## 'HARRY POTTER', THE LAST SPELL CAST?: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS, JULY 2007

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After ten years and 3407 pages, with the worldwide release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* on 21 July 2007 the saga is at last complete, the last spell is cast, and fans and critics alike can now, dragon-like, get their teeth into the flesh of the seven-novel series without fearing J.K. Rowling will catch them out with new material that might magick away their cherished speculations.

The whole phenomenon is unprecedented in the world of books. The number of people reading the seventh volume simultaneously across the planet, as if in some huge global meditation, over last week - and I was one of them - must surely have broken all simultaneous reading records. The initial print run of 12 million (compared with 1000 for the first book) was more than the population of Portugal, Joanne Rowling's onetime country of residence; the combined worldwide sales of the first six volumes, even before Deathly Hallows came out, were reported to be 325 million, or one and one-fifth times the entire population of the USA. This modern fairy-tale has brought fairy-tale wealth and fame to its creator, once an ill-paid English teacher at an obscure language school on Oporto's Avenida Fernão Magalhães, and, when she miraculously landed a publisher for the first volume, a single mother on the dole in Edinburgh. Much has been said already about the Potter books that has become cliché and yet remains true, above all about how they have unexpectedly and triumphantly rekindled interest in the written word in today's media-savvy kids, but from now on something has changed to put the discussion on more solid foundations: we can at last meaningfully speak of something called Harry Potter, in other words, the whole chronologically evolving series of seven novels whose sequence J.K. Rowling had mapped out for herself before the first volume ever saw print.

I shall now briefly look at what we can now call *Harry Potter*, from a number of specifically literary and critical perspectives, including translation, genre and intertextuality, and with particular reference where relevant to the new, final volume.

Harry Potter, in many ways a very British creation with its boarding school complete with house system and its culinary Englishness, has paradoxically become an international phenomenon. The boy wizard's adventures have been translated – or at least one of the volumes has – into (on my count) 62 languages, including Galician, Greenlandic, West Frisian, Khmer, Marathi, Malayalam, Afrikaans and some like Latin and Ancient Greek that are normally considered dead – not to mention the 'localised' American English versions (and similar dual versions for Chinese and Portuguese). Replete with invented words and names, the books pose their translators a formidable challenge, and indeed starkly epitomise the traditional dilemma of the translator, caught again and again along the decision-making chain between the Scylla of domestication and the Charybdis of foreignisation (do I translate 'Crumpled-Horned Snorkack' or keep it in English?). The very title of the new volume will cause translators headaches worldwide (in French 'the Deathly Hallows' will be the rather less arcane and archaic 'les Reliques de la Mort'). The Potter books point up the importance of translation, yet at the same time are also a curious case of what in certain circumstances can only be called its redundancy. Living in one mainland European country and working across

the border in another, last week in both countries I saw vast piles of *Deathly Hallows* in bookshops and stationers – in the original, by definition, and obviously by no means destined only for Anglophone expatriates. It is clear that there are Potter readers, children and adults, worldwide who have been making translation redundant, at least for themselves, by snapping up the English version as soon as it comes out, preferring to struggle through a foreign-language text to find out what happens to Harry, rather than wait a couple of months for the translation. One also wonders how much these books by a former teacher of English to non-native students have done, and will do, for the teaching, learning and understanding of the English language around the globe.

Generically, the Potter books are hard to place, and have been from the beginning since they have collapsed the distinction between children's and adult literature by attracting devotees of all ages – a phenomenon not new, but unprecedented on this scale. *Harry Potter* may be viewed as epic, as fairy-tale, as Gothic fiction, as didactic fiction or moral allegory, as school story or as *Bildungsroman*. All of these dimensions could be developed by critics. From the fairy-tale viewpoint, it is especially interesting that the new volume includes what reads like a perfect Brothers Grimm pastiche (essential too to the plot) in the form of the 'Tale of the Three Brothers', told by Luna Lovegood's father to Harry, Ron and Hermione. The Gothic element is particularly promising for future exegesis. Gothic is considered to be a literature of fear and terror, or alternatively of paranoia and persecution – elements present aplenty in Rowling's narrative. Hogwarts is a classic example of the Gothic interior, recalling Poe's House of Usher or, indeed, with its moving suits of armour, the book generally seen as the first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. Indeed, J.K. Rowling could be studied as a modern exponent of the women's Gothic tradition as inaugurated by Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley.

The seven volumes are also a monument to intertextuality. On the one hand, there are Rowling's legitimate borrowings from fairy-tale and the Greco-Roman classical tradition. On the other and perhaps more important, as the series evolves sequentially each volume refers back to the earlier ones, to episodes and characters from before. In other words, J.K. Rowling is intertextual with herself. In this last volume, the author has brought this intertextuality to a fine art, tying up loose ends and bringing back characters from earlier books with consummate skill. It is said that she employs a consistency editor, and it is true that some loose ends are left dangling (what happened to the Dursleys? or to Hermione's parents?). However, all in all the endless backward references in *Deathly Hallows*, to this reader at least, work as a constant memory test and stimulus to alert and on-the-ball reading, while also consecrating the Potter books as a model – one might think of Balzac's *Comédie Humaine*, though there the intertextuality is rarely sequential – of the vital principle of interrelatedness.

Criticism is, of course, not only about formal, linguistic and generic aspects but also about evaluation. Here, it is well known that opinion has been mixed. The literary quality of the Potter books has been affirmed by authorities – writers or critics - such as George Steiner or Mario Vargas Llosa, and excoriated by others such as Harold Bloom or José Saramago. Christian fundamentalists, meanwhile, have rejected the books out of hand on a priori ideological grounds. All this creates a potential ocean of discussion, and I can here only venture a few inches into the water. The last volume, certainly, raises two points crucial for the evaluation of the message of *Harry Potter* as a whole. One is the good/evil divide, which in Rowling is far from simplistic or black-and-white. While it has long been clear that Harry and Voldemort, linked by their twin wands with their phoenix feathers, have from the outset been deadly antagonists yet also uncomfortably close, what emerges with new and striking

force from *Deathly Hallows* is the surprising ambivalence of two other key characters, Dumbledore and Snape – the one revealed as several shades less whiter-than-white than had been thought, the other as far less malevolent. Rowling's moral universe proves to have multiple hues of grey.

The second salient aspect - and here, in view of its importance, I will give page references - is the new volume's exploration of the totalitarian. As befits the last book in the series, this is also the most adult. Harry, Ron and Hermione are for a large part of the narrative on the run from a viciously totalitarian regime imposed on the wizarding world after the Death Eaters have taken over the Ministry of Magic, killed the Minister and commandeered the press. Under this significantly titled 'new order' (395), the watchword is ethnic purity, and a purge is directed against 'Mudbloods' (wizard-Muggle hybrids) and the 'blood traitors' who defend them: 'The Ministry is determined to root out such usurpers of magical power, and to this end has issued an invitation to every so-called Muggle-born to present themselves for interview by the newly appointed Muggle-born Registration Commission' (172). 'Mudbloods' are rounded up and herded into a Ministry of Magic that is now more like Orwell's Ministry of Love, with the foreseeable consequences. Gangs of bounty-hunters called 'Snatchers' roam the country in search of refusenik 'Mudbloods'. The new under-race is routinely referred to as 'vermin' (362) or 'animals' (462). It is in this climate of fear and intimidation that Harry has to face his final showdown with the Dark Lord. If the analogies with Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four are evident, so too are those, even more disturbing, with Nazi Germany. This is no trivialisation of the events of the 1930s: critics may yet even conclude that Rowling's symbolic re-creation of that environment can stand comparison with the recent, direct literary evocations of Germany's darkest hour by Vikram Seth in Two Lives or Salman Rushdie in Shalimar the Clown.

The literary and ethical import and significance of *Harry Potter* will no doubt be fought over now for many years to come. Meanwhile and finally, the question on everyone's lips will be, whither now for Joanne Rowling? She has many times vowed that after the seventh volume there will be no more Harry Potter books. In theory she might yet be tempted to revive him as Conan Doyle did Sherlock Holmes (by popular demand) or Cervantes did Don Quixote (to counter plagiarism). She has already said she is at work on new, non-Potter material, whose sales are obviously a sure-fire bet. It may, though, be significant that *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* concludes with an epilogue, 'Nineteen Years After', with Harry, now married to Ron's sister Ginny, escorting their three children to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters at King's Cross, to see off the two oldest on the Hogwarts Express. If there will be no more Harry books, will there be books about Harry's children? Or are those millions of youthful devotees across the globe the real 'Harry's children', and will the true progeny of the Potter books be the stories that J.K. Rowling's young readers will go on to make of their own lives?