

# The road goes ever on

## Tolkien's use of the 'Journey' motive in constructing *The Lord of the Rings*

John Ellison

Recall a commentary or review of *The Lord of the Rings* which appeared a considerable time ago. In it the writer expressed surprise at finding so large a proportion of the book given over to simple descriptions of travel or journeyings, involving little, on the surface, in the way of events or action. If it is thought of in simplistic terms as a "tale of heroic adventure," then perhaps it is rather surprising how little actual action and incident it seems to contain in relation to its length, forceful and memorable though events are seen to be when eventually they occur. The apparent imbalance between those sections of the book which record events, action and incident, and the long intermediate sections, becomes easier to understand if it be thought of in terms of realism, if, in other words, one remembers that fantasy is only realism approached from another direction, Tolkien's own formulation of the content of the book as "a war the progress of which it was my task to report"<sup>1</sup> (my italics) is revealing here. In real life an individual's experience of active service in war (and Tolkien had all too immediate personal experience of it) tends to alternate between long periods of enforced inactivity fraught with tension, and very brief periods of violent and frenzied activity accompanied by extreme personal danger.

*The Road Goes Ever On*, therefore becomes, not so much a recurrent theme-song, as a principal motive woven into the structure of the book itself. Some years ago I carried out an inquiry which issued as an article<sup>2</sup> essaying to interpret the background structure of *The Hobbit*.

I have, since then, contemplated a parallel one essaying an interpretation of the structure of *The Lord of the Rings*, but I have never properly embarked on it. It would, without doubt, provide material impossible to confine within the limits of a single paper or article. This present one might be thought of appropriately enough as a 'journey' in that direction.

A journey, 'there and back again', of course represents the whole outline of *The Hobbit*. Actually, though, journeying, or travelling, plays a relatively minor part in its structure, and Tolkien does not allot very much space to description of it as such. The proportion of action and incident in relation to the length of the book is much greater than is the case with *The Lord of the Rings*, naturally, as *The Hobbit* stems from Tolkien's practice of oral storytelling to his own children, who of course demanded, like all children, plenty of action and incident for their attention to be held.

Like *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* at the simplest level is a story of a journey, 'there and back again'. It breaks down, however, into a considerable number of separate, if interdependent, journeys. These can be grouped into major, or principal ones, and minor, or intermediate ones. The alternation of the two is most evident in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, at the end of which the Fellowship itself is broken.

The four major journeys up to that point are as follows:

1) Hobbiton to Crickhollow.

2) Bree to Rivendell.

3) Rivendell to Khazad-dûm and Moria East-gate.

4) Lothlórien to Parth Galen.

The three (or perhaps two) minor ones are: 1) Crickhollow to chez Bombadil.

2) Chez Bombadil to Bree

3) Moria East-gate to Lothlórien (Caras Galadon)

(The first two perhaps as a pair.)

It is worth looking at the first of these journeys in some detail. It occupies thirty-one pages of the text<sup>3</sup>, and so represents a substantial slice of narrative. "We're off at last," says Frodo as it starts and indeed the preliminaries have taken up a long time, though necessarily so, Gandalf's exposition having set the tone and the entire agenda of all that is to follow. (The third element in the book's structure, of course, is that of exposition and discussion, as with Gandalf's narration, or with the Council of Elrond, but that is not our concern here.)

The delayed beginning of the principal narrative, with such an extended preparation preceding it, may help to explain the difficulty some people have, coming to *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time, in getting started at all. One has sometimes recommended such people to start some way into the book, and to return to the beginning subsequently.

The main narrative, as Frodo and the others leave Bag End, starts very quietly and simply. It is notable that four pages go by before any out-of-the-way event occurs. Tolkien takes his time over describing the walk, the view back over Hobbiton in its valley, the night under the fir tree, and so on, without the least feeling of hurry or urgency. The early drafts of the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*, published in volume VI of *The History of Middle-earth*, convey precisely this sense that the progress of the early stages of the journey is expanding into a far greater timescale than anything in *The Hobbit*. Perhaps it is this that first leads Tolkien to suspect that what he is now engaged on is something vastly different from a simple Hobbit Mark II. The disparity between the new, extended timescale and the crowded incidents of the first chapter may help to explain why the opening had to be redrafted so many times.

The first appearance of a Black Rider disturbs and unsettles the hobbits, but disturbs the reader even more. Two pages later the Rider appears again and the hobbits then fall in with a party of Elves with Gildor, who drops alarming information that the Riders are servants of the Enemy, but refuses to say more. We have now been effectively introduced to Tolkien's technique of creating increasing tension as the narrative proceeds by turning the screw. His quietly descriptive way of dealing with incidents of travel itself is ideally suited for this purpose. There is no hint of literary artifice about his descriptive writing; one can imagine him as actually present to report on the hobbits' travels from day to day, padding along behind them with notebook and camera at the ready. The appearances, and the behaviour of the Rider,

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or Riders, are alarming just because of the normality of the setting in which their appearances take place, a point perfectly illustrated by the passage describing the hobbit's descent of the steep bank to reach a stream, after their night with the Elves, when they turn and see a Rider standing on the skyline above them. The hobbits continue their journey, still in the same state of apparent unconcern as though they were just out for a day's ramble ("a hobbit walking-party," as Gandalf later puts it), and are brought up short again, when they hear the answering cries of two Riders from two unseen points, nearer and further away. Tolkien's theatrical sense is spot-on here, much more so than that of the producer of the BBC radio serial, who missed the dramatic pause after the second cry.

This episode has given the screw another and sharper turn. The hobbits by now are genuinely scared, but their alarm still possibly falls short of the reader's. Tolkien continues in his straightforward narrative mode, as the journey goes forward to Maggot's farm and finally to Crickhollow, but the tension grows further with two more varied appearances of a Rider. The first one introduces actual words, but rather subtly, only in indirect speech as reported by Farmer Maggot, and the second, seen across the Brandywine river - the hobbits of course know nothing of the Rider's inability to cross water. The extent to which everyone's nerves have been stretched makes itself evident in the fright caused by the sound of Merry's approach on pony back; the sense of relief at his appearance is very short lived.

The climax to which all of this has been leading duly arrives, but turns out to be, not a confrontation with a Rider, or Riders - none of the hobbits are in the least degree ready for that - but the revelation of Frodo's friends' awareness of the purpose of his quest and of the appalling danger that it represents, and of their standing shoulder to shoulder with him. The effect produced is that of a great release of tension, and crisis passed: "I have dreaded this evening," as Frodo says; it is the result of all the long-drawn out preparation and accumulation of tension over the previous thirty-odd pages. It is as though the first supporting pillar of the construction of the whole book has now been set in place.

The first journey, then, displays, as clearly as any of those that are to follow, Tolkien's structural and narrative method. Not all of those to come are going to be equally prominent or significant, however, and there now follow a pair of intermediate ones, in both of which the hobbits, still quite inexperienced in the ways of the wide world, get themselves into serious trouble, and have to be rescued by Tom Bombadil. (This represents very much the same sort of character-developing process as takes place in *The Hobbit*, where Bilbo, largely a passive participant in the early stages, grows into maturity and independence later on). The Tom Bombadil digression (as some feel it to be) is nevertheless a valuable episode, or pair of episodes, in that it keeps the hobbits well away from the Riders, while they are still quite unprepared to face them.

All the same Tolkien is in no hurry. The journey through the Old Forest, the midday halt, and the sunlit late afternoon by the Witherwindle are all fully realised in a straightforwardly descriptive mode, and the leisurely pace is reflected in the behaviour of the hobbits themselves, who waste a lot of the middle of the day on the Barrow-downs and thus become entangled in the clutches of the Barrow-wight. These two

intermediate journeys therefore usefully demonstrate how far the hobbits are in need of experience and training, a point further underlined by the injudicious antics in which they indulge after they reach Bree itself, ("after all the absurd things you have done since you left home" as Gandalf drily comments as soon as he has the opportunity). They do, anyway, acquire a guide, Strider, without whose presence they would no doubt have stumbled into even worse disaster than the encounter at Weathertop.

The next journey, from Bree to the point where the Riders are overwhelmed at the Ford of Bruinen, is organised rather like an extended 'first act finale'. Try reading it aloud; you can almost hear the swish of the curtain falling as Frodo lapses into unconsciousness at the end.<sup>†</sup> It is built round two action climaxes, the first of which discharges much, but not quite all, of the accumulated tension of the preceding pages, which can then build up to an even higher level before curtain-fall. The action passages, though, are in themselves quite brief and the special interest in the present connection lies in the way they are prepared. Typical of this is the little episode of the distant flashes seen by Strider and Frodo from the direction of Weathertop two days before they reach the hills; unexplained until much later, this has an effect quite out of proportion to its brevity and apparent insignificance, the effect of course reinforced by the indications of burning later discovered on the summit of Weathertop itself.

The whole of the following section, set in Rivendell, and comprising the Council of Elrond, apart from its importance as regards the underlying argument and developing plot structure of *The Lord of the Rings*, provides necessary relaxation at the beginning and an intermission before the next great journey; it is of course constructed to lead to its own climax as Frodo undertakes to transport the Ring to its destruction.

The journey that follows is a huge section of some 52 pages<sup>†</sup>, which ends with a tremendous dramatic crisis greater than anything that has been experienced so far, and is succeeded by a slow dying fall, beside the east gate of Moria. Read aloud, it can only be crammed into a single evening with difficulty; it is well worth trying.

The remarkable thing about it from our present point of view is the method by which Tolkien achieves its huge build-up of tension. If the incidents that it contains are examined, it can be seen that, not only are they evenly spaced out along the way, but that they are placed in ascending order of importance (and frightfulness). The overflight of the *crebain* is a mild disturbance - the atmosphere becomes slightly, but perceptibly tense. The snowstorm on Caradhras, although the party is not attacked by any overt enemy other than the weather, is more long-drawn-out; the atmosphere of unease is greatly intensified, and the hand of the Enemy is felt to be at work, "his hand has grown long indeed" as Gandalf says. Then they are attacked by wolves at night, although Gandalf repels the attack without too much difficulty. As the party prepares to enter the Mines of Moria they are attacked by the 'Watcher in the Water', emerging from the lake behind them. This is a far nastier experience than the attack by the wolves has been, and it is not surprising that everyone needs a good stiff drink afterwards, just as any member of The Tolkien Society would do in a similar situation. Actual fighting occurs, for the first time in *The Lord of the Rings*, with the assault by orcs on the chamber of Mazarbul, and the party's

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<sup>†</sup>The two chapters concerned run to 40 pages (pp 188-227); the actual journey starts five pages into the first chapter. I have found 16 pages per hour to represent an average reading pace aloud: the journey should thus take about two hours.



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flight from it. The sequence reaches its peak with the Balrog's appearance, the confrontation with Gandalf on the bridge of Khazad-dûm, and Gandalf's fall. Once again an apparently minor episode by the way, Pippin's stone dropped down the well in Moria, is used by Tolkien to create consequences on a much wider scale - an additional turn of the screw. It sets up a background rhythm that persists right to the end of the whole section, as the very Beethovenish disappearing drumbeats fade away as the curtain falls very slowly this time, on the sight of the Company mourning their leader's loss by Moria east gate.

The following journey, an intermediate one, provides the narrative with what it now needs, a passage of winding down, followed by a period of complete relaxation. (To continue with the analogy with 'real' warfare, a soldier requires periods of leave from time to time if he is to function efficiently). The earlier stages of the journey are still marked by a certain disquiet, evident in Gollum's approach to the flet, and the reported passage of the orcs across the stream north of Lorien. Once Lothlórien is reached the passage of time is entirely suspended.

This process of alternately raising and lowering tension in

relation to the passage of time is itself, of course, an important aspect of structure in *The Lord of the Rings*. Time begins to run again when the Company departs from Lothlórien, and the last journey in *The Fellowship of the Ring* starts.

As the party makes its way down Anduin tension gradually re-asserts itself. Tolkien mostly confines himself to describing the scenery on either bank of the river, but this in itself becomes steadily more impressive until the Argonath and the passage of the narrows to Nen Hithoel are reached. Incidents along the journey, Sam's awareness of Gollum trailing the boat's progress, and the exchange of fire across the river with Legolas' direct hit on the Nazgûl's undercarriage, contribute to the reader's sense of impending crisis. Ostensibly, this will be the dramatic sequence of events accompanying the breaking of the Fellowship and the death of Boromir. In reality it will be a personal one, like that which brought the first journey to its climax, but one of much greater importance - Frodo's decision to travel on to Mordor alone, if need be, followed by Samwise's to accompany him.\* The reader's understanding of the crucial nature of this decision is enhanced by the long build-up that has

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\*The events themselves are consequently kept offstage.



*The hobbits reach the Withywindle*

*John Ellison*

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preceded it; Frodo has been nerving himself to face the decision since the departure from Lothlórien, and Sam, half unconsciously, has been sharing his struggle.

Following the breaking of the Fellowship, with the third book, the first half of *The Two Towers*, the whole shape of the narrative changes. Or rather, it splits into two contrasting modes: the new one dominates the third book, ending as Gandalf rides away with Pippin at speed to Minas Tirith. Speed and variety of pace are now to be the keynotes; the various journeys overlap each other and reflect the increased pace of outside events. There are eight journeys in all, but the first and the last two, respectively those of The Three Hunters, Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli, and of Merry and Pippin with Saruman's orcs, take place in parallel, and at the fastest possible pace, emphasised by the moments of stasis occurring at the halts during them.

Two others are dramatically cut off in mid-stream, leaving the reader, as it were suspended in the air. These have the effect of two further variants of the curtain fall endings that have appeared in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Description of place and scene is still important, but tends to happen much more by the way: it continues its role of making the narrative vivid, but there is no longer the scope for employing it to build-up long periods of accumulating tension, as was the case in the earlier books. The proportion of action, discussion and incident, in relation to the space given over to the journeys themselves, is much greater than anywhere in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

Curiously enough, the greatly increased pace of the narrative in the third book, and the more rapid sequence of events, does not result in the reader's sense of the developing shape of the whole work being lost. However important and interesting the content of Book III - the treachery of Saruman, the separate fortunes of Merry and Pippin and their meeting with Treebeard, the defence of Helm's Deep and the destruction of Isengard - all of these are still felt to be secondary to the central issue at stake - the slow, agonising progress of the Ring towards the fires of Orodruin. So it is with a sense both of shock and recognition that we return to Frodo and Samwise, now lost in the trackless hills of the Eryn Mui, and find ourselves plunged back into the original mode; journeying by slow and painful stages as the screw is slowly being turned once more. From this point to the hobbits' first sighting of Gollum descending the cliff-face at the end of the hill is a passage of ten pages. Is all this descriptive material relating to their passage through and escape from the hills really necessary? - one can imagine the uncommitted reader asking, when it is quite plain that the vital encounter is just about to happen. Of course, Tolkien needs the whole of it, these pages determining the scale of the whole of the fourth book, and setting a tone and a mood that will pervade the longest of all the journeys in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The whole of the fourth book might be thought of as representing one single journey, but divided into two sections with an interlude separating them, and mounting at the end to the greatest crisis in *The Lord of the Rings* so far, with the shattering series of events ending with the slamming of the rear entrance gate of Cirith Ungol with Samwise left apparently powerless outside. Each phase is built round a major scene of one person's reflection expressed as dialogue, in which an alternative choice is faced and taken; first of all Gollum's to lead the others on to Morgul Vale, and later on Samwise's, to take the Ring and to continue with the apparently hopeless quest on his own. (These

noticeable symmetries of event and incident are features of both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* itself, and themselves represent a notable aspect of the structure of each book.) At the climax of the first phase of the journey, as the three halt within sight of the Black Gate, the tension that has built up steadily through the passage of the Dead Marshes has reached a tremendously high level, but when they leave the Gate behind and move into Ithilien it drains away again, and the sequence of events and dialogue which involves the appearance of the Gondorians under Faramir, the stay at Henneth Annûn, and the episode of the Forbidden Pool, important as they are in themselves, do also provide relief and contrast, the value of which to the total scheme is immediately apparent when it is over and the journey restarts.

Many people may agree that Book Four contains the finest of all of Tolkien's descriptive writing in *The Lord of the Rings*. At the same time, if it is compared with the descriptive writing characteristic of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, a marked development of style becomes evident; the range of tone is much wider. That is to say, the range between the straightforwardly factual reporter's tone which was so convincing previously, and which still recurs (Tolkien has his feet still firmly on the ground) and these passages where the tone is elevated or emphasised. The daybreak revealing the slag-mounds of the Morannon, or the vision of Minas Morgul with its black windows looking into nothingness, for instance, are typical of the latter. In the passages describing the natural beauties of Ithilien there is a poetically lyrical tone that has not been in evidence previously, despite Tolkien's delight and skill, evident from the beginning, in the description of land and landscape. At the same time the note of underlying realism persists, and the longer the journey continues the more he continues to remind us of the basic essentials of life. The frequent meals, or halts for sustenance, that punctuate the narrative have come in for a certain amount of derision, but in a structural sense they perform a most important task. They highlight the reality underlying the increasingly bizarre and oppressive setting, and therefore one's sense of ever-present danger, and they mark out the passage of time, which contributes increasingly to rising tension and the turning of the screw. Book Four contains ten references to meals or food taken en route, and such references seem to increase in numbers as the hobbits' ordeal begins to seem more and more one of sheer physical endurance.

We first of all, says Tolkien at the start of Book Five, return to the fortunes of battle in the West. And with it we also return to the alternative mode characteristic of Book Three, as we take up Gandalf's journey with Pippin to Minas Tirith just where we left it. The furious haste of their progress comes with a similar sense of surprise and recognition as that produced by the corresponding transition back to the slow tempo of Frodo's and Sam's progress at the start of the previous Book. Haste becomes an all-important consideration in the narrative as events adapt to the pattern of a race against time. There are some half-dozen journeys contained in the fifth Book, the final one being the army's march from Minas Tirith to the final battle before the Black Gate. The two most prominent ones, that by way of the Paths of the Dead to Erech, and finally to Pelargir, and the Ride of the Rohirrim from Dunharrow, are both involved in the race, made in desperate haste in the extremity of the situation. Descriptive detail comes, if



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it comes at all, in vivid flashes; action and incident, culminating in the Battle of the Pelennor and Denethor's madness and suicide, occupy the stage for most of the time. The final march of the host, ending with the confrontation with the Mouth of Sauron and the last, hopeless battle, builds up quickly to a brief climax, cut off in midstream in the same fashion as the ending of the third Book.

One more journey is left before the final denouement and the crisis for which all the previous ones have been a preparation. The last progress of Frodo and Samwise, from Cirith Ungol to the Sammath Naur, has turned into a struggle for bare existence, by ever more gradual stages, and dominated by the physical necessity of food and water; its position as the final journey to the Ring's destruction, lends it as much the significance of a race against time, as the desperate haste of the principal journeys in the preceding Book has done in relation to them. Contrasting episodes, the overheard quarrel of two orcs, or their temporary involvement with the marching column of orcs and their escape from it, only underlines the agonising slowness of the hobbits' progress as a whole. By now it seems that one can distinguish a vast underlying pattern in all this sequence of journeys, back to the original departure from the Shire and Hobbiton.

Frodo's journey, with his Companions, and then with Samwise only, is a vast main theme, with two variations, expanding with the utmost spaciousness at a broad, increasingly halting pace. It alternates with two contrasting episodes at a much faster tempo, the second of which is again a variation of the first: in the two episodes, contained in the third and fifth Books, the two principal journeyers, Frodo and Samwise, who have the longest road, take no part. (This pattern has parallels in other spheres, notably in music; for instance, in several of the slow movements of Beethoven's final period). Tolkien, naturally, could hardly have consciously intended such a scheme, or planned it in advance; that he possessed such an intuitive sense of formal design on the largest scale is one way in which his genius makes itself felt, and helps to explain why he outshines all his imitators. And so the grand design completes itself in a *Götterdämmerung* of fire and rainstorm, a cleansing and changing of the world through an ordeal of fire and water, corresponding to the personal ordeal of fire and water undergone by Gandalf in Moria.

Barad-dûr fallen and Sauron passed away, the epilogue and the return journey are left. There are three separate journeys (four if Bree to Brandywine Bridge ranks as a separate one), but these, unlike their predecessors, do little more than gradually restore the mood and scale of the opening, and so allow the hobbits to re-enter their own world (though it's not quite the world they expected). They provide an opportunity for the remainder of the 'cast' to leave the stage one after another; of the whole company that leaves Minas Tirith as the funeral train of Theoden, Eomer and the Riders remain behind at Edoras; Aragorn leaves the party west of the Gap of Rohan; Celeborn and Galadriel go their separate way over the Redhorn and so on until the hobbits alone are left to complete the journey

back again. There is no need for Tolkien to describe the journeys themselves, or the lands through which the travellers pass, (except for the odd reminiscence, like the glimpse of Weathertop in the rain as Frodo averts his eyes), or to break the journey up with incidents along the road, other than the brief falling-in with Saruman before the latter turns his steps towards the Shire.

The last journey and the ending; Frodo departs from the Shire and journeys with Bilbo and the Elves to the Havens; the return of the other Hobbits to their homes comes as a pendant. The end of the connecting thread running through the whole work is a double-branched one, that in conclusion unites the structure of *The Lord of the Rings* and its symbolism in one. Frodo's gradual and increasingly painful progress throughout his journey, (and in their separate ways those of his friends) stands for his and man's progress through life to maturity and wisdom, and his passage into the life to come; the return of the others to the Shire stands no less for the work's other great themes of fellowship and home. Tolkien in this way places himself firmly among the last of the Romantics, for nothing is more characteristic of Romanticism, in art, literature and music, than its tendency to identify physical appearances, the sights and sounds of Nature or the experience and concomitants of a journey, with the psychological or spiritual states which accompany them, and with which they are held to correspond. The image of a journey considered in this sense as a spiritual as well as a material pilgrimage, is a concept entirely typical of the Romantic age, nowhere better seen than in Schubert's great song cycle *Die Winterreise*, (The Winter Journey). Schubert's songs, and others of the nineteenth-century treasury of the German *Lied*, and the romantic poems that he and others set to music, constantly return to the theme of travel considered in this way. The *Traveller*, or *Wanderer*, becomes a generally understood symbol of the *Outsider*, the one set apart from society. This is very much the fate of Frodo (and also of Bilbo before him).

This is something that sets Tolkien quite apart from his many imitators; as does his use of 'the Journey' as the structural foundation and connecting thread of his tale. However conscientiously his successors have sought to re-employ the externals of his world, the many journeyings in their works do not seem to do much more than to provide a means of transporting the characters from one location to another. This is one means by which Tolkien's infinitely greater originality and creative power can be demonstrated.

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## References

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