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Sentences in Harry Potter, Students in Future Writing Classes

> *It ascends me into the brain, dries me there all the foolish and dull and cruddy vapors, which environ it, makes it apprehensive, quick, forgetive, full of nimble, fiery, and delectable shapes, which, delivered o'er to the voice, the tongue, which is the birth, becomes excellent wit.*
>
> —Henry IV, Part Two, IV. iii

All families, happy and unhappy, have their rituals. One of the happier rituals in ours has been each of us reading at bedtime to our girls. But I must confess that two years ago I was becoming increasingly bored and impatient with a constant dose of writing not far beyond the syntactical complexity of Dick and Jane. Having already read hundreds of such books with Katherine, I did not exactly relish Nora putting me through the same dull old round again. Then we all discovered Harry Potter, and it was as if the flagging spirit of my attendance at this Church of the Nightly Reading had received a new life.

So thoroughly did I enjoy the Potter books that I began wondering not only about my own delight in them but also about that of my children and their friends. What is it about these books that has spread a fever for the written word among those who only yesterday did not know how to read at all? The pages that follow attempt a diagnosis of this epidemic in the joy of reading, a diagnosis whose major finding is that unlike so many of the tastes of the young, the Harry Potter craze is cause both for general celebration and for a very particular hopefulness about the college reading and writing classrooms of a decade hence. The series is not the poisoned and poisoning cup some current witch-hunters have sniffed out. Nor does its dismissal by a Whitbread Prize judge as "derivative, traditional and not particularly well written" very plausibly or effectively dispose of it and put it back in its piffling place (Safire A27).

Rhetoric Review, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2002, 170–87

"Derivative, traditional and not particularly well written." Against the derivative or traditional count of this indictment, one might counter with Joan Acocello's observation that the radical strength of the Potter books is their "utter traditionalism," the way they subsume into their own imagined world the preoccupations and techniques of fairy tales, a great tradition of the English novel dominated by Austen and Dickens, and mythic accounts of the cosmic struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness (74). These things are the makings of the Potter books, but Rowling does not just passively inherit them. She energetically spins them out into any number of combinations, even as time and again she contrives to make it all newly pertinent to the way we and our children live now. On the "not particularly well written" charge, Harold Bloom has chimed in with the acerbic remark that on page four of the first book, he counts no less than seven clichés, a symptom of easy reading that apparently led him to sound the alarm for children's books that offer "more difficult pleasures" (A26). But the perhaps too-easy pleasure I confess to finding in the run of clichés Bloom has thus singled out is the way they sound the spiritual and linguistic shallows of the Muggle whose temper of mind and tone of voice Rowling is elaborating and mocking. (To appreciate how Bloom's beloved Shakespeare reveled in the same easy pleasure, all you need to do is hear what he and Falstaff make of Justice Shallow in the second half of *Henry IV.*) Typically, Rowling plays with the prefabricated stuff of clichés. She runs antic circles around and through them, treating them with the same free-wheeling aplomb as she does the larger hand-me-downs of myth, literature, and folklore. When, for example, Harry's Muggle uncle does indeed carry out a threat, he is said to be "as bad as his word" (*Chamber* 21). That's not a cliché plopped lumpily onto the page. To the contrary, it performs a sprightly turn on one particular example of what Byron called "set trash of phrase" (Byron and McGann 376). Near the end of *The Chamber of Secrets,* Harry has just returned from a triumph brought off by an Excalibur-like sword he drew out of the Hogwarts Sorting Hat. Hearing of this, Dumbledore affirms that "only a true Gryffindor could have pulled *that* out of the hat" (334). The witty fun twinkling around the edges of Dumbledore's plaudit signals his (and Rowling's) delight at the turn he is performing on yet another piece of verbal old hat.

The distinctive liveliness of Rowling's writing first became apparent to me not so much in her turns on individual words as in the sweep and structure of her sentences. Although I eventually read all of these books straight through, I must confess that my first reading of them with my children alternated with my wife's performance of the same duty, so that I was usually returning to the story some ten or fifteen pages down the line from where I had left off the night before. This is a method of reading that can leave you puzzled about plot and character, even

if a qualified informant is right in your lap; but it does have the advantage of drawing your attention to the shape and tone of individual sentences and paragraphs. A reading on the lookout for well- or ill-made sentences was, in any case, something I had been indulging myself in ever since I had stumbled on Richard Lanham's *Revising Prose.* As its title suggests, this little jewel of a book is meant to be very practical. But it is not a book without a thesis. As witty as it is, it even has something of the air of an impassioned tract for our times. For it is the trenchantly argued and copiously illustrated conviction of this book that the most virulent species of bad writing infecting our culture is neither grammatical incorrectness nor rhetorical cluelessness. It is what Lanham calls the "Official" or "Mandarin Style." By whatever name we give it, we all know this style, not least because we all can so easily find ourselves writing or committing it. Its lifeless sludge is the idiom of choice for bureaucracies, committees, and academics. Among college students it can often be our best and our hardest-working—our Hermione Grangers—who write this way. They have always excelled in their classes and so they are well schooled in the Mandarin Style as the emblem of a rigorously serious intelligence, the mark of someone in total and thoroughly serious command of whatever the subject or situation happens to be.

Lanham calls his method sentence-based, and he regales his reader with example after example of how deadly an unrelieved diet of Mandarin Style sentences can be. Convinced that the state of the written language is in critical condition and close to death's door, he wittily deprecates his tips for revising prose as merely the stop-gap of a "paramedic method." The patient is dying. Until we have time for extensive surgery and rehabilitation, here's a handy way of providing life-support. Dr. Lanham's prescription for bringing our written language back to a steady showing of some vital signs comprises three interrelated points about the anatomy or physiology of a written English sentence: *first,* that the verb—the action word—is the heart of the sentence, never mind (or do mind) that the Mandarin Style tends to shunt that action off into nouns, "an action was taken" sounding more official than "we acted"; *second,* that sentences, powered by verbs, have shapes and rhythms that the agility of the writer should turn and vary in response to what each successive segment of the discourse is trying to get across; *third,* that even as you get each individual sentence up and running, you must be on the *qui vive* for how best to "pass the baton" of your discourse on from one sentence to the next.

Rowling's subject matter invites a torrent of verbs, and she often accepts this invitation with hyperkinetic abandon as in "Ron dived, Hermione rocketed upward, the key dodged them both, and Harry streaked after it; it sped toward the wall, Harry leaned forward and with a nasty, crunching noise, pinned it against the stone with one hand" (*Sorcerer* 280–81). To be sure, sometimes all

the racing members of a single sentence are scarcely better coordinated than the limbs of an adolescent: for example, "Neville, his face tear-streaked, clutching his wrist, hobbled off with Madame Hooch, who had her arm around him" (*Sorcerer* 147). But more commonly the sentences are as lively and as well managed as the following: "The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches" (*Sorcerer* 31). Along an archly secure course of verbs, the second sentence builds up to a final pratfall on the consumerist works and days of Dudley the Destroyer.

Not only does Rowling's briskness of address rein in and manage all the speed and hyperactivity of her plots, it also braces these books against their list toward a sentimentality that would be ruinous to their pertly knowing charm. The moment when the infant Harry must be abandoned to the Dursleys could easily turn into mush. But the crisp march of the verbs—not to mention the focused specificity of these verbs to their grammatical and human subjects—prevents this from happening. "He [Dumbledore] stepped over the low garden wall and walked to the front door. He laid Harry gently on the doorstep, took a letter out of his cloak, tucked it inside Harry's blankets, and then came back to the other two. For a full minute the three of them stood and looked at the little bundle; Hagrid's shoulders shook, Professor McGonagall blinked furiously, and the twinkling light that usually shone from Dumbledore's eyes seemed to have gone out" (*Sorcerer* 16). At a moment teetering on the edge of sentimentality, the twinkling lights of this prose do not dissolve in tears. They are still up and running.

Here's a last and more extended example of Rowling's plain but lively style. It's the final paragraph of the opening chapter of *The Sorcerer's Stone:*

> A breeze ruffled the neat hedges of Privet Drive, which lay silent and tidy under the inky sky, the very last place you would expect astonishing things to happen. Harry Potter rolled over inside his blankets without waking up. One small hand closed on the letter beside him and he slept on, not knowing he was special, not knowing he was famous, not knowing he would be woken in a few hours' time by Mrs. Dursley's scream as she opened the front door to put out the milk bottles, nor that he would spend the next few weeks being prodded and pinched by his cousin Dudley. . . . He couldn't know that at this very moment, people meeting in secret all over the coun-

> try were holding up their glasses and saying in hushed voices: "To Harry Potter—the boy who lived!" (17)

If you diagrammed the long, third sentence, you would come up with a series of three participial phrases, each beginning with "not knowing." The first two members of the series are identical in clipped length and rhythm, but as befits its descent into the pit of Dudleyland, the third member is both longer and syntactically more complex. The grammatical object of the third "not knowing" is still a noun clause on the order of "[that] he was special," but this climactic clause in the series first spreads its wings and then, on the pivot of a "nor," which would have another "not knowing" elliptically understood, it turns home toward the odious Dudley. Then, in the concluding sentence, the act and theme of knowing is given a positive turn toward the acclaim of "Harry Potter—the boy who lived!": that is, the boy whose vitality contrasts significantly and rhymes syntactically with the deadly Dudley on whom the preceding sentence closed.

In this concluding move of the book's first chapter, motif-hunters of the traditional sort will immediately pounce on the master-plot of the hero born of exalted or divine parents and left in the sequestered keeping of some all-too-ordinary mortals until such time as he becomes ready to undertake the adventure of self-recognition, becomes ready to make good on the claim that he is special and picked out, that he is the truly living thing. But what is distinctive about Rowling is less her reworking of this master-plot than the way she makes its promise of authentic liveliness play itself out in a sometimes hyperactive prose that positions the world of Muggledom as the great Leviathan of dullness from which this writing is always magically delivering itself in and by the act of getting off one lively, rhythmic, and fluidly paced sentence after another. To set off her realm of wonder from the dullness of Muggledom, Rowling must come out with and sustain a lively style. This story about the "boy who lived" is obliquely but omnipresently about a prose that lives, a prose that sentence by sentence is counting on its power to bring this whole parallel universe of Hogwarts to dazzling and wonderful life.

Intuitively, most people would say that the major difference between the spoken and the written language is the greater formality and even stiffness of the latter. We speak on the fly; we write to order. I would like to question this half-truth with the example of the introductory participial phrase, a verbal construction largely confined to the written language. If you *say,* "Walking into the room, he tripped over a toy," you are using very simple words, but you are putting them together—composing them—in a way that is usually reserved for the written word. Professional talkers are notoriously prone to lecture-speak, but when not speaking from a lectern either real or imagined, even they would use

the accumulative style of "He walked into the room and he tripped over the toy." Despite its simplicity of diction, the alternative participial construction strikes the ear as too composed, too "narrated." All this being granted, however, the participial phrase also illustrates the enhanced freedom or range of the written language, particularly in regard to word order. For in spoken English, the rules for word order are little short of tyrannical. Not so with the written sentence. If you know what you're doing, not just words but entire phrases and clauses can be moved around *ad libitum,* depending on *your* desired emphasis, depending on where *you* want the writing to be coming from or going on to. Here's a rather crudely melodramatic example: "Whispers followed Harry from the moment he left his dormitory the next day. People lining up outside classrooms stood on tiptoe to get a look at him, or doubled back to pass him in the corridors again, staring" (*Sorcerer* 131). The emphatic placement of *staring* in this sentence marks it as written. If as a reader you repeatedly find yourself attending (to) such performances, you will almost inevitably find yourself becoming proficient in this dialect of written English, one of the features of which is that the placement of words and phrases is more crafted than in spoken English, and more crafted precisely because the written language is more flexible and supple. In allowing for more movement, the writing game makes the fluidity and force of that movement a major criterion for playing the game well, for having a good go at it. Invocation of the grammarian's quaint terms of participial phrase (and ablative absolute) will sound musty, but however you name them, these verbal constructions pop up everywhere in a style that flies and turns and loops with an agile mastery that Muggles of all ages never suspected could be found anywhere else than on a skateboard, a video screen, or a squash court.

About the playful but deadly serious shuttle of written and read words, Rowling can be powerfully explicit. The plot of *The Chamber of Secrets,* for example, hinges on an elaborate figure for the experience and consequences of reading. In what amounts to this writing's extended portrayal of its own potentially harmful power to charm and even possess, the very young Ginny Weasley comes upon a diary that while apparently composed of stubbornly blank pages sucking back into oblivion any characters inscribed on them, is really in the diabolical business of taking in these confidences so that it can then insinuatingly talk back to and skillfully manipulate the unsuspecting girl with whom the diary is in conversation. This way of staging the give-and-take of reading strongly suggests that Ginny's scripting or authoring is less a matter of her writing her diary than of it writing her, and the Archimago behind this fiendish contraption is a Voldemort who will boast that "she [Ginny] put too much into the diary, into me. Enough to let me leave its pages at last" (*Chamber* 313). In a truly fearful symmetry, then, Voldemort (aka T. M. Riddle) becomes incarnate in exact proportion

as Ginny keeps giving herself up to the diabolical practice of a book that is quite literally Voldemort's last will and testament, the latter a genre of writing performed in the prospect of departure from the scene but also in the hope of somehow living on in one's heirs. This diary is an antiscripture with which its diabolical designer would become flesh and pitch his tent and legions among us. It is put in the way of the tenderly unformed Ginny with the precise intention of "preserving my sixteen-year-old self in its pages, so that one day, with luck, I would be able to lead another in my footsteps, and finish Salazar Slytherin's noble work" (*Chamber* 312).

The whole thing reads like a cautionary tale about the power and the responsibility of both reading and writing. Given that one will inescapably be formed by what one gives one's attention and confidence to, we are implicitly admonished to apply to ourselves what Mr. Weasley says to his victimized daughter, "Never trust anything that can think for itself *if you can't see where it keeps its brain*" (*Chamber* 329). This admonition (that is reprised at page 194 of *The Prisoner of Azkaban*) has the sound of a very sophisticated hermeneutics of suspicion; and to my ear, it is very clearly speaking to a time where the passive and unthinking consumption of all sorts of designing and interested media is a constant and staggering fact about the way we live now.

It is no surprise that a writer so given to reflection on the act and power of reading should be similarly self-conscious and (in the best sense of the word) crafty about her medium of the written word. There is, for example, Knock Turn Lane, a disreputable back-alley venue for the paraphernalia of the dark arts commonly associated with nocturnal blackouts and the dark side of the moon. There are patches of a zany literalism, reminiscent of Lewis Carrol, as when Dumbledore at the start of a banquet says he "would like to say a few words." And then says, "And here they are: 'Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!'" Or Peeves the Poltergeist, under pressure to tell what he knows, insisting, "Shan't say nothing if you don't say please," and then when the apparent request for the magic word of *please* is grudgingly honored, logically infuriating his inquisitor with "NOTHING! Ha haaa! Told you I wouldn't say nothing if you didn't say please! Ha ha! Haaaaaa!" (*Sorcerer* 160).

Rowling's interest in her medium of words shows up constantly in her repeated ventures in mimicry and parody. Among the occasions of her parody are the play-by-play of sporting events, tabloid journalism, and advertising copy for anything from tacky correspondence courses to such up-scale vehicular trophies as Harry's Firebolt broomstick. And of course, in addition to these sendups of the fixtures of our noisily high-verbal culture, she is constantly capturing and delivering the tone of her characters: of a snarling Snapes; of super-student Hermione "all books and cleverness"; of the generous but no-nonsense headmis-

tress Minerva McGonagall; of a shrieking Aunt Petunia, rising to real eloquence on the Muggle fuel of fear and resentment when she recalls how her sister

> got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that—that *school*—and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was—a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family! (*Sorcerer* 53)

That's Rowling mimicking the voice of proper Petunia ratcheted up to banshee pitch. And at the other end of the scale, listen to how Hagrid addresses Dudley Dursley for the first (and last) time: "Budge up, yeh great lump" (*Sorcerer* 47). To André Gide, Hamlet's "lug the guts into the neighbor room" had an untranslatable and quintessentially English heft to it. You can feel a similar—and similarly pertinent—heft in these words of Hagrid's.

Rowling's delight and trust in her instrument is not just a local phenomenon of her writing. It is the air this writing breathes, an ambient barometric pressure felt in various ways, not the least of which is the first book's overarching insistence that no one should be timidly referring to Voldemort as You-Know-Who, because there's an important truth lurking in that fragment of magical thinking claiming that to articulate a name is to gain power over the bearer of the name. The psychoanalytic variant of this truth is something Bruno Bettelheim has drawn on in his therapeutic brief for fairy tales that give a manageable name and a ventilating expression to the terrors and anxieties of the very young; and as Harry negotiates his way through adolescence, this specifically verbal good of going over one's most harrowing ordeals—and thus coming to *terms* with them—becomes a more explicit and central theme in his adventures.

If such uses of enchantment bespeak a trust in our species' capacity for naming things, other features of the Harry Potter books display a sheer delight in this capacity. For what must strike the ear of even an eleven-year-old is how these books treat their readers to an often zany but rarely pointless feast of names. The menu includes preposterously real English names like Nicholas de Mimsy-Poppington and Julian Flitchfletchley; mock sinister names like Hogwarts or really sinister names like Voldemort; significant names like the bad boy of Slytherin: Draco Malfoy, a whey-faced Dracula-in-training, full of bad faith and public-school prejudices, and wickedly referring to Harry and Ron Weasley as "Potty and the Weasel."

Rowling's penchant for significant naming is one of the many Dickensian traits of her writing, Dickens being not only one of the language's most gifted novelists and most enduringly loved writers for children but also (in both capacities) an endlessly inventive coiner of names. His notebooks contain pages of strenuously playful efforts to bring character and name together as when, for example, he hits upon *Bradley Headstone* as just the right handle for a dry-as-dust character in *Our Mutual Friend*. There's a similar gold of significance to be found in Rowling's names. To suggest the dullness of the Muggle world, for example, she hits upon "*Dud*ley Dursley" as the name for the cousin—both passively bovine and cruelly malicious—who plays the role of flaccidly wicked stepbrother to Harry's vitalist Cinderella. When Harry is fitted for a wand (in a scene where the wand could very easily be figuring a pen), both it and Harry's life start to take off, to catch fire, and throw off sparks. By contrast, couch-potato Dudley is indeed a dud. He doesn't really grow up. He only grows larger and lumpier.

In the world opened up to Harry by Hogwarts School, people without a stitch of magic to their name go by the name and identification of *Muggle,* as if without some kind of magic it's all a mug's game and a bit of a muddle, as Stephen Blackpool laments in *Hard Times,* Dickens' rather grim-faced satire on an inflexibly Utilitarian world where the iron round of the mythical Midlands factory town of *Coketown* is intimately welded to a schooling regimen enforced by such educationists as *McChoakumchild* and *Gradgrind,* constantly drilling it into their innocent charges that they are to "never wonder" because "in this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts!" (The debt to *Hard Times* does not go unmarked by Rowling. Early in *The Sorcerer's Stone,* when letter after letter to Privet Lane is calling Harry away from the Dursleys and on to Hogwarts, his fleeing stepfather makes his last stand against such a summons at the "Railview Hotel, Cokeworth" [42]).

In *Hard Times* the alternative to the Gradgrindian redoubt of Stone Lodge is the spectacularly glamorous but easy-going acrobats of the "horse-riding" circus. In a world where the Dursleys are planning to have Harry continue his education at Stonewall High, the alternative to our current forms of the Gradgrindian is clearly Hogwarts. But the more strictly familial alternative to Harry's stepparents is the Dickensian family of the Weasleys, short on money but long on love, kids, horseplay, and eccentricity. Harry may be the "boy who lived," but until he is welcomed into the mutually implicated folds of Hogwarts and the Weasleys, he's as much a poor lost lamb as Oliver Twist or the young David Copperfield. Because the Dursleys do not want Harry coming home for Christmas, he has to spend his first school vacation immured in the almost deserted halls of a Hogwarts usually all-a-go with adolescent energy and excitement. But Ron Weasley is there too with Harry, there for reasons that the plot contrives to

make the happy ones of happy families. Over the holidays Mom and Dad are visiting others of the clan further afield, but not before Mrs. Weasley has fussed over a handmade Christmas present for Harry that signals his adoption into the Weasley family. This Christmas present is what Mrs. Weasley's affectionately embarrassed son names a "Weasley sweater": "'I think I know who that one's from,' said Ron, turning a bit pink and pointing to a very lumpy parcel. 'My mom. I told her you didn't expect any presents and—oh, no,' he groaned, 'she's made you a Weasley sweater'" (*Sorcerer* 200). As it comes (fudge included) to Harry, this emerald-green sweater constitutes the *toga virilis* of the Weasley tribe. In itself it is only a shapeless expanse of warm material (and none too expertly knitted), but with the passing of this mantle of the warm and fuzzy on to Harry, our young and previously displaced hero finds a home within the generous weave and fabric of the Weasleys' domestic space.

But for all my conviction and delight in the clear Dickensian thread running through Rowling's books, it has to be said that hers is, if not a better, then a very different and more swankily up-to-date piece of work than, say, *A Christmas Carol.* Alison Lurie has remarked on a certain English preeminence in children's literature as the backdrop to Rowling's work and success in the genre (6). But this Scotswoman, the rhythms of whose life may run closer to *Trainspotting* than *Rob Roy,* wears the label of the English children's story with a hip difference. Lewis Carroll is, to be sure, a certified zany, but the world of the Hobbitt and even of Barrie's lost boys is generally a snug and cozy affair. Rowling's world is not like that. If it has something of the feel of Toad Hall, it's Toad Hall ratcheted up to the speed at which kids live and move today. These books "make new" the related worlds of Dickens and the English children's story by turbocharging them with a quick and agile dynamism that is constantly up and running not only in narrative details like the lightning fast moves of Quidditch but also in the verve and suppleness of the writing, in (to quote Seamus Heaney) "the springiness, the clip and dart of it" (25).

If the Christmas gift of a "Weasley sweater" suggests Rowling's debt to Dickens, another gift given to Harry on the same morning of the Nativity marks a crucial difference between her and her nineteenth-century precursor, and suggests (I will argue) what picture of her work and style she herself entertains and would pass on to her readers. This gift is the Invisibility Cloak, an inheritance from Harry's father, which Dumbledore, the Hogwarts Headmaster, was holding in trust while Harry served his childhood term of subjection to the Dursleys. Now shortly after Harry's arrival at Hogwarts, Dumbledore passes this mantle of invisibility on to its rightful and sufficiently grown-up heir.

The investing of Harry with the magical possibility of invisibility clearly trumps the Weasley sweater. It trumps it in provenance, coming down to him

from his father. And it also trumps the sweater in the opposite direction of consequences. For once Harry realizes that "the whole of Hogwarts was open to him in this cloak," he heads straight for the so-called *Restricted Section* of the school library and almost immediately provokes an illicitly opened book into shrieking at him (*Sorcerer* 205). The scream of this forbidden fruit triggers a series of personal and institutional alarms. Most immediately, it drives Harry in terrified flight down the halls of Hogwarts and into a hiding place, which is both uncannily familiar and off the beaten track. This temporary hideout looks "like an unused classroom," but in it Harry finds "something that didn't look as if it belonged there, something that looked as if someone had just put it there to keep it out of the way" (*Sorcerer* 207). What Harry here confronts, Dumbledore will later identify as the Mirror of Erised (*desire* spelled backwards), an identification Harry and his reader have quite literally right before their eyes if only they could decipher the inverted and randomly segmented inscription carved around its top: "Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi" (207). The magic of this mirror—a stock image for a way with words that would, as Hamlet says, hold the mirror up to life—is to tell those looking into it not how they look but what they want more than anything else, their heart's desire. So in Harry's case and only in Harry's eye, what is on view in this mirror are the generations of family this orphaned child has lost. By contrast, Ron whose family has attended Hogwarts for generations sees himself as Head Boy, a distinction that his overachieving older brother, "Percy the Prefect," is already on his way to attaining. So this mirror holds the glass up not to how we live now, but to what we now desire—what, for better or for worse, in fantasy or in conviction, we have set our hearts on.

Eventually we learn of and share Harry's suspicion that it was Dumbledore who deliberately put this mirror of desire in his terrified and hiding-out way. Like all competent headmasters and Prosperos, Dumbledore knows that for some things, you just have to learn them on your own. He knows that for all his pressing admonitions "to use it well," the green boy on the receiving end of this gift of invisibility is going to let his untutored desire draw him on to some version of a *Restricted Section,* whose frightening consequences will put him in urgent need of a good clear look at just what is it he wants out of what he has gotten himself into.

The Mirror of Erised is not, however, granted a final authority. In the same breath with which Dumbledore identifies it as a spectacle of "delights," he expressly impugns its value and its staying power. He congratulates Harry that "you, like hundreds before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised" (*Sorcerer* 213); but he then quickly adds that this plane or level of self-reflection "will give us neither knowledge or truth." "It," he ominously goes on, can even "drive you mad" (215). With this characterization of the mirror as

both a dallying place of recuperative delight and a potential opening to madness, Dumbledore enters an authoritative warning not only against any heart that would feed on narcissist fantasy alone but also against any book that would glut its readers on only such fare. The fantasy of this mirror—a fantasy that is both reflected upon and hedged with cautionary comment—marks these books' flights of invention and turns of magic as written not in the spirit of wildly outlandish fantasy but in acknowledgement of the limits and constraints of such inevitabilities or near inevitabilities as gravity, death, Muggles, and Draco Malfoys. Through all these, any young reader of Harry Potter has to chart his or her course toward some magically improvised way of becoming at home in the world. Doing an end-run around them is not an option; it is the purest of fantasies. Harry's mother and father, for example, are irretrievably gone, but a family for this "boy who lived" is already there with the Weasley sweater and the fatherly Dumbledore. Similarly, to fly on a broom is a fantasy and a possible figure for arrant escapism. But the kind of writing so typical of our present cultural moment is such a constant drag on our spirits that genuinely lively writing can strike us as a breath of fresh air, on the force and thrust of which we may take wing. Against the travesty of *gravitas* that is the "Official" or "Mandarin Style," the differently pitched notes and rhythms of a lively style can act as a tonic working its way through a reader's entire system. The writing itself is launched and in flight, and on what is essentially nothing but the air or breath of its every turn and move it can take its attentive readers along with it—even and perhaps especially if these readers happen to be inexperienced fledglings who didn't even know that they were thirsting for such flights of words and fancy. This is one sense of flying that is possible for us, not in fantasy but in fact, the facts of reading and writing.

Within its framing of a stilled moment of self-reflection, the Mirror of Erised tells us more even than what Harry wants and more even than the proverbial danger of getting what you wish for. With its commentary on the potential trap of fantasy and nostalgia, the mirror brings into sharp focus a pointed, powerfully generalized, and judiciously self-critical reflection on the genre and literary mode of fantasy to which the Harry Potter books more or less belong. In the end, then, the Mirror of Erised in *The Sorcerer's Stone* constitutes the book's own reflection on what all these Harry Potter books would be about. With and through this looking glass, Rowling enters a thoughtfully reflective claim about a desired feature of her work that would distinguish it from escapist fiction for whatever age group. In the imaginative gardens of these books, you will find real toads (and real heroes). Romping through these fields, an alert child will constantly come upon the kinds of telling truths that are most effectively and authoritatively snared in a web of fiction or make-believe. That is the literary sleight of

hand practiced by these books. They make appear a fairly endless stream of caricatured but telling parallels to, and takes on, our workaday world. And all these endless parallels—for example, Quidditch broom models with flashy trademarks like *Nimbus 2000* or *Firebolt*—crop up and keep multiplying within the one all-encompassing garden of the imagination staked out by the series's deep-rooted opposition between the dullness of Muggledom and the magic of Hogwarts, the latter, it would appear, an uncannily familiar send-up of the whole tone and cast of characters for a British public school or, *mutatis mutandis,* for any school.

To appreciate the full import of the Mirror of Erised, we should recall how Harry came to be standing in front of it as a consequence of coming into his inheritance of the Invisibility Cloak encumbered by nothing but the admonition to "use it well." If the Mirror of Erised is not just a convenient plot device, no more is this cloak just a one-page wonder. And to begin exploring its significance, one can start with the very real material difference between it and "the Weasley sweater" so redolent of the world of Charles Dickens. For these differences—differences of style as well as material—are very much on display in Rowling's writing. The down-to-earth wool of a Weasley sweater embraces one in a bulky and warmly inclusive fold. To anyone lucky enough to wear it, it administers one large and sustained hug. By contrast, the mysterious silkiness of the invisibility cloak is sleekly smooth and fluidly labile. Forever on the shimmering move and always poised to show its stuff, it gleams, flows, and slithers. Just that mobile liveliness strikes me as a figure for the writing of this book, both the activity of writing the book and the character of the writing to be found in it. The cloak is Rowling's signature, its panache her signature fashion or style. It announces that the writing in which it occurs represents a newly juiced and sleekly dynamic style of writing for children, a style that, while inheriting and putting to good use all of the good English work in this line, would also have it known that it is engaged in redesigning that line, set on bringing it up to speed with the very different velocities and spaces in which our kids now go about their lives of working and playing, fearing and taunting, competing and wondering, goldbricking and grade-grubbing, dying of embarrassment and living for attention. It's as if this inaugurating book of the series says, one Potter to another, "Even England isn't in that England any more, Beatrice."

Harry's true but wild surmise that in this cloak "the whole of Hogwarts was open to him" is obliquely addressed to us readers, who are, in plainest point of fact, having the world of Hogwarts opened up to us by nothing other than a weave of writing whose fabricator has long since ceased to be seen in anything other than the works or remnants of her hand (*Sorcerer* 205). For

Harry, the patrimonial cloak comes out of the blue, but for someone like Ron with magic in the family, it comes as something he has heard tell of in awe-struck tones. Ron knows of the cloak and knows further that it is "really rare and really valuable" (*Sorcerer* 201). This testamental gift come down from the hands of the father rings out with the sound of a gift *for* something—a gift that brings danger and risk with it, as when Harry's inexperienced hand so thoroughly botches his maiden voyage of invisibility. Enfolded into the material of this cloak, then, is a rare and valuable power that, misused, could bring on things even worse than the handiwork of the sorcerer's apprentice. The cloak is magical, it is a gift, it is an inheritance, it is a responsibility. Does anything more economically answer to this complex of identifications than the fact and gift of language itself?

But the Invisibility Cloak, it might be objected, writhes and slinks with the motion of a snake. When Harry takes it out from under wraps and lets it display its stuff, it "slithers" down to the floor and luxuriates in "gleaming folds" (*Sorcerer* 201). The reptilian quality of this "something fluid and silvery gray" is richly ambivalent. On the one hand, it recalls the snake memorialized on the crest of Draco Malfoy's Slytherin House, not to mention the very alive and enormously menacing snake who will be attending the resurgent Voldemort of *The Goblet of Fire* (201). On the other hand, Harry's specialness stems in great part from his totemic affinity with serpents. The first major demonstration of his powers occurs at a zoo where he inadvertently springs a boa constrictor from its cage. Later, when the Hogwarts Sorting Hat is assigning its new arrivals to their different houses, we learn that Harry harbors at least a strain of what in others less blessed or gifted will come to full expression under the sinister sign of Slytherin House. And still later—in *The Chamber of Secrets*—Harry will be discovered to be a Parseltongue, one conversant in snake-talk. (Not to worry though. Even the patriarchal Dumbledore's words coil out "snake-like" and his writing is "narrow" and "loopy.")

In his *Biographia Literaria,* Coleridge remarks that the Ancient Egyptians saw the serpent's slithering motion as an emblem of intellectual power (II. 14). It's not hard to see why. The subtlest beast of the field is sinuousness incarnate. It is quicksilver made flesh, the glittering choreography of a quick mind or an agile pen. The snake's ever so finely articulated skeleton is naturally gifted at turning itself into sinuous coils or gathering itself into powerful uprearings. Whatever else one might be tempted to call a snake, *disjointed* does not immediately come to mind. There seems to be no joint there, only superlative torque and flexibility. If you think of a body of writing as a *corpus,* the lither the better, but also the lither the more dangerous, the more coiled up with a potentially venomous thrust. So too with the gifts of mind and language. A way with written words

is a rare and valuable gift, but on the principle that the corruption of the best is the worst, it can also become a very dangerous playing with fire. This sense of the stakes in what could become of Harry Potter provides his adventures with an edge. The adventures of the "boy who lived" are adventures in quest of using that boy's life and liveliness well, but the hydra-headed spawn of Slytherin House stands as a constant reminder of how such potent vitalities can go wrong to degrees of magnitude appallingly beyond the reach of your typical Muggle. In *The Prisoner of Azkaban,* Harry is so disproportionately vulnerable to the "Dementors"—supernatural agents of despair whose kiss can suck the life and spirit out of you—both because he has had more horrors to contend with and also because, like all heroes, he is endowed with a greater potential for evil as well as for good. As Shakespeare pungently puts it, lilies that fester smell worse than weeds.

With an appreciative charge and length of cherishing that go far beyond the demands of the plot, Rowling has an entranced Harry dwell on the "shining, silvery cloth" of an Invisibility Cloak that, seemingly alive, is yet "strange to the touch, like water woven into material" (*Sorcerer* 201). Indeed, so attractively fluid is the cloak that Harry cannot resist letting its "material flow over his hands, smoother than silk, light as air" (*Sorcerer* 205). I will not say that Rowling intended this, and I do not detect any development of it in the four books so far published, but such dwelling on a Harry himself so tactilely absorbed in handling the cloak suggests to me not only a writer delighting in her touch for the weave and fabric of written words, but also a writer putting on display her cheerful confidence that all the verbal vitality and handicraft entrusted to her will be used not just charmingly but well. For my purposes suffice it to say that the glamorously serpentine shimmer of the invisibility cloak imagined by Rowling recalls the charged current of energy sluicing through sentences whose composer is delighted to be thus showing what she's made of in the deft moves she performs along a complexly branching course of well-made and well-linked sentences. Harry's enraptured kenning of the invisibility cloak as "water woven into material" weaves or steeps into one another both the value of fluency and the constraining fact that writing unavoidably requires the syntactical craft of weaving words together. The apparently invertebrate flow of the snake may be a powerful and charming ideal of fluency, but its illusion can only be achieved by the articulated turnings of syntactical mastery and the sure, supple, and endlessly various ligatures tying sentence to sentence.

Our most recent crop of readers are eagerly in on something that compels even those just along for the ride to keep attentively up to its mark and constantly on to its moves. With their enthralled reading of the Potter books, our children are happily being brought into receptive communion with a power, life,

and grace, which most of them would not have otherwise suspected was there for the having in words on a page. Certainly there are other and stronger antidotes to the woodenness of the Mandarin Style; but because Rowling's principal readers are just starting out, an early exposure to her verbal wizardry could conceivably cast so powerful a spell as to prevent these fledglings from becoming snared for life in the dead and deadening cadences of the Official Style. The more difficult pleasures of Harold Bloom's longing may or may not come later, but in our increasingly compartmentalized world of "age-appropriate" entertainment, these mature delights and trials don't have a chance of coming to full flower and fruition until some form of adolescent literature has prepared the ground both by addressing precisely where the young find themselves today and by performing that address in a style memorably and energetically counter to the passive lumpishness so recognizable in the likes of Dudley Dursley. I look forward to what I and my fellow teachers of rhetoric and composition can expect in the way of writing moves and capabilities from a generation whose first prolonged (and blessedly voluntary) immersion in the pleasures of reading has been the up-to-speed and decidedly well-written tonic of the Harry Potter books.

But do kids reading these books care about all this style and rhythm, fluidity and sparkle that I am dragging to front-stage center? Is that what they are attracted to in the Harry Potter books? No, it is not. Nor, truth be told, does any proficient writer really need to *think* of these moves and effects, if by thinking is meant a self-conscious, aforethought decision through every step and syllable of the process. Knowing the way these things get done—knowing your medium or vehicle—means in practice not having to stop for decisions every step of the way. Rowling's medium or instrument is the written language, and she knows this instrument. She can play its stops the way a gifted dancer can play her body out into moves and turns that are the wonder and delight of the rest of us. When an eleven-year-old boy gives his attention to a sentence like "Harry picked it [a letter] up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band," he's hooked or charmed, I imagine and grant, by the cartoonishly super-sized simile of a rubber band, whose elasticity his own idleness or mischief might have been playing around with that very morning (*Sorcerer* 34). But I would contend that an oblique and continuing result of this heightened delight and attention can be a comfortable proficiency in the ablative absolute, one among several distinguishing moves or structures of the written language. Just as you pick up the spoken language by hearing it all around you and trying to get your own tongue around it, so the most natural way of becoming proficient in the dialect of the written language is to be an alert and responsive reader of competent and lively prose. Watch performance after performance of ballet, and you will probably refine and deepen your sense of the graceful, but your own stride will not be found to be

magically approaching the condition of a sylph. The results of attentively reading complexly vigorous prose can or should be different, because this prose mounts a long run of syntactical performances that, when followed (in the sense of both tracked and understood) by a reader, will form and animate that reader's own repertory of writing moves. The kind of communicable power that I am locating in Rowling's syntax "keeps," writes Ralph Waldo Emerson, "quite another road than the turnpikes of choice and will, namely, the subterranean and invisible tunnels and channels of life." This is a power, Emerson adds, that works "obliquely, and not by the direct stroke" (483). But Muggles have little patience with obliqueness. Like the drills Vernon Dursley deals in at Grunnings, they are nothing if not direct (*Azkaban* 27). For the making of successful little readers, writers, and thinkers, they would prescribe a forced march of instruction, beginning with phonics drills and peaking with manuals on how to ace the verbal section of the SATs. In contrast to these ambitions and practices of a decidedly Mandarin cast, Rowling's style suggests a less dubiously programmed way of cultivating the written word. Her style is not directly drawing kids to her books, but it does provide something they will be picking up along the way, something that, for all the obliquity of its address, will be casting its spell very deeply into the propitious soil of their young minds, down where you find the "subterranean and invisible tunnels and channels of life." I am confident that Rowling knows something about this, that she senses the depth of what she is about, and that, like Emily Dickinson, she revels in the artist's necessity of telling it slant. So I will permit myself a last and no doubt fanciful flight that it was just this prospect of a magically oblique effect on her young readers that prompted Rowling to have the path toward the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry commence on the twisting and turning course of a street called Diagon Alley (*Sorcerer* 61).

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