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## **“Fake News”: Harry Potter and the Discourse about Reality<sup>1</sup>**

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“Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry,  
but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?”  
Albus Dumbledore, 1998, on King’s Cross, London  
(J. K. Rowling 2007, 723)

From among the several possible approaches to the novel,<sup>2</sup> I would like to highlight one at the moment, the one that I will designate as the discourse about reality. More precisely, I would be interested in the ways the novel represents the problem of reality for the reader. First of all, two brief samples from Hungarian newspapers:

An extraterrestrial being has been spotted in Thailand by several peasants; first in a rice field, then the ET became ERL (extra-rice-land): it climbed on a tree, then flew away. The ET was described as being 27.5 inches tall, having a fairly big head but small mouth, its skin was yellow and its breast flat. It was bald, its eyes and ears were big and what was strange about it was that it left no footprints. According to the peasants’ report, the ET was rambling on the rice field for about an hour, seemingly being unaware of the humans, then suddenly floated up onto a tree. Authorities have interrogated about ten peasants and each of them told the story of the encounter with an alien civilisation in the same way, and they described the alien identically. [...] An English gentleman was walking naked for unknown reasons in the historical downtown of Bratislava for unknown reasons on Sunday evening. The deed of the young man in his twenties caused general astonishment. According to the Slovakian news agency TASR, the nudist tourist is facing a fine of 1,000 korunas. The man was holding his clothes in a bag under his arm. (MTI 2005)

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<sup>2</sup> The label “novel” here refers to the reading of J. K. Rowling’s series about Harry Potter, the parts of which are interrelated but might be read separately as well, as one single text—which, though, cannot be fully consistent.

What happened, *in fact*? The question itself is quite laden with preconceptions, because it supposes that real events are indeed intelligible, as if it were intelligible what is commonly called “reality.” What can be supposed on the basis of the articles above is that something happened. These simple Thai peasants indeed saw something and this honourable English tourist got rid of his clothes for some reason in Bratislava. Since both pieces of news are unexplainable on a rational basis, we describe them as irrational in an ironic discourse. Nevertheless, something happened, and our bewildered or sceptical approach to it marks the boundaries of understanding and cognition.

It seems that in what we presuppose as reality there is a fair amount of incomprehensible things. It is just the strange, bizarre and absurd things that seem to form our sense of reality. Our reticence or irony about phenomena that belong to the sphere of reality and appear in its situation or context but that cannot be explained rationally does not deny the complexity of reality but still limits it and refers what is incomprehensible for it to the domain of the unbelievable, and explains it as fabulation, tale or madness.

Let us surmise (and this would be our trivial premiss) that reality in itself is unintelligible. More precisely it is way more complex and complicated than we would think. The world is composed of so many narratives and choosing from these, we decide what we accept or do not accept as so-called reality, as true, factual, and we compose our reality from these choices.

Our second proposition, to move forward the narrative a little bit, is this: only narrative fiction is suitable for representing the (complex, differentiated, relative) reality. More exactly: narrative fiction seems appropriate for somehow (re)presenting the elaborate complexity, the diversity composed of innumerable narratives, of the world.

As an instructive and entertaining narrative example of this, I would like to mention Gogol’s short story *The Nose*. Here, reality (that is, what exactly happened to Major Kovalyov’s nose) is not intelligible either for the characters or for the narrator(s) of the story. What is available for those (for example, the reader) who wish to fit the bizarre events into some kind of real (that is, plausible) pattern is merely hearsay, gossip, rumours, legends, that is, a set of unverifiable stories that contradict each other and themselves. In the final analysis, from all these stories, another,  $n+1^{\text{th}}$  narrative could be constructed, which, therefore, does not present itself as the credible version of true events but as the ultimate vanity of the final intelligibility of reality, the failure of all positivist and Cartesian narratives aiming to reach this, representing the schizophrenia of narrators who wish to achieve this aim.

Then what about the *Harry Potter* novels? How and why can the questions of talking about reality arise in relation to these stories? Can such a question be asked at all? (See Granger and Bassham 2010.) It seems that the situation is simpler in this case, for it could be assumed that the *Harry Potter* story is, after all, not reality, *only a tale*. On the basis of our generic prejudices, these novels are fairy tales, which means that the reading experience here is not particularly provoked. A fairy tale is not reality. Fairy tales are *a priori* read and interpreted metaphorically. Using Wolfgang Iser’s categories (See Iser 1993, 1–21), narratives such as tales are implausible, incredible, imaginary for the simple receiver (for instance, a child), that is, they are clearly separable from “real” narratives but they are different from fictive narratives as well, because, in contrast to them, in this case, the feeling of the semblance of reality does not even occur.

There is still a certain hostility towards this type of novel. This can be taken as a global semantic attack against humanity, which states outright that we are not alone; that the social, political, philosophical, physical and natural scientific order in which we live and acknowledge as real is not totally valid. That there is a world parallel to ours which is entirely similar to ours (mostly, of course, in its ethical aspects, because *the magician is also human*, the evil is evil everywhere, and the good is good everywhere). In the novel, the two worlds are penetrable. Maybe that is the problem. A tale which seems to be stubbornly and cunningly transgressing the frame of imaginary designated for it, a tale which questions the order of narratives about reality. The merging of appearance and reality is a dangerous thing, especially for the seemingly unprofessional and uninitiated readers like children. One of the characteristic ideological objections against the *Harry Potter* novels is precisely this: they disturb the child reader, who (caution!) is going to treat *the imaginary as fiction*. One of the instructive writings of Umberto Eco’s is exactly about the real uncertainty of this boundary, that is, why the polar bear of Central Park in New York could fatally wound two children that dived into its tank:

Instead, our children are raised with whales that talk, wolves that join the Third Order of St. Francis, and, above all, an endless array of teddy bears. Advertising, cartoons, illustrated books are full of bears with hearts of gold, law-abiding, cozy and protective – although in fact it’s insulting for a bear to be told he has a right to live because he’s only a dumb but inoffensive brute. So I suspect that the poor children in Central Park died not through lack of education but through too much of it. They are victims of our unhappy conscience. To make them forget how bad human beings are, they were taught too insistently that bears are good. Instead of being told honestly what humans are and what bears are. (Eco 1994, 215–216)

The kind bear of cartoons is just fiction, an illusion, zoo reality is much more dramatic and horrific. “Warning! Dangerous animals! Please do not tease or touch”, as it is stated.

Rowling’s novels are indeed dangerous inasmuch as they claim that the boundary between imagined and real things is artificial and the transgression of which is possible, what is more, natural. Rowling’s novels also undermine the moral and educational system of several centuries, but not by representing witches as living and benevolent creatures. The greatest offence of a *Harry Potter* novel is that it subverts European metaphysical and Cartesian logic in that it does not confront fantasy with rationality but the 20<sup>th</sup>-century postmodern experience of reality:

Ever since the Cognitive Revolution, Sapiens have thus been living in a dual reality. On the one hand, the objective reality of rivers, trees and lions; and on the other hand, the imagined reality of gods, nations and corporations. As time went by, the imagined reality became ever more powerful, so that today the very survival of rivers, trees and lions depends on the grace of imagined entities such as the United States and Google. (See Harari 2014, 34)

The relative experience of reality posited in the place of imaginary makes the novel a part of “reality”: the world of Hogwarts, in this sense, is a part of our reality, another narrative that sounds incredible among the others, improbable, yet difficult to refute. The fact that we cannot see Hogwarts or Platform 9 and  $\frac{3}{4}$  will not make them implausible. They might exist despite the fact that we do not talk about them. This novel shows the end of the unambiguousness of talking about reality, something that adults might know or suspect and which is becoming natural even for child readers.

Let us look at *Harry Potter* as a fictional (and not merely imaginary) narrative, in which one of the main themes of the novel is the questioning of the boundaries of reality, fiction and imaginary; more precisely the highlighting of the insufficiency of narratives constructing reality. How do they speak about Hogwarts and how do they remain silent about it? How does the discourse about this raise the questions of reality, tale and fiction? The *Harry Potter* novels abound in imaginary creatures, while the problem of the contact with reality is heavily reflected, for the novel does not claim that it is a tale, what is more, the text informs us about the fact that Hogwarts, a parallel world with ours, is very much real. That is, the novel does everything to present itself as a part of reality. It is ironic that the Ministry of Magic repeatedly clears the traces in a way that it shows them to be merely imaginary—that is why we do not know about the world actually. But why is removing traces necessary in a non-existing world? Eradicating traces and the ban of talking about

Hogwarts and diversifying it creates the illusion that this is a world that is very much existent but about which one has to be silent; in other words, it is not imagined but rather incomprehensible and dangerous.

There is a similar procedure in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*: Woland's entourage spends most of its time in Moscow clearing the traces after itself (just like the employees of the Ministry of Magic). Its aim is to prevent the investigating authorities from offering a reasonable, rational explanation for the confusing events that it brings about. What is more, these events are supposed to be found meaningless and the ones afflicted by them should be declared mad only to construct a narrative from the fragments of traces that has nothing to do with reality at all, still, it should sound more plausible and credible than any absurd, yet, true story.

Woland and his crew perform paradoxical things in Moscow: they wish to deprive their victims of their actual experience of reality. They offer the experience of reality of illusions, then, making it disappear, confuse their victims. What is absurd for the victims turns out not to be. Reality is something else, which, however, cannot be proven, because Woland's entourage made the pieces of evidence neatly disappear. Thus, reality turns out to be something extreme, unexplainable, unreal, paranormal, grotesque and absurd. What remains is the individual, hence non-sharable and non-collective experience, which causes the characters to flee: they turn into themselves and become insane. Perhaps it is not by chance that Homeless, as he calls himself, the poet, is the only one who survives (with a sane mind—committed to a psychiatric clinic), for only he has some idea about literature and fiction. Homeless understands that what he has done so far is worthless, that reality is practically unrepresentable in poetry, so he becomes a historian-philologist, paradoxically and ironically, as an expert who deals with facts. In Bulgakov's novel, reality, or more precisely, narratives credibly representing real events are only accessible for initiates, and that only as mere receivers.

Obviously, fairy tales also offer readers this kind of experience of being initiated. The participation in this experience is at the same time a sort of bargain as well, in a restrictive sense, inasmuch as receivers might be participants of events but not their authentic shapers and mediators. Making the discourse about reality uncertain, and the reading experience of this at a different level of the novel does not so much happen to Woland and the things he does but rather to the experience of the novel inscribed into the novel, for instance to the narration about the events with Pilate, what Jesus said and what eventually became of Judas. In fact, we do not get to know these exactly, but it does not matter, for all this is (caution!) literature. In this sense, Hogwarts is not fiction either, but a different form of reality which can

be accessed with the help of narratives that seem real. Hogwarts does not exist in the past, in what is declared imaginary, or in the future for that matter, because if it were so, its category would be absolutely obvious. This world is besides us, in the same time and space as ours, and it could be possible even here and now. It could be intelligible but the problem is that reports, tales, narratives about it are deemed mere fiction by us and are treated as such. The Thai peasants did not spot an alien creature, the good young Englishman was indeed drunk and Londoners in the novel were not astounded when an old Ford flew above their heads. We divide narratives into two groups (credible – incredible) and we name one of them “reality.”

From the aspect of real – fictive – imaginary, one of the interesting characteristic features of *Harry Potter* novels, then, is the presupposition of a parallel reality. The novel does not intend to stay within the limits of tales but works as a fictive narrative creating the sense of verisimilitude. These novels claim that there is no firm demarcation line between reality and fiction, since it is rather de-marcating in its nature: it moves, it is diffuse and changing. Let us take the example of Hermione Granger, who is Muggle-born. This position, above all, raises the problem of discrimination (that of between the Pureblood and the Mudblood), but it also silently informs us about the fact that, for Hermione, the transition between the two worlds is more than natural. Her dentist parents have no objection to their child having exceptional, though unusual, talents. She attends a special school because she is different from others. The Dursleys tell the neighbours about Potter that he goes to St Brutus’ Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys. The seemingly real, though non-existent, institution is still a more believable explanation than Hogwarts. The Dursleys will not talk about things they do not want to know about. They would like to push the problem aside with the false appearance of truth or the gesture of reticence and silencing, which is obviously a typical motif here, that of hypocritical Victorian concealment, the fear of cognition and the unknown and the total indifference and rejection towards otherness. The common denominator, then, of acceptance and rejection is that one must be silent about certain topics, either because they are *incredible* or *shameful*.

The *Harry Potter* novel can be regarded as an imaginary tale as far as there are incredible beings and things at work in it which are in contradiction with our empirical world that can be described in a Positivist manner. The world of Muggles is, naturally, not the more incredible for them. Any other (social, cultural, ethical, etc.) problem is fully similar. Looked at from Hogwarts, however, reality (that is, our Muggle reality) is not a fairy tale, even if it is sometimes bizarre and unfathomable. The Hogwarts experience of reality is liberal and relative: diverse worlds can live beside each other comfortably. We can imagine that there is a little

colony of aliens living in Thailand peacefully, about whom we know (on the basis of the cited article) but we will not disturb them, will not interfere into their lives and transgress their closed little world for we wisely tolerate otherness and enjoy its diversity, etc.

The question of reality viewed from Hogwarts does not arise in the same way as Hogwarts does for us but in a way we relate to narratives constructing and shattering reality. This communicative similarity is nonetheless remarkable. In other words, what is unbelievable is not the question of *pros* (do giants or hippogriffs exist?) or *cons* (do toasters or petrol-powered cars exist?) but of what really happened to Harry Potter at Hogwarts. That is, the question is whether Harry Potter’s stories or stories, narratives, gossip, hearsay, newspaper articles about stories that report about the return of Lord Voldemort are true or not. Hogwarts’ reality is, in fact, provoked by Potter’s implausible, fairy tale-like, insane narratives about the return of Lord Voldemort. (On more of this, see Dunbar 1998) Truth is essentially known by nobody (let us remind ourselves that Potter goes through most of the adventures *alone*), therefore, reality is even inscrutable for magicians, and for us, too. Apart from a few exceptions, Potter is looked at in the same way that we look at the poor Thai peasants who claim to have seen an alien: with gentle irony and a sarcastic smile. Potter is more like a celebrity of the tabloid press (let us think of the role and figure of Rita Vitrol and the Harry Potter image formed by her). The one who reports about the encounter with Voldemort is the most downright incredible medium of the sorcerer world, the magazine *The Quibbler*, edited by Luna Lovegold’s father, which appears esoteric even in that world. The common magician-reader, in fact, is reading Potter’s report about the Lord Voldemort encounter together with the usual everyday nonsense news.

What should the (magician) reader then believe? What indeed happened at Hogwarts? The dilemma of speaking about reality is, in fact, not about the existence of magicians of the Muggle (yes, they do exist) but about whether we can believe Potter. This is a question hardly decidable for the inhabitants of the magician world. In this sense, Potter appears to be losing the game: almost no-one believes his tales.

### Excursus: Nineteen Years Later

“And you don’t want to believe everything he [James] tells you about Hogwarts,” Harry put in. “He likes a laugh, your brother.”

Harry Potter to Albus Perselus Potter,  
1st of September, 2017, King’s Cross, London.  
(J. K. Rowling 2007, 754)

It seems like a great series has come to an end with the novel, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. However *Harry Potter* has been judged in the last few years, there can hardly be any doubt that Rowling has written herself into the history of literature once and for all, providing nourishment for the anthropologists of culture, education researchers, philosophers or even sociologists. With the birth of the *Harry Potter* novel not just a new hero, a new story, a new myth was born, but it can be taken as the first significant event in the globalised world of reading.

The closing piece of the novel-cycle, consisting of seven parts, is an interesting part of the series, from several points of view. Not only because the great story, rounded up from the independently readable novels, comes to a resting point at last, offering a solution and explanation for all that was bending the curiosity of the reader with a more and more vexing force, but rather because Rowling’s concept is being completed here: a *Bildungsroman* that is changing and forming together with the ideal reader.

This type of synchronicity, which comes from the experience of the intense overlap of novel time and the real time of the reader (namely: what we read is happening right now), is not a new phenomenon in itself. But there are not many examples for its conscious thought-out application on the level of a novel-cycle. One of the most well-known projects is the Rougon-Macquart cycle of Émile Zola, from the French literature of the last third of the 19th century. Zola wished to create the natural- and social-drawing of a French family, living during the second Empire, legitimating the fundamental determinational principle of naturalism with their story, according to which the hereditary features and the factors of the actual living-world (nature) exclusively specify our deeds and essentially our fate. Zola wrote the multitude of the novels of this cycle for about two decades (1871–1893) in terms of this scientifically founded concept, accordingly forming the characters’ fatal life as well.

I’m not going to compare the cycles of Zola and Rowling, I would just like to reflect on the temporality of writing, publication and reading here. First of all, essentially in both of the cycles, only the last novels give a clue to the retrospective

clarification of the putative or concrete synchronicity between the novel-time and the real time of the reader.

Upon the publication of the first book (*The Fortune of the Rougons*, 1871), which the contemporary French could have read, all the heroes of the narrated family-story are virtually dead. Yet the reader has no idea about all of this. Then the novels published in sequence obviously brief the reader, that the plot happens in the recent past. At the same time only the last part of the novel-cycle, published in 1893, titled *Doctor Pascal*, reveals in its full transparency the dated history of the three generations of the Rougon and Macquard family, with a correctly drawn family tree. Dr. Rougon Pascal, during the creation of the family tree, made discoveries that had illuminating force from a “medical” point of view, and at the same time realised his own destiny: his incestive relationship with his niece, from which a baby boy is conceived, who will be born in 1874, thus out of the time-frame contained in the novel-cycle. His other fundamental discovery is, that the family logically has an ancestress as well, Tante Dide, who can be found at the bottom of the family tree, married to the quiet Rougon first, then, after his death, married to the drunkard Macquart, having a child from both men, thus initiating a story that determines three generations. Tante Dide otherwise was born in 1768, and died at the age of 105 in 1873, in an asylum. (Namely, according to the diagnosis of Dr. Pascal, Tante Dide was a born neurotic, which was more or less inherited by everyone). At the moment of the publication and the actual affiliation of the first book, and in synchron with that, exists the beginning and the ending (the birth of the unbeknown child, representative of the new generation of the family, and the death of the ancestress of the family, Tante Dide) at the same time—as yet unknown to the contemporary reader.

From all this, the following conclusions can be drawn, regarding the temporality of the cycle:

1. The contemporary reader, in fact, starts to read an already closed story in 1871. (The first novel, according to the foreword of Zola, is nothing else, than *The Origin*.) The beginning and ending of the great story that is to be told (namely: the death and birth of its first and last hero) is in the narrow interval of writing, publication and the first reading.
2. The ancestress (Tante Dide) is born some hundred years before (1768) Émile Zola starts to write his first book in 1869.
3. The ancestress (Tante Dide) survives every member of the family: she dies at the age of 105, in 1873, nine months before the birth of “the newer link”, the youngest heir (a child from Pascal Rougon’s incestive relationship), so not so much after the publication of the first book. Thus she is present in the complete time of the story: allegorically connected to the reading and the writing.

4. At the publication of the last piece of the cycle (1893) the last Rougon boy is almost twenty years old: we do not exactly know his name, and if he is alive, presumably before raising a family, probably this way restarting the chain of the “clan’s degeneration” determined by neurosis and environment, the fateful DNA-spiral. Probably (unlike the reader), he is not, and will not be aware of this. However, his story played in the future is unwritten, it can certainly be foreseen.

Harry Potter, similarly to Pascal Rougon, got an answer to his great question in the last piece of the novel-cycle: who is he exactly? The novel-cycle, which can be understood, as a progressional novel, unfolds the story of seven school years, during which its hero matures from an 11 year old boy to an 18 year old young adult.

But when is Rowling’s novel-cycle laid, and how can the reader relate to this? It was unravelled from the first six books, that *parallel and synchronous* realities exist. The material construction of the non-magic (muggle) world allows the conclusion that the events in the novel happened more or less in the time now. Ergo Harry Potter lives here and now amongst us. But still, when was he born, and how old can he be right now? This legitimate curiosity is resolved in Part 7. Harry Potter’s visit to Godric’s Hollow is the first (and the last) time, when a *direct* stronghold is aroused for the reader, for the temporal comparison, thus clarifying the expression „our days”, between the time of writing, publication, the story and act, or the own time of the reader, etc. In the graveyard Harry finds the grave of his parents, on it a possibly coded message, the reader in turn realises the *only date* in the canvas of the novel:

The headstone [...] was made of white marble, just like Dumbledore’s tomb, and this made it easy to read, as it seemed to shine in the dark. Harry did not need to kneel or even approach very close to it to make out the words engraved upon it.

James Potter Born 27 March 1960 Died 31 October 1981

Lily Potter Born 30 January 1960 Died 31 October 1981

*The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.*

Harry read the words slowly, as though he would have only one chance to take in their meaning, and he read the last of them aloud. (J. K. Rowling 2007, 328)

The narrator uses refined irony for the motivation of her hero, and the reader is to solve the awaiting hermeneutic task, to which she has just been given a key. Not passing the only moment (and flipping through the previous volumes), the reader, thanks to the *dating of the epitaph* (which reports from the beginning and end as an authentic medium) can easily calculate the most important facts:

1. Harry Potter was born in July 1980. (According to the related article from Wikipedia, he was born on the 31st of July; this is in fact also the birthday of the writer, J. K. Rowling; and on the 27th of July, her first daughter, Jessica, was born.) His parents could have married at the age of 20, at a pretty young age.
2. He ended up in Privet Drive 4 on the 31st of October 1981, at his kind relatives, where he moodily spends almost ten years.
3. The last novel of the cycle is laid in the school year of 1997–1998, and ends a few months before Harry would become eighteen in July 1998.
4. Harry receives an invitation from Hogwarts in July 1991 (when he became 11 years old), where he travels on the 1st of September.
5. The book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* was published on the 30th of June, 1991 at the publisher Bloomsbury, more or less after the death of Dumbledore. Essentially, all that we have read about, has already happened, those were recent events, in fact the 90’s. But when the ideal reader (who is a young teenager at that time) finishes the first book in 1997, that time Harry Potter is pretty close to conquering You Know Who, and to finishing his school years.
6. The chapter, *Nineteen Years Later* is created on the 1st of September, 2017. Actually *it did not happen yet*. Harry’s middle child, Albus Perselus is going to Hogwarts at this time, with his 11 years, meaning he was born in 2005. In 2017 Harry is over 37. At the same time, 1st of September, 2017 is an event on the World Wide Web. Supposedly, unhallowed Potter-fanatics are going to gather together near the 9th and 10th platform of King’s Cross station in London, certainly at this time and place the members of the Potter family, Harry, Ginny, James, Albus Perselus, the small Lily will surely show up, and of course there will be the redheaded children of Ron and Hermione as well...

What’s the use of all this? In fact this is also part of the interpretation—a previously uncertain piece of puzzle finds its place, the ages can be calculated, the events can correlate, thus not only on the level of act, but on the level of the complete story. (The fans on Wikipedia have already created the complete profiles.) We have to note (as the similar process of Zola’s cycle warns us) that the dating of the act typically happens in the last part of the novel cycle. The revealing of the date permanently fixes the events, quasi giving all that to the passing time. The cycle is closed, the act is closed, and “our days” illusion finally becomes past

time in the reader. Only the story told in novels of heroes seeking and finding identity is finished, their lives not necessarily ending. As an epilogue for the *Deathly Hollows*, the last chapter (*Nineteen years later*) is finished in the future: we can see our favourite heroes already as adults, with their children, who are wearing the talkative names of departed heroes, thus eternalizing and carrying the past. The always familiar interconnection of beginning and end can also be found in the end of Zola's novel-cycle, but only as an implied possibility, unwritten, leaving the "ending" to the reader. But Rowling, with the last chapter of the 7<sup>th</sup> part, in a paradoxical way, shows us the future, thus does not open, but, on the contrary, irrevocably closes her hero's narrative story. Moreover, the narrative creation of the future, in addition to not giving more possibility to the reader's imagination, also divests of the parallel and the concurrent images of realities. The clear fixation and revelation of the future also folds up the metaphysical thrill, which was meant by the possibility of this concurrence. With this movement, Rowling pushes her novel-world from the barrier of reality and fiction to the imaginary (simply: fairy tale) dimension. It is, of course, not a problem, only less exciting. And this is not changed much by Dumbledore's verbal truth, when he tells Harry in the bizarre place of King's Cross: "Of course *it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?*"

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