KARL S. GUTHKE

Last Words

Variations on a Theme in Cultural History

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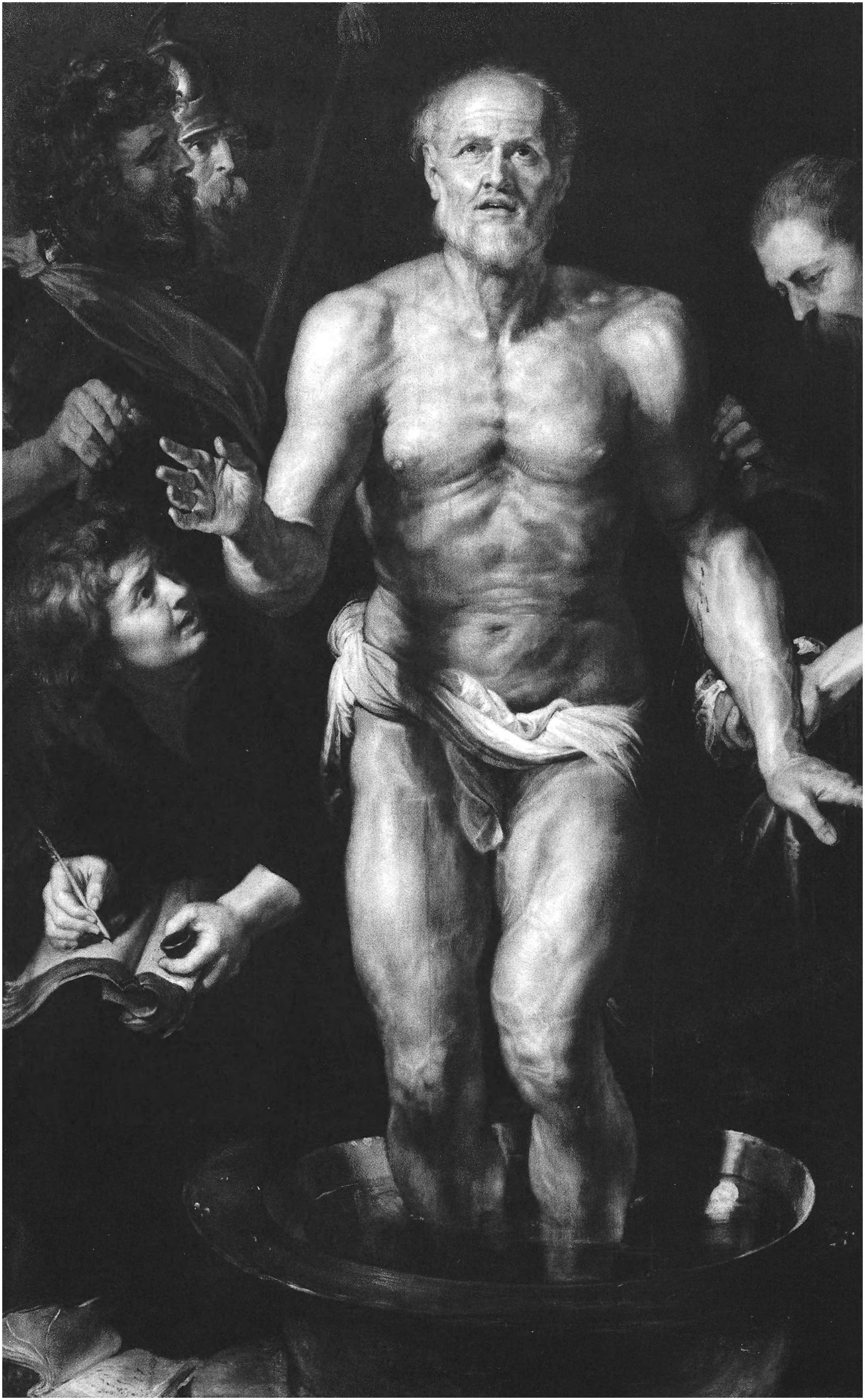
LAST WORDS



LAST WORDS

VARIATIONS ON A THEME IN CULTURAL HISTORY

Karl S. Guthke

REVISED, EXPANDED, AND TRANSLATED BY THE AUTHOR

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Preface

Death, as *the* taboo of our time, arouses secret interest. The "last words" of the dying stand on the border of that taboo region. Interest in them is less inhibited, having grown for centuries before death itself became a forbidden topic. As a result, last words have been a familiar concept in the world of our experience, an institution in fact; paying attention to them is a well-established tradition. Accordingly, such words of the final moment, such exit lines, meet certain expectations. What expectations? Why? How? The last words of the famous and the not-so-famous have become so commonplace in our everyday life that we forget to ask such questions—until we are made conscious of them by a film or novel or play, a newspaper story, a biography, a hit song, or one of those anthologies of last words which have become ever more popular in recent years.

How does one come upon such a subject? To commemorate the bicentenary of the death of the Swiss scientist and writer Albrecht von Haller (whose remarkably bad looks are flatteringly portrayed on the 500-franc note), I was asked several years ago to deliver an address in Berne, his hometown. It was only natural to start with the circumstances of his death. One source stated that Haller, whose works include edifying Christian apologetics, had passed on with an appropriate confession of faith on his lips; another source claimed the opposite, that Haller had—in so many words—died the unbeliever he was rumored to have been. Yet a third reported that the great empiricist physiologist felt his own pulse and whispered with his last breath: "It's beating...beating...beating—it's stopped." Was Haller's lifelong intellectual conflict played out on his very deathbed? A biographer commented that "for a

long time there was widespread and heated discussion" about which source was right. To be sure, a fourth "last word" turned up in due course, one which should have satisfied all parties: "I am calm."[1] Still, the fundamental question had been posed, and it was a challenge: Was one faced here with a feature of cultural history that might be worth pondering? One that might be able to tell us something about ourselves, as members of the human species or as individuals? A few years before his death, the Swiss dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt discovered a fifth version of Haller's last words in a note written by the pastor officiating at the deathbed: "My God! I am dying!" When Dürrenmatt reported the find in his acceptance speech for the Schiller Prize of the State of Baden-Württemberg in 1986, he not only furnished yet another example of the vitality of the institution—of the widespread cultural convention of paying attention to last words—then and now, he also confessed in a more personal vein: "Haller, feeling his own pulse while dying, has become a symbol of my writing."[2] And why does the audience smile so knowingly at the scene in Robert Bresson's film *Le Diable probablement* in which the protagonist has himself shot in the back in the Père Lachaise cemetery in mid-sentence, commenting that the bullet is interrupting his last word?

My interest in this at first esoteric and then no longer so esoteric subject refused to be shaken off. As Thomas Mann noted in *The Genesis of a Novel*: "There is something almost comical about the ability and willingness to find references to one's own passionate preoccupation in whatever one reads, and the truth is that pertinent things run into one from all directions, they are played into one's hands virtually in the manner of a procurer."

Over the years many people have humored my fascination with last words with "procuring" indulgence or a kind of sportsmanship bordering on complicity. I think of them with gratitude; almost every page of this book harbors happy mem-

ories of this sort. And when I heard "You should go on with it. It's dilettantish," I knew to whom I should dedicate this book.

Parts of *Last Words* were written in 1987 during my Fellowship at the Institute of Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh, thanks to its director, Professor Peter Jones, who, no stay-at-home himself, saw academic possibilities in this somewhat adventurous expedition into rarely traveled territories. I should also like to thank my assistant Doris Sperber for her patience, for her help with explorations in libraries, and for the good spirits with which she has allowed herself to be caught up in my interest in this subject.

K.S.G.

A Note on the English Version

Last Words is a translation of *Letzte Worte* (1990), extensively revised and significantly enlarged. I undertook it during my stay in a mountaintop village in the Vaucluse beneath Mont Ventoux, with friends interrupting my routine with excursions throughout Provence, which generated the good cheer I hope is evident on some of the following pages. The section on Shakespeare's use of last words in Chapter I replaces a discussion of dying speeches in German drama of the age of Goethe. Once again, many people, humorously tolerant of seeming scholarly eccentricity, have aided and abetted my project with suggestions for additions of all kinds—colleagues, friends, associates, students; above all, the ever-resourceful and enterprising members of Harvard's Signet Society, and the stimulatingly conspiratorial group that made my Freshman Seminars on Last Words in the fall of 1990 and 1991 an unusually happy teaching experience. Further new material was unearthed during my Fellowship in the summer of 1991 at the Herzog-August-Bibliothek Research Center, Wolfenbüttel. Special thanks are due to Daniel Sharfstein for valuable references to last words in popular culture, and to Justin Levitt for calling my attention to the works of art mentioned in the following pages.

Translations of quotations are my own, unless noted otherwise. Earlier versions of some sections were published in *The Harvard Library Bulletin* (1988), *Fictions of Culture*, ed. Steven Taubeneck (Frankfurt, 1991), and *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Shakespeare-Gesellschaft West* (1992).

I am most grateful to Robert C. Sprung for the critical care with which he reviewed my translation. To Rainer Gruenter I am indebted for the postcard reproduced on page 82.

K.S.G.

LAST WORDS

1

LAST WORDS IN EVERYDAY CULTURE

Forms and Meaning of a Convention in Life and Letters

"The unexamined life is not worth living." Such has been the conventional wisdom of the educated ever since Plato reported the words of Socrates in the *Apology* (38 B). Goethe, the unfailing oracle of worldly wisdom in German-speaking lands, equated the unexamined life with that of an oyster,[1] which generally enjoys a lesser reputation with writers than with gourmets; Hume and Holberg come to mind. Samuel Johnson thought a life without reflection was fit for oxen.[2] But whether oyster or ox, the opposite is man as a being conscious of himself. This "eccentric" ability of man to reflect on himself forms the foundation for the anthropology of, among others, Helmuth Plessner, who, from this point of view, also went on to define man as the only form of life capable of laughing and weeping.[3]

By definition, reflection on one's own self is realized only retrospectively. Such retrospection, such self-examination, takes one form when we are young, another when we are middle-aged, and yet a different one when we are old. But, according to Walter Benjamin's much-quoted essay on narra-

tion, it is only at the very end that human life gains "communicable" or "transmissable" form as well as "that authority . . . which even the poorest soul has over the survivors when it comes time for him to die."[4] This final, self-validating articulation of consciousness in extremis is commonly known as "the last word" or "the dying word."

The last word's special rank is more than hinted at in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Death and the Fool*, in which the protagonist is troubled by the realization that it is only the approach of death that may teach us "to see life not through a veil, but clearly and in its entirety."[5] Accordingly, we associate truth and wisdom with last words. We are alerted to this fact by the Renaissance proverb, often paraphrased by Shakespeare, to the effect that nobody would die with a lie on his lips (because it could offer no earthly gain and would gamble away the grace of God),[6] or the quotations familiar to every Frenchman: "He who has only a moment to live has no longer anything to hide" (Quinault), and "Wisdom is on the lips of those who are about to die" (Lamartine).[7]

Last words in this sense are an element of culture, particularly in the Western world, or an "institution" (D. J. Enright) that has been accorded particular attention, even reverence, for centuries. "The tongues of dying men / Enforce attention, like deep harmony" (*Richard II*, II.1.5–6). At the very least, last words have been a well-established concept, a familiar theme in our culture. But how is this theme defined more precisely? What are its facets? What questions does it raise and what problems are implied in it? What insights does it permit? Let us first look at a few cases: the last words of some famous persons (or what passes for their last words and as such has entered our literary folklore).

When Oscar Wilde lay dying in the Hôtel d'Alsace in Paris, his last words were, "I am dying, as I have lived, beyond my means." How fitting. When the nurse attending Henrik Ibsen at his last illness whispered to bystanders that he seemed a

little better, Ibsen retorted "on the contrary" and died. What could be more in character? Franz Kafka's last coherent remark was to his friend and physician, Robert Klopstock, who had promised him morphine, "Kill me, or else you are a murderer." Could anything be more typical of the master and victim of paradox? Goethe muttered something about opening the shutter so that "more light" might come in before he fell silent in the green Biedermeier armchair in his bedroom from which, in earlier years, he had on occasion made profounder pronouncements. It has been thought for generations that this epitome of the Enlightenment could not have chosen a more appropriate exit line. "But the peasants," said Tolstoy as the end was approaching in the house of the Astapovo stationmaster, "how do peasants die?" One might have guessed it. Diderot's final gem is authoritatively reported to have been, *"The first step toward philosophy is incredulity."* Consistent to the end. Gustav Mahler's heart stopped after a final word which is food for thought and argument for both historians of music and others: "Who will now look after Schönberg?" Exiled King Umberto II of Italy expired on 18 March 1983 in Geneva with just one word on his lips, according to an eight-line item in *Newsweek*: "Italia";[8] while kings of Sweden tend to murmur "Sweden" when the curtain falls, according to usually well informed Swedish sources. Brendan Behan, much like a character in one of his plays, is said to have used his final breath to thank the nun who was wiping his feverish forehead: "Thank you, Sister! May all your sons be bishops." The last words heard from Cecil Rhodes, at the height of his imperial achievement, were: "So little done, so much to do." Suitable for framing. Heinrich Heine, predictably, checked out with a witticism: "God will forgive me; that's his job." On his deathbed, Frederick William I of Prussia, father of a flute-playing son, listened to the hymn "Naked I came into the world, naked I shall leave it" and died claiming a royal exception to the human rule: "No, not quite naked, I shall have my

uniform on." What else could the soldier-king have said? Edith Sitwell's last words were in reply to being asked how she felt: "I am dying, but otherwise quite well." How Edith could Dame Edith be. Gainsborough's thought, as the final darkness closed in on him: "We are all going to heaven, and Van Dyck is of the company." Who else? First things last.[9] And finally, a popular magazine reported a few years ago that Conrad Hilton, in reply to the question whether he had one last message to the world, solemnly intoned, "Leave the shower curtain on the *inside* of the tub," and passed away.

This random roll call of quality ghosts could be continued indefinitely, were it not for consideration of the reader. For the last words of hundreds and perhaps thousands of people—famous, infamous, and obscure—are known and anthologized, quoted and misquoted, until they become bon mots known by everyone including the dying—who sometimes have an unblushing way of quoting each other without attribution (which would never be forgiven in closer-to-life scholarship).[10] For example, at least six persons, when asked on their deathbeds to renounce the devil, are reported to have replied: "This is no time for making enemies."[11]

It seems safe to conclude from all this what one already knows instinctively: particular importance is, and has always been, attached to last words. Indeed, they have been treasured since time immemorial in cultural communities that otherwise have little in common. As a result, last words have survived where other, perhaps more significant, words have not; in some instances, they have become proverbial.

> Dying words have a better than usual chance to survive. There are reasons, reasons rooted very deep in human nature, why men pay particular attention to them and preserve them. They answer an expectation. The interest, because so natural, is older than anyone can say. It is and has been for uncounted centuries the daily stuff of legends and biographies and histories and ballads, has pointed many a moral and adorned many

> a tale. Peoples far distant in time, place and customs have joined in the feeling that the utterance which is never to be followed by any other is by that very fact significant. Sometimes we remember nothing else, nothing of Nathan Hale or Captain Lawrence except their last words. Those who have never read Goethe in prose or verse can still tell you that he said on his death-bed, "More light!"[12]

The process in which such dying words become common property even today is observed with a keen eye, and not without irony, by Carlos Fuentes in his novel *The Old Gringo*: "Try always to get yourself killed—that was the last thing General Frutos García said before he died in 1964 in his home in Mexico City, and his words became famous among the anecdotes told by the men who had fought in the Revolution."[13] To most readers, incidentally, this is probably one of the many cases in which death is more memorable than the life preceding it, or indeed is the only reminder that there ever was such a life.

Last words, then, seem to have a status all of their own in life and literature in the Western world (we shall go no further afield for the time being, although there appears to be a similar convention in Japan, for example). This status, guaranteed by the irrevocability of the final utterance, is highlighted perhaps by the way we use such phrases as "to have the last word," or "the last word on . . ." (makeup, or life insurance); in the German idiom, a person who pledges to speak "no dying word" (*kein Sterbenswort*) will be silent even under the greatest pressure to tell the truth. The special status of last words also tends to provide inspiration for a characteristic brand of jokes: the *Edinburgh University Library Guide* no. 42, on *Dissertation and Report Writing* (1986), reminds its students that professors whisper "Verify your references" just before they are gathered to their academic fathers (p. 14); the gentleman of the old school in the electric chair, when asked if he

has any final thoughts, regrets that he cannot offer his seat to a lady, etc. Indeed, the collective imagination tends to invent such anecdotal last words in cases in which no last utterance of the sort is actually recorded—as in the macabre story about the suicide of the Viennese critic and historian Egon Friedell: jumping out the window of his apartment a step ahead of the Gestapo, he is said to have shouted: "Watch out, please!" On the day of his suicide in 1972, French novelist Henri de Montherlant, according to a sophisticated travel-guide to Paris, had dinner in his customary restaurant; when the waiter, as always, brought him his decaffeinated coffee, he instructed him: "Today I'll have a real coffee."[14]

Some people, however, do apparently make an effort to die with words that lend themselves to such anecdotes, be it Laurence Olivier, whom *Encounter* reports to have expired with a theatrical reference to *Hamlet*,[15] or the otherwise-unknown killer of a Louisiana State trooper, who said, referring to his victim's family, "I hope they're happy."[16] In any case, last-word jokes, often in the form of cartoons—Gene Shalit's *Laughing Matters*[17] reprints one from *Playboy* about someone editing and reediting his "really and truly" last words—are not below the standards of the *New Yorker* (General Wolfe trying to think of the right last word; a man at the side of a hospital bed directing, "Call in the family, Nurse McIntire. I think he's about to process his last words"[18]); nor beneath the *New York Review of Books* (which put Goethe's last words about more light back into their original, nonsymbolic context[19]); nor the scholarly journal *Genre* (Mirabeau to Count Lamarck: "Connoisseur of beautiful deaths, are you content?" and the historian Frederick Jackson Turner: "Tell Max [Ferrand, his agent] I am sorry that I haven't finished my book"[20]). In their way, such jokes too point to the fact that last words are cultural heirlooms.

The belief, alluded to by Socrates in the *Apology* (39C), that the words of the dying have *magical* powers and that the

dying are distinguished by the gift of *prophecy* is now considered limited to "primitive" societies.[21] But "civilized" society still expects significant persons to die with significant words. Novelist and biographer Wolfgang Hildesheimer, committed to the view that the whole truth of a life will escape the searching glance even of the most painstaking biographer, noted bitterly in his *Mozart*: "The last hours and the death of genius . . . must provide at least some undisputed beauty for reverent generations to come; they must also have the stuff of tradition, 'last words,' last gestures."[22] Rilke's alleged last words—"Aber die Höllen!"—which supposedly took back the message of his poetry and his life, were the subject of a notorious and protracted controversy.[23]

In the past, the expectation associated with last words was even greater than it is today. For example, Puritan "conduct books"—handbooks of holy living and dying popular in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries—were quite explicit about the duty of the dying not to depart from this world without words designed to leave an impression on the survivors.[24] And throughout the nineteenth century, if novels and biographies are any guides at all, the formal deathbed scene, with family and friends in attendance, complete with last words and not infrequently theatrical, was a sine qua non of the final hours and, hence, part and parcel of virtually everybody's life experience—and eagerly sought after at that. Failure to speak a last word caused great disappointment, as private notes and letters document.[25] There was, in fact, a virtual cult of deathbed scenes and of last words. "In those days," one reads in Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*,

> even in European countries, death had a solemn social importance. It was not regarded as a moment when certain bodily organs ceased to function, but as a dramatic climax, a moment when the soul made its entrance into the next world, passing

> in full consciousness through a lowly door to an unimaginable scene. . . . The "Last Words" of great men, Napoleon, Lord Byron, were still printed in gift books, and the dying murmurs of every common man and woman were listened for and treasured by their neighbours and kinfolk. These sayings, no matter how unimportant, were given oracular significance and pondered by those who must one day go the same road.[26]

The death of the Anglican divine William Marsh (1775–1864) is an illuminating case in point: "In their eagerness to catch [his] last testament his family installed his eldest daughter in the sick room, unseen by him, to record his conversation, whereupon he recovered and the entire process had to be repeated over a year later."[27]

"In those days" one could therefore give incomparable weight to someone's or even one's own convictions by passing them off as utterances of the last moment, as did, for instance, a certain "M. H.," whose pious meditations appeared as *Death-Bed Thoughts*, despite the fact that she survived to publish them at the insistence of "some dear and intimate friends."[28]

Even in the twentieth century, this convention has not lost its power. The Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa, assassinated on his ranch in Chihuahua in 1923, died imploring a journalist: "Don't let it end like this. Tell them I said something." Whether authentic or not, this often-cited remark pointedly plays up the collective fascination with last words. William Saroyan, in his essay "Last Words of the Great," describes his own thrill at discovering this phenomenon:

> When I was 10 or 11 years old I found an old almanac in the barn of the rented house at 2226 San Benito Avenue in Fresno, half gone, but I studied every page that was still in place. And all I remember is the feature entitled Last Words of the Great. I was so impressed by what people had said at death that I felt absolutely exhilarated by the promise that someday I would die, and say my last words.[29]

Last Words. It is a curious experience to explore this little-known yet nearby territory whose natives we all are, though we may lack the love of dilettantism that gets us far into its interior. Nearly everybody knows at least a few quotable last words, as one can easily find out by being a capital bore and asking anybody one meets at a conference or cocktail party. Julius Caesar's proverbial "Et tu, Brute" may come up, or Archimedes' "Don't disturb my circles," or the words of recantation, expected impatiently by some bystanders and others, that David Hume did *not* speak on his deathbed, or Queen Elizabeth's "All my possessions for a moment of time" (and she may have had as many dresses as Imelda Marcos had shoes), or Captain Lawrence's "Don't give up the ship." Another good bet is Gertrude Stein's expectedly sibylline "In that case, what is the question?" after her earlier "What is the answer?"—directed to Alice B. Toklas—remained unanswered. Schiller might come to mind with his eminently appropriate exit line, "Judex" (judge), or Lessing's choice of lottery ticket number fifty-two as he had just turned fifty-two, etc. And what did Voltaire "really" say with his final breath? Michel Foucault, death already casting its shadow over him, devoted one of his last lectures at the Collège de France to a searching analysis of Socrates' famous last words.

Finality commands attention; last words, unlike all others, cannot be taken back. "The most trivial sentence becomes significant when nothing in the world or in oneself is strong enough any longer for another one to follow. Everybody agrees that he who has not said all has said nothing," says a French anthologist of last words.[30] Roland Barthes agrees: "What counts is the last throw of the dice. . . . Victory is his who captures that small animal that gives omnipotence: the last word. . . . Who is a hero? He who has the last word. Who has ever seen a hero who did not speak before he died?"[31] Therefore, it seems, last words are worth listening to, worth preserving, and worth citing in the media—even if the intended audience cannot be expected to know anything about

the subject. For example, the dying words of Hapsburg Emperor Francis I, "Don't change a thing," uttered in 1835, were said to be an instructive warning with a view to the possible decline of the American Empire in a recent *Newsweek* article.[32] The official Scottish exhibition commemorating the four hundredth anniversary of the death of Mary Stuart was announced throughout the country in 1987 by a gorgeous poster bearing as a motto words which were the dying utterance of King James V of Scotland—a fact deemed unnecessary to explain to the Scots, or to the English for that matter.

At the very least, last words have a sort of curiosity value, which proves irresistible even to the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times*. Both found it intriguingly newsworthy that French President Doumer "spent the last conscious moments of his life wondering how an automobile got into the charity book sale at the Maison Rothschild, where his assassination occurred."[33] Rather more macabre, and in worse taste, is the present-day habit of newspapers of revealing the last taped words of flight captains of crashed planes, no matter how insignificant. "Pilots reportedly talked of stewardess, not snow, before crash," runs the headline of one such news story in the *Boston Globe*.[34] And, on a Boston Harbor cruise, one may hear a bobbing buoy explained as a marker of the site of Nick's Mate Island, which sank into the sea after the mate was hanged there for the murder of Captain Nick; his last words under the gallows had predicted that if he were in fact hanged, the little island would go under.

Such attention paid to last words, whether they are highly revealing or bizarrely random, is a well-established convention in our society. No wonder *The Lazy Man's Guide to Death and Dying* by E. J. Gold advises not to say anything at all when the bell tolls.[35] This attention to last words (which, as Nietzsche thought it necessary to remind his philistine contemporaries, has its direct antecedents in the literature and historiography of antiquity as well as in the Old Testament)[36] is so

ingrained that if a news magazine dedicates only half a dozen lines or so to the death or the anniversary of the death of a celebrity, the last words will often be included. Front-page or, at any rate, lengthier and more-than-routine obituaries in the daily press would, of course, be incomplete without the piquant detail of the dying utterance, even in the arguably less-than-world-shaking case of crooner Rudy Vallee—and no matter how trivial the last words themselves.[37] On the other hand, there is the case of Leonard Bernstein, whose last words—"What's this?"—*Newsweek* not implausibly considered a veritable signet of his "investigating, questioning" mind in its two-page obituary.[38] And the same news magazine is properly alert to the folkloric quality of the convention when it reports in a two-sentence notice that a former governor of Guam shot himself at a downtown intersection flanked by a placard alluding to one of the most famous American last words: "I regret that I only have one life to give to my island."[39]

Obituaries in the media featuring last words are not just a convention of the present. As early as 1921, H. L. Mencken made fun of the practice in a letter to Theodore Dreiser, who had humorously informed him of his own passing. If he were to write an obituary for the *New York Times*, Mencken wrote, he would have to know Dreiser's last words. Rumor had it, he continued jokingly, that Dreiser had planned to say "Shakespeare, I come!" but now one heard that he had called for a "Seidel Helles." Mencken takes this as his cue for reminding Dreiser that Walt Whitman had for years practiced high-minded last words (ben trovato according to authoritative biographies), only to die with the expression of a rather more elementary human need.[40]

Last words of the newsworthy even cast their mythical spell over the 1988 Democratic primary campaign when the much publicized bloodstains on Jesse Jackson's shirt suggested, in the words of New York mayor Koch, that Jackson was "the

last man to speak with" Martin Luther King—a story deemed significant enough for the *Christian Science Monitor*.[41] The implication appears to be that Jackson must also have been the only one to hear King's last words, qualifying him to inherit his mantle. But fame was not a prerequisite to having one's last words recorded in the media even in the late 1980s. On 16 March 1988, the *Boston Globe* reported that a New Hampshire villager revealed on his deathbed the murderer of his daughter-in-law's first husband—it was his own son, which elevated the last word to the status of what is known as poignant family drama (p. 19). Similarly, *Newsweek* noted that when a 78-year-old Bible teacher was stabbed with a 12-inch butcher knife by a teenager in Gary, Indiana, she "recited the Lord's Prayer as she died."[42] By contrast, a political cliché was revived when the German newspaper *Die Zeit* quoted a survivor of Hitler's camps as remembering: "In Sachsenhausen, Soviet inmates died with Stalin's name on their lips."[43] Finally, the magazine *Nursing* recorded the last sentence of a twelve-year-old boy dying of leukemia as the high point of an uplifting human-interest story: "I'll remember you when I get to heaven," he said to a nurse.[44]

But to return from the obscure to the more prominent: When a panel of noted men of letters, W. H. Auden, Aldous Huxley, and others, were interviewed on the BBC Brains Trust program in the 1950s, David Daiches, one of the participants, recalls that the question designed to get to the heart of the matter was what their last words would be if this were the occasion for them. After all, life and literature have taught us that truths concealed throughout a long life will be revealed in the hour of death. Goethe, in an entry in his *Italian Journey* dated 18 November 1786, tells of the dramatic case of the classicist painter Raffael Mengs who confessed *in articulo mortis* that a supposedly antique fresco was really his own work, unleashing a heated controversy. And a documentary on Picasso reveals in its concluding seconds that the painter's last words