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# JÓZEFAS JEŻOWSKIS (1793–1855): KLASIKAS IŠ VILNIAUS IR JO PLATONAS TARP VOKIETIJOS IR RUSIJOS ARBA ITALIJOS IR LAPLANDIJOS

Józef Jeżowski (1793–1855): A Classics Scholar from Vilnius  
and his Plato between Germany and Russia, or Italy and Lapland\*

## SUMMARY

Numerous excellent scholars in the humanities were affiliated to Vilnius University in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of them was Józef Jeżowski (1793–1855), an expert in classical languages and literature, a scholar recognised for his edition of Horace's *Odes*, an outstanding student of G. E. Grodek in Vilnius, a founding member of the Philomath Society, and a friend of A. Mickiewicz. The aim of this paper is to examine Jeżowski's classical manifesto as expressed in his critical review of a Russian translation of Plato's *Laws*. This work was published by Jeżowski during his years in exile in Russia but was addressed to Polish readers.

## SANTRAUKA

Pirmaisiais XIX a. dešimtmečiais Vilniaus universitete dirbo daug puikių humanitarinių mokslų mokslininkų. Vienas jų buvo Józefas Jeżowski (1793–1855), klasikinių kalbų ir literatūros žinovas, pripažinimą dėl jo išleistų Horacijaus *Odes* pelnęs mokslininkas, puikus G. E. Grodeko mokinys Vilniuje, Filomatų draugijos steigėjas ir A. Mickevičiaus draugas. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojamas Jeżowskio klasikinis manifestas, kuris atsiskleidžia jo į rusų kalbą verstoje Platono *Istatymų* recenzijoje, analizė. Šį veikalą Jeżowski išleido būdamas tremtyje Rusijoje ir jis buvo skirtas lenkų skaitytojams.

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RAKTAŽODŽIAI: Józefas Jeżowski, Vilniaus universitetas, Platonas, tremtis.

KEY WORDS: Józef Jeżowski, Vilnius University, Plato, exile.

*To my Ukrainian  
Fellow-Historians of Philosophy*

Jeżowski is not frequently referred to by historians of 19<sup>th</sup> century Polish thought. The work presented here was written in Polish and nominally devoted to the discussion of a Russian translation of Plato's *Laws* (Платон 1827). Although published in Moscow (Jeżowski 1829), it can be regarded as a late fruit of his education at Vilnius University. Jeżowski's small book consists of two parts; the first expressed general remarks on the literature of Romanticism, while the second was devoted to Plato and the history of his dialogues, including the *Laws*.

A few words about Jeżowski's life are necessary here. He owed the foundations of his classical education to a school run by Basilian monks in Uman (today: Умань), where the Greek language and occasionally even "the philosophical systems of the ancient Greeks" (Tretiak 1911: 39–40) were taught. Jeżowski's academic supervisor in his classical education was a Vilnius professor, G. E. Grodek. Jeżowski's interest in classical authors was philological and methodological in focus rather than being purely of a philosophical nature. For some time Jeżowski delivered open lectures at the University on the so-called "hodgepodge", as the general methodology of sciences was then called (Pigoń 1947: 48). These lectures were extremely popular, as can be seen from the fact that instead of the expected six students, 90 students attended his course (Hahn 1929: 324). They remembered him as follows: "He was loved by all. Subtle, gentle, sweet to

deal with, profoundly learned; of a strong and always firm opinion; a literary flower; the pearl of our pedants, though he was not one himself; a Grecian, a Latinist, an Etruscan, a Sanskritian, hieroglyphicist, and perhaps even an antediluvian linguist – Jeżowski was the first among the first with his hard-dug, deep-rooted erudition and he was equal to the very first with his character of steel" (Morawski 1959: 243). He urged his colleagues to develop themselves in the spirit of ancient patterns of Platonism and Stoicism. "Among his peers he deserved the name of a Platonist because he tried to be principled, relentless, demanding to the limits of human endurance with regard to himself and his friends" (Rudaś-Grodzka 2003: 87). This is also how he and the Philomaths regarded Platonism: a certain way of life devoted to self-improvement and learning rather than to the development of professional philosophy.

After being exiled from Vilnius by the Russian imperial authorities for his patriotic, pro-Polish activities, Jeżowski was eventually able to continue his academic career at Russian universities, including teaching Greek in Moscow. The mysterious nature of the work he published there has already been observed: a book published in Moscow, but written in Polish, and intended to review a work published in Russian which very few in the Polish milieu could possibly have heard of. Was it written to enrich Polish literature, or perhaps "to persecute the Russian scholar?" (Pigoń 1947: 49). One possibility is that since Jeżowski was hoping to return to Poland, to teach

at a university in Warsaw or Cracow, this work might have given him the opportunity to leave Moscow and embark on an academic career in Cracow (Pigoń 1947: 50–54). This plan, however, failed, but ultimately Jeżowski was allowed to return to his homeland and died in the vicinity of Kaniv (today: Канів).

Another possibility that has also been suggested was that Jeżowski was attempting with his book to seek a niveau of communication with the circle of Moscow philosophers, *любомудры*, who were “the most important crystallisation centre of anti-Enlightenment Romantic philosophy in Russia” (Walicki 2002: 47). They were interested in F. W. Schelling’s philosophy of nature and art, which they regarded as an antidote to atomistic and mechanistic concepts of nature. This linked them to Plato. In writing about Plato and especially about Schleiermacher’s contribution to the research on the work of the Athenian philosopher, Jeżowski may have been hoping to interest the Moscow philosophers who “found true »wisdom« [...] in Germany, to which they turned their eyes with adoration” (Rudaś-Grodzka 2003: 98). The possibility that the *любомудры* association could have been the intended addressee of Jeżowski’s study seems to be additionally confirmed by an excerpt from Schelling’s work which appears without the author’s name but with a reference to “the most powerful philosopher today” (Jeżowski 1829: 16) and therefore was probably directed to readers who knew the works of the German philosopher. At any rate, if these were the originally intended addressees

of Jeżowski’s study, he must have changed his mind since the text was finally published in Polish, thus, as the author himself remarked, making his contribution to remedying the problem of the dearth of works on Plato in the language at that time.

Jeżowski’s book began with severe criticism of contemporary literature, for he believed that it was not well-grounded, but rather the result of indiscriminate reading and bad teaching. For him, it seemed quite natural that engaging in writing or literary criticism should be preceded by years of study of Greek and Roman literature. In the second part of his study he moved to issues related to the current image of Plato at that time and concluded that thanks to the development of classical studies and history, recent works on Plato “show the genius of this philosopher in a new light, to the extent that it would probably not be too bold to say that Plato has never before been known so properly and sufficiently as we can now know and assess him” (Jeżowski 1829: 1). Jeżowski was referring here to the works of Schleiermacher and F. Ast, which served as his benchmark for judging the Russian translation of the *Laws*.

According to Jeżowski, the account of the history of different epochs and schools which had contributed to the long history of the reception of Plato’s dialogues presented rather a sad picture. Let us quote a longer description of the Platonic philosopher: “he is not a founder or a follower of any philosophical system, but a man as perfect as is possible for a human being, who strives to

develop harmoniously, to strengthen and shape all his abilities and talents; to bring the mind and senses into harmony, to consider all the elements of the moral and physical world, to search for connections, interrelations, laws and order between them; to direct and drive human desires and works in an ever more dignified way in accordance with the universal and most beautiful harmony of the entire Universe and the highest and the best aim of the creator. This is the philosophy of Plato; it is neither scholastic philosophy nor some artificial system or fine mechanism, but it is a natural organism which unites the immaterial and material parts of being through a thousand links into one harmonious, perfect and living whole. Everything converges here, connects and combines: the most abstract concepts and the most sensual opinions; elements of speculation, poetry, allegory, and history were used interchangeably according to the needs and circumstances. So the form of Plato's philosophy, being organic and animate, could not be uniform and dead, but had to be full of motion and variety; and therefore, in keeping with the times, it became dramatic" (Jeżowski 1829: 7–8). It was only German scholars who were able to achieve a crucial breakthrough in Plato research, and Schleiermacher was the most eminent of those scholars, "being able to move to distant ages and engage with their spirit, get into the individuals of those distant ages and nations and transform himself into them [...]: he felt an inclination and a calling to get to know Plato more closely and to make him accessible

to his contemporaries" (Jeżowski 1829: 10; cf. Mróz 2013: 179–184). Jeżowski was lavish in his words of admiration for Schleiermacher's natural, that is, authentic ordering of the dialogues. The only disadvantage of Schleiermacher's work was the fact that he failed to complete the intended plan of translating all the dialogues into German.

It required a great deal of courage, said Jeżowski, to measure one's strength against such an authority, for the task of translating the dialogues is extremely difficult. Many difficulties arise from circumstances independent of the translator. It is easier to fulfill such a task in cultural centres with long traditions than it is in Eastern Europe, yet even here it is not impossible. The goal of classical studies is to perform a culture-forming function, and thus "to remake the soil and the climate" (Jeżowski 1829: 18). It is impossible to devote oneself to research on antiquity without an appropriate "garden", that is, an appropriate environment, an academic community and research instruments. These are necessary conditions for classical studies to bear fruit. In short, they cannot be grown in a barbaric setting that does not breathe the atmosphere of antiquity, and therefore does not share, or is not even aware of, neo-Hellenistic ideals. Jeżowski considered Russia to be such an environment. And although many hindrances can be remedied for the intellectual and moral spheres lie within the control of human powers – "in the place where today Lapland lies in the intellectual sphere, a delightful Italy could come into being; where only wild hawthorns

grow, it may be possible for magnificent cedars to flourish" (Jeżowski 1829: 19) – the question remains as to how far the Russian translator of the *Laws*, *Оболенский*, was able to compete with his German predecessor. The answer must be negative. The Russian failed to make reference to Schleiermacher in his work and he should have been aware of his achievements. Furthermore, the Russian translation lacked the basic philological apparatus, comments, explanations of doubtful *loci*, where the translator could have referred to authorities in the field of Platonic studies. It was also puzzling for Jeżowski that, out of the wealth of Plato's legacy, the translator should have selected the *Laws*, since its genuineness had been questioned by German scholars. Assuming the translator had good intentions in attempting to familiarise Russian readers with a dialogue on practical philosophy rather than dialectical works, Jeżowski was surprised that he had not chosen the *Republic*, Plato's masterpiece. The selection of the *Laws* for translation was unfortunate and could mislead readers as to the nature of Plato's philosophy. Thus, by failing to adhere to academic rigor, the translator violated scientific sanctity.

Translating an ancient work only to provide readers with a text they do not know in their mother tongue is not a sufficient justification for such a task, for Jeżowski argues: "We read the ancient classics in order to form our skills on the basis of perfect models and to prepare them to create something similar; [...] we invoke, as it were, a mighty ancient Genius and we implore him to refresh

us with the breath of those giants who reigned centuries ago, to sustain us, lesser mortals, and bring us closer to them. We translate the ancient classics in order to preserve the virtues of their compositions and give them a voice in our own language, thus enhancing our mother tongue; and even more: to make the spirit and character of the ancients available by means of a good translation (as far as this is possible) to those who are deprived of the ability and happiness of reading the originals. The *Laws* cannot lead us to this goal" (Jeżowski 1829: 24–25). The translation itself was also far from perfect and Jeżowski devoted the last few pages of his text to citing errors from the first page of the *Laws*, without even touching on any philosophical question from the dialogue.

To be fair, it must be admitted that the problems raised by Jeżowski were not crucial and *Оболенский's* translatory choices were not incorrect. It is therefore difficult to agree with the opinion that Jeżowski indicated his errors "with great conscientiousness on the basis of a few examples, pointing out numerous logical and grammatical flaws" (Hahn 1929: 328). There is no doubt, however, that Jeżowski had been greatly influenced by Grodek, who had instilled in his student the importance of the accuracy of the translation and the avoidance of modernising elements. Apart from this, however, Jeżowski's other objections – the lack of an introduction and all the basic information that should have been provided by the translator – are still valid. Editions of translations of the dialogues into Russian, with appropriate apparatus

and commentary, began to appear in the decades after Jeżowski's study, but what Jeżowski neglected to mention was that almost all Plato's dialogues were at that time available for Russian readers in translation (Абрамов 1979: 217–219; Tichołaz 2004: 58–59), whereas the first Polish translations only started to appear in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Platon 1945; cf. Mróz 2011).

It was not, then, profound criticism of the translation that was Jeżowski's primary goal. He used Schleiermacher as a model to demonstrate that the Russian translator of the *Laws* could not stand comparison with the great scholar. Although Jeżowski criticised the effect of the translatory work, he spared the translator himself, ascribing to him noble intentions and taking into account the difficult cultural conditions in which he had produced his work.

A favourable report on Jeżowski's book was published in *Gazeta Polska* in Warsaw, where he was described as „a Ukrainian Pole, a philologist educated at the University of Vilnius” (Lelewel 1829: 1101; it is only a well-founded conjecture that J. Lelewel was the author of this text, cf. Pigoń 1947: 54). *Gazeta Polska* emphasised the necessity for every scholar from Eastern Europe to familiarise themselves with the current achievements in the field of Platonic studies, which Оболенский had obviously failed to do.

Jeżowski's assessment of contemporary literature incited fierce opposition from M. Mochnacki (cf. Mróz 2018: 117–120), but his most important conclusion was a suggestion for the Polish reader that, given the conditions at that time,

they should reach out to the West, to German scholars, and not to Russia, to learn about Plato. This attitude towards Russian academia had obvious political overtones for Poles in Vilnius or Warsaw.

We shall add, in the margins, that similar assessments of Russian studies on Plato appeared when the style of the second Polish translator of the dialogues, A. Bronikowski, was defended against its critics by K. Libelt. He indicated two nations in Europe – the Russians and the Turks – that had not developed a humanist culture based on Greco-Roman foundations and had therefore been unable to participate in the universal spiritual growth of humanity (Libelt 1869: 53–54; cf. Mróz 2014: 62–65). Both Jeżowski in the late twenties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Libelt forty years later agreed that models of academic culture should not be sought out East of Vilnius or Kyiv. Their conclusions, though, need not have a universal or timeless validity, for they were rooted in the cultural and political situation of Poland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Returning to Jeżowski's work, it is true that “despite his great erudition, he was unable to interest Polish readers in Plato and his philosophy” (Rudaś-Grodzka 2003: 122). We should, however, bear in mind that his study does not contain much on Platonism. Nevertheless, one valuable effect of his book appeared several years later when F. A. Kozłowski, the first translator of Plato's dialogues into Polish, made extensive use of Jeżowski's remarks when writing an introduction to his own translation. The fact that he provided an introduction at all is in itself evidence of

Jeżowski's influence. In the introduction, he referred to the works of German scholars, sometimes uncritically, and even intertwined Jeżowski's opinions into his own text without referring to him (cf. Mróz 2011: 35–36, 52). Ultimately, Jeżowski's postulates were not forgotten and brought Polish culture late, but long-awaited fruit. His intention was to indicate a direction for scholars in Central Europe towards the intellectual blossoming of Italy, *i.e.*, German philology,

and away from what he considered to be the Lapland-like academic desert of Russia. Future development of classical studies and research on Plato proved that German achievements were indeed extensively imported, employed and discussed in this part of Europe, though – to stick to Jeżowski's geographical and botanical metaphor – there were still flowers that were able to grow in the East of Europe, despite the unfavourable conditions there.

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