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Dorothy E. Smith

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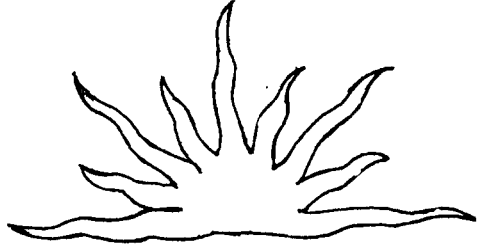
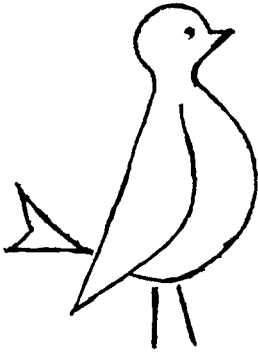


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ROUND ROBIN

Dorothy E. Smith, Editor

Dear Editor:

Over the past few years I have taken a very keen pleasure in reading the articles by Professor Louis Foley that have appeared in *Reading Horizons*. More years ago than probably he and I like to remember I was his student in a Chaucer course. Later Lou and I became colleagues and friends. I don't believe I ever came away from a session with him that I was not very much alive to the fact that I had learned something or gotten a fresh outlook on something—and not because he was a walking textbook, but because he was an original and knowledgeable thinker whose throw-away remarks, even, had gold in them. His philosophy had a 'lived-in' air about it because he was a man of considerable sophistication.

It is hard to disagree with such a man, but there are things in his article "A New Look at Longfellow's 'Evangeline'" (*Reading Horizons*, Summer, 1967) that I gravely question. (I was going to say that my viewpoint differs from his, but then I remembered that he took me to task once for using *viewpoint* instead of the etymologically more faithful *point of view*.) I hope that if you publish this he will come back at me. A dialogue with Professor Foley, even at long distance, is a refreshing experience.

First I should like to applaud his very perceptive remarks on the metrics and the architectonics of *Hiawatha*, *Evangeline*, and *The Courtship of Miles Standish*. It is fashionable to decry Longfellow today among the "in" crowd of critics and professors. This is partly a natural reaction to the excessive enthusiasm for him in his heyday,

partly a phase of our aversion to Victorianism, and partly a healthy rejection of such regrettable effusions as "The Village Blacksmith" and the "Psalm of Life." Like Tennyson, Longfellow seems to persist in fame for the worst things he ever wrote.

Like the little girl in the ditty, when he was good he was very good, and when he was bad he was horrid. The "Psalm of Life" is a reflective poem calling for the stately tread of iambic pentameter. But Longfellow gallops us through it breathlessly on the thudding hooves of trochaic tetrameter, and then leaves us with the painful image of our "footprints in the sands of time"—I say painful because it would be a traumatic experience to ram one's foot into an hourglass.

But Longfellow was a great poet when he was under the discipline of following the sonnet form or of doing translations—or, as Professor Foley points out, when he shaped an epic. The Foley article, I think, goes to the heart of that greatness with perceptive penetration.

But, and here my disagreement with him starts, Professor Foley finds "flaws" in *Evangeline* which in his next sentence he magnifies to "egregious blunders." *Evangeline* is written in dactylic hexameter. And, of course, it is written in English. Yet of a necessity there are French names in it. French pronunciation differs from English in that there is approximately equal stress on all syllables in French. So the reader of *Evangeline* is faced with dilemma. If he pronounces the French names in the French manner, he will "immediately throw the dactylic pattern out of joint." If he pronounces them in the way that will fit the English dactyls, his conscience will hurt him—that is, "if he is aware of how French names sound, so that they seem 'natural' to him only in their true form." The anglicized names will clash with the French atmosphere of the poem.

In his article Professor Foley never extends his objection to its logical conclusion, and it is this logical conclusion that bothers me. The English language is made up of a medley of stressed and unstressed syllables. Therefore English poetry is written in metre. As Professor Foley says, "French words cannot be written in 'metre.'" Ergo, there can be no use of French words in English poetry. Ergo, English poetry must never deal with French personages, French places, or French subject matter. If it does, it will offend the ears of the "bilingual readers" that Professor Foley is concerned about.

But the logical conclusion extends even further. The genius of every language is unique. And so, according to the Foley thesis, anglicizing words from any other language is falsification and, in a poem, destructive of atmosphere. The bilingual reader whose native

language is English need not have French for his other tongue. He may have Hebrew. Then pity his condition as he struggles with Milton's *Paradise Lost!* "How *can* one read it comfortably, if he is aware of how Hebrew names sound, so that they seem 'natural' to him only in their true form?" (I have quoted Professor Foley exactly, except that I have substituted *Hebrew* for his *French*—a substitution which in no way alters his thought.) The moment our bilingual English-Hebrew reader comes to a mention of Eve the atmosphere of the poem is destroyed for him. To him *Eve* is *hawwah*, which effectively destroys the iambic pentameter of such grand lines as:

So spake the patriarch of mankind, but Eve
Persisted, yet submiss, though last, replied.

Or suppose our bilingual reader's other tongue is Italian. There is that splendid climactic passage in *The Merchant of Venice* where Portia warns Shylock:

But, in the cutting it, if thou dost shed
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
Are, by the laws of Venice, confiscate
Unto the state of Venice.

Our reader would really be uncomfortable as he tried to substitute *Venezia* for *Venice* here.

And, of course to the English-Italian bilinguist the lines

To the glory that was Greece
And the grandeur that was Rome

lose much of their punch as *Rome* to his aware ear must always and forever be *Roma*.

As a matter of fact, he won't even be able to take pleasure in singing "Twas on the Isle of Capri that I found her," because in Italian *Capri* is accented on the first syllable, which, as Professor Foley would say, would "immediately throw the . . . pattern out of joint."

I cannot agree with this implied hypothesis that in an English poem only English names (and therefore subject matter) are consonant.

I do agree that anglicization may be carried too far. When Joaquin Miller, a turn of the century American poet, rhymed the name of the German poet Goethe with the English word teeth I think he wandered a bit out into left field. Apparently Henry Cuyler Bunner agreed, for he was moved thereby to write a tribute to Shake-

speare, Moliere, and Goethe which he entitled “Shake, Mulleary, and Goeeth.”

On the other hand, we have such ridiculous attempts at fidelity to the original language as are exemplified by what is surely the most ridiculous line in Shakespeare—that passage where Caesar, who has been speaking fluent English all through the play, suddenly yells, “Et tu, Brute” when he feels himself stabbed. What English-Latin bilinguist could possibly feel more comfortable with that line than with the anglicized “And you, Brutus?”

Professor Foley himself admits that among the French Canadians, who are—at least those who would be reading *Evangeline*—certainly bilingual for the most part, “nothing in American literature has greater celebrity than Longfellow’s *Evangeline*. In Canada it is doubtless considered . . . the authentic and moving account of the tragedy of a people . . .” Later he says, “French-speaking people can read it with pleasure . . .” (It was Wordsworth who said that the principal end of poetry is pleasure.) But, says Professor Foley, “the poem is *not* written for bilingual readers.”

I submit that just the opposite is true. His remarks on the poem’s reception in French-speaking Canada are powerful evidence to prove it. Furthermore Professor Foley, who, I happen to know, has had long and extensive acquaintance with the teaching of French, has reason to be more familiar than most of us with the axiom, “When you’re using a language, think in that language.” The Anglo-French bilinguist who is reading *Evangeline* is thinking in English, because *Evangeline* is written in English. And this includes the pronunciation of the proper names. Whatever adjustments are necessary he is better able to make because he is bilingual. He is familiar with both currencies, and the exchange presents less of a problem.

Charles A. Smith
Associate Professor of English
Western Michigan University