

Meeting with Joyce*

Jan Parandowski

NOT MANY NATIONS HAVE ENJOYED the privilege of a translation of Joyce's *Ulysses*. But whenever a translation of this remarkable work has appeared, it has been an exciting and controversial event. I lived through such a time in the fall of 1946, toward the end of my sojourn in Sweden. The translation was published [in Stockholm] by Bonnier, who also publish *BLM*, one of the outstanding periodicals, or rather magazines, worthy of the name 'literary'. The editorial board of Bonnier asked me if I would be willing to write a few pages on *Ulysses* or Joyce. It was at that time that I recalled my only meeting with this remarkable Irishman and, our conversation, which was as striking as any that I have ever had with a contemporary writer – a recollection somewhat obscured by time, like an old photograph, and for that reason all the more intriguing. I wrote up our conversation in French, which was translated into Swedish by Marika Stiernstedt, a distinguished writer whose name is well known in Poland both as an author and as a great friend of Polish literature. Today, while putting my papers in order, I discovered the record of our conversation. I thought that, although a translator of *Ulysses* will not soon be found among us, Polish readers, who generally are well acquainted with Joyce's short stories and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, know enough about the man himself that I might share with them my recollections¹.

It was in 1937 – in Paris. Joyce came to a plenary meeting of the P.E.N. Congress, being held in the Jouvet Theatre. On the stage were the president's table and a lectern. As Joyce mounted the stairs to the stage, he wavered at every step and would have fallen had someone not helped him at the last moment.

"He is nearly blind", someone near me whispered.

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¹ A Polish translation of *Ulysses* was published in 1969. The Polish reception of Joyce is discussed by Piątkowska 1971 and by Lewicki, Gerauld 1971.

Joyce used our congress as an opportunity to denounce the censors' attacks on *Ulysses*. Since he himself could not read his report, he gave it, if I am not mistaken, to one of the Irish delegates, and, taking a seat at the corner of the president's table, accompanied the reading of the report with a rhythmic tapping of his fingers on the red cloth. The fortunes of his book were being recounted.

An edition of a thousand numbered copies was published in Paris by Shakespeare and Company (this name struck me as a bit of pretentious symbolism). In the fall of the same year an edition of two thousand was published in London by a company with, it seems to me, an equally peculiar name – the Egoist Press. Five hundred copies from this edition were sent to America where the New York postal authorities burned all except a single copy, kept for the Post Office archives. The same fate met the third edition – five hundred numbered copies – which was burnt by order of the customs authorities. The “Nausicaa” episode had thoroughly incensed the guardians of morality. But Joyce reserved most of his outrage for the “abridged” version of the book, which had been published without his permission and for which he received not a cent².

The American delegation listened with embarrassment, while Marinetti was exuberant, though a bit earlier he had sat there ill-humored when the distinguished historian Guglielmo Ferrero spoke of the burning of his books by the Fascists³. When his paper had been read, Joyce picked it up, put it in his pocket, and left the stage, groping his way into the darkened auditorium.

² The published version of this speech (Joyce 1959, 274-75) differs somewhat from Parandowski's recollection of it. The “abridged” edition of *Ulysses* was that pirated by Samuel Roth in 1926-1927.

³ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who founded the Futurist movement in Italy, was an enthusiastic supporter of Mussolini. Ferrero, an outspoken anti-Fascist, had fled Italy and taken refuge in Switzerland. Joyce's anger at this eruption of politics into the meeting surfaced a few days later when Nancy Cunard made the mistake of sending him a questionnaire asking his opinions on the Spanish Civil War: He telephoned to say, “I am James Joyce. I have received your questionnaire. ‘Are you going to answer it?’ she asked. ‘No! I won't answer it because it is politics. Now politics are getting into everything. The other night I agreed to let myself be taken to one of the dinners of the P.E.N. Club. The charter of the P.E.N. states that politics shall never be discussed there. But what happened? One person made a speech, referring to one angle of politics, someone else brought up a conflicting argument, a third read a paper on more politics. I wanted the P.E.N. to take an interest in the pirating of *Ulysses* in the United States, but this was brushed aside. It was politics all the way’. He concluded by saying he was sending her the script of his remarks at the P.E.N. meeting and commanded, ‘Print that, Miss Cunard!’” (Ellmann 1959, 717). Joyce had reason to feel a special sympathy for Ferrero, whose *Young Europe* he had read with admiration thirty years earlier, finding in it the inspiration for “The Two Gallants” as well as interesting discussions of the Irish, Jews, and other subjects that concerned him. He even identified himself, half jokingly, with Ferrero (see Joyce 1966, 133, 159, 212). But all this apparently was forgotten in the face of his aversion to politics and his concern over the rights of authors.

Since I was sitting on the aisle in the second row, I hurried to give him my hand and direct him to a vacant seat. However, he whispered that he wanted to leave and leaned on my arm. I asked if he had someone there with him. He waved his hand toward the door and quickened his steps with the élan of a boy who was about to skip school. We passed through the door and out to the street, where he turned to me abruptly:

“I can tell from your accent that you are not French. What are you? I can't figure it out”. He spoke these last words with a kind of nervous impatience, but when I satisfied his curiosity by giving my name and identifying my country, he received the information with complete indifference. He asked with some concern, however, if I didn't wish to return to the meeting. Naturally, I preferred his unexpected company. We walked along silently for several minutes. In my wish to break this silence, I could find nothing better than to ask this nearly blind man if he had noticed that on the stage had been some of the scenery for Giraudoux's *Electra*, which was currently playing there.

“No, and I will tell you right now, Giraudoux interests me very little”.

“And yet he is a master of French prose”.

“It's too bad that he doesn't write in verse. He would have been able to unmask himself more easily. Giraudoux belongs to the school of poets whose day has passed, the so-called rhetoricians, and waits in vain for his Du Bellay and his Ronsard to come to life again. Never have I come upon a writer who was such a brilliant bore”.

Clearly, the creator of *Ulysses* could not admire the creator of *Elpenor*⁴. However, both of us happened to be already thinking of Homer, and immediately we began discussing the *Odyssey*. When I told him that I read it almost every day, he responded with an appreciative murmur and then said quickly:

“You, too, certainly have noticed that I have leaned extravagantly on this work?”

Before I could reply, Joyce led me into a little restaurant, which, unfortunately, I would be unable to locate now.

“They serve a more or less true Orvieto⁵ here”, he said.

He must have gone there often because a wicker-covered bottle along with a plate of crackers appeared immediately on the table. Joyce raised the small glass to his impaired eyes, which glittered light blue through the thick lenses of his glasses. We talked a while about the city of Orvieto, its cathedral, its quiet as though woven of the sound of church bells.

⁴ But Giraudoux apparently admired Joyce. He sent him a copy of *Elpenor*, a Homeric parody published in 1919, inscribing it: “A James Joyce *moi qui depuis si longtemps voulais offrir un hommage, en hommage, Jean Giraudoux*” (see Connolly 1955, 24). In 1940 Giraudoux helped Joyce in his struggle to escape France.

⁵ An Italian white wine.

“Certain of the rocks there give a bell sound if you strike them”.

“You have noticed this”, he said happily, as though I’d flattered him.

We stayed on the topic of Italy for a long time. He spoke affectionately of it. He had spent some of his happiest years there. I got the impression that his wife was Italian and their children had Italian names. In the midst of his rambling reminiscences, he shifted from French to Italian, the latter language sounding more natural in the mouth of this elderly tenor. He became silent, then returned to French and the *Odyssey*. His erudition amazed me. He knew not only the chief works on philology, archeology, and history, but also the minor treatises that contained something out of the ordinary. But best of all, he knew the *Odyssey* itself. He expounded upon many facets and features of the work, including the smallest details, fragments to which the glow of genius adhered, as a tiny rainbow does to morning dew. He derived extraordinary meanings from otherwise commonplace words. I listened to him in blissful delight.

“It is strange that you have retained such appreciation for a book that has provided a springboard for your own work”, I said.

“Why?”

“Because usually after finishing a long work one has become surfeited with it and feels perhaps distaste or aversion for the sources that have provided material for it”.

“Possibly, but that didn’t happen with me. I worked on *Ulysses* eight [sic] years; however, it is essentially the product of my whole life”.

He ordered a second bottle of wine and, when it appeared on the table, became lively and talkative.

“You say that you read *Ulysses* in French. It is not a bad translation, I myself supervised it, but only the English original is really authentic”.

“As always”.

“But even more so in this instance. Ah, how wonderful that was to get up early in the morning, around five o’clock, and enter the misty regions of my emerging epic, as Dante once entered his *selva oscura selva selvaggia*⁶. Words crackled in my head and a multitude of images crowded around, like those shades at the entrance to the Underworld when Ulysses stood there awaiting the spirit of Tiresias. I wrote the greater part of the book during the war. There was fighting on all fronts, empires fell, kings went into exile, the old order was collapsing with a crash; and I had, as I sat down to work, the conviction that in the midst of all these ruins I was building something for the most distant future”.

He spoke these haughty words quietly and naturally as if referring to a banal, self-evident truth.

⁶ “Dark, wild forest” – from the opening of the *Divine Comedy*. If Joyce got up at five to write *Ulysses*, that contradicted his usual practice, which was to go to bed late and rise late.

“Yes. I created the epic of our era, and the spirit of Homer was always beside me, to sustain and encourage me. I believe that this was the first time he did such a thing, since he could hardly have been concerned with all those feeble imitations that every second generation feels duty-bound to produce. Poets allow themselves to be drawn to epic poetry as if to the scaffold – out of bravado, devotion, or cowardice”. Joyce lifted his glass close to his eyes and held it there awhile, as if to observe the golden flecks playing in the miraculous juice of the Umbrian earth.

“Much is said about my debt to Homer. It is simple. I took from the *Odyssey* the general outline, the ‘plan’ in the architectural sense, or maybe more exactly, the way the fable unfolds, and I followed it faithfully, down to the tiniest detail”.

“That is exactly what astonishes me the most”.

“Astonishes?” Joyce exclaimed. “Then perhaps I completely misunderstood when I heard you say that you revere the *Odyssey*. Its construction is incomparable, and one must be a German ass to detect in it the work of several authors. It is a unique work, at once fairy tale and cosmos. Such a thing cannot be done a second time; therefore, I took Homer’s work and placed in its framework my nice little people, with their bodies and souls. Their bodies – *Ulysses* is more an epic of the body than of the human spirit”.

“That is perhaps all too apparent”.

He waved me off impatiently.

“Always the same complaint; for too long were the stars studied and man’s insides neglected. An eclipse of the sun could be predicted many centuries before anyone knew which way the blood circulated in our bodies”.

Then in support of his argument, he quoted a long passage out of Saint Augustine. Unfortunately, I can neither remember this quotation nor find it in Augustine’s writings. At the time I expressed mild surprise that he should have read such an author.

“You will understand when I tell you that I was raised by Jesuits. And so far as the human body is concerned, I studied medicine in Paris⁷. In my heart Paris is the second city after Dublin. Dublin! I transformed it into a whole world of adventure in my *Ulysses*. My book wanders through my city as Homer’s did through the Mediterranean, from bed to bed, through streets, offices, cafes, restaurants, bordellos, and like his book, mine has its dead and its sorceresses”.

A charming smile appeared on his thin, straight lips.

“I believe that on the basis of my book it will be possible to reconstruct Dublin a thousand years from now just as it was at the beginning of the twentieth century”⁸.

⁷ In 1902 Joyce attended a few medical classes, first in Dublin and then in Paris.

⁸ This echoes his remark to Budgen: “I want to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book” (Budgen 1960 [1934], 67).

I was astonished at this, since *Ulysses* gives no exact description either of the streets or the buildings; those which Leopold Bloom encounters along his way are hardly even named.

“Then you depend upon the commentators”, I said, “on those patient scholars, to reconstruct Dublin on the basis of your book, just as Troy is being reconstructed today, and just as fantastically”.

But he was no longer listening to me. After a while he suddenly told me to recite a Polish poem. Surprised, I could come up with nothing for a minute.

“Well”, he said impatiently, “you must know something by heart”.

Either because he wanted to encourage me or because he felt the need to enter into a foreign rhythm, he himself began to recite. It was a page from Flaubert’s *Herodias* – “the dance of Salome”. His delivery of the passage sounded splendid; he recited it vigorously with his full voice and broke it off shortly and sharply, the way Flaubert always concludes his long, swollen sentences.

I asked him whether he experienced the same effect that I did when reading the last sentence of *Herodias*, which describes the school children carrying the head of John the Baptist, “Et comme elle était très lourde, ils la portaient alternativement”⁹. “Admirable”, he exclaimed. Then he repeated the sentence. And the way he did it! In his harsh rhythm there really was all the pain of carrying a heavy burden.

Finally I reached into my memory. I recited several of the *Crimean Sonnets*, a fragment from *Pan Tadeusz*, and several verses from *King Spirit*¹⁰. He rested his high forehead on the palms of his hands, leaning his ear in my direction and listening intently. When I stopped he remained silent for a while; then he asked me about the meaning of certain of the expressions that had stuck in his memory. He repeated them several times, trying to pronounce them accurately.

“What a mystery human speech is! So many varieties! What divine harmony amidst dissonances. Perhaps you have heard that I am writing something...”

“Work in Progress”.

“Yes. It doesn’t have a title yet. The few fragments which I have published have been enough to convince many critics that I have finally lost my mind, which by the way they have been predicting faithfully for many years. And perhaps it is madness to grind up words in order to extract their substance, or to graft one onto another, to create crossbreeds, and unknown variants, to open up unsuspected possibilities for these words, to marry sounds which were not usually joined before, although they were meant for one another, to

⁹ “And because it was very heavy, they took turns carrying it”. This same sentence provided Joyce with one of the ‘boners’ that he had a penchant for collecting. He said: “*Alternativement* is wrong since there are *three* bearers” (Ellmann 1959, 506)

¹⁰ *King Spirit* and *Pan Tadeusz* are nationalistic epic poems, the former by Juliusz Slowacki (1809-1841), the latter by Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), who also wrote the *Crimean Sonnets*, a sonnet sequence.

allow water to speak like water, birds to chirp in the words of birds, to liberate all sounds of rustling, breaking, arguing, shouting, cracking, whistling, creaking, gurgling – from their servile, contemptible role and to attach them to the feelers of expressions which grope for definitions of the undefined. I took literally Gautier's dictum, 'The inexpressible does not exist'. With this hash of sounds I am building the great myth of everyday life".

After a while he added, "Perhaps it will end in failure, be a wreck or 'catastrophe' such as Virginia Woolf believed *Ulysses* was; and perhaps in the years to come this work of mine will remain solitary and abandoned, like a temple without believers"¹¹.

He did not finish his distant reflections. And I could not come up with anything that would prompt him to continue. I knew several fragments of "Work in Progress" which Louis Gillet had shown to me, and had claimed to be very interesting. Up to this moment, however, up to this memorable conversation, I had almost decided that this work was the product of a madman, although I am always very cautious about making such judgments in literature. All that I could recall of the work was an astonishing mumble, as though coming from the tower of Babel, where the words entwined themselves in some kind of fantastic linguistic sodomy. I saddened at the thought of the exhausting, obstinate toil that Joyce put into his book, which had no other chance than to be regarded by both his contemporaries and posterity as a genial caprice. And in fact, with the death of its creator, *Finnegans Wake*, as it is now called, lost the only reader capable of enjoying it in the clear light of comprehension and not just in the fog of conjecture.

What writer has not been tempted to confuse the harmony of language, to mix up its laws, to liberate it from boundaries imposed upon it by timid and ignorant ancestors? Must the three persons of the pronoun and the three degrees of an adjective suffice? Can inflexible parts of speech never enjoy inflection? The Futurists have been breaking their heads on this issue; others are content to reject punctuation, which once was also a great innovation. In *Ulysses* there are thirty well-packed pages without punctuation. But the polyglot Joyce, with his great passion for sounds that were meant to unify heaven and earth in innumerable variations among races and people, surrendered to more powerful temptations. For years on end he dwelt amidst rocks and reefs, like a shipwrecked man, but illumined by the wisdom of time because he was a great poet. His last work seems to me a wrecked ship, incapable of delivering its cargo to anyone. This gigantic charade contradicts divine and human laws of language – language as a means of communication between people who are locked up in their thoughts and dreams.

¹¹ Virginia Woolf, who was both attracted and repelled by *Ulysses*, called it a "misfire", "diffuse", "pretentious", and "underbred" (Woolf 1954, 46-49, 349).

Such, more or less, was the burden of my silence, from which I could not rouse myself. Joyce was whistling thoughtfully some sort of tune that I did not recognize. I asked, "What is that you are whistling?"

"Oh, it's one of those old, old ballads from the music hall; it ends: 'Isn't it the truth I've told you, / Lots of fun at Finnegan's wake'".

He repeated the last verse again. I didn't know at the time that it contained more or less the hidden source and the very title of his curious work.

Joyce appeared exhausted. He paid, we left, and I called a taxi for him. He held out his hand to me and said:

"If you should wish to record our conversation (I always reckon with such a possibility), please do not publish it while I am alive. It would be indiscreet. After my death it won't do any harm; it will become part of the scholarship business, which will probably never let me out of its grip. Goodbye".

I never saw him again... I kept my word, and, in now writing down this recollection of that distant meeting, it seems to me that I am adding a small contribution to a gigantic commentary which is growing up around the man and his work.

TRANSLATED BY WILLARD POTTS

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