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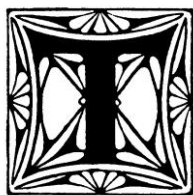
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The "Polish Inkling": Professor Przemyslaw Mroczkowski as J.R.R. Tolkien's Friend and Scholar



THE “POLISH INKLING”: PROFESSOR
PRZEMYSŁAW MROCKOWSKI
AS J.R.R. TOLKIEN’S FRIEND AND SCHOLAR¹

ŁUKASZ NEUBAUER

THE NAME OF PRZEMYSŁAW MROCKOWSKI is not one which is very well known in today’s world of Tolkien scholarship.² In fact, his acquaintance with the author of *The Lord of the Rings* has never really been common knowledge, even in his native Poland. Even for those Polish academics who came to know him personally and were certainly aware of his contacts with Tolkien, the actual nature of their friendship and correspondence has never really been a matter of serious scholarly discussion. There is, for instance, practically no mention of Tolkien in a volume published in 1984 by the Polish Academy of Sciences in honour of Professor Mroczkowski, who was, at that time, just about to turn seventy.³ Nor is there much information about Tolkien in the volume of essays celebrating Mroczkowski’s centenary, published in 2015 under the editorship of Marta Gibińska.⁴ An interesting, if obviously quite

¹ I would here like to thank the people—Przemysław Mroczkowski’s family, colleagues and former students (all of whom are now renowned scholars)—who generously agreed to share their personal stories with me, in particular, the professor’s daughter Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand, Irena Janicka-Świdarska, Barbara Kowalik, Marta Gibińska, Andrzej Wicher and, last but not least, John McKinnell, Tolkien’s student in the early 1960s. Without their kind assistance and encouragement, the present article would have been much less complete.

² In some publications, e.g. Scull and Hammond’s *Companion and Guide: Chronology*, his first name is also sometimes incorrectly spelt as *Przemysl* (528, 602 in the 2006 edition) or *Przemysł* (907 in the 2017 edition), which happens to be an earlier, now utterly obsolete (except in the Czech language, where it took the form of *Přemysl*) variant of *Przemysław*.

³ In it, a comprehensive, though already incomplete, list of the recipient’s publications (11-16) follows a short biographical note by Tadeusz Ulewicz. The name of Tolkien is to be found there in connection with Mroczkowski’s reviews of *The Lord of the Rings* that appeared in the Polish press in the early 1960s (14).

⁴ Apart from the first, introductory essay by Marta Gibińska (7-12), the book’s individual chapters deal with a selection of fields representative of Mroczkowski’s academic interests: medieval literature (13-32), William Shakespeare (23-32; 71-90), T.S. Eliot and G.K. Chesterton (47-55), Joseph Conrad (57-70) and the history of English literature in

concise, résumé of what Barbara Kowalik refers to as the "medievalist liaison" (3) might be found in her introduction to the collection of essays entitled "*O, What a Tangled Web*": *Tolkien and Medieval Literature. A View from Poland* (3-5). Some good, but likewise brief, insights into the life of Mroczkowski and his acquaintance with Tolkien are offered online, particularly in the articles published on the *Tolkien Gateway* (in English)⁵ and *Parmadili* (Polish)⁶ websites. Last but not least, an interesting interview with one of the professor's daughters, Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand, focusing primarily upon the relationship between the two scholars, may be read in Polish in one of the latest issues of the hybrid academic-literary journal *Creatio Fantastica* (117-125).⁷

None of the studies could, however, be described as being in any way comprehensive. Furthermore, their analytic scope is for the most part minimal, focusing mostly upon the few (usually the same) biographical details and disregarding the actual significance of Mroczkowski's contribution to the translation and then popularisation of Tolkien's works in his home country as well as the subsequent, if initially slow-burning, development of serious Tolkien scholarship in Poland. Therefore, I hope that the following article (as well as a few more texts to be written in the near future)⁸ will, at least in some measure, fill the existing gap and allow the academic community in the field of Tolkien studies—both in Poland and the rest of the world—to more fully appreciate the role that the Polish scholar played in his own country in making *The Lord of the Rings* what it is there today (and has been since 1961-1963), namely a social phenomenon whose impact in the area of popular literary culture in the second half of the twentieth century could, perhaps, be compared with the one that, more or less at the same time, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones had on pop and rock music (in Poland as elsewhere).⁹

general (33-45). Tolkien is only briefly mentioned there three times (9, 37, and 40), with little insight into the actual character of the scholars' friendship.

⁵ "Przemysław Mroczkowski" at *Tolkien Gateway*.

⁶ See Piwowarczyk in the bibliography.

⁷ See Mroczkowska-Brand in the bibliography.

⁸ The thematic scope of the planned publications will cover such diverse matters as the scholars' private correspondence, Mroczkowski's reviews of *The Lord of the Rings* in the Polish press, his understanding and interpretation of Tolkien's work, and, lying somewhat outside the areas of standard literary investigation, being invigilated by the State Security apparatus in communist Poland.

⁹ It is hard to express in exact numbers the actual degree of Tolkien's popularity in the 1960s (and beyond). Suffice it to say that the entire print run of 10,250 copies of *The Lord of the Rings* sold out very quickly, even though (or, perhaps, because) many of them came to be sold under the table. Because the second edition would not come out until 1981, it is said not to have been uncommon for some of the more desperate readers to borrow the books from the library without the intention of ever returning them (Olszański 16).

PROFESSOR PRZEMYSŁAW MROCZKOWSKI

Przemysław Mroczkowski was born on 28 June 1915 in Cracow, the son of Feliks, a treasury inspector from Lvov Province in present-day Ukraine, and Bronisława. In 1933, having graduated from the Henryk Sienkiewicz 4th Grammar School, where he studied both Latin and French (for five and seven years respectively), he enrolled at the Faculty of Philosophy at the Jagiellonian University, where he pursued his linguistic interests, this time in the fields of Romance (1933-8) and English Philology (1934-9). He obtained his first Master's degree under the supervision of Professor Władysław Folkierski, having submitted a thesis entitled *L'élément romanesque et fantastique comme moteur d'action dans les romans de Chrétien de Troyes*. The completion of his second degree, this time in English, was interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War.¹⁰ He would not defend his thesis (*G.K. Chesterton as a Hagiographer*) until 1946, following which he managed to obtain a one-year grant that allowed him to carry on with his work as a research fellow at the University of Notre Dame (summer 1946—October 1947).¹¹ While there, Mroczkowski studied towards his doctorate, which he completed shortly before the end of 1947, once again focusing upon the author of *The Ballad of the White Horse* (*G.K. Chesterton and the Middle Ages*, written under the supervision of Professor Władysław Tarnawski).

The next seventeen years he spent working at the Catholic University of Lublin, where, in 1951, he also obtained his post-doctoral degree (*habilitacja*). At first, he was employed as an assistant professor (*docent*), then as an associate professor of the Chair of the English Philology. He did not, however, have an easy time there. From 1944 until the late 1980s, the academic staff of the University was under continuous vigilance from the State Security Service (*Służba Bezpieczeństwa*, usually referred to as the *SB*), the proverbial bone of contention being its independence—limited, but independence nonetheless—from the communist authorities. As a result, it was difficult, sometimes even impossible, to obtain a higher degree or publish one's scholarly work, the latter

¹⁰ In 1939, he was mobilised to fight—as a member of the 10th Heavy Artillery Regiment—in what came to be known as the September Campaign, after Poland had been invaded by Germany and the Soviet Union (Ulewicz 8). Following the demobilisation of his unit, Mroczkowski returned to Cracow, was arrested, and spent a few weeks in prison (8). Most of the remaining years of the German occupation of the Małopolska region (i.e. until January 1945), he spent in some provincial areas, teaching French, English, and Latin (8).

¹¹ Contrary to what the Polish edition of the Wikipedia claims ("Przemysław Mroczkowski"), incorrectly quoting from the Tolkien-dedicated website *Elendilion*, he did not at that time go to Oxford to meet Tolkien and Lewis, but only stopped off in England on his way back from the United States. This is probably a consequence of what Tadeusz A. Olszański once erroneously claimed in his article in *Aiglos* (15).

of which was regularly subject to various forms of censorship. Being a Catholic and having fairly systematic contact with the Embassies of the United Kingdom and the United States of America, as well as the employees of the British Council, Mroczkowski's peace was regularly disturbed by visits from the agents of the Polish Secret Service.¹²

In 1963 he returned to his *alma mater*, the Jagiellonian University, where he worked as the Head of the Department (1963-1975) and later Institute (1975-1981) of English Philology. Four years later, at the age of fifty-two, on the strength of his outstanding academic work, Mroczkowski obtained the title of professor. His quiet conflict with the communist authorities would, however, continue until the mid-1980s, particularly when he openly voiced his disapproval of the suppression of student strikes in 1968¹³ and the enforcement of martial law in 1981.¹⁴ Notwithstanding his retirement in 1985 (at the age of seventy), he did continue to work academically for a few more years, remaining an active member of the Polish Academy of Sciences (*Polska Akademia Nauk*) and the Polish Academy of Learning (*Polska Akademia Umiejętności*). He was also one of the founding members of the Neophilological Committee and the Polish Shakespeare Society. In 1985, in the year of his retirement, in recognition of his contribution to the popularisation of British literature in Poland, he was also awarded the Order of the British Empire.¹⁵ Przemysław Mroczkowski died on 12 July 2002 at the age of eighty-seven and was buried six days later at Rakowicki Cemetery in Cracow.¹⁶

As may be deduced from just the titles of his theses, the actual scope of his academic interests was quite extensive, if, for the most part, revolving

¹² Three volumes of documents are kept at the Institute of National Remembrance in Cracow. From my personal correspondence with Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand, I learned that particularly hard were the years of Stalinist repressions (1948-1956), when the Polish scholar was often subject to all-night questioning.

¹³ In 1968 several students and intellectuals held protests in some of the major academic centres in Poland (including Warsaw, Cracow, Łódź, Gdańsk, Lublin and Poznań) against the policies of the Soviet-controlled government. The demonstrations met with a strong, sometimes very brutal response from the Communist Party.

¹⁴ On 13 December 1981, the self-proclaimed Military Council of National Salvation (*Wojskowa Rada Ocalenia Narodowego*) drastically suppressed any form of opposition, seriously restricting life in Poland through the introduction of martial law. Although it was lifted on 22 July 1983, the long-term effects of the military control of normal civilian life would be felt well into the second half of the 1980s.

¹⁵ The order was accepted with much deliberation, though, as Mroczkowski, an avid reader of Joseph Conrad's prose, was rather negatively disposed towards British colonialism and everything it entailed (including the very existence of the British Empire).

¹⁶ Przemysław Mroczkowski's family tomb may be found in sector LXXXIX, row 18, grave 2 (entrance from the side of Bishop Jan Prandota Street).

around his great affection for the colorful world of the Middle Ages, often in very close connection with his personal religious convictions. This is not to say that Mroczkowski in any way disregarded the subsequent periods in the history of British literature or that he was not knowledgeable in the works of those writers whose language was not English (or French).¹⁷ Nevertheless, it seems fair to say that a significant amount of his academic *oeuvre* either deals directly with the authors and works of indisputably medieval provenance (Geoffrey Chaucer, William Langland, Saint Francis, Saint Thomas Aquinas) or, in some measure, touches upon the rich heritage of the Middle Ages (William Shakespeare, G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien).

The complete list of Przemysław Mroczkowski's publications is quite long (too long to be enumerated here) and comprises a wide range of works, from strictly academic papers to less complex (but no less interesting) works of a popular scholarly discourse. These include monographs, collections of essays, articles in scientific journals and popular magazines, book reviews, translations, introductions to books and entries in encyclopaedias.¹⁸ Amongst the most important works to be contained within the first group of Przemysław Mroczkowski's publications is, for instance, his highly influential (at the time) monograph on Chaucer and *The Canterbury Tales—Opowieści kanterberyjskie na tle epoki* (*The Canterbury Tales and their Age*, 1956). He is also the author of two noteworthy translations of the milestones of medieval English literature, William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (1983) and Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* (1988).¹⁹ Mroczkowski's 1957 collection of essays entitled *Znaki na głębiach* (*The Signs in the Depths*) focuses upon the mystery and celebration of the Catholic liturgy, with its profound indebtedness to medieval culture. Published five years later, *Katedry, łuki i minstrele* (*Cathedrals, Burghers and Minstrels*) is often thought to be one of the best syntheses of the medieval mentality ever penned in the Polish language.²⁰ Last but not least, the oft-reissued one-volume *Historia*

¹⁷ He did, for instance, publish on such diverse modern writers as Joseph Conrad, Sigrid Undset, and Eugene O'Neill.

¹⁸ Most of them were written in Polish, and, as such, are of little immediate interest and value to the international scholarship. Some of his strictly academic publications, however, are in English and French.

¹⁹ With only little more than 5,000 copies, the former had a rather limited readership. The latter, however, with a print run of over 20,000 was not only highly praised for its language merits and academic value, but also provided a fitting complement to the excellent, though incomplete, translation of *The Canterbury Tales* by Helena Pręczkowska (1963).

²⁰ It is also sometimes compared with *The Discarded Image*, C.S. Lewis's brilliant introduction to the medieval world view, which first came out two years later (Wicher, "Koncepcje mediewistyczne Przemysława Mroczkowskiego" 180-182).

literary angielskiej (*The History of English Literature*, 1986)²¹ is still considered by many to be unsurpassed in its concise (but not in the least superficial) treatment of British fiction, from earliest times to the second half of the twentieth century.²²

Given the scope of Przemysław Mroczkowski's scholarly interests as well as his great commitment to the academic profession and, no less importantly, his own spiritual life, it seems quite natural that his path should cross that of Tolkien's. Indeed, the first opportunity came only two years after the war, when the Polish scholar was still working on his doctorate thesis. At some point during the summer of 1946, Mroczkowski wrote to Tolkien (as a university employee rather than an individual) in connection with his intention to pursue a course of study at Oxford. According to the second, two-page typewritten letter signed in ink by Tolkien, sold along with seven other letters at an auction and reproduced in *Christie's Fine Printed Books and Manuscripts 1 June 2009*,²³ the author of *The Lord of the Rings* apologised for the lack of action on his part (apart from discussing the matter with C.S. Lewis and attempting to get in touch with the Censor of St. Catherine's College) and, on account of the mounting complications, suggested that the University of Notre Dame, which was not only Mroczkowski's alternative but also, in the end, the ultimate choice of the young Polish scholar, should "prove to be a better place [to study] than present-day Oxford."²⁴ Nothing is known of any further correspondence upon the matter. The following fourteen months Przemysław Mroczkowski spent in Indiana.

It is hard to tell whether in 1946 the name of J.R.R. Tolkien was already known to him (either on account of the sender's academic reputation or his promising literary career).²⁵ The fact that at least one of the two letters was

²¹ In its first edition, however, the book was published in two volumes as *Zarys historii literatury angielskiej* (*An Outline of English Literature*, 1978).

²² In it, Mroczkowski mentions Tolkien a few times, both as a writer (587-590) and as a graphic point of reference for further investigation into the Old English riddles (22) and the hobbit-like ways of the English people in the seventeenth century (225).

²³ The lot of eight letters was ultimately sold for the price of £9,375 ("Christies Online Catalogue").

²⁴ "Letter to Przemysław Mroczkowski (2 August 1946)." Tolkien's unfavourable opinion of the academic community at Oxford may sometimes be detected in the correspondence he had with other people, most notably in the letters to his son Michael (*Letters* 336-337, #250) and grandson Michael George (370, #290).

²⁵ By that time, Tolkien has published three major works of fiction: *The Hobbit* (1937), *Leaf by Niggle*, and *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun* (both 1945), as well as a number of poems in various collections and periodicals. In the mid-1940s, his academic publications were far more numerous. Of particular interest to Mroczkowski would have been perhaps his scholarly edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1925, together with E.V. Gordon), the

preserved does not necessarily mean that, at that time, Mroczkowski considered him a great writer and/or scholar (although such a possibility cannot be ruled out). It may well be that he simply wished to keep the address for further correspondence, perhaps in case he should need some assistance with his academic research in England.

One way or another, it was not until ten years later, in the autumn of 1957, that the two scholars finally came to meet in person.²⁶ According to the interview that Tomasz Fiałkowski conducted with Przemysław Mroczkowski in 1973, for the Polish Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* (published in the first week of October, a month after Tolkien's death), the meeting took place at the British Council office in Oxford, at that time located in Blackhall, at 20 St. Giles' Street, literally a stone's throw from The Eagle and Child pub. The Polish scholar,²⁷ now in his early forties, certainly knowing (and adoring) both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, approached Tolkien, quite famously exclaiming, "I come from Mordor" (Mroczkowski and Fiałkowski 12; Petry-Mroczkowska 31), in this way naturally referring to the dramatic political situation in his home country.²⁸ Mroczkowski had only just arrived in Oxford (together with his family),²⁹ having obtained a scholarship from the British Council to spend a year in one of the local colleges,³⁰ but he was already fascinated by the academic atmosphere at England's oldest university and, not improbably, sought the acquaintance of some of its best known scholars/writers.

article "Chaucer as a Philologist: The Reeve's Tale," (1934), or the essay "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" (1937).

²⁶ It is hard to locate the said meeting at a time with any greater precision. Scull and Hammond are unfortunately silent upon this matter. The most likely dating appears to be just before the beginning of the Michaelmas term (13 October), following Tolkien's short trip to Belgium in mid-September, when he visited his friend Simonne d'Ardenne (Scull and Hammond, *Chronology* [C] 540 [2017]).

²⁷ Contrary to what Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond seem to claim in the second (2017) edition of their *Chronology*, in 1957 he was not yet a professor (543, 595). As has been outlined above, he would be promoted to a full professorship ten years later.

²⁸ Tolkien was surprised, yet, notwithstanding his dislike of such interpretative practices, he appears to have understood the intended meaning of Mroczkowski's humorous salutation. In some of his letters—not only those addressed to the Polish scholar, but also his son Christopher (*Letters* 67-68, #55)—he would sometimes express his deep concerns about Poland and its tragic history in the twentieth century.

²⁹ He was accompanied by his wife Janina (1915-2008) and their three children: daughters Maria Anuncjata (b. 1945) and Katarzyna (1950), as well as son Tomasz (1949).

³⁰ He was aided in this by Graham Greene with whom he corresponded for a few months, following the writer's visit (early in the same year) at the Catholic University of Lublin (Mroczkowski and Fiałkowski 12; Petry-Mroczkowska 31).

THE "POLISH INKLING" IN OXFORD

It is on account of his renowned Oxford acquaintances that Przemysław Mroczkowski is sometimes referred to in his home country as the "Polish Inkling."³¹ This is, of course, not quite correct in the strict sense of the meaning. The long list of names provided in the first volume of Scull and Hammond's *Reader's Guide* features a great number of scholars, including regular members, such as J.R.R. Tolkien and his son Christopher, the Lewis brothers, Hugo Dyson, Charles Williams, Owen Barfield, and Nevill Coghill, as well as the less frequent participants of their weekly meetings in C.S. Lewis's college rooms at Magdalen College, The Eagle and Child or The Lamb and Flag, people like Gervase Mathew OP, C.L. Wrenn, C.E. Stevens, and John Wain (569-576). The name of the Polish scholar is not to be found there, yet it is not improbable, given the scope of Mroczkowski's academic interests—so consistent (despite inevitable differences) with those of Tolkien and his fellow academics—that he may have, in fact, attended some of their smaller, less formal assemblies in late 1957 and/or the first half of 1958, particularly as he claimed a number of times to have been acquainted with at least a few of them, most notably C.S. Lewis (Mroczkowski and Fijałkowski 12; Mroczkowski, "Uczoność a wyobraźnia w Oxfordzie" 4),³² Gervase Matthew OP (Mroczkowski, "Uczoność" 4), and Nevill Coghill (4).³³ During his stay in England, the Polish academic may have therefore been treated as a more or less official guest, much as, for instance, Eric Rücker Eddison or Roy Campbell, who are known to have made merely a few appearances at the Eagle and Child in the early 1940s (Carpenter, *The Inklings* 190-192). If so, as a visiting scholar at Oxford and a

³¹ He is, for instance, quite regularly called *polski Inkling*, "the Polish Inkling," by Ryszard Derdziński in his series of posts written for the Tolkien-dedicated website Elendilion (e.g. Galadhorn, 8 March 2019 and 11 March 2019).

³² As has been observed, Lewis would have already heard of Mroczkowski in 1947, when the latter corresponded with Tolkien in connection with his prospective studies in England. It seems unlikely, though, that in 1957-8 he would have remembered the inquiries made by the then 32-year-old scholar from Cracow.

³³ It is rather unlikely that he should take part in any of their weekly meetings at The Eagle and Child (or, less frequently, The Lamb and Flag), as, at that time, Tolkien himself was no longer a regular participant (nor was C.S. Lewis who, having taken a new post at Cambridge in 1954, had to divide his time between Cambridge and Oxford). In fact, the author of *The Lord of the Rings* may have altogether stopped attending these gatherings a year or two before Mroczkowski even came to Oxford, his last recorded presence at the "Bird and Baby" being 9 November 1954 (Scull and Hammond C467 [2017]; *Reader's Guide* [RG] I.575 [2017]). Besides, the Polish scholar is also uncertain as to when exactly the Inklings actually used to meet, erroneously (but also hesitantly) claiming that the day of their habitual gatherings was Monday ("Uczoność" 4; *Dżentelmeni i poeci* 281).

friend of Tolkien, Mroczkowski could also, perhaps, with a little bit of semantic stretching, be referred to as a “visiting Inkling”.

Notwithstanding his informal contacts with the Inklings, it should be borne in mind that Mroczkowski’s priority in Oxford was to carry out his postdoctoral research. During his one-year stay there, he must have attended a number of lectures, including those conducted by Professor Tolkien. Of these, Mroczkowski said,

Tolkien’s lectures had a keen following, but they weren’t, in my opinion, especially popular—at least, not popular in the sense that Nevill Coghill’s were. He didn’t specialize in his subject, but would occasionally speak extemporaneously on whatever interested him at the moment. Sometimes he would spend the entire lecture period reading a translation of a Norse saga or a Middle English poem instead of concentrating on the work at hand. Like his conversation, his lectures were very often difficult to understand. (qtd. in Grotta 78)

Part of the difficulty was, without a doubt, Tolkien’s notorious “quick speech and indistinct articulation” (Carpenter, *Tolkien* 179). According to his Polish friend,

Tolkien’s speech was extremely difficult to follow, since it was all but inarticulate. I personally believe that the supreme test of a foreign English scholar was trying to understand Tolkien. If he did, perhaps he deserved an extra Ph.D. or the like. Tolkien didn’t care to articulate; he simply expected and assumed that you could follow him with ease. (qtd. in Grotta 78)³⁴

It is, unfortunately, not known which of Tolkien’s lectures were attended by Mroczkowski. Nor is it in any way certain whether he attended them as a regular student or not. One way or another, these could only have taken place during the Michaelmas term of 1957 (i.e. from 13 October until 7 December), as, following that, Tolkien was on sabbatical leave for the duration of the subsequent two terms, Hilary and Trinity (Scull and Hammond, C541ff

³⁴ The accounts of Tolkien’s lectures, particularly with regard to his reportedly poor articulation, are, however, not unanimous. According to professor John McKinnell from the University of Durham, a former student of Tolkien in 1962, when Tolkien was standing in for C.L. Wrenn, who was then on a sabbatical leave (Scull and Hammond, C630, 636 [2017]), his speech was perfectly comprehensible, both while he was lecturing and when he was reciting passages from various Old English texts (private conversation).

[2017]).³⁵ This means that, unless the author of *The Lord of the Rings* had given any uncredited lectures, Mroczkowski would have attended either his classes on the thirteenth-century English text *Sawles Warde* (Wednesdays at 11:00 at Merton College) or the ones in which Tolkien would provide a survey of Middle English dialects (Fridays at 11:00, also at Merton College; Scull and Hammond, C540 [2017]). Alternatively, he could have attended both. Neither became the major foci of his academic research, although certain possible traces of both could be found in some of his later writings. One of them might be his book of essays *Dżentelmeni i poeci* (*Gentlemen and Poets*) and the aforementioned *History of English Literature*, in each of which he devotes an entire paragraph to *Sawles Warde* as one of the most illustrious instances of Middle English *exempla* (*Dżentelmeni i poeci* 31-32; *Historia literatury angielskiej* 68).³⁶ Another one is the fact that, as has been mentioned, in the 1980s, he translated two major works of medieval poetry written in two different dialects of Middle English: first, in 1983, William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (West Midlands),³⁷ and then, in 1988, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* (London).³⁸

TWO CATHOLIC SCHOLARS AND THEIR LONG-DISTANCE FRIENDSHIP

Strange as it may seem today, in the Europe of open borders, Tolkien and his Polish friend would only be able to see one another, more or less regularly, in the period of less than a year, from the autumn of 1957 until the summer of 1958, and it is not reported anywhere that they should ever meet again after Mroczkowski had returned to his home country.³⁹ If only for this

³⁵ Tolkien requested a leave of absence in a letter to the Secretary of Faculties on 26 July 1957 (Scull and Hammond, C537 [2017]), arguing that he wished "to accept a number of invitations to lecture and visit scholars abroad, in particular in Sweden and the United States." He would, however, never go to any of these countries. Instead, he would visit the Netherlands, being the Guest of Honour at a "Hobbit Meal" in Rotterdam (van Rossenberg).

³⁶ *Sawles Warde* may be an important text in its own right, a thirteen-century treatise bearing evidence of anchoritic spirituality in medieval England, but it is seldom found in single- or even multiple-volume histories of English literature.

³⁷ Besides, in the mid-1960s, Mroczkowski also published two major texts dealing with William Langland's poem, "*Piers Plowman: The Allegory in Motion*" (1965) and "*Piers Plowman and His Pardon, A Dynamic Analysis*" (1966). The first of them is dedicated to the Inkling Nevill Coghill.

³⁸ The works of Geoffrey Chaucer and, in particular, *The Canterbury Tales*, are, nonetheless, a major area in Mroczkowski's academic research since the early 1950s.

³⁹ For one thing, Tolkien never went to Poland, although he was, in a sense, "expected" to do so in 1963 in order to collect the royalties for the Polish translation of *The Lord of the Rings*, the equivalent of £76 (more than £1,600 in today's value; Scull and Hammond, C644

reason, their friendship was of a somewhat different character than, say, the one that, for more than three decades⁴⁰ flourished between Tolkien and Lewis (regardless of its numerous frictions with regard to the two writers' views upon literature, religion, politics etc.). The other obstacles, soon to be overcome, though, were the age difference between Tolkien and Mroczkowski (the Oxonian, born in 1892, was more than twenty-three years older)⁴¹ and the fact that the former was already a prominent scholar and writer, whose numerous publications, both academic and literary, were quite well known in the English-speaking world, while the latter, despite his already extensive knowledge of languages and literature, at that point, was still at the threshold of his academic career.⁴²

Notwithstanding this, however, the acquaintance gradually developed into a friendship, one in which the undeniable distance that existed between them with regard to their age and academic status did not seem to be a problem. What connected them was evidently their Catholic faith and passion for medieval literature and culture. This is not to say, though, that they were of the same mind when it comes to their attitude to the post-Conciliar changes in liturgy,⁴³ or views upon certain literary works, their interpretative frameworks and relationship to matters of Faith.⁴⁴ Indeed, despite Tolkien's usual reluctance to provide too many explanations of his works, they would sometimes deliberate upon certain interpretative ambiguities in *The Lord of the Rings*, with the younger scholar speculating about the Eucharistic properties of lembas,

[2017]). As for Mroczkowski, he would travel abroad at least a few times before Tolkien's death in 1973, but not to England.

⁴⁰ Tolkien and Lewis are believed to have first met on 11 May 1926 at a meeting of the English Faculty at Merton College (Scull and Hammond, C145 [2017]; Lewis, *All My Road Before Me* 523-524).

⁴¹ In fact, Mroczkowski was only two years older than Tolkien's eldest son John (b. 1917).

⁴² Besides, Mroczkowski lived and worked in a country which, for many years, was separated from the Western world by the Iron Curtain, thus giving him little opportunity to make his name known outside Poland.

⁴³ Both Tolkien and Mroczkowski may be described as liturgical traditionalists. The latter's book of essays *Znaki na głębiach* (*The Signs in the Depths*), for instance, exposes his very conservative attitude to the celebration of the Holy Mass. Nevertheless, unlike Tolkien, who often voiced his displeasure with the changes brought by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965; Birzer 86; Mroczkowski and Fiałkowski 12), Mroczkowski seems to have embraced the reforms, although, at the same time, he was well aware of the wave of secularisation that might as well undercut their very foundations (Borkowicz 25).

⁴⁴ One such example might be Mroczkowski's deep fascination with the books of C.S. Lewis, including *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in which he particularly admired the Christ-figure of Aslan (Mroczkowska-Brand 123). Tolkien's attitude to the very same series was, on numerous grounds, considerably less enthusiastic (Christopher 37-45).

Marian features in Lady Galadriel, or Christ-like attributes in the character of Frodo (Grotta 96).⁴⁵ It may therefore be argued that, at least with regard to some such topics as, in particular, Roman Catholicism, its rites and practices as well as its claim to possess the universal Truth, there were evidently more things that Tolkien had in common with Mroczkowski than he had with, say, C.S. Lewis or Charles Williams.

It is also interesting to note that, despite being more than twenty-three years Mroczkowski's senior (not to mention the fact that, by 1957, he was, at least in England, both a renowned academic and a successful writer), Tolkien did not seem to have any reservations about addressing him and, evidently, being addressed solely by surname. This may sound very formal today, but sixty years ago it was a rather conventional way of referring to the people with whom one was on familiar or even friendly terms. Hence, apart from the letter which Tolkien sent to the Polish scholar in 1946, where, understandably, he addresses the recipient as "My dear Mr. Mroczkowski,"⁴⁶ all the subsequent correspondence between them would begin with either "Dear Mroczkowski" (9-10 and 17 November 1957),⁴⁷ or "My dear Mroczkowski" (20-26 January 1964).⁴⁸ In an analogous manner, the author of *The Lord of the Rings* would normally address such close and long-term acquaintances as C.S. Lewis ("My dear L."; *Letters* 60, #49),⁴⁹ Sir Stanley Unwin ("Dear Unwin"; 112, #98, and ff.)⁵⁰ or W.H. Auden ("Dear Auden"; 211, #163, and ff.). Most of the other correspondents are usually addressed as "Dear Mr/Mrs/Miss X".⁵¹ Moreover, as the intimacy of their friendship evolved, so would also the way he signed his letters, from "Yours sincerely, J.R.R. Tolkien" (in, understandably, 1946⁵² and

⁴⁵ According to Grotta (not a particularly reliable biographer on the whole, but one who did actually contact Mroczkowski about his acquaintance with Tolkien), it was the Oxonian who told his Polish friend that lembas "was really the Eucharist" (96). As for the other two assumptions, Tolkien "declined to confirm Mroczkowski's conclusion[s]" (96), although, as Grotta claims, he did not actually deny them (96).

⁴⁶ "Christies Online Catalogue."

⁴⁷ "Letter to Przemysław Mroczkowski (9/10 November 1957)" and "Letter to Przemysław Mroczkowski (17 November 1957)."

⁴⁸ "Christies Online Catalogue."

⁴⁹ He does, however, also call him by the name that he was known to his family and friends ("My dear Jack"; *Letters* 59, #48; 125, #113).

⁵⁰ Prior to 1945, at least as far as the published letters are concerned, he did, however, address his publisher as "Dear Mr Unwin" (*Letters* 23, #17, and ff.)

⁵¹ Understandably, this does not apply to the members of his immediate family: his wife ("My Edith darling"; *Letters* 7, #1) or children ("My dearest Mick/Christopher/Prisca" etc.; 47, #42, and ff).

⁵² "Letter to Przemysław Mroczkowski (2 August 1946)."

just after they had met in 1957⁵³) to “Yours sincerely Ronald Tolkien” (e.g. in the last known letter to Mroczkowski dated 20-26 January 1964,⁵⁴ more than six years after Mroczkowski had returned to Poland⁵⁵).

It was indeed Tolkien who—in response to Mroczkowski’s deep concerns not to offend the sixty-four-year-old professor⁵⁶—actually encouraged the younger scholar to consider him a colleague,

I do not understand your use of ‘bold’! It is extraordinarily kind of you both to bother about us [i.e. Tolkien and his wife]. We are quite unimportant people. And I do hope that as I have been bold enough to address you as a colleague without title you will please do the same to me. (“Letter to Przemysław Mroczkowski (17 November 1957).”)

It was also quite unusual (not just for the Oxford standards in the second half of the 1950s) that, only a few weeks after they had first met at the British Council office, Mroczkowski would invite both Tolkien and his wife Edith to lunch.⁵⁷ This would not, in all likelihood, have happened if the two men had not instantly (or otherwise quickly) established some common ground for their inquisitive minds, be it their shared Catholic faith or interest in literature, languages and philosophy (Mroczkowska-Brand 118, 121). Moreover, in view of Mroczkowski’s other daughter, Maria Anuncjata Mroczkowska-Gardziel, what ultimately connected her father with Tolkien was a comparable type of imaginative thinking and deep interest in broadly understood cultural heritage.⁵⁸

There must have been enough common ground between the two scholars already in the first few weeks of their acquaintance, when Tolkien

⁵³ “Letter to Przemysław Mroczkowski (9/10 November 1957)” and “Letter to Przemysław Mroczkowski (17 November 1957).”

⁵⁴ It is not, however, certainly not the last letter that was sent to his family. On 10 April 1969, for instance, Tolkien is known to have written a letter to Mroczkowski’s wife, who was at that time in England.

⁵⁵ “Christies Online Catalogue.” The name of Ronald—rather infrequently used in his published correspondence—was the one by which he came to be addressed mainly by his parents, relatives and wife (Carpenter, *Tolkien* 26; Duriez 8).

⁵⁶ According to his daughter, Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand (and, in fact, everyone who has come in contact with the Polish scholar), Mroczkowski was every inch a pre-war gentleman, always courteous and well-mannered towards other people (Mroczkowska-Brand 119).

⁵⁷ In the said letter, though, Tolkien apologises and, on account of his wife’s health concerns, kindly declines Mroczkowski’s invitation “to have lunch chez vous” (“Letter to Przemysław Mroczkowski (17 November 1957”).

⁵⁸ Galadhorn, “Tolkien spod Wawelu.”

agreed to take a look at the paper on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* that Mroczkowski was working on at that time.⁵⁹ In a letter written around midnight on 9-10 November, the Oxonian offers his comments concerning the younger scholar's work. While he admits that he does not agree "on many points" with his Polish friend, he tries not to discourage him from further work upon the subject. In his opinion, however, Mroczkowski "uses too many abstract nouns [...] and avoids saying in direct language what [he supposes] is meant."⁶⁰ Tolkien thus makes some corrections in red ink "concerned with style and tone"⁶¹ of the text. Finally, he apologises "for much neglect" on his part,⁶² and expresses his hopes that "[he has] helped in it, and not in fact made it more difficult."⁶³

It is unfortunately not known whether the above-mentioned paper was the only one that Tolkien agreed to read or whether, from time to time, the Oxford scholar continued to offer Mroczkowski his feedback, stylistic as well as substantive. It may be that, afterwards, his Polish friend—perhaps somewhat reluctant to further trouble the man he considered to be some sort of a mentor (Mroczkowska-Brand 119)—would only seek occasional verbal comments with regard to certain more difficult passages he was investigating at the time. It seems unlikely, on the basis of the available correspondence, that Tolkien would continue to offer his assistance once Mroczkowski had returned to his home country. However, the case of his oldest daughter, Maria Anuncjata, who, in or around 1969, sought the Professor's advice with regard to her master's thesis on *The Hobbit*, demonstrates that at least some, perhaps sporadic and rather general, assistance on Tolkien's side was not utterly implausible (Mroczkowski, "Uczoność" 7).

Tolkien's altruistic disposition towards his friend could also be seen in other, more mundane, matters. At an regrettably unspecified time in 1958 (but certainly in the first half of that year, at least some weeks before Mroczkowski's departure), he sends two letters (presumably in quick succession) to his Polish friend in which he raises the subject of a delicate matter. Seeing that Mroczkowski and his family are living on a very tight budget, he offers them financial support in the amount of £30 (some £650 in today's value), expressing his great pleasure when the money is finally accepted by the naturally much

⁵⁹ The paper in question was Mroczkowski's review of F.N. Robinson's edition of Chaucer's *Works* (second edition) for *The Times Literary Supplement* titled "A Lusty, Plain, Habundant of Vitaille," ultimately published in June 1958 (Bursiak 14), around the time of his going back to Poland.

⁶⁰ "Letter to Przemysław Mroczkowski (9/10 November 1957)."

⁶¹ "Letter to Przemysław Mroczkowski (9/10 November 1957)."

⁶² This seems to suggest that the idea of his correcting Mroczkowski's paper may have been hatched either around the time of their first meeting or very soon after that.

⁶³ "Letter to Przemysław Mroczkowski (9/10 November 1957)."

distressed scholar from Poland (Scull and Hammond C547 [2017]).⁶⁴ It is, Tolkien says, “a little of the proceeds of *The Lord of the Rings*,”⁶⁵ which he hopes will “be an answer to prayer, for on the way from church on Sunday [he] had a sudden clear intuition that [his friend was] worried and in difficulties.”⁶⁶ It was an intuition (if “intuition” we may call it . . .) which certainly did not fail him, a much-needed addition to Mroczkowski’s meagre scholarship⁶⁷ that helped him to stand again on his own two feet.

Mroczkowski’s gratitude was, we may assume, truly profound. It was, therefore, perhaps partly on account of Tolkien’s unexpected munificence in 1958 (and partly as a token of friendship) that the Polish scholar sent his English friend a bibliophile edition of *Pan Tadeusz* (Petry-Mroczkowska 31),⁶⁸ the national epic of Poland written by the nineteenth-century Romantic poet and scholar, Adam Mickiewicz.⁶⁹ In response, the writer sends (or, at least, intends to do so) a copy of the *Festschrift* he was presented with at a small dinner party at Merton College on 5 December 1962 (Scull and Hammond C633-34 [2017]).⁷⁰

⁶⁴ This was an enormous amount of money for anyone living in Poland in the late 1950s, where an average monthly salary, depending on the qualifications, would oscillate between 10 and 20 pounds.

⁶⁵ For a detailed examination of Tolkien’s financial arrangements concerning the sales of his books—*The Hobbit* (1937), *Farmer Giles of Ham* (1949) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955)—see Humphrey Carpenter’s *Tolkien: A Biography*, in particular chapter “Cash or Kudos” (292-309).

⁶⁶ This means that, at least on some Sundays, the two families (excluding, however, Mroczkowski’s children, who were, at that time, staying in a boarding school) might have been present at the same Holy Mass, perhaps in the Oratory Church of Saint Aloysius Gonzaga, the same that Tolkien is known to have regularly attended. Since the Catholic community in Oxford was not, at that time, particularly big, the ties between the individual members of the congregation (or their families) must have been quite strong.

⁶⁷ It should not be forgotten that he came to Oxford accompanied by his wife Janina and their three children, the latter of whom, nonetheless, spent much of their time in a boarding school. Being himself a married man and father of four, Tolkien was, no doubt, perfectly aware of the financial difficulties that the one-year stay in England could place upon the head of the family.

⁶⁸ It may have been the hardback illustrated edition (with a dust-jacket and a slipcase) published in 1959 by Arkady.

⁶⁹ In his response to Mroczkowski’s unexpected gift, Tolkien modestly replies that his knowledge of Polish is unfortunately insufficient to fully appreciate the literary and linguistic merits of the book (Petry-Mroczkowska 31).

⁷⁰ Published in 1962 by George Allen and Unwin and edited by Norman Davis and C.L. Wrenn, *English and Medieval Studies Presented to J.R.R. Tolkien on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* is a collection of fourteen essays written by some of the professor’s colleagues (C.S. Lewis, A.J. Bliss, Simonne d’Ardenne, Nevill Coghill *et al.*) and a dedicatory poem by Tolkien’s former student, W.H. Auden.

Many years later, Mroczkowski would perhaps have also sent him a copy of his own *liber amicorum*, published in 1984 by the Polish Academy of Sciences under the title *Litterae et Lingua. In honorem Premislai Mroczkowski*. By that time, however, Tolkien had already left the shores of Middle-earth . . .

It is very difficult to tell how many letters were exchanged between the two scholars during the sixteen years of their mostly long-distance friendship. Although some of them came to be preserved, many may have been irretrievably lost. According to Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand, one should not rule out the possibility that, having been posted in what the communist authorities would regard as "an imperialist country," some portion of Tolkien's correspondence was simply confiscated by the postal services in Poland (117). Moreover, of those letters that Mroczkowski did receive, many came opened, packed in a plastic bag with an annotation informing the addressee that this was the condition in which they arrived (117). Contrary to the fears of the communist-controlled security services, though, there was nothing suspicious in them. Apart from the usual courtesies, Tolkien would, for instance, write about the death of C.S. Lewis and the marital problems of his youngest son Christopher, both of which naturally caused him much sorrow.⁷¹ Already in the late 1950s and early 1960s, shortly after Mroczkowski's return to his home country, Tolkien would also express his growing anxieties about old age, retirement from academic life, and insufficiency of pension benefits.⁷²

Back in 1958, Tolkien would have certainly been concerned about his friend going back to Poland, the country which, over the period of the past twenty years, had not only fallen prey to two totalitarian regimes—first German National Socialism, and then Soviet Communism—but whose puppet government was also actively involved in a silent war against the Roman Catholic Church. Unlike many people in Western Europe, in whose eyes Stalin would regularly appear behind the mask of a friendly "Uncle Joe" and a key ally in the war against Hitler,⁷³ Tolkien—perhaps also on account of his old acquaintance, a Polish officer by the name of Popławski, who, in late 1943 or early 1944, sought his assistance "in devising a new technical vocabulary" (*Letters* 68, #55)⁷⁴—knew all too well that the geopolitical situation that Poland

⁷¹ "Letter to Przemysław Mroczkowski (20-26 January 1964)" and "Letter to Przemysław Mroczkowski (unknown date)."

⁷² "Letter to Przemysław Mroczkowski (December 1959)" and "Letter to Przemysław Mroczkowski (unknown date)."

⁷³ For an insightful look into the manipulative techniques of the media in Britain during the Second World War and in the aftermath of the global conflict, see Jenks.

⁷⁴ Beginning in 1981, with the first edition of Tolkien's *Letters*, his name is consequently misspelt as "Poptawski".

found herself in was certainly not one to be envied.⁷⁵ Not allowing himself to succumb to despair, however, a quarter of a century later Tolkien does assure his friend behind the Iron Curtain (or, to be more specific, his wife Janina, who, in 1969, appears to have been visiting England) that “Poland for its own sake, but especially since it is your country, is ever in my mind.”⁷⁶

THE FIRST TRANSLATIONS OF TOLKIEN’S WORKS BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN

The indebtedness of Tolkien readers and scholars to the work of Przemysław Mroczkowski is understandably difficult to measure in objective terms. It appears, however, that the Polish scholar played an essential role in popularising the works of his Oxford friend behind the Iron Curtain, first by being actively involved in making possible the translations of his novels, and then, by directing the critical discourse in Poland towards a more positive appreciation of the new genre, so much alike (in the sense of its imaginative spectrum) the books of Lewis Carroll, Kenneth Grahame, or Edith Nesbit, yet so much different (in its cultural, linguistic, mythological, ethical, and ontological dimensions) than *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Wind in the Willows*, and *Five Children and It*, all of which had already been regarded there as classics.

Mroczkowski’s very first thoughts of translating Tolkien’s novels into Polish may have dawned upon him even a year or two before his coming to Oxford in the autumn of 1957.⁷⁷ In his 1961 review of the recently published first

⁷⁵ That Tolkien and Popławski discussed the geopolitical situation in Central Europe is at least plausible. Following the mysterious death of the Polish Prime Minister Władysław Sikorski (4 July 1943) and the Teheran Conference (18 November–1 December 1943), which saw considerable alterations to the borders of pre-war Poland, the spirits amongst the thousands of Polish soldiers still stationed in Britain in 1944 are known to have been rather low. It should come as no surprise, then, that the letter Tolkien wrote to his son Christopher on 18 January 1944 (mentioning “poor old Pop[ł]awski”) should conclude with the ominous words “if there are any Poles and Poland left . . .” (68, #55).

⁷⁶ “Christies Online Catalogue.” As for the first part of the above sentence (“Poland for its own sake”), it seems doubtful that what Tolkien had in mind was the fact that he believed to actually have some Polish (as well as Saxon) blood running through his veins. After all, as the Oxonian declares in his essay “English and Welsh,” after two centuries, it has probably come to be no more than “a negligible physical ingredient” (170). It is, apparently, far more likely that the reasons why Tolkien felt such a strong bond with Poland were her widespread Catholicism and fierce resistance to the totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia (Petry-Mroczkowska 31).

⁷⁷ Much, of course, depends on when he first came in contact with *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Mroczkowski himself claims to have read both novels before he met Tolkien (Mroczkowski and Fiałkowski 12). Unfortunately, though, he does not specify the dates, and so the *termini post* and *ante quem* for the latter book should be placed within the period

volume of *The Lord of the Rings* [Polish title: *Władca Pierścieni*] for the weekly magazine *Przegląd Kulturalny*, he declares that the fact that it has come out in print in Poland is felt by him to be a personal success, as it was he himself who not only encouraged his kith and kin to read it in English, but had also come up with the idea of having it rendered into his mother tongue (4). The idea of translating *The Lord of the Rings* into Polish may seem rather obvious today, now that it has been published in more than fifty languages (some of them more than once; "Translations"), but it was not necessarily a foregone conclusion back in the late 1950s.⁷⁸ Mroczkowski claims that he first consulted it with Tolkien in 1958, perhaps at some point towards the end of his one-year stay in Oxford (Scull and Hammond C557 [2017]). Later that year, on 17 September, the Polish publishing house Czytelnik was already in contact with Allen & Unwin (Olszański 15), and in 1959, Tolkien is reported to have been corresponding with the translator Maria Skibniewska (Scull and Hammond C573 [2017]; *Letters* 299, #217). By that time, Max Schuchart's world-pioneering *In de Ban van de Ring* (1957) had only just been published in the Netherlands and, in all likelihood, Åke Ohlmarks's *Härskarringen* (1959-61) was still being translated into Swedish.⁷⁹ In other words, notwithstanding the promising sales results in the United Kingdom, a few years after its publication, *The Lord of the Rings* was certainly not yet a world classic and the cult status that it ultimately came to acquire in the second half of the 1960s was still a few years off.

How Mroczkowski managed to persuade two Polish publishers, Iskry and Czytelnik respectively, to release both *The Hobbit* (1960) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1961-3), two relatively unknown books of an obscure Oxford don, is anyone's guess.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, when they came out, Poland was very much in the vanguard of translating the books of Tolkien, the Polish edition of *The Hobbit*,

between 1954-1955 (i.e. when it first came out) and 1957-1958 (when the Polish scholar became acquainted with Tolkien).

⁷⁸ According to Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand, her father correctly predicted that, regardless of the then current literary trends and reading sensibilities, Tolkien's works—with all their richness of humanistic thought, beauty and wisdom—would one day enter the canon of European literature (125).

⁷⁹ It is known from the letter that, upon his return from Scandinavia, Rayner Unwin sent to Tolkien on 30 September 1957 that, by that time, "the Swedish translation of *The Fellowship of the Ring* [was] nearly complete" (Scull and Hammond C540 [2017]).

⁸⁰ While it is true that various works of contemporary writers from behind the Iron Curtain were quite regularly published in communist Poland, even in the late 1940s and 1950s, it should come as no surprise that a novel in which the antagonist is a powerful Dark Lord from the east could be viewed with utmost suspicion by the wary censors. To illustrate the point, it could be sufficient to note that George Orwell's two most famous novels, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948) were not officially published there until 1988, when the communist regime was already in decline.

namely *Hobbit, czyli tam i z powrotem* being only the fourth such translation in the world (after Swedish, German and Dutch) and *Władca Pierścieni* the third (after Dutch and Swedish). Both, however, were the world's first translations of Tolkien's novels into non-Germanic languages, the former two years before the Portuguese *O Gnomo* (1962) and the latter seven years before Italian *Il Signore degli Anelli* (1967-70).

Despite the fact that the idea of translating the books first came from Mroczkowski and that Tolkien may have initially given him his blessing, the Polish scholar was not, in the end, the one to translate it into the language of Sienkiewicz. According to Scull and Hammond, on 2 June 1958, the writer informed his younger colleague that, notwithstanding Mroczkowski's excellent command of English, he had absolutely "no idea of his skill with Polish" (Scull and Hammond C557 [2017]),⁸¹ and so he would rather leave it to his publisher, Allen & Unwin, "to arrange contracts for translation" (557). In effect, both novels ended up being translated by Maria Skibniewska (except for the poetic insertions, which were rendered into Polish by Włodzimierz Lewik and Andrzej Nowicki), whose translatorial work is still considered canonical by a significant number of Tolkien readers in Poland.⁸² Before she passed away in 1984, Skibniewska, a prolific translator from English and French,⁸³ would have also completed her vibrant, if at times controversial, renditions of *Farmer Giles of Ham* (1962), *Smith of Wootton Major* (1982), and *The Silmarillion* (1985).

Although he did not personally translate *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, it appears that Mroczkowski would continue to play a noteworthy role in the process of bringing them to the Polish reader. Having received a printed copy of the Polish *Hobbit*, Tolkien writes a letter (dated 23 November 1960) to Alina Dadlez, a Polish-born employee of George Allen & Unwin and member of the Polish Social and Cultural Association in London, with whom he is known to have quite often corresponded in connection with the translations of his writings into other languages (mainly Dutch, Polish and German). In it, he

⁸¹ What Tolkien meant by this was not Mroczkowski's general command of Polish, of course, but solely his skills as a translator of literary works. Having already had some experience with the Dutch translation of *The Lord of the Rings* (*Letters* 249-251, #190), he certainly wished to play it safe.

⁸² To date, there have been three translations of *The Lord of the Rings* into Polish. Following the aforesaid work of Maria Skibniewska, there was a highly controversial one (mainly on account of the characters' names) by Jerzy Łoziński (1997-1997) and the collective effort (2001) of Maria Fronc, Cezary Fronc, Aleksandra Januszewska, Aleksandra Jagielowicz (prose), Tadeusz Olszański (poetry) and Ryszard Derdziński (appendices).

⁸³ She is credited with the translation of more than a hundred novels, including the works of Gilbert Keith Chesterton, William Golding, Graham Greene, Herbert George Wells, Henry James, Maurice Druon, Guy de Maupassant, and Haldór Laxness (from English).

thanks her for the book and expresses his hopes that he will "get some comments on the translation from his Polish acquaintance Professor Mroczkowski" (Scull and Hammond C594-595 [2017]). Whether Tolkien was ultimately informed upon the matter or not cannot unfortunately be confirmed by the surviving body of correspondence. However, within the following three years, Tolkien must have been notified about the fidelity of the Polish translation of *The Lord of the Rings*, since he claims in a letter to Dudlez (1 November 1963) that he has been assured by Mroczkowski that the treatment of the text is not in the least akin to the books' covers (Scull and Hammond C643-4 [2017]; Petry-Mroczkowska 31), particularly with regard to *The Return of the King*, which the writer forthrightly describes as a "Mordor hideousness" (643).⁸⁴

MROCHKOWSKI'S REVIEWS OF *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* IN THE POPULAR PRESS

Mroczkowski's contribution to the popularisation of Tolkien's work in Poland is naturally far more tangible than the handful of private observations upon the quality of Skibniewska's translations in his unpublished correspondence with the writer. Following the publication of each of the three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*, the Polish scholar would write his book reviews for the widely circulated press (rather than the academic journals with a limited accessibility to the non-specialist readers). Neither the weekly newspaper *Przegląd Kulturalny*, specialising in such fields of cultural creativity as literature, philosophy, music, film, and fine arts (where the first two volumes were given highly enthusiastic reviews in 1961 and 1962), nor the monthly periodical *Więź*, with its overtly Catholic profile (where the third book came to be reviewed in 1964), could ever hope to successfully compete with the bulk of Marxist-orientated press titles, publicly supporting the official line of the Party, ideological, cultural or otherwise.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, with some degree of thematic independence and a regular circulation of several thousand copies (not to mention nationwide distribution), they could reach a substantial percentage of

⁸⁴ The cover art of each of the three volumes was conceived by the Polish graphic designer and illustrator Jan Samuel Miklaszewski. The dust cover of *The Return of the Kings*, which features a sinister-looking figure of an unidentified monarch (whether it was meant to depict Aragorn, Sauron or the Witch-king of Angmar is not in the least clear), or, in particular, his crowned head, may easily bring to mind Tolkien's own depictions of the towers Orthanc and Barad-dûr reproduced, for instance in Scull and Hammond's book *The Art of The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien* (110, 113, 221, 222).

⁸⁵ The first two reviews are titled, respectively, *Wielka baśń o prawdach* "A Great Fairy-tale about Truths" (*Przegląd Kulturalny* 49/1961) and *Dalsza baśń o prawdach* "A Further Fairy-tale about Truths" (*Przegląd Kulturalny* 51&52/1962). The third one, published in *Więź* (2/1964), simply bears the title of the novel's final volume: *Powrót króla* "The Return of the King."

the more culturally-conscious readers for whom the fairy-tale-like narratives of the hobbits, dwarves, elves, wizards and magical rings of power may, at first sight, have seemed to be unworthy of any serious consideration.

Although he was actually not the first in Poland to provide some sort of critical insight into the works of Tolkien,⁸⁶ it is Mroczkowski who could now be thought of as the one who sparked genuine interest—popular as well as academic—in *The Lord of the Rings*. There are, naturally, good reasons for this. As has been observed, it was the then Lublin-based scholar who first came out with the then eccentric idea of translating the books of Tolkien into Polish (Mroczkowski and Fiałkowski 12). Furthermore, it was not only the first truly reliable, if somewhat sketchy, piece of critical assessment of Tolkien's works in Polish,⁸⁷ but also the earliest review of *The Lord of the Rings* to have been published in Poland,⁸⁸ the country in which the entire first print of little more than 10,000 copies sold out in a matter of weeks, often in the way which exposed some of the principal shortcomings of centrally-planned economy.⁸⁹ Finally, one must not ignore the fact that, being a good friend of Tolkien, Mroczkowski would naturally make a rather well-informed, and thus more reliable reviewer of his books than Janusz Stawiński, Zofia Jaremko-Pytowska, or even Krystyna Kuliczowska (see the footnotes above), books which, by the time the three

⁸⁶ Here, the victor's laurels should be awarded to Krystyna Kuliczowska, whose review of *The Hobbit* was published in 1960, in the monthly magazine *Nowe Książki* (1476-1477).

⁸⁷ Krystyna Kuliczowska's review of *The Hobbit* is not devoid of certain cognitive values (she does, for instance, point to its deeply humanistic merits). However, some of the observations she makes (such as, in her opinion, the novel's near-allegorical quality) together with a number of truly irritating factual and nomenclatural errors make her critical evaluation little more than just a Tolkien-related curiosity, interesting mainly for its historical character.

⁸⁸ Early in 1962, a sceptical—and, for the most part, thoroughly erroneous—review by Janusz Stawiński, titled "Swift redivivus", was published in *Nowe Książki* (74-75). In it, the author argues that *The Lord of the Rings* was almost certainly meant to be some sort of an allegory on the modern world (75). Likewise, in her article "Bajki dla dzieci i dorosłych" ("Fables for children and adults"), Zofia Jaremko-Pytowska maintains that in his greatest work, Tolkien attempts to "bring back to life old Scottish and Icelandic legends, so that in this allegorical form he could express his views of the modern world" (979).

⁸⁹ In a communist-orientated economy (such as the one that was enforced in post-war Poland), the law of supply and demand did not operate freely in, for instance, determining the number of books to be launched on the market. Consequently, a genuine financial success (as was certainly the case with *The Lord of the Rings*) would not automatically result in the publisher's decision to print more copies. Indeed, the second edition would not come out until 1981, nearly two decades after the first, thus making *Władca pierścieni* not only a cult classic, but also a true *rara avis*, sold second hand for several times the price it would have had if the principles of free market economy had been upheld.

reviews were published, he had almost certainly read more than once.⁹⁰ Besides, as the Polish scholar repeatedly declared in his later publications, at least some of what he came to know about the overall style, subject matter and numerous underlying themes of *The Lord of the Rings* he may have actually heard from Tolkien himself (Mroczkowski "Wielka baśń o prawdach" 4; "Uczoność" 4-5, 7; Mroczkowski and Fiałkowski 12).

As may be deduced from the titles of the first two texts, the central arguments of Mroczkowski's reviews are that, first of all, *The Lord of the Rings* is a fairy-tale (or something in its generic vicinity) and that, secondly, there exists some underlying union between the work of Tolkien and what the Polish scholar refers to as the "truths." The strength of the first of his claims evidently rests upon Mroczkowski's reading of Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-stories." In fact, he does quote his friend from Oxford as saying that "fairy-stories should not be specially associated with children" ("On Fairy-stories" 56; Mroczkowski "Wielka baśń o prawdach" 4), a somewhat cutting-edge statement in his native Poland, where the fairy-tale genre was and, indeed, still is usually looked down upon and where, for the vast majority of non-academics, any distinction between a fable, a folktale and a fairy-tale appears to be practically non-existent. As for the "truths" he writes about, Mroczkowski's argument may seem to be even more intriguing, particularly when one keeps in mind the rather distinctive dismissal of universal values and truths in the works of some postmodernist writers of the mid-twentieth century, i.e. at the time when *The Lord of the Rings* was written and published. It appears, however, that by adhering to these "truths" the Polish scholar tries to accentuate the fact that, regardless of its outward appearance of a medieval-like tale of adventure, magic and wonder (which, of course, in some ways, it is), Tolkien's novel in fact adheres to some primal stock of universal values which are not only objective, but also interminable, unconditional and not based upon any man-made criteria.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Mroczkowski had certainly read both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* by the time he first met Tolkien in the autumn of 1957 (Mroczkowski and Fiałkowski 12). His daughter Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand also maintains that he would read both novels to his children in English (122-123). She does not specify the time, but claims that it must have been after the family's return from Oxford, where they would attend an English school (123). Finally, it seems rather unlikely that Mroczkowski would have reviewed the Polish translation of *The Lord of the Rings* without reading it first, if only for the sake of Tolkien, particularly that the writer had already expressed his hopes to get some comments from him on the Polish *Hobbit* (in a 1960 letter to Alina Dudlez; Scull and Hammond C594-595 [2017]). Indeed, he does actually praise Skibniewska's translation in his review of *The Return of the King* ("Powrót króla" 98).

⁹¹ If such indeed be Mroczkowski's line of reasoning, his eponymous reference to the "truths" would clearly echo what, in "On Fairy-stories," Tolkien claims to be the hub of the inherently imitative character of subcreation, namely that "we make in our measure

Another vital issue of Tolkien's sub-created world which Mroczkowski's reviews brought into discussion is the writer's extensive knowledge of languages and, in particular, early medieval literature with its numerous mythological references and allusions.⁹² This knowledge, the Polish scholar argues, allows the writer to have a better understanding of the cultural heritage of our civilisation and, in this way, successfully adhere to the universal archetypes that underly the bulk of our literary cannon, be it epic fiction, romance or fairy tale ("Powrót króla" 98). Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, therefore, only processes (albeit in a highly creative way) the ancient treasure trove of concepts and images that was once common to half of Europe (98). It was this trove, Mroczkowski continues, that used to provide people with a set of roughly corresponding ethical norms and rules, the norms and rules that, unfortunately, seem to have lost much of their colour in our modern world (98). Tolkien's novel thus, according to Mroczkowski, constitutes an all-embracing catalogue of various human attitudes whose roots reach back to the Middle Ages and beyond, a truly magnificent gift to the people of our era (98).

Notwithstanding its quasi-medieval aura and fairy-tale-like form, which, Mroczkowski argues, can frustrate and, in effect, discourage many a serious-minded reader ("Wielka baśń o prawdach" 4; "Dalsza baśń o prawdach" 9; "Powrót króla" 98), *The Lord of the Rings* is, in fact, a highly realistic novel which, as has been mentioned, successfully tackles some of the big issues of our present time. Its mimetic qualities are, therefore, best discerned when Tolkien's book is approached without the reservations that all too often spring from the mind of an adult reader. Somewhat disputatiously, however, the Polish scholar argues that, odd as it may seem, one needs to be adult enough in order to realise that not all the knowledge and experience we appear to gain over the long years of our earthly sojourn are of any greater value and that not everything which comes to be reflected in the wide-open eyes of a young person should automatically be rejected as some irrelevant childish nonsense ("Wielka baśń o prawdach" 4). Being "adult enough" is, therefore, not some derogatory epithet to be directed at a person who seems to be entirely devoid of any spark of imagination (like the rational-minded narrator in William Wordsworth's *We Are Seven*),⁹³ but a genuine compliment, much as in C.S. Lewis's oft-quoted words in his dedication from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: "some day you will

and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker" (66).

⁹² He also points it out in the interview (Mroczkowski and Fijałkowski 12).

⁹³ In this Romantic poem, the narrator keeps on interrogating an eight-year-old village girl, for whom the fact that two of her six siblings are no longer amongst the living is no obstacle in claiming that there are, indeed, seven children in her immediate family.

be old enough to start reading fairy tales again" (7),⁹⁴ or, better still, Christ's admonition from the Gospel of Mark, "unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven" (18:3).

Consequently, Mroczkowski appears to be saying that to read *The Lord of the Rings* is to immerse oneself into a world of universal truths and values whose foundations are to be found in what constitutes the very cornerstone of our civilisation: the old tales and myths of, particularly, but not exclusively, north-western Europe and, most importantly (although in this case the Polish scholar evidently has to resort to some fairly transparent understatement),⁹⁵ Christian ethics with its central concepts of truth, faith and hope. These, he says, clearly evince the affirmation of human (in a broad sense of the word) endurance and solidarity, particularly in the face of seemingly imminent, if not always expressly personified, evil ("Wielka baśń o prawdach" 4). Given this, it should come as no surprise that Tolkien's masterpiece would grow to such epic proportions, both in terms of its physical dimensions and thematic scope, and so become, in the words of Mroczkowski, "A Great Fairy-tale about Truths" ("Wielka baśń o prawdach" 4). After all, when asked by his Polish friend about the actual reason(s) why he decided to write *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien replied, with disarming honesty that all he wanted to do was "to tell a long story" ("Uczoność" 5); one in which, one may add, not only his numerous peoples could speak the languages he so painstakingly worked on, but also, perhaps most importantly, one in which the aforesaid truths and values of essentially Christian humanism could be found in plenty.

It would be a bit of an overstatement to claim that the three reviews of *The Lord of the Rings* that Mroczkowski published in the popular press in the early 1960s ought to be considered as some sort of a foundation of Tolkien studies in Poland. Indeed, they were probably never meant to be anything more than a mere introduction to the work that, particularly at that time, more than half a century ago, seemed to escape any rigid classification in the fields of literary history and theory. It is, however, in this role of a populariser that Mroczkowski appears to have fulfilled himself best, igniting (or, at least, helping to ignite) the enormous interest that Tolkien's books garnered in Poland in, particularly, the second half of the twentieth century.⁹⁶ It was then but a natural

⁹⁴ C.S. Lewis dedicated the book, the first to be written in the series (but chronologically the second), to Lucy Barfield, the daughter of his close friend Owen Barfield, his own godchild and the namesake of one of the novel's protagonists Lucy Pevensie.

⁹⁵ While not exactly illegal, explicit references to the Christian faith in the state-controlled popular media were, on the whole, not welcome.

⁹⁶ Naturally, their popularity continued well into the twenty-first century, but it is difficult to tell to what extent the book sales in the first two decades of the new millennium should

consequence that so many Polish scholars—mainly, but not exclusively, in the field of English philology—would try to leave their own imprints on the ever-expanding universe of Tolkien studies. They may not necessarily invoke in their publications the name of Przemysław Mroczkowski,⁹⁷ but it is not unlikely that, at least in some measure, the observations which are to be found in his reviews of *The Lord of the Rings* came to be reflected in the academic publications of some of the leading Polish Tolkienists in the 1970s and 1980s, people like Andrzej Zgorzelski (52-78), Andrzej Wicher (“The Disturbed Utopia” 76-87), or Adam Ziółkowski (1479-1490). The more tangible impact that the three reviews might have had upon their works is, however, yet to be examined.

LOOKING OUT UPON THE SEA

Tolkien’s acquaintance with Przemysław Mroczkowski is, unfortunately, not yet common knowledge in the world of academic research whose central figure is the author of *The Lord of the Rings*. The Polish scholar is, of course, mentioned a number of times in the biographical works of Daniel Grotta (1992) and Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond (2017). Very often, though, his presence there is no more than that of a person who either says something about Tolkien (as in the former book) or is in some way involved in a correspondence with the famous Oxonian (the latter). On the other side of the coin, the numerous, if, for the most part, disappointingly sketchy, portraits of Mroczkowski in the academic press and in the media (traditional, as well as electronic) usually deal with only a selection of episodes from the life of the Polish scholar, as a result of which most of those who have heard of him only think of Professor Przemysław Mroczkowski as “the man who knew Tolkien,” which is, to say the least, a serious understatement, both on account of his work as a scholar and the role he played in the translation and popularisation of *The Lord of the Rings* in Poland. A more consistent and comprehensive biographical study of his—perhaps something like the recently published book about Tolkien’s guardian Father Francis Xavier Morgan (by José Manuel Ferrández Bru)—one in which the character of the above-outlined relationship between the two scholars could be given a more in-depth treatment, is yet to be written. For the time being, though, the present publication, being, in fact, little more than just a compilation of easily accessible information (albeit mainly in Polish) about

be attributed to their ongoing fame or the fact that they were ultimately brought to the screen by Peter Jackson (2001-2003 and 2012-2014).

⁹⁷ The sheer number of various Tolkien-related publications (both academic and popular) which are now available on the market—in Polish, English or, in fact, any other major Indo-European language—is so high that for a more in-depth analysis of his works most scholars in Poland today would naturally turn the canonical (and more recent) publications of people like Tom Shippey, Verlyn Flieger, or John Garth.

Przemysław Mroczkowski, supported by the accounts of those who had the privilege of knowing him personally and a handful of reflections concerning his reviews of *The Lord of the Rings*, will have to do. Nonetheless, it may well be that from the top of this intricate tower of factual threads and fabrics we may still be able, like the man in Tolkien's famous allegory on criticism concerning *Beowulf*, "to look out upon the sea" (8).

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