

LAYNEY VIETS

The Language of Liberty: Milton's Nationalistic Linguistics

English as Lingua Franca, or ELF, seems a straightforward concept: in today's globalized society, speakers of all varieties of languages elect to use English as a means of communication, regardless of their native tongues. The origins of ELF lie in the era of aggressive British and American imperialism, when English was forced on much of the world as a language of governance. At that time, native speakers held considerable power over non-native speakers; "proper" English was a marker of civilization as defined by the colonizer and entrance into positions of power depended on mastering it (frequently at the expense of one's native language). Given the ubiquity of English as the modern lingua franca and its imperialistic past as something of a bully language, it can come as a bit of a shock to shift one's linguistic paradigm back a few centuries to the English Renaissance, when English was struggling to prove itself to the more prestigious French, Italian, and then-lingua franca, Latin. In England, various scholars tried to enhance their mother language's reputation, largely by making it more like Latin in its vocabulary and syntax. But these attempts were always in tension with a nationalism that asserted that English was fine just the way it was and should be recognized for its own merits as a language of the common people, not of scholars. One man who skillfully navigated these two opposing forces and largely succeeded in reconciling them was John Milton, one of England's greatest poets and propagandists. His career was equal parts building up the English language, defending the English people, and encouraging both to match and then surpass the linguistic might of the Continent. Through his political prose and his poetry, both in English and Latin, Milton sought to prove that England could deftly wield language to assert its dominance in political, religious, and (the highest laurels for Milton) literary spheres.

As a poet and rhetorician, he was equally determined to improve his craft as he was endowed with a natural genius for it. Milton was more than worthy of being a language

warrior. His first and earliest qualification was his familiarity with all of the contemporary languages of scholarship, especially Latin and Greek. Though it remained the medium for most international communication, by Milton's birth in 1608, virtually no one was a native speaker of Latin. Milton, however, came close. He began studying the language under the instruction of a private tutor, Thomas Young, somewhere between the ages of seven and eleven and probably before entering grammar school, where a thorough education in Latin and Greek would have been standard anyway (Leach 2-3). In a Latin elegy addressed to Young, Milton credits his tutor with inspiring his love of classical poetry, a love that would have an immense influence on his own verse throughout his career (Pattison 4). At around ten years old, Milton began attending the renowned day school St. Paul's, where he would have spent much of his time reading, translating, and imitating the classical writers in both Latin and Greek; St. Paul's also provided instruction in Hebrew for its older students, so by his mid-teens any student, regardless of his precocity, would have had at least four languages at his disposal. The young Milton also undertook to master the Italian of his dear school friend, Charles Diodati, the son of a learned Calvinist pastor from Geneva. Somewhere along the line he acquired French too, following the advice of his father as well as his own drive to educate himself as completely as possible in modern as well as ancient learning (Pattison 20). Thus Milton was comfortable with at least five languages in addition to English, and the ancient and modern writings of each language were open to him, as were the audiences that spoke them.

Milton definitely made full use of his knowledge, tackling the classical forms of elegy and ode in his late teens and early twenties, translating psalms from Hebrew, and producing several political and religious tracts in Latin to be read by a broad European audience. Yet he also reserved a special place in his body of work for his native English, and the key to understanding when he used one language or the other—or, in some cases, a hybrid of both—is his unique brand of nationalism. During Milton's lifetime, England went through three monarchs and two Lord Protectors, all of whom exercised varying degrees of tyranny

over the English people. He saw public opinion swing several times from hatred and mistrust of Puritans like himself to an unconditional embrace of their values. He went from holding an important office in the government (as, most appropriately, the Foreign Language Secretary) to being imprisoned and forced into hiding. Overall, his relationship to the State was tempestuous, but his love of the nation never faltered. Time and again in his writings he asserts England's exceptionalism and its potential. His *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, which defends the highly controversial execution of Charles I, anchors its argument against tyranny in a quasi-legendary history of elective monarchy in England: "from first beginning, the original kings... [were] exalted to that dignity above their brethren; and...turning to tyranny they may be as lawfully deposed and punished as they were at first elected" (389). Here Milton displays his pride in the English people's tradition of democracy and rule of law, concepts that, if not strictly accurate from a historical perspective, certainly enhance the image Milton has in his mind of an England that leads the way in the fight for liberty. A still more striking example of nationalism in Milton's writing, and one that has particular significance to the current argument, appears in his passionate treatise condemning government censorship, *Areopagitica*. Arguing that such censorship as had been proposed in a recent act of Parliament was counter to the values of the nation, he writes, "our English, the language of men ever famous and foremost in the achievements of liberty, will not easily find servile letters [enough] to spell such a dictatory presumption" (346). For this gifted rhetorician and poet, the language one used was not merely a medium for the communication of ideas; it represented an expression of one's beliefs.

Bearing this in mind, we can interpret Milton's relationship to language through his nationalistic sentiments. One fascinating text to study from this angle is his 1644 essay *Of Education*. There Milton lays out a plan for what he believes to be the ideal education for a young gentleman. He fashions this plan primarily for the benefit of Englishmen, though he notes that perhaps "other Nations will be glad to visit us for their Breeding, or else to imitate

us in their own Country” (332). Foreign students or no, the international reputation and functionality of his English graduates is clearly at the forefront of his mind throughout the essay, as his preoccupation with language instruction indicates. One suspects that he was dissatisfied with the Latin and Greek pedagogy he encountered at St. Paul’s grammar school, for he suggests that having students labor over declensions and conjugations in isolation from authentic classical texts makes learning the ancient tongues “miserable” when they could be learnt “easily and delightfully in one year” (323) by exposing students to the works of classical authors for a kind of immersion learning. Even if we don’t take this claim quite at face value (he was after all something of a linguistic prodigy), we can still appreciate his concern with producing cheerful and proficient speakers of Latin and Greek. He understood that in order for England to be relevant in Europe, to be a seat of scholarship and political power, it needed an educated upper class that could handle the continental lingua franca with ease. This meant amending not only the way Latin was taught but also the way it was spoken on the island. Due to England’s isolation from the Continent, its species of Latin, though fairly standard in its syntax and semantics, had grown to be pronounced in a distinctly different manner from that spoken in Europe, especially in Italy. To Milton, who had spent several years studying in Italy, hearing the Anglicized Latin of his compatriots would have been torture. Indeed, he rails against it in *Of Education*, calling it “exceeding close and inward, so that to smatter Latin with an English mouth is as ill a hearing as Law French” (325-26). Nor is his complaint merely aesthetic: he also writes that this mispronunciation is “observed by all other nations” (325), that is, that England is a laughingstock when it comes to using the learned lingua franca. International status as butchers of classical idioms did not figure into Milton’s vision of England; his preoccupation with Latin in *Of Education* is, therefore, a fundamentally nationalistic one.

Milton himself used Latin quite frequently (and presumably pronounced it beautifully too) both as a private individual and in his role as Foreign Language Secretary for the English

Commonwealth. But again, acceptance of a foreign tongue did not, in his career, equate with rejection of the national culture. Two of his major Latin prose works, *De Doctrina Christiana* (*Of Christian Doctrine*) and *Defensio pro Populo Anglicano* (*Defense of the English People*), functioned as English propaganda directed at the whole of Europe, explaining and justifying the highly controversial actions of the Protectorate government, especially the execution of Charles I. For purposes political and religious, Latin was a powerful vehicle for exporting English cultural values and ideas to the Continent.

But Latin couldn't do everything Milton wanted. He devoted the prime of his life to the cause of the Commonwealth, which he viewed as the consummation of an English tradition of liberty and self-government; when the Cromwells' regime fell apart and Charles II was restored to the throne eager to punish all involved with the interregnum government, Milton had little choice but to abandon his political activities. It was then that he took up poetry again, which he had put on hold to serve his nation, and then that he produced one of modern English's greatest achievements: *Paradise Lost*. The epic was not the first to appear in English; Spenser's *Faerie Queene* had been published nearly eighty years before. Nonetheless, Milton's poem represented a momentous step in English literature. *Faerie Queene*, with its rhymed stanzaic structure, resembled a very long ballad; *Paradise Lost* resembled Homer and Virgil. True to his youthful love of the classics inspired by his tutor Thomas Young, Milton sought to adopt the classical epic form into English, an undertaking that suggests an enormous degree of confidence in his native language's ability to match Greek and Latin in depth and expressivity.

Another early influence on the development of Milton's linguistic sensibilities—this time with regard to English—also deserves recognition. The scholarly activity of Alexander Gill, the master of St. Paul's Grammar School during Milton's time there, suggests that the students would have had a thorough grounding in the history of English linguistics and the current trajectory of their language. Gill was the author of the *Logonomia Anglica*, one of the

earliest known linguistic textbooks dealing with modern English, written, rather ironically, in Latin. While the *Logonomia* includes sections on etymology, syntax, and scansion, it is primarily focused on English phonetics and orthography. Like many other devotees of English nonetheless frustrated by the language's apparently nonsensical spelling system, Gill sought to standardize English orthography by means of an early sort of International Pronunciation Alphabet, bringing back a couple of letters from Old English to represent the two phonemes currently written as "th" and introducing a few diacritical marks to distinguish long from short vowels. This well-meaning project never caught on, but it does offer us some insight into the thinking that Milton would have been exposed to at school. His interest in *Of Education*, for example, with improving the English student's pronunciation of Latin shares the same theoretical underpinning—that is, that one way of speaking a language can be superior to another. Creating any kind of standard in language imposes a cultural hierarchy and implies that there is a single right way to use a language. Gill was from London and as such his idea of how words ought to sound would have differed from that of someone from, say, Yorkshire. Likewise, Milton's preference for Italian Latin was a result of his having spent so much time in Italy, not of Italian Latin's greater merit as a dialect. Of course, Gill's book probably is more the result of oversight than an agenda to marginalize non-Londoners, but it nevertheless tacitly purports to be an authority on the proper use of English and explicitly seeks to improve the language.

Modern linguistics acknowledges that no language is superior or inferior to another, that none actually needs improving. During the Renaissance, however, it was widely believed among English scholars that Latin and Greek were superior languages, and that if English ever wanted to be taken seriously it would have to become more like Latin and Greek. This viewpoint led to the invention of much-reviled inkhorn terms (so called because of the association of inkhorns with pedantry and bookishness), words that were taken directly from the Greek or Latin lexicons and jammed into English texts. The results were words like

fatigate, “to fatigue,” and illecebrous, “beautiful or alluring” (Quinion), which thankfully have not survived the mockery they suffered from the likes of Robert Cawdry, who wrote in the preface to his 1609 *Table Alphabetical*, “Some men seek so far for outlandish English, that they forget altogether their mothers [sic] language, so that if some of their mothers were alive, they were not able to tell, or understand what they say” (3). A far more insidious tactic, one that has persisted even to the present day, was the imposition of Latin grammar rules on English, such as the prohibition on split infinitives and prepositions at the ends of sentences, both of which are impossible constructions in Latin but perfectly natural ones in English.

Milton seems to have had some sympathy with the position that gave rise to inkhorn terms; in *Paradise Lost*, one can find such unabashedly Latinate words as “omnific,” “conglobes” (which he uses twice in one book), and “circumfluous” (7.217, 239, 270), none of which are attested more than a dozen times each in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Interestingly, we witness an explosion of Latinate vocabulary in Book Seven of the epic, in which the archangel Raphael describes the splendor of Earth’s creation to Adam. Perhaps this explosion indicates a lack of confidence in English’s ability to illustrate grandiose and majestic themes; even today English speakers intuitively use Latinate words when they want to lend some gravitas to what they’re saying. However, Milton can’t have been too worried about the strength of the English language overall, because he used it to write an epic to rival the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*. Besides, though inkhorn terms arise from a misguided approach to comparative linguistics, they do represent a love of the language into which they are adopted. If Milton did not believe in the poetic potential of English, he would not have tried to “improve” it.

One further notable element of *Paradise Lost* that mixes classical linguistic practice with modern English usage is Milton’s then revolutionary decision not to rhyme his verse. The epic is written in blank verse, in the style of “our best English tragedies,” as he writes in his brief preface to the second edition of the poem. Also in this preface, he appeals to Homer

and Virgil for defense of his choice, which had not been met with universal praise upon the first printing of the book in 1667: the renowned classical authors had not used rhyme, so why should Milton? In fact, blank verse is even more suited to English than it is to Greek or Latin. English, unlike the classical languages, is rhyme-poor. Our nouns and adjectives lack matching declension endings and our verbs can end any way they want, especially in the present tense. Therefore, declaring independence from the necessity to rhyme speaks not only to an admiration for the *Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid* but also to a recognition of the unique qualities of English, whose musicality, to quote Milton, “consists only in apt numbers, fit quantity of syllables, and the sense variously drawn out from one verse into another, not in the jingling sound of like endings” (“The Verse” 2). English should not sound like rhyme-rich French, Italian, Greek, or Latin, but like English.

Taking all this evidence together, we see that Milton’s choice to use his native language to compose an epic on the scale of *Paradise Lost* is decidedly nationalistic. Like the students he imagines in *Of Education* who would have been worthy to represent England with their knowledge of Greek and Latin, Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* to be a representative of his country, to speak for his mother tongue through a form that had an international reputation as the gold standard of artistic achievement: the epic. Nowadays, when English is the primary language for international communication and eighty percent of the English spoken today is by non-native speakers (Weil), Milton’s nationalistic view of language may seem obsolete. Though most of the world speaks English, it’s not necessarily our English, and certainly not Milton’s English. Rather, it is a reductionist English, freed from bondage to exact subject-verb agreement, precise use of prepositions, and many other rules native speakers take for granted (“Features of English as Lingua Franca”). English as Lingua Franca isn’t even quite like Latin was in Milton’s time; as we saw, he was very concerned with speaking Latin properly, with the correct accent, as his early teacher Alexander Gill was concerned with spelling English words the “right” way. ELF makes no such demands. Yet Milton’s most fundamental belief

about English, as demonstrated through his writings, was that it was flexible, resilient, and expressive. It could withstand the imposition of Latin and Greek features on its vocabulary and syntax, could support the weight of a massive epic, and could be improved by both. As modern usage attests, English is still changing and proving its continued relevance on the international level, something that would have made Milton very proud.

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