

ON RALPH WALDO EMERSON

COLLÈGE DE FRANCE, MARCH 14, 1843

All those who have written about the reform of the Slavic peoples express the wish to Europeanize them. They wish first of all to civilize them, that is, to make them merchants, shopkeepers, industrialists, to make them English, German, or French, to strip them of their Slavic characteristics.

To show you what is false about this, and I dare to apply the word sacrilege to such attempts, I shall quote to you some further lines from the American philosopher Emerson. In his land, teeming with industry, with railroads, with banknotes, with division of labour, the practical philosopher sighs for agricultural life. He shows that the manner in which European nations have lived, whereby they have exploited Christianity for private profit, has put them into a condition so wretched that they can no longer feel what is true. If Christianity gives strength to man by showing him the inferiority of nature, it is not for the purpose of inspiring within him a single desire, the desire to lay hold of nature; if Christianity proclaims the equality of men, it is not only for the purpose of stirring up jealousy and competition.

Let us see what Emerson says, in a harmonious, thriving society, at Boston.⁹¹

"We must begin to consider if it were not the nobler part to renounce it — the advantage offered by a civilized society — and to put ourselves into primary relations with the soil and nature, and abstaining from whatever is dishonest or unclean, to take each of us his part, with his own hands, in the manual labour of the world.

"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 out of the belief that our primary duties as men could be better discharged in that calling. Who could regret to see a high conscience and a purer taste exercising a sensible effect on young men in the choice of their occupation?"

From "Mickiewicz in Foreign Eyes" in the book "Adam Mickiewicz, Poet of Poland," New York, 1951, p. 269.