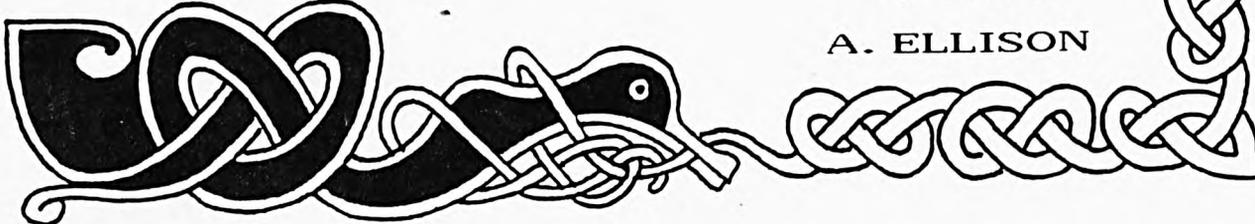




The Structure
of
The Hobbit

by JOHN
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he subject-matter of this paper involves a little preliminary explanation of a personal nature. As certain fellow-members of the Tolkien Society are only too well aware, I recently indulged myself with a light-hearted retelling of the adventures of Bilbo Baggins, viewed as perhaps they might have been through the eyes of a writer very different from J.R.R. Tolkien, but, like him, possessed of a unique individuality.¹ A frivolous occupation. Frivolity, though, may lead on to serious consequences and conclusions, independent of any satisfaction that it might give to its perpetrator. I did not expect the tale in question, at the time I was misguided enough to embark on it, to assume anything like the scale it subsequently did. It "grew in the telling", if I may be allowed an irreverent comparison,

and of course the reason for its doing so lay in the mastery and economy with which the original tale is told. Tolkien displays these attributes in his transitions to an even greater degree, perhaps, than in his set pieces, and the transitions could neither be shortened nor evaded. They therefore presented the strongest obstacle to the transmutation of the tale into an alternative mode, and made expansion inevitable, the more so by degrees as the travesty proceeded.

Thus far, there is nothing original or new about my or anyone else's emphasizing the formal and structural qualities evident in the way in which Tolkien sets forth the story of The Hobbit. The train of thought that ultimately led to this paper started with a conversation I had with a friend of mine. He had recently, as he said, been re-reading The Hobbit as a consequence of his having been co-opted into a proposed amateur musical presentation of it. It had occurred to him, he continued, that, despite its qualities, it contained a considerable amount of incident that appeared repetitious. The instance he cited was the appearance of the Dwarves, introduced by Gandalf in batches at Beorn's hall, which to him seemed to represent little more than a repetition of their arrival at Bag End for the "unexpected Party". Such an illustration was very much to the point, and stifled my immediate impulse to dismiss the whole argument out of hand. Then a possible means of reconciling the apparent conflict between the nature of my friend's experience and the nature of mine suggested itself. It occurred to me that what he had thought of as "repetition", might really exist as a formal and structural element in the way the story is told. That is to say, it could operate in the same sort of way as "recapitulation", in the sense of this word as it is applied to form in music. What follows represents the outcome of an attempt to think about the structure of The Hobbit along these lines.

The word "recapitulation", as applied to music, is mainly used in connection with what is called "sonata-form", or "classical-first-movement form", meaning, broadly speaking, the plan on which most of the principal movements of classical symphonies, sonatas, or quartets, and so forth, are constructed. That is to say, the musical ideas, tunes, or motives which are to constitute the subject-matter are first of all stated or presented as "the exposition". They

are then varied, fragmented, combined or reshaped in one way or another ("the development"), and at the third stage of the argument, reappear more or less in their original form and sequence ("the recapitulation"). In the new and altered context of their reappearance they now assume fresh significance. Anything that remains to be said, by way of bringing the whole argument to a conclusion or climax, is presented in the last section, the "coda". I do not intend to suggest that the structure of The Hobbit displays, or is based, on this particular pattern as such². However, the elements of "exposition", or what, for a reason to be explained shortly, I would prefer to call "statement", and of "recapitulation", which likewise I shall call "counter-statement", are, I believe, crucial.

The present submission is that the "structure", of The Hobbit falls in three sections; the narrative to the point where the party arrives at the Carrock, transported there by the Eagles; the further course of the narrative as far as the death of Smaug; and the final part of the book, which treats of the outcome of the quest and its aftermath in terms of what one might call, "the politics of Middle-earth". The crisis represented by the Battle of the Five Armies provides the chief climax of the whole story, and is then succeeded by an epilogue in which all the previous tension is dissolved.

The special feature of this scheme, from our present viewpoint, is that the second section, the "counterstatement", appears to proceed through a series of reminiscences, or mirror-images, of events and incidents in the first section. The parallelism cited above is one of these. This is not to say that the second section is a deliberately constructed counterpart of the first: the "reminiscences", do not all recur in the same order, and the later events or incidents do not simply reflect events or incidents that happened the first time around: they also represent a development of them, perhaps also a commentary on them as well. To return to the analogy with musical form, this part of the book combines the function of a "recapitulation", of the first part of the book with that of a "development", of it. The final part of the book then functions as a "coda", bringing a peroration in which all the previous events attain a fresh significance. There is, as it happens, one specific instance where musical form and architecture are organised on this kind of pattern: the mature symphonies of Anton Bruckner. I mention it here only because I have borrowed the terminology of "statement", "counterstatement", and "coda", from this source; in fact, from the standard analytical monograph on the Bruckner symphonies³.

In order to make the nature and extent of the "reminiscences", clear, I will have to begin by summarizing the events and incidents of the first part. For ease of reference, I will do this schematically, as follows:

Phase I. The introduction and the preparations for the quest.

- (a). Gandalf appears at Bag End, and tells Bilbo that he intends to send him on an adventure.
- (b). The dwarves arrive, in batches, at Bag End.
- (c). The "unexpected party". Gandalf, and the dwarves, enjoy Bilbo's hospitality.
- (d). Plans are made for the quest, and for the recovery of the treasure stolen by Smaug: Bilbo's place in them is allotted.

Phase II. The journey as far as Rivendell.

- (a). The journey begins: straightforward at first, and passing through hospitable country.
- (b). It continues through more difficult and in now inhospitable country, in bad weather. Gandalf disappears.
- (c). (i). Bilbo finds himself on his own for the first time, and encounters the trolls. He tries to pick the pocket of one of them, and is caught.
- (c). (ii). The dwarves become involved, and are captured and trussed up. Both them and Bilbo are planned by the trolls to provide their next meal.
- (c). (iii). The trolls, misled by an outside "voice", (Gandalf's), are induced to fight each other, and forget about the passage of time. They become stone at sunrise. The party is rescued. They collect weapons and stores from the trolls' cave.

Phase III. Arrival at, and departure from, Rivendell.

- (a). The whole party, with Gandalf, who has reappeared with the end of the trolls, reaches Rivendell, and recuperates. Preparations are made for the next stage, with the advice and assistance of Elrond.
- (b). The party sets out from Rivendell, and, as it makes its way into the mountains, the atmosphere becomes increasingly sombre. Storm. The discovery of a cave in which the party all shelter from the storm, and sleep. They are captured by goblins.

Phase IV. This is an extended subterranean episode, the main elements of which are as follows:

- (a). The confrontation with goblins, in particular with the Great Goblin, their chief.
- (b). The fight with the goblins, and the slaying of the Great Goblin.
- (c). Bilbo becomes separated from the rest of the party, and, alone, wanders in the goblin-tunnels.
- (d). He picks up the ring, without knowing what he has found.
- (e). Bilbo's encounter with Gollum, with the "riddle-game". This is the kernel of this whole "phase". Here a complication arises, because there are "early", and "late", versions of this episode. However, the structural feature of both versions is that they end with Bilbo's having acquired the knowledge of what the ring is, and what its powers are, and this knowledge will have an important effect on the later development of the story. The ring's wider significance, and the later motivation, Bilbo's pity for Gollum, and Gollum's last desperate curse, "Baggins! We hates it for ever!", belong, not to The Hobbit as a self-sufficient whole, but to the whole history of "The War of the Ring", and to The Hobbit as part of that history.
- (f). Bilbo eludes the goblin guards, and escapes from the tunnels.

Phase V.

- (a). Bilbo rejoins Gandalf and the dwarves, and the party continues its journey on the other side of the Misty Mountains.
- (b). Wolves, followed by goblins, who propose to attack the homes of Men living close to the Mountains, surround the party as it takes refuge in the tree-tops. The goblins set fire to the surrounding forest so as to encircle it.
- (c). The party is rescued from the tree-tops by Eagles, who provide it with shelter for the night. The next morning the Eagles transport everyone to a place from which they can continue their journey.

At this point the "Statement", ends. Gandalf marks its conclusion quite specifically: "I always meant to see you all safe (if possible) over the mountains, and now by good management and good luck I have done it." He goes on to say that he has other pressing business to attend to, but that he may "look in", on the adventure, "before it is all over". This will be in the "coda", as it turns out. The next stage of the narrative will not, then, otherwise than at the very beginning, have Gandalf as one of the principals. The "reminiscences", or "reflections", of events and incidents in the "Statement", will operate in the changed conditions of his absence. Bilbo and the others will have learnt from their earlier experiences, or should have done, and should be prepared to fight the new series of battles on their own.

The first section of the "Counter-statement", which corresponds to Phase I of the earlier narrative, is the arrival and sojourn at Beorn's house. It begins, as the earlier one did, with remarks by Gandalf, addressed to Bilbo principally, although not exclusively this time. The party then reaches Beorn's house, and is introduced to him in batches. (This was the instance of "repetition", to which my attention was originally drawn, as referred to above, and which prompted the entire enquiry). The effect of "reminiscence", or "recapitulation", is strengthened by Beorn's remark. "I am in for a party, it seems," reviving a memory of the "unexpected party". At Bag End the dwarves had made music, and had begun to sing as the fire died down, and there is a similar incident here: "the dwarves were sitting cross-legged on the floor, and presently they began to sing." The verses of their song

"The wind was on the withered heath", echo those of their song (in the same metre), in the earlier scene. This particular verse-form is to recur, once more, at a similar introductory stage of the last section of the book, the "Coda", in the present terminology. The second recurrence of the form greatly intensifies one's sense of these reminiscences as defining pivotal points in a structure.

Beorn, as the party's stay comes to an end, provides provisions for the next stage of its journey, and transport for it as far as the edge of Mirkwood, and also gives advice on perils that lie ahead. This could perhaps be thought of as a reflection, very much condensed, of the "planning session", at Bag End; or of the assistance and provisioning the party received at Rivendell. The next stage, corresponding to the earlier Phase II, opens, as that did, with a straightforward and trouble-free journey, till the eaves of Mirkwood are reached. The difficult and unpleasant path through Mirkwood follows, as the difficult and unpleasant route through the troll-country had previously done. The party again temporarily, "loses", one of its members, with Bombur's accident and lapse into unconsciousness, although this particular comparison is perhaps far-fetched, and is probably best regarded as fortuitous. The succeeding group of incidents, however, offers a very clear series of parallels with the earlier encounter with the trolls.

Each time, the "cue", is given by a light shining among trees, which attracts the party's attention, and turns out to betoken a meal or feasting in progress. Each time, likewise, Bilbo becomes separated from the rest of the party, and finds himself acting on his own initiative. He discovers the spiders, as before the trolls; the dwarves are involved again, and for a second time are imprisoned or rendered helpless. Once again, the scene reaches its climax in a *mélée*, in the fight with, and pursuit of, the spiders, (although, of course, on the earlier occasion the trolls had been induced to fight each other). The differences between the two groups of incidents are as important as the similarities; to go back to our original analogy, this passage is a "development", of the earlier one, as well as a "recapitulation", of it. The earlier one features Bilbo's first, unsuccessful, attempt at "burglary". Now, however, he slays the spider which is trying to attack him, and, in consequence, experiences altogether new sensations of courage and purposefulness. He acts on his own to release the dwarves from their predicament, and the final outcome, the defeat and discomfiture of the spiders, is due to his ingenuity and resourcefulness, instead of being an eleventh-hour rescue operation, courtesy of Gandalf. It is worth noting, incidentally, that the device he adopts with the aid of the ring, namely an external "voice", used to decoy the spiders away from their intended prey, is similar to the one Gandalf employed to distract the trolls.

So far, the order of events in the "Counter-statement", has followed that in the "Statement", quite closely. Just as with "recapitulation", in music, however, motives and incidents do not necessarily have to recur in the same order, or to reappear *in toto*. Too close a correspondence would clearly have been self-defeating, and might have suggested to the author's conscious mind that he was repeating himself. (I will return a little later to the question of how far, if at all, any of this could have been the result of deliberate planning on Tolkien's part). Our original Phase III, the sojourn at Rivendell and the subsequent departure, does not have a counterpart at this point, but one later on. The next sequence of events, concluding with Bilbo's exit from the Elvenking's halls, together with the embarrelled dwarves, does all the same contain several echoes of "the Statement". The capture of the sleeping dwarves, minus Thorin, by the Woodelves, brings a distinct reminiscence of the earlier capture of the party in the mountains. Thorin and the other dwarves are separately interrogated by the Elvenking, who imprisons them because they refuse to tell him why they are passing through his territory. The Great Goblin had earlier ordered everyone to be imprisoned because, after the discovery of the sword Orcrist, he rejected Thorin's explanation of the purpose of the party's journey through the mountains. Bilbo, separated from the rest of the party, wanders footloose in the Elvenking's halls, as he had previously wandered in the goblin-tunnels. Finally a rescue is achieved by way of an exotic and uncomfortable means of transport to a place from which the quest can be continued. The Eagles earlier rescued the whole party from its encirclement and transported it to such a place at the close of "the Statement". The altered and independent role of Bilbo is now given an ironic emphasis

He had been a distinctly undignified "passenger", himself the first time around, but he now turns the tables, and devises a scheme for the dwarves' release which involves them in having to undergo quite a trying travel experience. Is it possible, perhaps, to detect a suggestion of "Schadenfreude", about his remarks to Thorin when the latter emerges from his barrel on arriving at Laketown? It would be quite understandable if it was.

The section that now follows corresponds, in general terms, to the original "Phase III", arrival at and departure from Rivendell, and the rest in between. The party remains in Laketown for several days, occupied in feasting and recovering its morale generally, and, when it leaves, it is reprovisioned and provided with fresh transport. The atmosphere, as before, becomes steadily more tense and ominous as the journey proceeds. The whole passage represents a large expansion, with varied new incidents, of the original "III(b)", but again it ends with a halt being called, and the discovery of the entrance of what turns out to be a subterranean passage leading downward; the Misty Mountains/the Lonely Mountain itself. Without straining the comparison by trying to make details correspond, one can note that the important motive of Thrór's map, and the moon-runes on it, which had been introduced originally in "Phase III", is now recalled and developed, reaching fulfilment in the discovery and opening of the secret entrance.

An extended "subterranean", episode ensues, and reflects its forerunner. The kernel of it, as before, is a confrontation between Bilbo and an opponent: Gollum/Smaug. The previous one was largely taken up with the riddle-contest, and the same motive could obviously not have been used a second time without creating a plain sense of "déjà vu". Nevertheless it is still present, implied in the device Bilbo employs to conceal his identity: "no dragon can resist the fascination of riddling talk, and of wasting time trying to understand it." Bilbo had revealed his real name last time around, but now has the foresight to conceal it. Each confrontation is preceded by a taking by Bilbo of a particular item, whose disappearance is subsequently noticed and resented, by the other party to the dialogue. Each dialogue ends with the hobbit in possession of information of crucial importance for determining the further course of events: the power of the ring to confer invisibility; the "weak spot in the old Worm's diamond waistcoat". In both subterranean episodes the remainder of the party disappears to the sidelines but is involved in a burst of activity which precedes the main material of the episode: the fight with the goblins and the flight from their cave, in the first episode; the flight back into the tunnel from the dragon awakened to fury by the loss of a cup, in the second.

The last section of the "Counter-statement", is the descent of Smaug on Laketown; previously wolves and goblins had made a rendez-vous as a preliminary to an intended descent on the homes of Men closest to the mountains. The imagery of fire recurs; Laketown is set on fire by Smaug, mirroring the fire set in the forest by "the goblins encircling the fugitives in the trees. The "Counter-statement", then concludes dramatically with Smaug's death at the hands of Bard, in a way quite different from its predecessor's. Possibly the death of the Great Goblin can be thought of as a kind of counterpart, but clearly, if both "Statement", and "Counter-statement", ended in the same way, the reader would be left with a sense of conscious repetition deliberately planned.

The significance of all the correspondences and similarities I have tried to trace does not lie in assuming that Tolkien planned them himself, or deliberately patterned the second part of the book on the model of the first. There is no way in which anyone can be sure, of course, but most people, I imagine, will think any such supposition, to say the least, highly unlikely. It would seem equally unlikely that he was particularly aware of them himself, and probably he would not have attached any great importance to the matter if it had occurred to or been pointed out to him. Such "reminiscences", or "symmetries", presumably arose instinctively through the workings of creative imagination. What we do know about Tolkien's particular way of telling a story suggests that it would have been quite at variance with it for him to have introduced them intentionally. The interesting thing about them is the feeling of formal and structural balance they set up in the mind of the reader, however unconsciously. At the same time the variations and developments which are introduced the second time around, the altered order of certain incidents, and the changes of emphasis which result, mean that

the old terrain is always being viewed in a fresh light, as one does with recapitulated material in a sonata or a symphony. The two parts are satisfyingly similar, and satisfyingly different. Above all, the scheme highlights, effectively and subtly, Bilbo's own development away from the unwilling but passively acquiescent spirit in which he begins his adventures, to the courage, enterprise, and ingenuity he discovers in himself before they are over. If he had not had the ring available to assist him from near the half-way stage, the contrast might indeed have seemed a little too obviously contrived. Well might the author have thought, years later, that the passages in which he appears to intervene and "explain", Bilbo to the reader, were not really needed.

It may be a coincidence, but if so it is rather a remarkable one, that the end of the "Counter-statement", Smaug's death, corresponds to the point at which, according to Humphrey Carpenter⁵, Tolkien broke off from writing the original MS. of *The Hobbit*, only to take it up again several years later when the prospect of publication arose. It almost seems that he must have felt, unconsciously, that he had already completed something possessing an individual formal unity of its own. In the final section of the story he was faced with the task of improving it, and bringing the whole tale to a larger issue than anything covered previously. He did this by placing the existing story in a newer and wider dimension.

Up to the time of Smaug's assault on Laketown, and of his destruction, together with that of the town itself, the story had proceeded on the assumption that the quest for the treasure is simply a private issue between Thorin and the dwarves on the one hand and Smaug on the other. Their struggle to regain their lost patrimony is no one else in Middle-earth's business, not even Bilbo's; he has become involved in it, if not by chance, at least without any interest of his own in the affair. "If you want to go on with this silly adventure," as he says at one point, "it's yours after all and not mine." Gandalf, at the Carrock, says the same thing, in announcing his intention of leaving the party to carry on the quest without him; "after all," he adds, "this is really not my adventure." The interesting thing is that, as a result of the publication of Gandalf's personal behind-the-scenes account of how, with Thorin, he planned matters in advance⁶, we now know this last remark not to be true. It was, in reality, very much Gandalf's adventure, as well as Thorin's with the other dwarves, and had been so ever since his "chance-meeting", with Thorin near Bree, months before the adventure was actually launched. The third part of the story, then, the "Coda", represents a decisive shift in the author's whole outlook. The emphasis is now placed on the public, Middle-earth wide consequences of all that has taken place up to now. The new motives to be introduced are those of diplomacy and war.

The introduction covers, in barely four pages, the arrival, via Roäc, of news of Smaug's death, and of the despatch of the embassy of Men and Elves to the Mountain, ready to state their claims in regard to the treasure; Thorin's furious reaction, and the summoning of the Dwarves of the Iron Hills to his assistance; and the party's retreat back to the Mountain, and fortifying of the Gate. The sequence of events becomes close-packed: more seems to happen in twenty-odd pages than in the previous hundred, and time seems to accelerate at the approach of crisis. This is the first occasion on which Tolkien accelerates the passage of time in this way, but the "technique", (if it can be called that) is to reappear on a larger scale in *The Lord of the Rings*, and is at its most refined in the final version of the *Narn i Hîn Húrin*, where the complex sequence of events leading to the dénouement is compressed into the span of one night.

As the dwarves await the confrontation with the embassy of Men and Elves, Bilbo now being, as he had been originally, a distinctly unwilling associate, they again begin to sing. Their characteristic song-form, their *leitmotiv* as it has now become, revives memories of its previous appearances at the original "unexpected party", and in Beorn's house. The confrontation takes place the next day, after which, for the last and most important time of all, Bilbo is separated from the rest of the party, forced to act on his own initiative, and charged with the task he has set himself of finding a way out of the situation that has developed around him, solely with the help of his own wits and bargaining ability. He is not left alone on the stage for very long: the other actors reappear in the drama one after the other to take part in the dénouement, the set-piece scene of

battle that provides the structure of *The Hobbit* with its last and greatest climax. Its aftermath leaves a sense of inevitability behind it, as if one had known from the first, without realizing it, that the quest's outcome would be a final great battle of all the forces involved, (in *The Lord of the Rings* the dénouement in Orodruin again produces this ambiguous sense of surprise mixed with recognition of the inevitable). All that remains is for the cast to leave the stage again one by one, and for the epilogue to wind down in a gradual diminuendo, and end the book in the same quiet and conversational tone in which it began.

This was not the last time Tolkien's writing was to reveal underlying formal structures. It is possible to look at *The Lord of the Rings* as one great structure, as a rising progression of climaxes which are related to each other by a process of alternately raising and lowering tension in relation to the passage of time, and the last of which is expected and overwhelming. (This, as it happens, is a major item of comparison between *The Lord of the Rings* and Wagner's "Ring" cycle, though in Tolkien's case the structure is filled out at either end by a prologue and an epilogue). Within this overall shape there are lesser structures: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, for instance, following the prologue, falls into three well-defined "acts", or phases each one of which ends with an extended finale which opens with a departure from a place of rest (Bree/Rivendell/Lothlórien), and builds up through rising tension to a climax at the end. *Of Tuor and His Coming to Gondolin* may officially be classed as an "Unfinished Tale". When it is read aloud, it creates a marvellous sense of formal perfection. It again seems to fall naturally into two extended parts, and, at the end, mounts to its climax, Tuor's entry into Gondolin, with a sense of total finality, as if it had known at the beginning exactly when its last sentence was due. Some intermediate sections of the *Narn i Hîn Húrin* are missing, but that does not too much obscure the complex and highly articulated structure of the whole tale.

The existence of these structures, whatever the state of Tolkien's own awareness of them may have been, may throw light on one very singular aspect of Tolkien's oeuvre, which all lovers of it will at once recognize. This is its compulsive re- and re-readability. It is very difficult and unsafe to make generalizations about the totality of individual experience, but many might agree that this particular quality is not, on the whole, a distinguishing mark of literature, at least of prose literature. However rich and deep the individual reader's experience of any of the great novels may be, for instance, it is a single "once-over", experience, rather than a continuing day-to-day one. You may read, and live through, *Anna Karenina*, say, or *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, twice, or perhaps three times, in a lifetime, but one would guess that, with average persons normally responsive to literature, it would rarely be more than that. It is quite otherwise with regard to music, drama, opera or ballet: the same symphony, play or opera may be heard or seen time after time over the years, without exhausting the listener's or the spectator's experience of it. It may, then, be that the reader's experience of Tolkien is, partly at least, not a literary experience in the strictest sense, but something of a class rather harder to define. In this, there may lie some means of interpreting the equivocal relationship his works seem to bear to literature as a whole.

Notes

1. *The Alternative Hobbit*, originally issued in ten parts in *The Farthing*, #28-35, 37 & 38. (Nan Elmoth Publications). Collected and revised edition issued as "*Stiff Upper Lip, Bilbo!*", (Nan Elmoth, 1987).
2. There have been a few attempts at reproducing musical forms in the shape of literary works, notably a novel (by Anthony Burgess) specifically patterned on Beethoven's Third Symphony (the "Eroica").
3. Robert Simpson. *The Essence of Bruckner*. Gollancz, 1967.
4. However, this particular reminiscence really derives its force from the revision. Gollum, in the early version, had proposed to give the ring to Bilbo, "as a present".
5. Humphrey Carpenter. *J.R.R. Tolkien: a Biography*. George Allen & Unwin (Unwin Hyman) Ltd, 1977, pp. 179-80; Unwin Paperbacks, 1978, pp. 183-4.
6. *The Quest of Erebor*, in *Unfinished Tales*. George Allen & Unwin (Unwin Hyman) Ltd, 1980, pp. 321-36.