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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

When I was writing on English fantasy literature in 1997, I knew nothing of a writer, then living in a terraced house not two hundred yards from me, who had just published the first book of a series that would transform the fantasy genre. I first heard of Harry Potter when in 1998 a colleague told me of a book he had seen called *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, which seemed both attractive and eccentric. I let it pass. I read an excited review, thumbed through a (later) copy and dismissed the book as part of the same mania that had deified Tolkien. I had spent years teaching fantasy to students and in trying to distinguish what was valuable, and I was not easily going to admit another to the canon. But then, one day I sat down and read *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* right through; and was then driven like everyone else to read the next book, and then everything else available. I cannot say I was instantly transformed by the first book, but I came to have a little more respect for the author, and since then this respect has done little but grow. It has now grown to the point where when I recommend the Harry Potter books to academic colleagues, I am seen as just the sort of misguided enthusiast I previously despised.

How did this change come about? Perhaps it can be traced to Little Whinging. I had at first been put off when I read the beginning of *The Philosopher's Stone*, with its cats and owls gathering in suburbia, and the preposterous Uncle Vernon. The account of the letters from Hogwarts that continually bombarded No. 4 Privet Drive, pouring through the door and down the chimney, while Uncle Vernon frenziedly tried to barricade the house, and eventually fled with the family to the safety of a hovel on a rock in a storm-lashed sea, seemed overpitched, an author

trying for a comic effect. My late wife, who was a realist in taste, also thought the whole thing was a desperate attempt to be funny which did not come off.

But when I came back to *The Philosopher's Stone* after reading the other books, I realised that this sort of grotesquerie was a feature only of the first two stories. The first book is actually full of extreme fantasy – a half-giant riding a flying motor-cycle, a shopping-centre for wizards, a murderous troll stopped by a wand pushed up its nose, a savage baby dragon being nursed by a gamekeeper, a herd of philosophical centaurs, a school sport conducted on broomsticks. This idiom continues into the next book, with a flying family car, a backfiring wand, an absurdly vain teacher called Gilderoy Lockhart, and a monstrous Basilisk that has its lair beneath the school.

Thereafter however, the fantastic seems to quieten down, with the rainstorm of the bizarre reduced to a light shower. In *The Prisoner of Azkaban* the exotic objects and creatures are confined to a rather formal Hippogriff, a collection of horrible Dementors that suck all vitality from the soul and a man disguised as a pet rat. The context is more human: Harry's supposed enemy in this book is not a ghoul or a monster but a wizard who has escaped from prison, and in fact a central concern of the book is how to come to terms with one's fears and terrors, which always exaggerate things. The description of how 'animagi' change from human to beast form is seen in Professor Lupin who turns at one point into a werewolf: but he is a normally kind man subject to a sickness which can be kept at bay when he takes a potion for it. Apart from him, Ron's pet rat Scabbers turns into the wretched Peter Pettigrew. One might even say that fantasy is here the enemy. The accent is on control. Fear can be cast out by using a 'Riddikulus' spell, and the Dementors may be stopped by conjuring up a 'Patronus' (rather like one of Philip Pullman's 'daemons' in *Northern Lights*) by an effort of will and concentration. Harry and Hermione save the Hippogriff from execution by going back an hour in time to adjust events without altering history. Harry controls his impulse to kill the villain Peter Pettigrew.

Later still a more 'normal' and even human context becomes the idiom, with only Voldemort the freak. All of *The Goblet of Fire* is concerned with 'ordinary' wizards, mainly in the World Cup match that starts it, and in the inter-school Triwizard Tournament that takes up much of the rest of it. And the antagonists are also wizards, in the form of the Death Eater Crouch who manipulates the entire plot, and in Voldemort, who wishes to use Harry to change from the horrible

form he has previously occupied to a more human one. And so it goes on in *The Order of the Phoenix*, where the enemy is no longer a visible grotesque such as a troll or a Basilisk, but a female wizard whose horror lies not in her body so much as her soul; and in *The Half-Blood Prince*, which until the end is little more than a series of meetings or non-meetings between people. Even at the end the dreadful *inferi* are still dead people. And the same is true of *The Deathly Hallows*, in which only the near-fatal episode with the snake Nagini in Godric's Hollow stands out as non-human – and even then Nagini is at first disguised as a human, Bathilda Bagshot.

So there was clearly a reduction in the overt fantasy across the seven books. It seemed that maybe its extreme nature in the first two books was the teething troubles of an author getting her work under way, and being tempted to resort to the jejeune effects of the grotesque. But that didn't seem quite right The later books were so obviously sophisticated that it seemed unlikely that she would have allowed the earlier ones to stand if this had been the case. Was there something else going on? If the first two books were meant to be as they were, what was the purpose?

Each of the seven books describes a year of a boy's seven years at a school, beginning at age eleven. In each book Harry Potter is older and has grown up a little. In every book he is the central figure. What if the nature of the first book was Harry's own picture of the Hogwarts world rather than one to be taken simply at face-value? Suppose the first book expressed Harry as he was aged eleven? Might it then be that its absurd fantasy portrayed the exaggerated responses to life of an eleven-year-old? And then if that were so, might not each book work the same way? Was it possible that what we had here was a style that changed from book to book to reflect a boy growing up? In such a case the picture of the Dursleys in *The Philosopher's Stone* would be quite other than a lapse or an aberration. It would be a picture made by the boy hero, not simply by the author. This would be the way the boy saw them, to deal with them by making them absurd, to distance himself from them by boyish comic-book humour. Might it even be that the very narrating voice of all the books is not the author's but Harry's?

The style looks objective: it is all 'Harry Potter did this or thought that.' But it all actually comes from his vantage point. There is no omniscient author making comments about Harry and his surroundings from outside, except in the first chapter when he is a baby: and Harry could have found out about that later and written it in an objective

mode. Otherwise pretty well everything is seen by him, and we are only occasionally given a scene at which he is not present. And everything is dramatised: the only people who say things about Harry are other characters. It might be possible to change every third person usage to the first person, from 'he' to 'I'. The whole thing would become a secret diary, veiled even from us. I tried writing 'I' for 'he' on several pages of *The Philosopher's Stone*. It worked, reasonably. But more proof was needed.

What provided it was the humour. There are actually few commentators who talk about the sheer fun of the Harry Potter books, how they are so full of ludicrous characters, and creatures, and situations that one is continually bursting out laughing. Indeed, this if nothing else was what initially drew me into them. In the first four books in particular there is something comic on almost every third page. The fun rather thins out a bit as Voldemort returns, but still it is remarkable how much of even the later books these books is amusing, despite their increasing preoccupation with the defeat of evil. Only in *The Deathly Hallows*, where Harry is engaged in final struggle with Voldemort, is comedy largely absent. So continual was amusement that it seemed almost a force in its own right.

Why the books were so constantly funny, even in darker moments, called for thought. After all, these are books about a boy threatened by a form of ultimate evil. From start to finish Harry Potter's life is blighted by the figure of Voldemort, who killed his parents and still wants to kill him. Yet at the same time this is a boy whose wretched existence with the Dursley family is transformed when he is taken to Hogwarts School for wizards and has a life filled with friends, fun and adventure. Indeed its capacity for happy amusement is part of the essence of Hogwarts. Hogwarts is a place where, free from the demands of the world, the Weasley brothers Fred and George can happily experiment with their magic jokes and gags on a captive audience; where Hagrid can express his love for the most savage and hideous of creatures on an unteachable baby dragon, a monstrous spider or a herd of Blast-Ended Skrewts; where a flock of ghosts chiefly represented in one Nearly Headless Nick may happily flourish and befriend the passing pupils; and most of all where young wizards meet and interact. It is all rather like Mervyn Peake's bizarre isolated mini-worlds within his Gormenghast, except that Peake's characters rarely meet: for meeting and colliding with one another is really the condition of Rowling's world, and the source of its comedy. It is not irrelevant that when the laughter dies away in the last

book, *The Deathly Hallows*, Harry is for most of the time absent from Hogwarts.

It was not surprising therefore to find that Voldemort, who is the antitype of Hogwarts, never makes jokes. Voldemort lives almost alone, and the only person he cares for is himself. He is obsessed with just one thing, where humour requires lateral thinking. He does not interact with others: the only forms of relationship he knows are domination or hostility. Because he is concerned only with himself, he has no real identity: and indeed we find that he forsook his family name of Tom Riddle for the more melodramatic 'Lord Voldemort'. The figure he presents to the world is a mask, a construct, for he is basically no more than a recipe from a pot. Compared to the creative energy of any of the inhabitants of Hogwarts, he is a cliché, a stock gothic villain. In this sense the fun and mockery native to Hogwarts win a small spiritual victory over Voldemort every time they appear.

So that had found a role for the humour of the books. It had an almost moral value. The relaxation of mind required to enjoy it, the wide thinking that goes into creating it, these are the antithesis of Voldemort, who is always intense, and always involved with only one line of thought, which makes him continually blind to realities alternative to his own. The humourist draws from many possibilities in life, where Voldemort spends his whole time refusing the next transition of his life – death. The humourist displaces settled views and is in a sense a revolutionary; but Voldemort is a conservative to the nth degree, refusing change. For six of the seven Harry Potter books he is trying to get back to the power he had before Harry Potter killed him; and in the seventh he does not act so much as spend his time looking for an object that will make him impossible to kill.

But later it became evident that there was more to the humour than this. For it was not of just one kind. Sometimes it was based on verbal humour, sometimes on grotesquerie, sometimes on discrepancies between what a character said and did, sometimes on irony. More than this, it seemed to change in character from book to book. At first it was often of the knockabout or child's cartoonish sort we have seen – Dudley Dursley being given a pig's tail, Hagrid trying in vain to rear a baby dragon, the huge troll defeated by a wand stuck up its nose. There were flashes of wit that stuck out, as when Draco Malfoy, confronted by Ron with the fact that Harry had a far more powerful broomstick than his, retorted "What would you know about it, Weasley, you couldn't afford half the handle.... I suppose you and your brothers have to save up, twig

by twig.”¹ The more physical humour continued into *The Chamber of Secrets*, with the flying car being assaulted by the Whomping Willow, with Ron’s backfiring wand, which hits him instead of Malfoy and made him vomit slugs for hours; and with Hermione developing whiskers.

But in *The Chamber of Secrets* there was something else in the comedy, something more to do with people’s characters. One felt it particularly with the new Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts, Gilderoy Lockhart. Lockhart, with his masses of published books and his stories of his heroic adventures and gigantic wizard abilities, all of which were proved a ludicrous fraud, brought comedy even to the dreadful Basilisk’s lair. But it was not the same kind of physical humour as before. This was humour derived from a grotesque discrepancy between what a character says he or she is and the reality. Lockhart was the target of the boyish form of humour known as teacher-baiting. Humour here was a little more mature, being derived from comparing two things. It could also be seen when Harry and Ron use Polyjuice Potion to appear as Malfoy’s friends Crabbe and Goyle, and their masks kept slipping; or in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* where the Divination teacher Professor Trelawney turned out to be a New Age fraud. This is more mental humour, where one knows what the truth is, and compares it with the picture someone is trying to convey about themselves.

Also, as people got to know one another, the comedy increasingly came from knowledge of personalities – from the amiable bungler Neville Longbottom who is always the butt of someone’s fun; from the ghost Nearly Headless Nick and his Deathday Party; from Filch the sadistic caretaker, pompous Percy Weasley, Dobby the apparently crazed house-elf, the moronic Crabbe and Goyle, Moaning Myrtle, Buckbeak the formal Hippogriff, Colin Creevey the celebrity-hounding new boy, Rita Skeeter the scandal-making journalist, Aragog the sinister chief spider, and even the awkward Mandrakes, who in March ‘threw a loud and raucous party in Greenhouse Three’ (*The Chamber of Secrets*, 186). The characters of Hermione and Ron came out much more too – Hermione with her devotion to the library and later her idealism over the house-elves, Ron with his blundering behaviour and his sense of being the down-trodden brother.

By the *The Goblet of Fire* the fun was coming less from such individuals seen on their own, and more from their interaction with

1 J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 122. References hereafter to all seven of the Harry Potter books are to the Bloomsbury first editions, respectively of 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2005 and 2007.

others in a relationship – from Ron’s jealousy over Hermione’s crush on Viktor Krum, the gaucherie of Harry and Ron over choosing partners for the Yule Ball, the awkward romance of Hagrid and Madame Maxine, the conversations between Harry and Moaning Myrtle, and Hermione’s attempts to make the house-elves want to be free. People were no longer singularities, but were trying to relate to other personalities. And in every attempted relationship they were making laughable mistakes – Ron’s jealousy proved unfounded, he and Harry were bunglers with girls, Moaning Myrtle laughed at Harry in his bath, Hagrid enraged Madam Maxine by calling her a half-giantess, Hermione got the house-elves ludicrously wrong. In many ways, apart from its sinister beginning and ending, *The Goblet of Fire* could be called Rowling’s *Comedy of Errors*.

This motif of interaction continued in *The Order of the Phoenix*, but now it was often darker, coming from opposition rather than attempted friendship. In the hostile house of the Blacks at Number 12 Grimmauld Place, the wizards of the Order were continually being screamed at by a portrait of old Mrs Black or else subjected to the house-elf Kreacher’s combination of polite answers with dog’s abuse. Similar, if lighter, humour came from Fred and George Weasley’s baiting of their brother Ron or trying out their magic potions on first-years; from Professor MacGonagall’s superb dismissals of Professor Umbridge’s intrusive attempts to monitor her class; and from Hagrid’s masochistic attempts to befriend the brutish giant Grawp. People collided with one another more sharply in this book: much of it described Dolores Umbridge’s cruel interactions with the Professors and pupils of Hogwarts.

After this, however, in *The Half-Blood Prince*, however, the kind of humour one was getting seemed to mark time. There was another bout of relationship comedy in Hermione’s anger at Ron’s slobbering passion with Lavender Brown: Ron generally came in for mockery in this book, through his sister Ginny and through his failures as Keeper for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. But for a good deal of the time we are away from Hogwarts, the home of good humour, or else Hogwarts is not itself, with pupils being mysteriously injured or murdered and the threat of Voldemort growing to the point where the school itself is invaded by Death Eaters. And after this, the final book, *The Deathly Hallows*, where Harry is for most of the time away from Hogwarts, is, as said, largely without comedy.

Having seen all these changes in the humour of the Harry Potter books, one had to wonder why they were there. It might seem at first that they came simply from the fact that the characters get more familiar

with one another: so that we move from the often grotesque fun of the first and second books to mockery of absurd individuals, and then to humour based on knowledge of people and closer relationships with them, and then a more oppositional wit based on the ascendancy of evil. The changes then simply depended on the movement of time and circumstance, on general influences rather than any particular factor. And the gradual shrinkage of the humour could be simply attributed to the darkening background with Voldemort's increasing ascendancy

But then, at another level, these changes could also be mirroring the growth of Harry Potter himself. At eleven or twelve, what humour would he most appreciate but the physical, sometimes disgustingly physical, humour that pervades the first two books? And again, also at twelve, what could be funnier to a boy than a posturing teacher such as Gilderoy Lockhart who keeps failing his own boasts? The pleasure would come from watching adult authority fall over itself, because Harry has reached an age where seeing that adults can be challenged is important. And wouldn't one expect the kind of personality-based humour one gets as Harry starts to realise that other people have their own characters and ways of dealing with the world? And later, a more interpersonal comedy as he begins to realise that another sex exists and that he has to relate to it? And still further on, a more sarcastic, bitter and oppositional humour mirroring Harry's growing teenage hostility to the world?

To realise that J.K. Rowling could be writing as subtly as this was quite a surprise. Someone who could make even the humour in a fantasy change as her hero grew was clearly a writer of considerable sophistication. Not that she worked it out consciously: it was clearly something that happened naturally as she wrote. More than this, it is possible to see each book as a whole as expressing through its style and idiom the stage that Harry has reached, both as a growing boy and as a moral man. What was one to make of this? What this writer had taken to be an overhyped fantastic school story was turning into highly wrought literary gold. The books were becoming art, a vision founded on order, pattern and rhythm.

And that in part is what led me to write this book, to show that the Harry Potter stories work as the best kinds of literature work, as an ordered vision with the style both mirroring and commenting on the content. For these books not only mean, they *are*, and what they are is a construct of style and imagery and brilliant invention. Almost without exception literary criticism of the Harry Potter books has concerned

what they signify: what are their moral, religious or philosophical meanings. This is fine as far as it goes; and in the next chapter we will see just how far it does go. But it is sometimes as though the books have to be translated into other terms in order to be talked about: as though a book can only be rated in terms of the moral or spiritual work it does. No-one seems to consider that the coded essay on, say, alchemy, to which they reduce the books is a grey thing beside the living stories from which they extract it. In moving away from such readings as we shall here, perhaps the discussion of the Harry Potter books will be brought back to where it should start, from a discussion of how well they work and are ordered. For that, given the millions of their readers who cannot put them down, must be the first consideration. What is it about them that makes them so fascinating and so readable? How are the books shaped and written to perform this spell on us?

But first, we must show just how far the books do have the Christian programme that many (American) commentators find in them. And to do that we will consider their debt to the 'Inklings', the group of Oxford writers of supposedly Christian fantasy – particularly Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien – with whose works they have often been compared.