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Dorothy E. Smith

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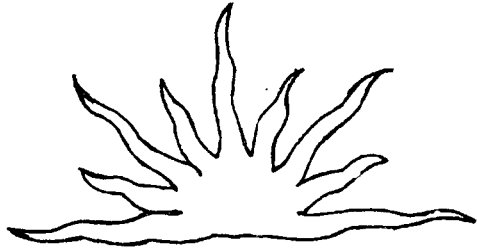
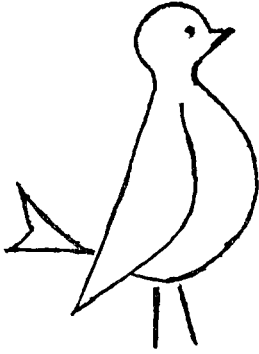


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ROUND ROBIN

Dorothy E. Smith, Editor

In the Summer issue of *Reading Horizons* Louis Foley wrote an article, "A New Look at Longfellow's *Evangeline*," and in the Fall issue Charles Smith wrote a letter discussing some aspects of the article. Now, below, we have a "response to the response," as it were. 'Round and 'round she goes . . .

Dear Editor:

It is indeed heart-warming to a teacher to receive such a testimonial from a former student as Charles Smith's letter in your Fall issue. I can only be humbly doubtful whether I really deserve his generous praise. If I find it surprising that he should recall so vividly our associations of a good while ago, certainly I remember him as one of my outstanding students at Western. He was the kind who not only did his homework but thought beyond it and made original contributions to a class, the kind who would come up with unexpected questions which oblige an instructor to search his mind and think fast to answer satisfactorily. To quote an expression of one of my former professors in France, such students are "les plus beaux fleurons de notre couronne."

I feel particularly complimented by Professor Smith's agreement with me concerning some rather fundamental things about Longfellow's poetry, which I am sure he knows as a whole better than I do. His remarks about the "Psalm of Life" are delightful. His humorous interpretation of "footprints on the sands of time" is a possibility that had never occurred to me. The mixture of metaphors which

I had visualized was quite different. Considered by itself, I think the line is beautiful, and it is as unforgettable as any could be. Its author must have loved it. It connected vaguely in my mind with fossil footprints of animals in what was once sand and then through geological ages hardened into rock. It strikes me as possible that without the poet's realizing it the image was suggested by the human footprint found on the shore by Robinson Crusoe, and its understandable emotional impact. What had really seemed ridiculous to me was the idea that the "forlorn and shipwrecked brother," who is "sailing" (apparently still on shipboard), could see the footprints on shore, and that "the sands of time" should take on an air of eternal duration, when the next tide would obliterate them completely.

I must move on, however, to the principal object of discussion, Longfellow's "Evangeline." Obviously the poem shows great skill in versification, as I have said. It carries the conviction of a story that must have been sincerely and vividly imagined. One must be hardened indeed to read it without emotion. Nevertheless it combines incongruous elements which I think can hardly quite "jell." In describing the country, as appears from his letters, "he had Swedish scenery in his head." (New York Times Book Review, May 28, 1967, p. 6) The linguistic limitations to which I have called attention are to my mind merely conspicuous symptoms of an "atmosphere," an informing spirit, which could not give the flavor of Acadian life as it was lived. Undoubtedly Longfellow was "scholarly." Inasmuch as his poetry was so largely based upon library research, the way he was able to rise above bookishness is remarkable enough. Perhaps I was too severe in taxing him with "egregious blunders." I have in mind, however, that he was a professor of French; as such he should bear the responsibility of a specialist.

Some years ago I discussed the handling of French names in *Evangeline* with a French friend of mine (now deceased) who was completely bilingual and well acquainted with English and American literature. He was entirely in agreement with my feeling about the matter. Later, in a letter replying to my question as to what he thought of the name, he wrote: "I have never heard the name mentioned except in connection with Longfellow's poem. I have always believed that Longfellow created the name; it probably sounded more poetical than either Angélique or even Angéline, which were occasionally used in the country districts."

For my part, I doubt if the name has ever been used in English except as it might have come from the influence of this poem. As is

well known, the real name of the girl whose story it tells was Emmeline Labiche. I am inclined to suspect that "Evangeline" suggested itself because it would fit easily with dactylic rhythm. Presumably Longfellow wished to avoid the girl's real name, which would be a perfect dactyl as pronounced in English, as a more common name might be, Joséphine for instance. With "Evangeline" I think he was getting off to a bad start.

I had pointed out that French words simply do not lend themselves to "metre" as we are accustomed to understanding that term. Professor Smith goes on to conclude that, according to my theory, "there can be no use of French words in English poetry," and consequently "English poetry must never deal with French personages, French places, or French subject matter," lest it "offend the ears of bilingual readers."

Now I do not think there is necessarily any implication to be carried nearly so far as that. It was particularly to the *kind* of metre used in this poem that I was objecting as unsuited to French words. It was already a *tour de force* to use dactylic rhythm (ending each line with a trochee) for a long poem in English. The easier and more natural iambic metre would not encounter such strong conflict with French intonation. This is true because, in good verse which is not "sing-songy," the stress on accented syllables varies in force and may sometimes be so light as to be scarcely noticeable.

Charles Bruneau, renowned professor at the Sorbonne, used to say in his course in the history of grammar that the "typical" French word is a word of two syllables. His favorite example was *martyr*. *Amour, désir, plaisir, français*, or any number of others might have served equally well. I think any such can be used in iambic verse in English (as has certainly been done) without shocking a sensitive reader. When, however, in *Evangeline*, to cite only one example, we are continually confronted with "Grand Pré" as an inevitable trochee, I think the distortion is too great to be acceptable.

Then let us distinguish between genuinely French words and *our* names for French places or other "French subject matter." The mere fact that a word came into English from French does not prevent it from becoming eventually as truly "English" as any other. Of course anglicization will change its sound though it may keep the same spelling, like *France, Paris, or champagne*. Virtually all of our commonest masculine Christian names, and many feminine ones, were adopted from French beginning in the eleventh century. Of course they were long ago completely anglicized in pronunciation. Some have

retained their identical French spelling, or kept very close to it, as Charles, Robert, Henry, or George; others such as William or John have been considerably modified. In any case they are now an integral part of our language. So are various geographical names which came into English from French, sometimes becoming slightly altered in orthographic form, as Italy, Egypt, or Alps, sometimes continuing to be spelled the same (aside from accents), as Rhone or Pyrenees. These are undeniably English words. It is possible, therefore, to deal with "French subject matter" without necessary recourse to "French words" in the sense of words really foreign to our tongue.

Now how about a "bilingual reader"? As has been demonstrated psychologically, any language that a person truly knows is like a separate register of the mind, distinct from any other. No matter in how many languages a person can easily and naturally read, he reads in only one at a time. For the many Italians who speak French with the greatest of ease, France is France, Paris is Paris, Rome is Rome, Venise is Venise, Florence is Florence, and *allemand* is *allemand*, when they are using French, not *Francia*, *Parigi*, *Roma*, *Venezia*, *Firenze*, or *tedesco*, as they are when one thinks of them in Italian. Similarly an Egyptian who is really at home in English will find it perfectly natural, in speaking or reading our language, to think of his country as Egypt rather than as "Misr," as we might transliterate its name in his native Arabic. Anyone for whom this is not true is simply not really "bilingual." So I think Professor Smith's quotations from English poetry do not bear upon the point. They involve no mixture of languages but use only words thoroughly established as part of the English tongue.

As I see it, the great fault of our anglicization of names is not so much that it "may be carried too far" as that it is so utterly inconsistent. In California, for instance, La Jolla and the name of the Franciscan missionary Junipero Serra have to be pronounced as in Spanish, while Los Angeles is distorted into something not in accord with any system at all. People who consider themselves cultured may ridicule those who pronounce Goethe otherwise than as what they think is correct German, whereas for Straus and some others they make a sort of compromise. Don Quixote is "correctly" pronounced about halfway between Spanish and English, but *quixotic* is treated just as anyone ignorant of Spanish would naturally expect. The name of the French opera *Faust* is pronounced as in German, and the French opera *Carmen* becomes simply "KARmn." While Romeo keeps the Italian spelling with changed pronunciation, Giulietta is

metamorphosed into Juliet. The whole business is completely hit or miss.

I still think I am right in principle about the effect of linguistic details in *Evangeline* upon a bilingual reader, though I may have overemphasized it. The trouble is, I believe, that we are talking about a sort of person who for practical purposes just isn't there. As I said in my article, probably most Americans read the poem before they ever have much feeling for French, and never go back to read it again. What goes farther to make the discussion merely academic is the rather evident fact (which it was careless of me not to bring up before) that the overwhelming majority of French Canadians read "Evangeline" (as they read Shakespeare if they do at all) only in translation.

Sous le ciel d'Acadie, au fond d'un joli val,
 Et non loin des bosquets que bordent le cristal
 Que déroule, tantôt sous les froides bruines,
 Tantôt sous le soleil, le grand Bassin des Mines,
 On aperçoit encor, paisible, retiré,
 Et loin de ce qu'il fut, le hameau de Grand Pré.
 Du côté du Levant, de beaux champs de verdure
 Offraient à cent troupeaux une grasse pâture.
 Ah, cette jeune fille, qu'elle était belle à voir,
 Avec ses dix-sept ans, son front pur, son oeil noir . . .
 Lorsqu'elle s'en allait à travers la prairie,
 Avec son corset rouge et sa jupe fleurie . . .
 On la voyait venir le long de la bruyère,
 Tenant dans sa main blanche un livre de prière.

Et ainsi de suite. It is of course a "free" translation. I doubt if any other kind could be made tolerably readable.

Louis Foley