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A Speculative Meditation on Tolkien's Sources for the Character Gollum

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A Collection of Essays Presented at the Joint Meeting of

The Eighth

FRANCES WHITE EW BANK COLLOQUIUM ON C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

and

THE C.S. LEWIS AND THE INKLINGS SOCIETY CONFERENCE

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A Speculative Meditation on Tolkien's Sources for the Character Gollum

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We would like to speculate on Tolkien's sources for Gollum. As a start, it is likely that Tolkien's sources for Gollum were the same as his sources for ents. Tolkien wrote that "...Ents are composed of philology, literature, and life." (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 212.) Tolkien accordingly cites three sources -- his love of word origins or linguistics (philology), literature (poetry and prose), and life (personal experience). Was Gollum composed in the same way?

The Poem *Glip*

The precursor to Gollum in Tolkien's writings was a slimy little creature named "Glip." *Glip* is one of a series of poems called *Tales and Songs of Bimble Bay*. (*The Annotated Hobbit*, p. 119.) The poem is undated, but was probably written around 1928. Keep in mind that Tolkien first wrote the sentence, "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit," late in 1929. (*J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, p. 83.) Here is Tolkien's poem in its entirety: (*The Annotated Hobbit*, p. 119.)

Under the cliffs of Bimble Bay
Is a little cave of stone
With wet walls of shining grey;
And on the floor a bone,
A white bone that is gnawed quite
clean
With sharp white teeth.
But inside nobody can be seen --

He lives far underneath,
Under the floor, down a long hole
Where the sea gurgles and sighs.
Glip is his name, as blind as a mole
In his two round eyes
While daylight lasts; but when night
falls
With a pale gleam they shine
Like green jelly, and out he crawls
All long and wet with slime.
He slinks through weeds at
highwater mark
To where the mermaid sings,
The wicked mermaid singing in the
dark
And threading golden rings
On wet hair; for many ships
She draws to the rock to die.
And Glip listens, and quietly slips
And lies in shadow by.
It is there that Glip steals his bones.
He is a slimy little thing
Sneaking and crawling under fishy
stones,
And slinking home to sing
A gurgling sound in his damp hole;
But after the last light
There are darker and wickeder
things that prowl
On Bimble rocks at night.

Many aspects of Gollum's persona, as seen in *The Hobbit*, are already established in the character of Glip:

- Where he lives -- in "a little cave of stone," "far underneath, down a

long hole where the sea gurgles," "his damp hole"

- Glip's lair is a deadly place. The mermaid draws many ships "to the rock to die." "It is there that Glip steals his bones.
- His invisibility -- "inside nobody can be seen." He "quietly slips and lies in shadow by."
- An allusion to "golden rings," but of the mermaid's wet hair rather than a ring on the finger
- What he looks like when seen -- He is "a slimy little thing sneaking and crawling," "slinking." His eyes "shine like green jelly."
- What he sounds like -- singing "a gurgling sound"

The Philology of Gollum

In the first edition of *The Hobbit* (1937) Tolkien wrote that the name "Gollum" came from this "gurgling sound." In Tolkien's words, "Gollum" describes "the horrible swallowing noise in his throat", that Gollum makes when he speaks. (*Ibid.*, p. 120.) Indeed, "That is how he [Gollum] got his name, though he always called himself 'my precious'."

Gollum's speech has two distinctive qualities. First is the snake-like sibilant "s": "Where iss it? Where iss it? Bilbo heard him crying. "Losst it is, my precious, lost, lost! Curse us and crush us, my precious is lost." (*Ibid.*, p. 128.) The sibilant "s" is reminiscent of the serpent in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). The second distinctive quality is the sound of being strangled: "What's the matter?" Bilbo called. "What have you lost?" "It mustn't ask us," shrieked Gollum. "Not its business, no, gollum! It's losst, gollum, gollum, gollum." (*The Annotated Hobbit*, p. 129.) Smeagol had strangled his brother Deagol to possess the ring, reminiscent of Cain who slew his brother Abel (Genesis 4).

The sound of being strangled was Andy Serkis's inspiration for Gollum in

the movie version of *The Lord of the Rings*: "I started to think about where he [Gollum] would physically carry his pain, and decide that his throat could be deeply affected, constricted by subconscious guilt associated with killing Deagol, so that when he talked he felt like he was choking." (*Gollum: How We Made Movie Magic*, p. 4.) Andy Serkis's other inspiration for Gollum was a cat bringing up a hairball!

In *The Hobbit* "Glip" became a "gulp" -- "Gollum." In *The Lord of the Rings* backstory Gollum began as the hobbit Smeagol. Smeagol's brother was Deagol. Tolkien retained the first syllable in Gollum, "gol", as the last syllable in their hobbit names (Smeagol and Deagol).

We speculate that Tolkien may have arrived at the name "Gollum" from at least six different literary sources: Old Norse Gold, the Jewish Golem, the Aramaic word Golgotha, the giant Goliath in the Old Testament, Gorbo or Golithos in E.A. Wyck-Smith's *The Marvelous Land of Snergs*, and the Golliwogg in the books by Florence and Bertha Upton.

Old Norse Gold

Did Tolkien get the name *Gollum* from Old Norse Gold? This is the hypothesis of Douglas Anderson, who annotated *The Annotated Hobbit* (p. 120). The Old Norse word *gull* means "gold." In the oldest manuscripts it is spelled *goll*. One inflected form would be *gollum*, "gold, treasure, something precious." It can also mean "ring," as is found in the compound word *fingr-gull*, "finger-ring" -- points that may have occurred to Tolkien.

The Jewish Golem

An alternative hypothesis is that Tolkien got the name Gollum from the Jewish Golem. (*The Riddle of Gollum*, pp. 135-138.) *Golem* comes from a Hebrew word that occurs once in the Old Testament (Psalm 139:16): "Your eyes

saw my unformed *substance*," the word root for substance being the consonants GLM in the Hebrew. (*The Golem: A New Translation of the Classic Play and Selected Short Stories*, p. ix.) Tolkien did have an interest in the Hebrew language. He reported being "immersed in Hebrew," but in 1957, after *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* were published. (*The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Reader's Guide*, p. 468.) Tolkien did translate the book of Jonah in *The Jerusalem Bible* (published in 1966), but "Not from the Hebrew direct!" (*Ibid.*, p. 468.)

Was Tolkien aware of the Jewish legend of the Golem? The Golem was a creature of clay constructed to represent a human being and endowed with life, but without a soul. The legendary Golem protected the Jews in the Ghetto. (*The Golem: The Story of a Legend*, pp. 45, 103.)

Did Tolkien read Gustav Meyrink's *The Golem*, a famous fictional treatment of the Golem first published in English in 1928? *The Golem*, a masterpiece of fantastic fiction, is a supernatural novel (probably more to Charles Williams' taste!). Tolkien read little contemporary fiction, but he did read fantasy and science fiction. (*Tolkien and C.S. Lewis: The Gift of Friendship*, p. 213) Tolkien did not refer to Gustav Meyrink or the Golem in his writings (to the best of our knowledge); however, the Oxford Christian writers could be secretive about their sources. Michael Ward's *Planet Narnia* is a case in point.

Gollum and the Golem have quite a few similarities, besides names that sound the same. They are both creatures of the earth. They are both imperfect beings. They both can become invisible; invisibility was a property of the Golem in some stories. Their magical power can be inactivated. In Gollum's case, his invisibility is lost when he loses the ring to Bilbo.

Golgotha and Goliath

Regarding the philology of the name Gollum, did Tolkien have Golgotha in mind? The English word "Golgotha" comes from the Aramaic word for "Place of the Skull." Gollum's cave in *The Hobbit* was certainly a place of death. According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus was crucified between two thieves. My favorite line in *The Hobbit* is Gollum's last line: "Thief, thief, thief! Baggins! We hates it, we hates it, we hates it for ever!" (*The Annotated Hobbit*, p. 134.)

Or did Tolkien have the giant Goliath in mind (1 Samuel 17)? David had a deadly one-on-one encounter with Goliath. David was only a halfling relative to the giant Goliath.

Gorbo or Golithos

Did Tolkien have Gorbo or Golithos in mind when he thought up Gollum? Gorbo and Golithos are two characters in *The Marvellous Land of Snergs*, a children's book by E.A. Wyke-Smith published in 1928. The story concerns the adventures of a Snerg named Gorbo. Snergs are "a race of people only slightly taller than the average table but broad in the shoulders and of great strength." (*The Marvellous Land of Snergs*, p. 7.) Another character is Golithos, a giant ogre who has become a vegetarian but is being tempted to eat children once again. (Wyke-Smith probably had the giant Goliath in mind when he coined the name Golithos -- "Gol" + *lithos*, stone.)

Tolkien admitted in a 1955 letter to W.H. Auden that *The Marvellous Land of Snergs* was "probably an unconscious source-book! for the Hobbits, not of anything else." (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 215.) But this statement fails to convey the esteem Tolkien once held for the book. In the drafts for his famous lecture *On Fairy Stories* he wrote, "I should like to record my own love and my

children's love of E.A. Wyck-Smith's *Marvellous Land of Snergs*, at any rate the snerg-element of that tale, and of Gorbo the gem of dunderheads, jewel of a companion in an escapade." (*The Annotated Hobbit*, p. 7.)

The Golliwogg Books

Did Tolkien have the "Golliwogg" books in the back of his mind when he thought up Gollum? These children's books, illustrated by Florence Upton and written in verse by her mother Bertha, were published from 1895 to 1909. (*Buy Golly! The History of the Golliwogg*.) Tolkien was born in 1892, so the Golliwogg books may have been among the first books Tolkien read as a child! The "Golliwogg" sparked an industry of dolls and publishing in Great Britain. The Robertson's Jam Company even used the Golliwogg as their logo. C.S. Lewis mentions a Golliwogg lawn ornament in *The Four Loves* (1960). (p. 34.) Unfortunately the meaning of "golliwogg" changed through the 20th Century, taking on the connotations of a racial stereotype. The word "golliwogg" came to mean "a grotesque black doll" or "a grotesque person." (*The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, p. 820.) Gollum is certainly "a grotesque person." Also, the word "golliwogg" sounds like pollywogg (Gollum is a somewhat aquatic creature.) and scalawag (Gollum is a rascal.).

Regarding the sources for Gollum's name, perhaps Tolkien should have the last word: "Nevertheless one's mind is, of course, stored with a 'leaf mould' of memories (submerged) of names, and these rise up to the surface at times, and may provide with modification the bases of 'invented' names." (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 409.)

Grendel

Surely the monster Grendel in *Beowulf* was a source for Gollum. The first

edition of *The Hobbit* was published in 1937, while Tolkien's lecture on *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* was in 1936. *Beowulf* is at the top of Douglas Anderson's list of Tolkien's probable sources for *The Hobbit*. (*The Annotated Hobbit*, pp. 5-6.) Tolkien claimed that *Beowulf* was among his "most valued sources," but also that it was "not conspicuously present" in his mind as he wrote *The Hobbit*. (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 31.)

The Hobbit is modeled on *Beowulf*. Both are quest romances ("there and back again"). Both Grendel and Gollum live in lairs. Charles Beach has noted that both are associated with caves and water and seen as pitiable (*Report of the 9/9/11 Meeting*, p. 14). Grendel is said to descend from the race of Cain. (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, p. 9.) Cain, like Gollum, killed his brother. Grendel is the first of three monsters that *Beowulf* has to face. Gollum is the first of three monsters that Bilbo faces in *The Hobbit* (followed by the spiders and the dragon Smaug). Frodo also faces three monsters in *The Lord of the Rings* -- the Watcher, Gollum and Shelob.

Professor John M. Bowers has claimed that without Grendel, "we wouldn't have Gollum." (*The Western Literary Canon in History, Part 2 of 3*, p. 18.) Tolkien "liked to believe, in a sense, that the stories he was telling were true stories that had passed along in oral tradition, to surface later in the earliest literature." (*The Western Literary Canon in History, Part 3 of 3*, p. 173.) When he wrote *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien imagined that he was "writing that lost prehistory of the English people out of the evidence that was passed along in oral tradition, surfacing in the earliest literary accounts..." (*Ibid.*, p. 173.) When Tolkien "reads *Beowulf* and sees the character Grendel, he imagines that this character is based ultimately on Gollum. So his Gollum, he imagines, is the original type,

the source for the literary Grendel." (*Ibid.*, p. 173.)

The Christian Gospel

Another certain source for Gollum was the Christian Gospel, as expressed by the frequent appeals for mercy in the Catholic Mass. (*The Quest for Pity and Mercy in Tolkien's Middle Earth*, pp. 79-84.) The Mass often repeats each appeal three times:

- *Kyrie eleison* (Lord have mercy)
- *Christe eleison* (Christ have mercy)
- *Kyrie eleison* (Lord have mercy)

The Catholic Mass was Tolkien's predominant source for the great theme of pity and mercy that starts with Gollum in *The Hobbit* and then runs throughout the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. One can even make a merciful acronym from Gollum's name: GOD Loves U(You) Mercifully!

Summary

We have hypothesized that Gollum, like the ents, was "composed of philology, literature, and life." Gollum got his start in Tolkien's writings as a creature in his poem, "Glip." Gollum got his name from his "gurgling sound," the "horrible swallowing noise in his throat." We speculate that Tolkien may have arrived at the name "Gollum" from at least six different literary sources: Old Norse Gold, the Jewish Golem, the Aramaic word Golgotha, the giant Goliath in the Old Testament, Gorbo or Golithos in E.A. Wyck-Smith's *The Marvelous Land of Snergs*, and the Golliwogg in the books by Florence and Bertha Upton. Two more definite sources for Gollum are the monster Grendel in *Beowulf* and the Christian Gospel, as expressed by the frequent appeals for mercy in the Roman Catholic Mass.

On hearing this presentation, James Como quipped, "I can easily imagine Tolkien listening to you and

saying, "Is that where I got all that?" (*Report of the 9/9/11 Meeting*, p. 15) It seems fitting to let Tolkien have the last word. Tolkien believed that "...only one's guardian Angel, or Indeed God himself, could unravel the real relationship between personal facts and an author's works. Not the author himself (though he knows more than any investigator), and certainly not the so called 'psychologists'." (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 288.)

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