

FAMOUS LAST ANAGRAMS

JOHN HOLGATE
Sydney, Australia

Deathbed utterances of famous people are sometimes recorded for posterity and generally contain the last spark of wisdom before they go to greet the great Anagrammatist in the Sky. Who could forget Madame de Pompadour's bon mot to a priest at her bedside "Stay a little longer and we will go together" or Brendan Behan's remark to an obliging nun "Bless you, Sister. May you be the mother of a bishop"? In fact many of these gems are apocryphal or said while the notable enjoyed good health. His or her very last words were probably prosaic, garbled and best forgotten. Cecil Rhodes' dictum "So much to do, so little time" was not his final message but rather "Turn me over, Jack" which isn't particularly quotable at after-dinner speeches.

Fortunately, many men and women of letters have left us a record of what they really said cleverly disguised in their own names. I have collected a short anthology of their cryptic mumblings and provided a biographic annotation to put them in context.

DANTE ALIGHIERI - "I had a ten, girlie"

The Italian maestro, dying of malaria in Ravenna, confides to his daughter Antonia his eternal love for the "wonderful lady" in his life, Mrs. de Bardi, who later played Beatrice in the "Vita Nuova".

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE - "Aw, I'll make a piss here"

Crude to the very last gasp, the Immortal Bard was replying to his wife's query "Will, do you want to use the outside loo or shall I fetch a bedpan?" Could this allusion to micturition be a clue to why he left Anne Hathaway his "second-best bed"?

BENJAMIN DISRAELI - "Bread? Jam? I lie 'n sin!"

Lord Beaconsfield reacts angrily to the suggestion that he take holy communion before facing the final Scrutineer. Cocking a snoot at the High Church, Dizzy misses out on his last shot at redemption.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE - "Delouse my allegoric art!"

Coleridge here calls on posterity to fumigate his work and purge it of that type of nitpicking symbol-hunting critic Tennyson once described as a "louse in the locks of literature".

OSCAR FINGAL O'FLAHERTIE WILLS WILDE - "Well, siree, call writing a foolish fad"

Oscar manages one last quotable quip for the American reporter who was covering his death for Life magazine. When asked to define the significance of his contribution to world literature, the Prince of Wit gives a riposte which matches the mood of his time.

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS - "Hear darn kingly poems?"

As Hopkins lay dying of typhoid in Dublin, a local priest offered to hear his final confession. The Jesuit poet's reply reveals that his whole life had been one long artistic absolution.

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS - "Art, beauty will smile"

This simple affirmation of a Pre-Raphaelite faith in the triumph of art over history, beauty over evil is Yeats' last testament to his life's work.

THOMAS STEARNS ELIOT - "So I'm there at last, son"

Ever the plagiarist, Eliot echoes Galsworthy's famous adieu "So here it is at last, the distinguished thing".

WYSTAN HUGH AUDEN - "Why a death unsung?"

In his final moment Auden ponders the meaning of his own death as he recalls the lines of his early poem "Epitaph for an Unknown Soldier":

To save your world you asked this man to die:
Would this man, could he see you now, ask why?

Auden asks why he himself will receive no such lyrical epitaph.

ADELINE VIRGINIA WOOLF - "I, a loving wife, I, Leonard"

Clutching at disjunctive pronouns, the Bloomsbury bohémienne is drowning in the cold waters of the Ouse. Does her plaintive call to her husband reveal the soul of a bourgeoisie trapped in the body of a bluestocking?

DAVID HERBERT LAWRENCE - "I verbal retarded, wench"

Lawrence, dying in a sanatorium in Antibes, imagines he is Mel-lors the gamekeeper and his French nurse is Lady Chat. Lapsing into his Nottinghamshire dialect he sums up his literary genius in a last flicker of insight.

JAMES AUGUSTINE JOYCE - "Jesus, I enjoy a cute mag"

Ailing in Zurich, the author of "Ulysses" is caught reading a Swiss girlie magazine by the visiting priest.

ALDOUS LEONARD HUXLEY - "One loud sexy hula, darl"

The author of "Brave New World" and "The Doors of Perception" awaits his final hour in a Los Angeles hospital in 1963. A ward sister asks him how he imagines life after death. The fact that she had accidentally given him mescaline instead of morphine may have coloured his reply.

WASHINGTON IRVING - "Nothing was virgin"

America's literary pioneer laments the depravity of the Wild West he had described in "A Tour of the Prairies" and "The Adventures of Captain Bonneville". His Presbyterian sensibility deploras the loss of innocence he witnessed in the frontier towns of his young country.

EDGAR ALLAN POE - "Age palled Nora"

In his final moments Poe thinks of the beautiful Eleanora. She, like her creator, was daunted by the thought of growing old and died prematurely.

THOMAS CLAYTON WOLFE - "Walt's can fly home too"

The author of "Look Homeward, Angel" and "You Can't Go Home Again" lies dying of pneumonia in Baltimore. He asks for his copy of "Leaves of Grass" to be placed in the coffin on his final trip back to Asheville, North Carolina.

FRANCIS SCOTT FITZGERALD - "Frig 't, Zelda! Frantic costs!"

The author of "The Great Gatsby" badmouths his wife for her Sybaritic habits. On his deathbed he overheard her telling the mortician to book the White House for her husband's wake.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY - "Where's my neat gin?"

Before blowing away his cranium, the grand old man of American literature utters this final cry of despair as he stares at his empty bottle of Beefeater.

ALFRED DAMON RUNYON - "Red Alf run on Monday?"

The famous sports writer asks how the favourite went in the last race at Aqueduct.

CLIFFORD ODETS - "O, cold red stiff"

The author of "Waiting for Lefty" is asked what he would like engraved on his tombstone. His reply is as crass and down-to-earth as the characters in his plays.