

MAGIC WORDS

MOHAN LAL SHARMA

Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania

Liberation from the here and now is recognized as the true mark of the escapist as well as the ascetic and is, by no means, a common experience. That there might be a different sort of mystery about the collocation of there and now is seldom realized.

There is a curious magic in these two monosyllables when they shake off the shackles of place and time, speaking phenomenologically. The utterance of "Now, now, now" is taken to be an admonition, a gentle reminder that someone has blundered or been indecorous. Why there should be this weight of meaning in the simple now is a mystery.

Equally strange is the potency of the word there, which is also employed in repetition. Just as there is no apparent reason why now should discourage ill-doing, so it is hard to grasp why the announcement of location, especially in the double form of "There, there" should provide comfort.

The tears welling up after a fall on the pavement or after the departure of a train or plane (evidently carrying a dear one) are mysteriously checked by a soothing murmur of this kind which need not necessarily be followed by a longer assurance of no harm done. These two words are almost incantations.

Others have their own constant favorites in prefatory noises. Few when asked a question can do without the word well before they even begin to reply. The opinion to be expressed may be ill indeed, as when a critic starts to slate a book or play which is the subject of enquiry: "Well, I thought The Entertainer dreadful" or "Well, I am not going to mince words about Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?".

Also, and equally inexplicable, is the acceptance of "Well, well, well" as an indication of surprise or disbelief instead of the assent which it might be taken to convey. Often when one is perplexed by a question and needs time, the thing to do is to play for it with some such prefix to an answer as actually or basically.

If the listeners to an unfriendly broadcast think that some actual or basic nonsense is being put across the air, they may find themselves muttering "Well, well" or even "Now, now". Only in their more irate moments are they likely to say never and then emulate Lear by repeating the word five times.

"Words, words, words", Hamlet thought poorly of words, though he found a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. Othello, however, in his valedictory speech wanted to have a word or two, and then provided a spate. This was in true keeping, for as he said he was unused to the melting mood, and yet his tears came as fast as the Arabian trees dropping their medicinal gum. His words on this occasion were as plentiful as his tears.

And why not? Words have a magic in them, apart from the meaning. Indeed, some words are a distillation of magic -- all the charm of all the Muses flowering in a lonely word. Hence it is that a quest of the right word, or the mot juste, is not finicky fastidiousness. It is a quest of ineffable magic, of glory and loveliness.