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SICK AND TIRED

Louis Foley

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Recently one of our sprightliest columnists wrote an entertaining article on things that people were "sick and tired" of hearing. For a final example, as a sort of climax, he said: "I am sick and tired of the attempt to eliminate the word 'now' from the English language. On radio, on television, and in the press there seems to be a conspiracy to wipe out this wonderfully short and to-the-point word meaning 'at this very instant.' The most common substitute is the word 'presently,' which doesn't even mean 'now,' but 'soon,' as everybody with a second-grade education used to know. But does that keep these half-witted radio people from saying, 'The temperature outside our studio is presently 67 degrees'? It does not." (1)

Indeed one can become very sick and tired of meeting this distortion regularly in the mass media. "A number of foundation-sponsored leadership training programs are presently under way . . ." (2) "While the race is close, the United States is presently ahead." (3) "Warnings about inflation presently vie with cheerful words about new records being set . . ." (4) "President Sunay presently enjoys the firm backing of the Turkish Army." (5) "Mr. Pisco presently receives \$9,540 a year." (6) ". . . Escalation can bring situations that will be worse than those we presently face." (7) "Mr. Acheson, presently a consultant of the State Department . . ." (8) "Nowhere is it presently sufficient for man to be man." (9) ". . . Individuals and groups around the nation are presently challenging loyalty statutes." (10) ". . . Price discussions in which East Europeans presently are engaged with the Soviet Union." (11) "Brooks is presently holed up in an office at Columbia studios . . ." (12) "Mr. Henning is presently Undersecretary of Labor . . ." (13) "The government presently bans travel to mainland China . . ." (14) "Presently, 35,000 journals print over a million scientific articles a year." (15) ". . . The wage-price spiral which is presently in process." (16) ". . . One colonel, two majors, three captains, and one warrant officer are presently in jail charged with conspiracy and murder." (17) "[These stories] get beyond what television can presently deal with . . ." (18) And so on and on and on.

What is even more disheartening is the way the contagion of this epidemic spreads into *milieux* where we might naturally expect to find more disciplined language. So we see a very prominent educator displaying it repeatedly: "Presently, numerous agencies are in the

process of alerting elementary and secondary education . . .” “Presently the most important problem of humanity . . .” “Presently, many of the developing countries . . .”(19) It can creep into publications of our most respected scholarly organizations: “This responsibility . . . is not presently accepted or even acknowledged in classical studies.”(20) “The children presently in the schools need to be educated *now*.”(21)

One really wonders where these people have been all this time. Actually the word *presently* is remarkable for the way its proper meaning is built into its form. Here the *-ly* ending (worn-down remnant of *like*) still *means* “like”; it has not slipped off into other relationships, as has happened with *daily*, *hourly*, *yearly*, *occasionally*, or various other examples which no longer have to do with resemblance. Something which is to happen “presently,” though obviously *not* at the present moment, is near enough that it seems (almost) *like* the present.

Aside from the conventional terms which represent merely grammatical structure and have no meaning in themselves, it would be hard to find a single word which has been more useful to writers of narrative through long generations. No other word could be more unmistakable in its meaning. It is a most convenient equivalent for “pretty soon,” “before long,” “in a little while,” or “after a brief interval,” where no more precise measurement of time is needed.

It is amazing how often the word is to be found (of course in its correct meaning) in the stories of virtually every English or American fiction writer of the last two centuries, to go no farther back. Starting say with Mark Twain, who used it frequently, we find it again and again in the narratives of one author after another, down through H. G. Wells, Irvin S. Cobb, Melville Davisson Post, Wilbur Daniel Steele, Katharine Brush, Somerset Maugham, Erskine Caldwell, Erle Stanley Gardner, and Ian Fleming, besides many others less well known.

The Anatomy of a Murder, by Robert Traver (1958), shows an interesting contrast. The first-person narrator, speaking in his own right, has no thought otherwise than using the word in its traditional sense:

“And, as I presently saw, it certainly had the tourists.”

“Not to mention the sylvan environs, which I shall presently get to.”

“Maida went to her room and presently reappeared with her book and bristling battery of pencils.”

No less does the endearing old Parnell McCarthy respect the usage:

“Maida reminded Parnell . . . ‘Remember, you promised.’ ‘Presently, my dear, presently,’ Parnell said, smiling benevolently.”

The talk that goes on in the courtroom scenes creates a very different atmosphere. There is a certain note of pompousness in the speech of various characters. So, as might be expected, “presently” degenerates into a mere pretentious expression for *now*.

“. . . Judge Maitland, who is presently recovering from illness.”

“He is presently in the hospital under a doctor’s care.”

“I ask you . . . if the man is presently sane.”

“Presently an inmate of the county jail.”

“Where do you presently reside?”

Since the author clearly shows his own respect for the word in its meaningful sense, we may presume that its loose use by these people is intended as part of the way they are characterized by their manner of speech. They tend to use what they take to be impressive, high-sounding terms, in keeping with their notion of legal dignity.

Of course not *all* journalistic writers, by any means, are unaware of what “presently” means and why. From time to time our jaded senses may be refreshed by the usage of people who do know what they are saying. “Our coverage will presently include satire in art . . .”(22) “Billy Blunt dropped the spade and rushed indoors. And presently Mr. Blunt came out . . .”(23) “The young man and the lame and aging poet struck up a friendship. Presently Harry Stafford invited his friend out to the farm.”(24) “Presently three uniformed men came into sight.”(25) “Presently we reached the crossroads and pulled in by the pumps.”(26) “Then the wild dogs went out to hunt, and presently each returned with a little of the meat for the puppies.” (Two other examples in the same article.)(27) “. . . The history of humanity must presently culminate in some sort of disaster . . .”(28) “. . . The Communist powers on their side will presently perceive the futility of their announced mission to dominate the world . . .”(29) “. . . She is enrolled at a college. She presently meets a rich, liberal-thinking white girl and they become friends.”(30) “The leader of the band . . . gave a little kick that had nothing to do with the rhythm. Presently he did it again, harder.”(31) “We sat at lunch in a downtown restaurant. Presently she forgot she was among Manhattan land-lubbers and referred to the people at a nearby table as ‘passengers.’”(32) We might go on with plenty of examples to show that

respect for the honest meaning of this word, while it may be languishing, is not yet dead.

The columnist from whom we quoted in the beginning had added where we left off: "And those that don't say 'presently' say 'currently.' 'The temperature is currently, Mr. Pompidou is currently visiting, Elizabeth Taylor is currently playing.' The temperature isn't currently; it's now. And poor Mr. Pompidou! Why can't they let him be visiting now instead of currently? I'm sick and tired of . . ."

These are, after all, merely conspicuous examples of a kind of pollution of our language which has been going on for a good while. The accelerated communication of our day has served to spread their infection with astonishing rapidity. The way had been prepared for them, however, by the same sort of irresponsible looseness which had produced other distortions that had spread more gradually. These things are started by people who are trying to be "fancy," to use words which they think are impressive but whose exact meaning they never bothered to understand. Not content with the words they really possess, they want to use a vocabulary beyond their means.

This is what we have in the careless throwing around of *anticipate* (to head off, foresee and prepare for) to mean merely "expect"; *appreciate* (to value justly) to mean nothing more than "be pleased with"; *comprise* (take in, include) as if it were just a somewhat more elegant synonym for the opposite *compose* (make up, go together to form); *transpire* (leak through, become known) as if it meant simply "to happen"; "inferentially" to represent the opposite point of view by *implication*; *disinterested* (not influenced by selfish motives) to stand for nothing more than *uninterested*.

No more outstanding instance could be found than what has happened to the word *type* in undisciplined parlance, rather particularly, it seems, among educators. Its solid meaning of symbol or perfect example remains undisturbed in the adjective *typical*; when anything is mentioned as "typical," everyone understands that it is perfectly representative of its class. The *type* used in printing gives us the true symbols, the perfect letters which we imitate only crudely by hand. So with "type casting" for plays; you find a person who just naturally corresponds ideally to the personage to be played; then he needs no skill in acting but can simply be himself on the stage. Yet this good old word—uttered sometimes with a certain unction as if it subtly implied some refinement of meaning—is worked to death as, most commonly, a mere synonym for "kind" or "sort," but also instead of form, variety, class, style, model, design, or what have you. Often in-

deed it is dragged in where any word would be superfluous: "an informal type of discussion" for an informal discussion, "an interesting type of book" for an interesting book.

An insidious way in which the mass-directed media have given us reason to be sick and tired is their habit of overriding distinctions that go to the very heart of our language. Nothing is more profoundly a part of the structure of modern English than the clear difference between phrases and compound words. This difference is none the less real for the fact that we are continually creating new compounds, rather more than we seem to need.

The latest befuddlement of this sort to sweep the country is the printing of "anymore" as if it were a compound word (and therefore accented on the first syllable) like *anybody*, *anyone*, or *anytime* (at any moment), which is infinitely different from any *time* (duration). Any *more* is as far from being one word as no more, much more, a little more, or a great deal more. This is true whether *more* happens to be an adjective, an adverb, or even a substantive, as it is in the sentence, "That's all we want; we don't need any *more*." Anyone who heard Ethel Barrymore years ago in *Les Déclassés* will never forget her famous line: "That's all there is; there isn't any *more*," with of course the inevitable intonation which unmistakably demonstrates the point.

Likewise we have seen *ad nauseam* "underway," as if it were like *underwear* or *underbrush*, when it is simply a prepositional phrase with accent naturally on the object, *under way*.

As a matter not of "punctuation" but of *spelling*, the hyphen has become an increasingly useful device. We seem to be more and more fond of taking a phrase which would normally come *after* a noun and putting it in front. In such case the hyphen is necessary to make the construction instantly clear. Thus clothing ready to wear becomes ready-to-wear clothes, a decision made once for all is a once-for-all decision, a driver who hits and runs is a hit-and-run driver. These temporary compoundings are eternally different from *real* compound words; they keep their meaning and intonation like the phrases that they essentially remain, as true compounds never do.

In line with the thoroughly established system, a view or picture over *all* becomes the over-all picture. When the phrase appears as "overall," as it frequently does in newspapers, it looks as if it belonged in the class of *overcoat* or *overshoes* or other such common expressions where the "over" never was a preposition at all.

To some people these may seem trifling details. But if such

indifference is allowed to continue indefinitely, it can seriously weaken the general feeling for the nature of our language. Instead of “murdering the King’s English” by obvious violence, it is a sneaking sort of killing by poisoning. In the long run this kind of pollution might do as much harm as the neglect of honest meaning that makes us sick and tired of the abuse of “presently.”

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