

Memoranda and Documents

“L’HOMME RELIGIEUX RÉFORMATEUR”
THE FIRST FRENCH TRANSLATION OF
EMERSON IN ADAM MICKIEWICZ’S
REVOLUTIONARY *TRIBUNE DES PEUPLES*

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UNTIL now, the earliest known translation of Emerson into French is that of Émile Montégut. His single-volume translation of Emerson’s *Essays* was published in France in 1851.¹ The first translation, in fact, appeared in 1849. It was edited, and almost certainly authored by, the most celebrated Polish author of all time—Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855). Exiled in France due to his revolutionary political views, Mickiewicz oversaw publication of the *Tribune des Peuples*, a radical newspaper published in Paris, the spiritual hub of the wave of revolutions that swept through Europe in 1848–49. This translation sheds new light on the early reception of Emerson in France and, perhaps most significantly, shows the ways in which Emerson’s words were used and manipulated to shape and justify a revolutionary political agenda in a time of violent rebellion. “L’homme religieux réformateur,” a translation of Emerson’s “Man the Reformer” (1841), appeared in four installments in the *Tribune des Peuples* during the spring of 1849.² In a sense, it can hardly be

¹Émile Montégut, *Essais de philosophie américaine, par Ralph Emerson* (Paris: Charpentier, 1851). See Reino Virtanen, “Émile Montegut as a Critic of American Literature,” *PMLA* 63 (1948): 1265–75, and Ruth Elizabeth Brown, “A French Interpreter of New England’s Literature, 1846–65,” *New England Quarterly* 13 (1940): 305–21.

²“L’homme religieux réformateur,” translation of “Man the Reformer.” Published serially March 19 and 20, and April 8 and 16 in *La Tribune des Peuples*. Two Mickiewicz scholars have made passing reference to this translation, but it has never been explored in connection to Emerson. See Roman Koropeczyk, *Adam Mickiewicz, The Life of a Romantic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 413n, and Ludwik Krzyzanowski, “Mickiewicz and Emerson,” in *Adam Mickiewicz: Poet of Poland*, ed. Manfred Kreidl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 273n. The translations are also

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called an accurate rendition of Emerson at all. It is, rather, a conveyance of Emerson's lecture which is fitted to an ideological purpose, and goes far beyond what could reasonably be granted as poetic license, even to a writer as powerful in his own right as Mickiewicz.

Mickiewicz wrote at a time when Poland did not exist as a sovereign entity on the map of Europe. The once-great Polish Empire had been overpowered and parceled out between the continental powers of Russia, Prussia, and Austria during the eighteenth century, meaning that Poles did not have a national homeland even as the currents of nationalism grew stronger over the course of the nineteenth century. Poles were a subjugated people in non-democratic empires. The Polish language lost influence and, in some cases, was actively suppressed. In Prussia and Russia, Poles as Roman Catholics were also a religious minority. In this context, it is unsurprising that Mickiewicz, a Polish nationalist, Catholic visionary, and liberal progressive, was obliged to spend much of his life in exile. Mickiewicz had lived as a young man under the domination of the Russian Empire. He went into exile abroad in 1829 after having already served a five-year internal exile for his advocacy of Polish independence.

In 1832, Mickiewicz settled in Paris where he published his masterwork, the epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* (1834). In 1840, he was given the chair in Slavic Languages at the Collège de France where he delivered influential lectures and became acquainted with two key French intellectuals, Edgar Quinet and Jules Michelet. His early interest in Emerson seems to have commenced with a reading of *Nature* (1836) in English, which he loaned to Edgar Quinet in 1838. Both Mickiewicz and Quinet referred to Emerson's works frequently in their lectures and writings in the 1840s.³ He also read Emerson's 1841 lecture "Man the Reformer," which he quoted in a series of lectures in 1842 and 1843.⁴ In 1845 both he and Quinet were pushed out of their positions because of their political activities.

mentioned obliquely by Sylwia Kokot Martin in her engaging, "Ralph Waldo Emerson and Adam Mickiewicz: Two Visions of Salvation" (unpub. MA thesis, Mississippi State University, 1999), 52.

³Maurice Chazin, "Quinet an Early Discoverer of Emerson," *PMLA* 48 (1933): 147–63.

⁴Edmund Ordon, "Mickiewicz and Emerson," *University of Buffalo Studies* 23 (1956): 33–49. Also see Krzyzanowski, "Mickiewicz and Emerson," 266–69. "Man the Reformer" was originally published in *The Dial*. Mickiewicz may have worked from a pirated pamphlet version of the lecture published in London in 1842 by Simpkin, Marshall & Co. cited by Joel Myerson in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), 47. "Man the Reformer"

In the mid-1840s, Emerson was climbing to the highest levels of international prominence and success as a writer in the English-speaking world. His works were well known and popular in Great Britain to readers from a wide range of class backgrounds and political perspectives.⁵ In France, however, his work remained unavailable except in the original English, though it was already being cited in debates raging in a nation on the brink of revolution. Emerson's work had been reviewed in several French publications between 1844 and 1848. Writers and intellectuals such as Mickiewicz, Quinet, and Daniel Stern, who favored and in some cases fought for democratic forms of government, wrote of Emerson as the fruit of American liberty and idealism. Conservative liberals like Émile Montégut also saw Emerson as a champion of individual rights.⁶

Mickiewicz never met Emerson, but came to know his close associate and friend Margaret Fuller, whom he met for the first time in Paris in February 1847, just before her departure for Italy. She presented him with a copy of Emerson's *Poems* and wrote to Emerson from Naples on the 15th of March describing the meeting.⁷ Mickiewicz and Fuller continued to meet and correspond as the revolutionary events of 1848 and 1849 unfolded. Emerson visited Paris during the "spring of peoples" following the outbreak of the 1848 revolutions. In the weeks and months immediately after the overthrow of Louis Philippe in France in February 1848, uprisings spread rapidly across Europe, each one with its own distinct character. Some revolutionaries sought modest liberal reforms; others, a more radical reformation of society along socialist lines; some fought for independence from foreign rule, some, for unification, and many, for a combination of these and other local causes. Emerson was in Britain when the revolutions broke out. He had been on a lecture tour around the country which had caused considerable controversy because of the unorthodox religious and political statements embedded in his orations, particularly those addressed to working class

was subsequently included in several pirated British compilations of Emerson's works in 1843, 1844, 1845, and 1848.

⁵Daniel Koch, *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Europe: Class, Race and Revolution in the Making of an American Thinker* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012). Also see Len Gougeon, "Emerson, Great Britain and the Workingman," in *A Power to Translate the World: New Essays on Emerson and International Culture*, ed. David LaRocca and Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2015), 83–96.

⁶Koch, *Emerson in Europe*, 131–32.

⁷Krzyzanowski, "Mickiewicz and Emerson," 260.

audiences. When the revolutions broke out, Emerson, like many liberal observers in Britain, was at first highly enthusiastic, but became increasingly reserved, particularly about the prospect of the revolutions being hijacked by conspiring extremist groups. He went to Paris to observe the atmosphere, arriving in May 1848 for a sojourn of three and a half weeks. While in France, Emerson visited the National Assembly—where French intervention in revolutions elsewhere was a constant focus of debate—and also attended gatherings of radical, conspiratorial political clubs which were plotting to overthrow the new government.⁸

Mickiewicz was in Italy where he continued to meet and correspond with Margaret Fuller. He had gone there in February 1848 and, after the outbreak of the revolutions, decided to raise a legion of Polish exiles to fight in a war to “liberate” Lombardy and Venetia from Austrian domination—Austria being a common enemy to both Italian and Polish nationalists. The war was unsuccessful. Austria triumphed over the Piedmontese-led forces at Custoza in July 1848.

Prior to the crushing of the greater Polish uprising in early 1849, Mickiewicz had returned to Paris in late 1848 and began setting up the *Tribune des Peuples* which was published between March and November 1849. The paper started at a time of great excitement that the European revolutions, which had stalled during the winter of 1848, were reawakening. There had been successes recently in Frankfurt, Hungary, and in Italy, where Piedmont went to war a second time against Austria. It was hoped by Mickiewicz and many others that other subjugated peoples of Europe—in Bohemia, in Poland, in Romania and elsewhere—would rise up in response.⁹ Radicals in France both encouraged public sympathy and raised private funding for the resurgent revolutionaries. Paris was home to large numbers of liberal exiles from the countries affected.

Financed by Polish aristocrat Xavier Branicki, *La Tribune des Peuples* was first published on the 15th of March 1849 with Adam Mickiewicz as editor-in-chief. The translation of Emerson was published within the first month of the newspaper’s existence. This suggests

⁸Koch, *Emerson in Europe*, 132–39. Also see Larry Reynolds, *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 25–43.

⁹Stefan Kieniewicz, “Histoire de La Tribune des Peuples,” in *La Tribune des Peuples (1849): Édition phototypique*, ed. Henryk Jabłoński (Warsaw: Maison d’édition de l’académie polonaise des sciences et des letters, 1963), v–xiii, originally published in *Przegląd Historyczny* 50 (1959).

that Emerson was very much on Mickiewicz's mind during the revolutionary period and that the American's key messages—or rather Mickiewicz's interpretation of them—were central to what he wanted the paper to achieve. The *Tribune's* stated aims were to defend the constitution of the Second Republic in France, to serve as a pan-European organ defending the rights of peoples fighting for liberty, and to lead towards the creation of a society that served the needs of the people.¹⁰ Its purpose was to take up the cause of oppressed people and address the French nation, in order to gain their support in spreading the ideals of the French Revolution across the continent.

Within the context of Second Republic France, the *Tribune* was a part of the left-wing press, but with one important qualification. Mickiewicz, like others in the Polish émigré community, maintained a loyalty to the cult of Napoleon I.¹¹ An important dimension of Napoleon's legacy was that of a reformer who had spread some of the original ideals of 1789 into the darkest and most repressive corners of Europe through his conquests. Napoleon's nephew Louis-Napoleon (later named Napoleon III) had run for president of France in the democratic elections of December 1848 and won. Espousing the socialistic aims of the French Left, while at the same time endorsing the conservative Louis-Napoleon (against the wishes of some of Mickiewicz's collaborating authors), put the paper into a unique position and opened its editor to criticism for running an inconsistent line.¹² The position would change later after Napoleon's crushing of Mazzini's Roman Republic in the summer of 1849. However, at the time of the publication of Emerson's article, Mickiewicz was still very much of the persuasion that a great man would come, the new Bonaparte possibly, and that a new dawn of liberty in Europe was close at hand. The translation of Emerson appeared within the first weeks of the paper's existence, before it began commenting critically on Napoleon's invasion of Rome, which soon resulted in the forced shutdown of the paper as part of a wider dismantling of the free press by Bonaparte.

It cannot be said for certain whether the translation is by Mickiewicz himself or by one of his colleagues. The paper published the work of seventy writers and reporters. Personnel on the *Tribune* were split into two main groups: one group of reporters with regular briefs and another group with more general influence on the paper as a

¹⁰Kieniewicz, "Histoire de La Tribune des Peuples," viii.

¹¹Kieniewicz, "Histoire de La Tribune des Peuples," vi.

¹²Koropeczyk, *Adam Mickiewicz*, 411–12.

whole. Articles were edited by Mickiewicz first before going to other members of the second group.¹³ However, it is highly likely that the translation was by Mickiewicz. He contributed over ninety articles of all kinds to the paper, none of which were signed. His ability to produce material quickly himself was particularly crucial in the first weeks of the paper's existence: he wrote an editorial nearly every day. Mickiewicz had dabbled on previous occasions in translating excerpts of "Man the Reformer" into French, and so knew it well.¹⁴ We can postulate that Mickiewicz had worked on the translation earlier in the 1840s and—needing to fill space in his newspaper with worthy material—completed the translations rapidly for publication, with little regard to the accuracy of the translation.

Even at first glance, a number of key deviations between the translation and the original text are instantly recognizable. Whereas the original English publication carries the title "Man the Reformer," the French version adds a word to the title, making it "L'homme religieux réformateur," or "Religious Man the Reformer." Emerson's original lecture was published with the note that it was "read before the Mechanics' Apprentices' Library Association, at the Masonic Temple, Boston, 25th January, 1841." The French translation states that it was "prononcé par R. W. Emerson dans une séance de l'association des ouvriers réformistes de Boston." Rather than giving the name of the Mechanics' Apprentices' Library Association—an organizational title that gives no indication of a political purpose—the translator changes the receiving body to an "association of workers for reform." These changes instantly cast Emerson in a light to readers of the *Tribune* that would not come through in a straightforward translation. Emerson is shown to be speaking to an audience of pro-reform and thus politically conscious workers, harking more to the Paris clubs of 1848 than to the milieu of self-improving members of the Boston Mechanics' Apprentices' Library. The date of the discourse is left out, possibly to suggest more immediacy to the current situation; indeed, several references are made in the translation to events since 1841. And his topic is not simply man and reform, but rather the *religious* man and reform. These changes place Emerson and his message

¹³Kieniewicz, "Histoire de La Tribune des Peuples," vii. Also see Koropockyj, *Adam Mickiewicz*, 411.

¹⁴See Ordon, "Mickiewicz and Emerson," and Martin, "Emerson and Mickiewicz: Two Visions of Salvation." Mickiewicz had mastered English and French, and had been trained in translation, as a student. Koropockyj, *Adam Mickiewicz*, 12, 149.

instantly into line with Mickiewicz's own *mélange* of revolutionary politics and Christianity.

The entirety of the French translation is roughly 14,000 words as compared to the original English which comes in at roughly 6,500 words. The difference in word count is not simply attributable to the more verbose style of the translator; there are in fact long sections and passages in the translation that have no clear correspondence with the original text. Indeed, they are rather elaborations or riffs on Emerson's thought, made to fit with the larger purpose of the newspaper and the context of the time. The French article wanders back and forth between loose but recognizable translation of the original text and more exuberant discourse.

Je vous parlerai de la situation exceptionnelle où se trouve maintenant tout honnête homme qui se sent appelé à se poser en réformateur de la société. Nous croyons tous qu'il n'y a rien de plus digne de nos méditations, et nous y sommes entraînés par ce qu'il y a de plus intime dans l'homme, par nos sentiments religieux. . .

(I will speak to you of the exceptional situation in which any honest man who feels called to make himself a reformer of society now finds himself. We all believe that there is nothing more worthy of our thoughts, and we are brought to it by that which is most intimate in man, by our religious sentiments. . .)

The opening lines of "Man the Reformer" do not correspond. Mickiewicz consciously rejected Emerson's words "I wish to offer to your consideration some thoughts on the particular and general relations of man as a reformer. I shall assume that the aim of each young man in this association is the very highest that belongs to a rational mind." The translation makes its first accurate conveyance of Emerson's words in its third paragraph: "Or, la vie telle qu'on l'a faite, est vulgaire dans son aspect, pauvre dans ses moyens, et vile dans ses tendances," corresponding roughly to Emerson's original: "Let it be granted, that our life, as we lead it, is common and mean . . ." Where Emerson writes: "But now all these and all things else hear the trumpet, and must rush to judgment," Mickiewicz translates "Maintenant la trompette socialiste appelle tout, hommes et choses, à la barre du tribunal du dernier jugement." Emerson's "trumpet" becomes a "socialist trumpet," again bringing the discourse more into line with the contemporary situation in Paris.

The second installment bears only passing resemblances to Emerson's original lecture, though it repeats its crediting of "R. W. Emerson" as the author. In one passage, Mickiewicz presents Emerson

imagining a conservative decrying the “*économistes mohicans*” bearing a “*tomahawk socialiste*,” and then responds in his own voice by saying, “*je suis . . . passablement mohican*,” in other words espousing socialism. The references to tomahawks and Mohicans are inserted into the translation, perhaps, to link the text to its American author; creating a contrived authenticity within what is a highly inauthentic rendering of Emerson’s lecture. It continues: “*je verrais avec infiniment de plaisir toute réforme, toute révolution et même toute émeute (c’est un Américain parlant aux Américains) qui aurait pour résultat la dépréciation des objets de luxe et de confort.*” This translation corresponds to Emerson’s words: “I see no instant prospect of a virtuous revolution; yet I confess, I should not be pained at a change which threatened a loss of some of the luxuries or conveniences of society, if it proceeded from a preference of the agricultural life . . .” The translation thus again presents Emerson taking a more political, socialist line, even saying that he would approve of any *émeute* (riot or uprising)—far from Emerson’s original word “change”—that depreciates objects of comfort and luxury. Mickiewicz leaves out Emerson’s key condition that his support for revolutionary changes would be dependent on them proceeding from a preference of agricultural life, probably because the urban socialism that was being propounded in Paris at the time had little to do with Emerson’s pastoral vision.

The translation does return to the original text for its closing messages. Where Emerson writes: “The state must consider the poor man, and all voices must speak for him,” Mickiewicz translates: “*Toute la législation, toutes les institutions qui en découlent ne devraient avoir pour but que le plus grand bien possible de cette classe d’hommes [les pauvres].*” But rather than: “Every child that is born must have a just chance for his bread. Let the amelioration in our laws of property proceed from the concession of the rich, not from the grasping of the poor,” we get “*Tout enfant nouveau-né, de parents riches ou pauvres, appartient naturellement à la respectable classe des prolétaires. Commençons par protéger l’enfance. Assurons à chaque prolétaire . . . la possibilité de vivre.*” (Each newborn child, of rich parents or poor, belongs naturally to the respectable class of proletarians. Let us begin by protecting childhood. Let us assure each proletarian . . . the chance to live.) The language used makes it sound as though Emerson was appealing to the class consciousness of the reformist workers to whom he was supposedly speaking—the clear intention being to make the text more relatable to the real reformist workers

(and leftist intellectuals) of Paris that Mickiewicz was hoping to reach through his radical newspaper.

Emerson's words in the same paragraph "Love would put a new face on this weary old world in which we dwell as pagans and enemies too long, and it would warm the heart to see how fast the vain diplomacy of statesmen, the impotence of armies, and navies, and lines of defence, would be superseded by this unarmed child" are translated "Les membres de la société une fois reconnus comme membres d'une même famille, chacun y trouvera facilement sa part de travail et sa récompense légitime . . . Il n'y a donc que les sentiments de famille, in n'y a que l'amour pour le Père commun de la société (notre Père qui est aux cieux) qui puisse rajeunir notre vieux monde morale, faire refleurir la terre." (Once members of a society recognize themselves to be members of the same family, each will easily find his part of the work and his legitimate compensation. . . There will only be family sentiments, love of the common Father of society (our Father who art in heaven) which might rejuvenate our old moral world, and reflower the earth.) Emerson's words are made over to add both a more overtly Christian mysticism, and an "update" to fit with the vision of social justice espoused by the journal's editor.

There is no indication that Emerson was ever aware of the publication. The *Tribune des Peuples* was one of over seven hundred ephemeral political journals that sprung to life in the brief Second Republic, only to die again under Napoleon III.¹⁵ Mickiewicz doesn't seem to have made any effort to publicize it again after 1849. Perhaps he had realised that the distance between Emerson's vision and his own was greater than he had thought, or perhaps he was simply too engrossed in his subsequent activities. Fuller may have been aware of the translation, but she died in a tragic shipwreck in 1850 depriving the world of her immense talents and her memoirs of the European revolutions she witnessed, which she was working into a book manuscript.

Circulation figures for the *Tribune des Peuples* are not known, but it is unlikely to have had a wide readership even amongst left-wing readers in France. Kieniewicz postulated that it fell between two stools: there was too much competition from other left-wing journals for it to have a great appeal to workers, whilst for the bourgeoisie, it was generally too radical.¹⁶ Koropecy notes that it was read and

¹⁵Kieniewicz, "Histoire de La Tribune des Peuples," vi.

¹⁶Kieniewicz, "Histoire de La Tribune des Peuples," viii.

cited by other French newspapers of the time, but that it was only one “amid the welter of periodicals of every ideological stripe being published in Paris at the time.”¹⁷ In the thousands of books and articles of Emerson scholarship, this early translation, interesting as it is, has gone almost completely unnoticed, and perhaps rightly so insofar as one is interested in Emerson’s works—for this text can hardly be called his own.

What it tells us is that Emerson was being adapted and lined up in support of a rhetoric that supported the ideological aims of one of Europe’s greatest writers. Indeed, that his words were being channeled into the great maelstrom of the mid-century revolutions. Mickiewicz’s “translation” was an appropriation, an enlistment to a cause. Emerson would likely have been appalled by it in 1849. He went through a phase of doubting whether the 1848–49 revolutions had been of any use, even ridiculing the dramatic but ineffectual bravado of the continental revolutionaries. He was moving away from the cautious approval of socialism’s aims that he had espoused in earlier writings. By the end of 1849, the revolutions had all been put down with a more-or-less complete restoration of the pre-1848 order in all parts of Europe except France, where the republic lived on only slightly longer before totally succumbing to Napoleon III’s rigid authority during the Second Empire. Later, however, Emerson changed his views on the 1848–49 revolutions and saw them as precursors to the great struggle for liberty and human dignity which he saw crystallizing in the campaign to abolish slavery in America.¹⁸ By that point, Mickiewicz was dead. He had perished in 1855 during another campaign to raise Polish exiles to fight an oppressive power, this time in Istanbul preparing to assist the Ottomans in their war against Russia. Perhaps the two men would have found a great deal more common ground had Mickiewicz lived to see the American Civil War.

¹⁷Koropecyk, *Adam Mickiewicz*, 410, 414.

¹⁸Daniel Koch, “Revolution” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Context*, ed. Wesley T. Mott (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 127–35.

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