser Zeit.
Drum ist's verwunderlich, daß du die Welt so liebst,
und aufs Vergängliche dich allzusehr begibst.

Fourteenth Aphorism:

The soul, since it is born for Eternity,
Has no true rest in the things of this age.
So it is amazing that you love the world so much
And devote yourself too much to things that pass away.