

## Jan Parandowski and James Joyce

*Fiorenzo Fantaccini*

Università degli Studi di Firenze (<[ffantaccini@unifi.it](mailto:ffantaccini@unifi.it)>)

“A philologist indulgent toward human excesses” (Miłosz 1981, 202), this is how Czesław Miłosz defines Jan Parandowski (1895-1978), a distinguished writer and translator who was the president of the Polish Pen Club from 1933 to the year of his death. In spite of being a very active member of the international literary community, Parandowski was intellectually remote from the avant-gardist concerns of most of his European and North-American contemporaries; he is considered a ‘classicist’ for his passion for antiquity and his books inspired by Greek, Roman and Italian themes (*Eros na Olimpie* 1924, *Eros on the Olympus*; *Dysk Olimpijski* 1933, *The Olympic Discus*; *Godzina śródziemnomorska* 1949, *A Mediterranean Hour*). Throughout the course of his life he translated works by Julius Caesar, Einhard, Longus, Teofilatte Simokatto, Homer, as well as Romain Rolland, H.G. Wells, Th. Gautier, A. Chekhov, H. de Montherlant, C. Farrère etc. (Lichański 1997, 15). Parandowski believed “in the continuity and unity of Western European culture surviving all the tragedies of History and in Poland’s integral role in that continuity and unity” (Corliss 1973, 65), and this was the focus of interest of most of his works. Parandowski’s idea was that the Mediterranean was the centre of European civilization and art, the hotbed of creativity in which Poland also participated. His idea is thoroughly expressed in *Trzy Znaki Zodiaku* (1939; *Three Signs of the Zodiac*), a collection of stories sketching the lives and times of historical figures such as Ptolemy, Cicero, Dante, Diderot, but also Jan Kochanowski and Joseph Conrad, all of them drawing creative energy from and belonging to a common Mediterranean cultural heritage. An exception to this non-fictional approach was his most popular achievement, his only novel as such, *Niebo w płomieniach* (1936; *Sky in Flames*), in which he convincingly explores a young boy’s religious crisis and rebellion against the world of adults and the Catholic Church against the background of pre-World War I Poland and his first love affair. Yet Parandowski is now mostly remembered for *Król życia* (1930; *King of Life*), his fictionalized re-creation of Oscar Wilde’s life which has been and still is enormously popular in Poland (in 2008 a radio play based on Parandowski’s book was broadcast to much acclaim), for his popularization of the *Iliad* (*Wojna trojańska* 1927; *The Trojan War*) and the *Odyssey* (*Przygody Odyseusza* 1935; *Ulysses’s Adventures*) for young people, and for his accurate unabridged prose version of the *Odyssey*, a “gift” for “post-war Polish generations” (Miłosz 1981, 202). Homer and his works – the *Odyssey* in particular – were

central to Parandowski's cultural cosmogony, a trait that he shared with James Joyce. Parandowski met Joyce in 1937, during a PEN conference in Paris, but his recollections were published only in 1946 in a Swedish journal<sup>1</sup>. Despite Joyce's reticence to comment on *Ulysses* after its publication, their conversation, made smoother by several glasses of Orvieto wine, focused on the structure of the *Odyssey* and the complex "way the fable unfolds". Joyce revealed that he was fascinated by Homer's "plan" and that in his novel he "followed it faithfully down to the tiniest detail" (139), with its irregularities in time and place, and its mixing of incidents and stories. As Willard Potts notices, if these traits are pervasive to *Ulysses*, they "are even more prominent in *Finnegans Wake*, suggesting that Homer's work provided a model for the latter as well as for the former" (Parandowski 1979, 154). And the final part of that "memorable conversation" (141) is mostly about the *Work in Progress* Joyce was trying to complete at the time, and shows that despite his usual self-confidence Joyce feared "a catastrophe", a book wreck, a failure of his efforts "to liberate all sounds of rustling, breaking, arguing, shouting, cracking, whistling, creaking, gurgling – from their servile, contemptible role" and to look "for definitions of the undefined", feelings that Parandowski shared, judging Joyce's endeavour "a genial caprice" and "a gigantic charade" (141). Luckily they were both wrong: two years later *Finnegans Wake* was published, celebrating "the great myth of everyday life".

#### Works Cited

- Corliss F.J. (1973), "Jan Parandowski", *The Modern Language Journal* 57, 1-2.
- Lichański J.Z. (1997), *Jan Parandowski – tłumacz i teoretyk literatury*, in *Przekład literacki. Teoria – Historia – Współczesność* (J.P. – translator and literary theorist, in *Literary Translation. Theory – History – Contemporaneity*), ed. by A. Nowicka-Jeżowa, D. Knysz-Tomaszewska, Warszawa, PWN, 13-25.
- Miłosz Czesław (1981), *Native Realm: A Search for Self-definition*, trans. by C.S. Leach, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London.
- Parandowski Jan (1946), "Möte med James Joyce", trans. by Marika Stiernstedt, *BLM. Bonniers Litterära Magasin* 10, 851-853.
- (1957), "Begegnung mit Joyce", trans. by Leo Koszella, *Deutsche Rundschau* LXXXIII, 279-284.
- (1959), "Spotkanie z Joycem", in Id., *Dziela wybrane 3*, Cytelnik, Warszawa, 468-477.
- (1960), "Il mio incontro con Joyce", trans. by Alessandro Koltowski, *L'Europa letteraria* 3, 67-75.
- (1979), "Meeting with Joyce", trans. by Willard Potts, in W. Potts (ed.), *Portraits of the Artist in Exile. Recollections of James Joyce by Europeans*, Washington, University of Washington Press, 153-162.

<sup>1</sup> They were subsequently translated into German (1957), Polish (1959) and Italian (1960); it was not until 1979 that they appeared in English in the collection *Portraits of the Artist in Exile. Recollections of James Joyce by Europeans*, edited by Willard Potts, and published by University of Washington Press.