

*The moment America yields to its neurotic impulse to become a Christian nation, instead of being a nation that respects and values Christianity, Harry Potter and the rest of our imaginative life will join Darwin on the scaffold erected each year by the Kansas City school board to toast great ideas.*

# THREE CHEERS FOR CICERO

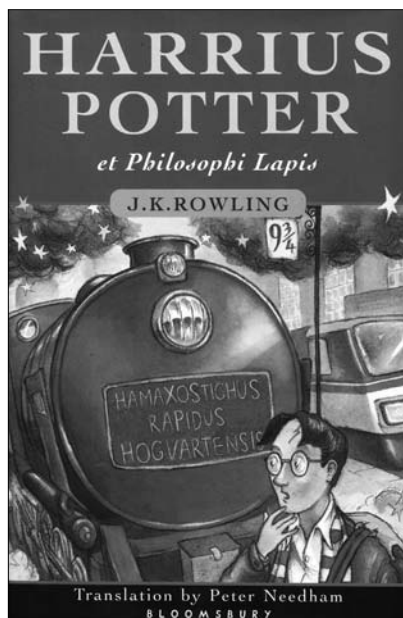
## SOME THOUGHTS ON READING HARRY POTTER IN LATIN

By Edwin Firmage Jr.

LAST CHRISTMAS, I DECIDED TO brush up on my Latin. I say brush up, but vigorous scrubbing with steel wool designed to remove heavy rust would be more accurate. As an undergraduate, I studied Latin, as well as a number of other dead languages, but had not done much with it in the almost twenty-five years since. After a couple of weeks' review with a well-thumbed copy of Wheelock, I was ready to begin my first big Latin read in decades. Providentially, at that very moment, my kids were cleaning out their rats' nest of a bookcase and came across a copy of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in Latin (*Harrius Potter et Philosophi Lapis*, translated by Peter Needham, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003) that had been given us by my dad, who is prone to buying strange things in London bookshops. In school, I had never gone in for translations of English kids' books into Latin and Greek. But, being older now and more fun-loving, I opened the book and began reading:



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*Dominus et Domina Dursley, qui vivebant in aedibus Gestationis Ligustrorum numero quattuor signatis. . . .* By the end of the first page, I was hooked. I finished the book two weeks later. Following are some reflections on reading a twentieth-century children's classic done into the language of Cicero, two thousand years dead.

WHAT INITIALLY SURPRISED me most is the fact that the book *could* be done into Latin. It's a testament to the timeless quality of J. K. Rowling's writing, as well as to the brilliance of Needham, her Latin translator, that the book reads beautifully and fluently, despite the occasional appearance of twentieth-century problems such as Uncle

Vernon's car (*autocinetum*), the traffic jam (*vehicula impedita*) in which it gets stuck, and motorcycles (*birotulae automatiariae*), flying and earthbound.

But more is at work here than "just" timeless writing and clever wordsmithing. Perhaps reports of the demise of Latin, I began to think, have been exaggerated. The more I reflected on this, the more positively perfect Latin, among all dead languages, seemed to be for this sort of thing. I imagined reading *Harry Potter* in my Sumerian and Hittite classes at Berkeley, and I pondered if it were done in Hittite, would we use all 315 cuneiform characters, complete with Akkadian and Sumerian logograms, or would we opt for the chicer look of the hieroglyphic Hittite inscriptions? And, speaking of hieroglyphics, how would *Harry Potter* work as part of a new, conversational

approach to teaching Middle Egyptian in place of the *Tale of Sinuhe* and *The Shipwrecked Sailor*? The fact that the humor in these last two sentences will be lost on readers who have not spent years trying to learn Ancient Near Eastern languages and literatures is in itself instructive. Clearly, when we're speaking of languages and their associated cultures, there are degrees of morbidity. Sumerian, Hittite, and Egyptian (Old, Middle, and New) are all in the class of things, like the Monty Python parrot, that would not vroom if you put 4,000,000 volts through them.

Latin and Latin culture, by contrast, are still very much with us, even those of us who do not call Vatican Hill home. Classical Latin just refuses to die. No doubt many thought it dead when uncouth Germans of various persuasions overran Gaul, Spain, and Italy. The Empire did die, but Roman culture lived on and actually ended up conquering the conquerors. The Franks, to take one instance, overran Gaul, giving it the new name (France, Frankreich) by which we still know it. Yet so completely did Roman Gaulish culture absorb the barbarian horde that less than a dozen words of Frankish origin survive in contemporary French. Gaul, that nation of *Astérix*, was the medieval equivalent of the Borg of *Star Trek*, assimilating everyone who crossed its path. Roman Gaul, complete with assimilated Franks, was again listed as an endangered species when an invasion of strapping blondes from Norway hit the shores of Omaha and Utah beaches in the ninth century. Like their Frankish cousins, however, the Norsemen, or Normans, too, were totally assimilated. By 1066, when they had had enough of continental easy living and set off to obliterate all things bright and beautiful in Britain, these *quondam*-Vikings were no longer speaking Old Norse but French, a new-fangled derivative of Latin.

The purpose of the preceding *CliffsNotes* review is to illustrate the fact that a lot of what made Roman culture great in Cicero's day continued to make it great for centuries, long after people stopped reading Cicero. One reason that *Harry Potter* in Latin is not only possible but is positively good reading is that something of ancient Roman culture hung on through countless invasions and disasters and lives on in Europe and its colonies today.

Unfortunately, however, except in a few isolated monasteries where the inmates sought relief from the tedium of ceaseless scripture reading by an occasional illicit dip into the classics, people *did* stop reading Cicero. Despite the stubborn survival of some basic elements of classical culture in Europe, people today would not be reading *Harry Potter*, or Oxford editions of Cicero for that matter, if other events had not occurred to bring the classical authors back to life. The story of that resurrection not only explains how we get a Latin version of *Harry Potter* that reads as naturally as if J. K. Rowling were Cicero's daughter, but also how European culture came to be and why it, not the fabled empires of the East, was to be the birthplace of the novels about Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

What I've come to appreciate in my musings on *Harrius Potter et Philosophi Lapis* is that, in ways so deep and broad that they at first escape our notice, our culture is Roman, or, to give

the Greeks their due, Greco-Roman. *Harry Potter* in Latin makes sense to us because, generation after generation since at least the eighth century, European culture has made the culture of Rome its own. Roman culture is the source to which Europe has returned again and again when it needed to reanimate its flagging spirit. When new words, new ideas, new legal forms, new philosophies, new architectural models, and new ways of analyzing the real world were needed, Europe did not create these from scratch, but rather dug deep into its own Roman past for the solutions. During the Renaissance alone, for example, some 10,000 new words, and with them thousands of new concepts and untold numbers of new institutions, came into the English language, and the vast majority of these were direct borrowings from Latin. Thousands of additional Latin words had already entered the language in the Middle English period. Through his Bible translation, Wycliffe singlehandedly contributed about a thousand. Also during the Middle English period, English adopted some 10,000 new French words, which of course themselves stem mostly from Latin sources. These too also represent more than just vocabulary items as isolated phenomena. Words embody concepts, practices, beliefs, institutions, and the like. The fact that English found a need for these words indicates the profound transformation of European society that was then underway. And the fact that the borrowings come ultimately from Latin suggests where a lot of this new cultural equipment originates as well: Rome.

To put these Latin influences into perspective, consider that the lexicon of ancient Sumer as we know it consists of about 3,700 words (it's admittedly incomplete). The modern Hebrew lexicon contains about 20,000. The contemporary English lexicon numbers between 50,000 and 60,000 entries. What these comparisons reveal is the extent to which our English vocabulary has increased in both size and expressive range due in no small measure to Latin influence.

Renaissance linguistic borrowings are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Latin influence on European culture. There have, in fact, been four great turnings to Roman culture. The first had already taken place in the eighth century when Charlemagne, in the process of trying to resurrect the Roman Empire, realized that to build such an empire he would need to have the same tools the Romans had used. He needed a literate and educated administration, a language capable of handling the complexities of empire, and a legal system that was equally sophisticated and flexible. He found them all in classical Rome. Thus began the first of Europe's Romanizing renaissances.

The Carolingian Renaissance contained all of the elements that would mark the three subsequent great awakenings of European culture. It came at a time of incipient political expansion and development, which in turn were made possible by the reintroduction of Roman institutions. It heralded a flowering of literature, music, and art, which likewise drew inspiration from Roman precursors. And it inevitably led to conflict with the Church, though the Church benefitted in the end.

*As one living  
in the most overtly  
and sometimes  
extremely religious  
Western nation,  
I say of the  
Bible Belt,  
“There but for  
the grace of  
Roman unbelief  
go I.”*



Charlemagne's grand plan for a new Roman Empire came crashing down with the appearance of the Norsemen, who plunged Europe into two hundred more years of turmoil. Emerging from this in the eleventh century, Europe was once again ready to expand and develop, and once more it turned to Rome for guidelines. The result was the twelfth-century renaissance that heralded the birth of modern Europe. From this time on, despite several setbacks, Europe never again sank into a dark age. This was the age of the great Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals, of the Crusades and the Inquisition (OK, so it's not all good), of Magna Carta, of nascent nation states, and of a triumphant Papacy. This was

also the beginning of European industry, which initiated an unprecedented exploitation of water and wind power; of the rise of cities, the first worthy of the name in hundreds of years; of trade; of scientific and philosophic inquiry; of Thomas Aquinas, Peter Abelard, Roger Bacon, Leonardo Fibonacci, and the anonymous authors of the Merton Speed Rule.

Empowering all of this—the most extraordinary cultural and political renaissance the western world had seen—was the rediscovery of Roman culture. It was a new-found appreciation of Aristotle and other Greek philosophers of science in Latin translation, that made the new philosophical and scientific achievements possible. It was the rediscovery and adaptation of Roman law, transformed into canon law, that enabled the growth of the Church and the papacy on an unprecedented scale, with all of the attendant consequences for good and ill. (The use of torture and the techniques of the Inquisition, for example, are of Roman extraction.) It was this same Roman law that became the foundation for continental Europe's nascent civil law codes.<sup>1</sup> This amazing age, in which Europe began to leave other regions of the world behind in all things political, economic, technological, and scientific, is a child of Rome.

The fourteenth century witnessed political unrest and disaster (the Black Death) on such a scale that, by rights, Europe should have sunk into another century or two of chaos. Instead, it rebounded even stronger than before—and in less than a generation. It's a testament to the depth of the transformation that began in the late eleventh century, which is in no small way a Roman transformation, that even having lost a quarter to a half of its population, Europe of the fourteenth was able to spawn what we call the Renaissance, *the* Renaissance.

The accomplishments of the Renaissance are well enough known that they need no retelling here. Like its predecessors, it is fundamentally a societal awakening brought about by the continuing unfolding of Europe's own classical past. What starts to change is the pace and extent of the unfolding and the increasing ability of society to absorb and adapt the past to its own new purposes. One of the novelties of this renaissance is the fact that for the first time since the fall of Rome ancient materials are no longer exclusively Latin. Scholars now have access to Greek originals, and Greek joins Latin as the *sine qua non* of the educated man. Greek philosophy, aesthetics, art, sculpture, architecture, and science now take their proper place alongside their Roman counterparts as models for emulation and adaptation.

One consequence of the rediscovery of Greek culture that's particularly relevant to *Harry Potter* is the huge interest of Renaissance scholars in Greek magic and alchemy. It is not the much-maligned Dark Ages but the iridescent Renaissance that, borrowing on Hellenistic sources, is the origin of Europe's fascination with such arcana as the philosopher's stone. The combination of this interest in magic and the newly invented printing press created the cottage industry of books about magic that continues unabated to this day.

It's ironic that the Renaissance, this highest of high points in classical studies (at least until then), should also represent the beginning of the end (a sort of end, anyway) of the Latin language. With the Renaissance, the living Latin of the middle ages gave way to a learned, classicizing Latin, admirable but artificial, and increasingly less of an obvious choice over rapidly maturing vernaculars. Having been injected and reinjected into the cultures and vernacular languages of Europe for centuries, Latin, in the years following the Renaissance, gradually yields to the vernaculars as they become capable of standing on their own as tools for political administration, literary expression, and scholarly and scientific research. Even so, Latin remains the prime language of scholarship well into the eighteenth century and the revolutions that brought Europe into modernity.

**I**T WAS THIS turmoil that set the stage for the fourth, and in some ways most important, European borrowing from the classical world: the revival of a democratic political culture. If, for Charlemagne and the twelfth-century Church, Rome was the paradigm of empire, for Thomas Jefferson, it (and of course Athens) provided a model for the world's first republic since Cicero's day and the first democracy since Plato's. The etymology here speaks for itself: democracy, from Greek *demos*, people, and *kratia*, power—the original people's power; republic, from Latin *res publica*, the people's business, as administered on their behalf by the mostly rich, powerful, and hopefully enlightened (a typically Roman transformation of Greek radicalism).

Less famously indebted to the classical world than its predecessors, the eighteenth century enlightenment and its political ramifications are in fact unthinkable anywhere but among the spiritual descendants of Pericles and Cicero. To understand

why, consider Europe's next-door neighbor, the Middle East, which has never known a political system other than tyranny—even if, as in modern Jordan, the reign of Saladin, or the caliphs of Spain, that power could be considered relatively benign. Not to put too fine a point on the matter, the Middle East has never had a political *culture*. The manifold institutions of thought and practice that made republican Rome, Periclean Greece, or modern America possible are as rare beyond the Bosphorus as lovers of George Bush. Middle Eastern government was, and still is in many places, tied to familial and tribal, rather than public, forms of organization. Political life and the practice of government in democratic Greece or republican Rome revolved around the *agora* and the forum. Political life in the Middle East was focused in the *divan*, the potentate's private council chambers. There was no architectural forum in Middle Eastern cities because there was no metaphorical forum for discussion. And not much has changed for the better between Saladin and Saddam.

The primary gathering place in a Middle Eastern city is the mosque. Even today in Cairo, the Muslim world's greatest city and its cultural Mecca, the grandest buildings—and, colonial structures and squares excepted—the only places *everyone* can enjoy, are the mosques. Herein lies another great difference between the classical world and its European descendants on the one hand and the Middle East on the other. The importance of this difference for the emergence of free thought and imagination of the sort that lead to a *Harry Potter* can't be overstated. Greco-Roman law, politics, and government are essentially secular. The making of democratic and republican law was by and large a matter of public debate based on practical, real-world considerations, and the people making these decisions were not religious leaders. No religious scripture defined the parameters of the debate. Interestingly, although they were even in their own day more a matter of propaganda than of practice, the ancient Near Eastern law codes (Eshnunna, Lipit-Ishtar, Hammurabi, the Middle Assyrian Laws, and the like) were also decidedly secular in nature. Too bad they proved to be a false start. In the

## THE GRACE OF HOCUS POCUS

SOME READERS MIGHT question whether books on magic constitute a plus for European culture. I make the point here primarily by way of a parenthesis relevant to the background of the *Harry Potter* books. But, while we may dismiss the practice of magic as so much hocus pocus, its presence in our culture is not without an upside. It has certainly provided a wealth of historical curiosities that writers of fantasies such as *Harry Potter* have used to wonderful effect. If you believe Carl Jung, however, it's done more than that. Magic and alchemy have also enriched our imagination. In Jung's reading, alchemy in particular shows itself to be not (or not simply) a misguided predecessor to chemistry but a form of psychological symbolic expression and self-exploration for a sizeable chunk of European society for whom Christian orthodoxy was an unsuitable vehicle.

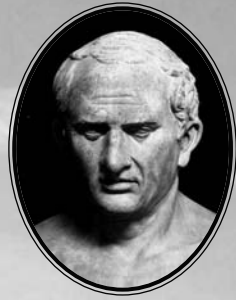
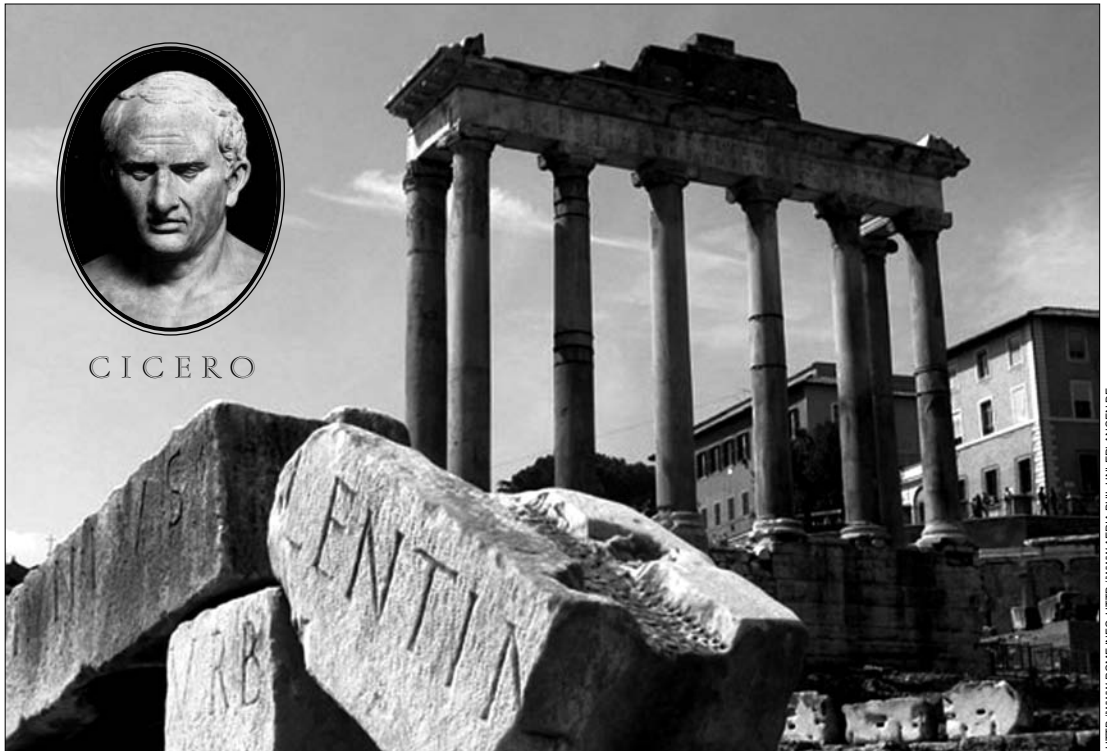
The magic of the *Harry Potter* books, being nothing so deep, merits no such analysis. But I don't think one should try to evade evangelical criticism of the magic in *Harry Potter* by simply dismissing it as superficial or just a prop for the story. Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that it was a richer and deeper part of the story, as it is in, say, Charles Williams's adult fantasies. How should one then react to it? If Jung's alchemical studies have demonstrated anything it is that one man's garbage is another's treasure, one man's magic, another's religion. Your hocus pocus is my Eucharist (*hoc est corpus meum*), your hail-fellow-well-met gentleman's cult is my temple endowment. That portion of its past that mainstream religion—any religion in any age—deems to be inappropriate can conveniently be dismissed as so much magic. The Christian church certainly did this with paganism. From a skeptic's point of view, however, the definition of Christian orthodoxy as something self-evidently other than magical mumbo-jumbo is a distinction without a difference. From a phenomenological perspective, religion and magic are the same thing. When we talk about the significance of the magical tradition, therefore, what's really at stake is the cultural value we place on that particular form of imagination *cum* spirituality that is religion. Strange as it may sound to orthodox ears across the Christian spectrum, therefore, I would say that Christians, as symbolic thinkers and humans who would be more soulful, are richer for our magical, pagan past, for the survivals of the worship of trees, springs, storms, and animals, and for the numinosity that surrounds sex.

If one grants the possibility that much of what one believes is at least significantly incomplete and possibly utter nonsense, as close to a real understanding of God as the alchemists were to real chemistry, one has to concede that there isn't much point in being unduly concerned about achieving philosophical perfection in one's belief system. Is there any advantage in being 3 percent accurate in one's statements about God as opposed to, say, 2 percent, if 4 percent is all you can achieve? Pursuing this line, then, one must admit that religion, insofar as it is a matter belief and ritual, is more metaphor than syllogism, and one should feel free to explore a variety of metaphors. Many believers, for example, don't object when the Hebrew Bible calls Yahweh a warrior. It is (for most moderns at least) a metaphor that says something about God, and one doesn't feel compelled to take the statement too literally. Why, then, should one object to the notion that God is also an oak tree, a summer thunderstorm, or a bountiful harvest? In this case, the more metaphors perhaps the better. Take all for what they can offer, none as absolute truth. In this view, if the early Christian church made a mistake in its confrontation with paganism, it was in not incorporating more of the mumbo-jumbo than it did, for it ended up with an impoverished notion of God. Perhaps evangelical critics of *Harry Potter* should trust that God won't hold them to a metaphor and try a bit of spiritual homeopathy: read the book!

*Large parts of Roman culture, especially the godless bits, have always been part of our own, even in outposts such as Salt Lake City, Utah. They live on, like the boy who lived. Harrius Potter exists because Cicero and his pals in the Senate and the plebs of the comitia believed that people should be governed by rational, civic-minded debate, not by revelation from God.*



Church because it had a sophisticated and secular legal tradition, a Roman tradition, to take the place of the Bible and the priestly guardians of righteousness. That tradition included such abstractions as the corporation, on which all modern business depends. In fact, the genius of Roman law is that it is full of abstractions—abstractions that free it from any attachment to the particular individuals who make and enforce the law. As a result, in the West, the notion of law itself is an abstraction. It is something that exists independent of a lawgiver (Yahweh, Marduk, Allah, or your local tribal headman). It is sanctioned not by the threat of divine punishment but by the consent of the governed. At the core of modern Western law is



CICERO

Muslim Middle East, there is no native legal tradition that is independent of Scripture and its interpretation. Indeed, no aspect of life, including modern business practice, escapes the jurisdiction of the Qur'an. In extreme cases, such as Saudi Arabia, Qur'anic interpretation in practice means that public and private life alike are subject to the intrusions of the religious police. In Afghanistan, until its liberation, it meant Taliban thugs.

This is where secular Roman law saves the day for Europe. European political culture was able to throw off the yoke of the

the conviction of the governed that there exist certain inalienable rights such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, which it is the purpose of all law and government to protect. It is not the purpose of law to enforce righteousness. Mostly, in the view of those brilliant colonial interpreters of Greece and Rome, that government is best which governs least.

Thus Thomas Jefferson and Tom Paine. At a time when many in America are demanding that the country return to its roots, people would do well to remember that as far as its political philosophy is concerned, these roots are in the Roman forum, not the Vatican or Mt. Sinai. Paine, a true man of his time, was among the first to apply, if crudely (in both senses of the term), what we today would call a historical-critical approach to the biblical text. In the process, he ripped that text to shreds.

As America struggles to decapitate a Hydra of its own making in Iraq, it would likewise be useful to recall that politically and culturally speaking, Iraq has yet to emerge from under the shadow of the caliphs, of whom Saddam Hussein is simply the last and most sadistic incarnation. It has not had the benefit of a secular, democratic political culture two millennia in the making. There are only two real democracies in the Middle East today, and both took their lead significantly not from their own ancient sacred books (in fact, they deliberately turned their back on these books), but primarily from European examples. Both were founded by men committed to secular democracy. Considering this, I think the Israelis and the Turks would agree with me that George Bush is therefore unlikely to be the father of a third Middle Eastern democracy. Such a happy eventuality is only slightly easier to conceive than the idea that the next worldwide children's bestseller will

be written by a Muslim woman presently on the dole, as was J. K. Rowling when she wrote the first *Harry Potter* novel. But, two thousand years down the road from Cicero, I (an American living in a remote western city where “Latin” refers variously to a class of salacious dances, the blank spot on the map south of Tucson, or cheap labor) read a children’s book written by an unemployed English woman and translated into Latin by a professor at stuffy old Eton, and it seems like the most ordinary thing in the world for me to do. It seems that way because large parts of Roman culture, especially the godless bits, have always been part of our own, even in outposts such as Salt Lake City, Utah. They live on, like the boy who lived, *puer qui vixit*. *Harrius Potter* exists not only because Cicero spoke Latin but because Cicero and his pals in the Senate and the plebs of the *comitia* believed that people should be governed by rational, civic-minded debate, not by revelation from God.

**H**ARRY POTTER, and you can pick the version, Latin or English, is indebted to the classical tradition in at least two other specific ways that are worth mentioning. The first has to do with the sacred role of comedy in that tradition. We might also call this playfulness of mind. It’s a very good sign indeed when the first book of the *Harry Potter* series opens with a delightful send-up of parental authority. In the original tongue, the book reads:

Mrs. Dursley was thin and blonde and had nearly twice the usual amount of neck, which came in very useful as she spent so much of her time craning over garden fences, spying on the neighbors.

And in Peter Needham’s inspired translation:

*Domina Dursley erat macra et flava et prope alterum tantum colli habebat quam alii homines, quod magno ei usui fuit quod tantum tempus consumebat in collo super saepes hortorum porrigendo, finitimos inspiciens.*

Like the best of her countrymen authors—I think of Roald Dahl, G. K. Chesterton, P. G. Wodehouse, and Charles Dickens—Rowling has a fine satiric and comedic intuition, and Needham renders it as dryly as one of James Bond’s martinis.

Humor is an unobtrusive but constant feature of Rowling’s books, and in good classical tradition, a lot of it is directed at authority. One thinks, for instance, of Cornelius Fudge, the blustering, self-important, and aptly named Minister of Magic, or the hilarious celebrity professor, Gilderoy Lockhart. There’s the Ministry of Magic, whose bureaucratic buffoonery lacks only a Department of Silly Walks in order to be complete. Rowling’s playfulness of mind is everywhere manifest. There’s her deliciously incorrect pedagogy that has Mad-Eye Moody turning Draco Malfoy into a ferret. There’s Hagrid’s hexing fat Dudley Dursley with a pig’s tail. No wonder educators love this stuff! What tired and underappreciated teacher wouldn’t love to be able to use such a spell just once, perhaps on a school board member? Then there’s the plethora of positively Dickensian personal names and magic book titles such as Cassandra Vablatsky, author of *Unfogging the Future*; Vindictus

Viridian, author of *Curses and Countercurses*; or Phyllida Spore, author of *One Thousand Magic Herbs and Fungi*. Peter Needham makes his own contribution to this treasury of outrageous nomenclature when he turns the town in which the Dursleys live, Little Whinging, into *Querela Parva*, Little Whining. All this foolery is authentically English, but it would equally be at home in Aristophanes. It is not at home in the *Thousand and One Nights* or *Kitab al-Aghani*.

Now, I won’t claim that humor is uniquely Roman, or more correctly, Greco-Roman, in the way that secular law is, but there is a point to be made here about the special place that humor has in classical culture. It is a curious fact that although we have an abundance of material from the cultures of the ancient world, our only significant body of comedic works comes from Greece and Rome.<sup>2</sup> Most of them still make great reading and have been appreciated by European audiences for as long as they have been known. Terence and Plautus were shamelessly plagiarized by Shakespeare. Martial’s epigrams are still piquant and readily enjoyed without a critical apparatus. He’s quite as quotable as H. L. Mencken or Edward Abbey. Go to Amazon.com, and you’ll see that people still read him and even write reviews of his work. The satires of Juvenal and Petronius console us with the realization that culture has more than once survived the idiocy of the rich and the powerful, and that we, or at least future readers of Edward Abbey, will have the last laugh. Considering the antics of the current White House, who cannot agree with Juvenal that it is hard not to write satire?

Towering above all of these figures, however, is Aristophanes, the maculate master, the only Athenian who could hold his own against Socrates in a verbal or a drinking duel. You’ll look in vain for his like in other ancient literatures. And, it’s hard even to *imagine* his like outside Greece or Rome. Aristophanes and the funny men who came after him enjoyed the luxury of writing in a culture that gave even sharp-tongued critics a remarkable degree of license. I, for one, have difficulty imagining an often obscene and foul-mouthed Aristophanes, an even more obscene Petronius, or a trenchant critic like Juvenal thriving, or indeed surviving, in any of the cultures of the ancient Middle East. And I would rate their chances of survival in the contemporary Middle East only slightly higher. Their modern descendants—the Twains, Menckens, and Abbeys—also thrive because of the license for humor and imagination that Western culture still offers more abundantly than any other. If you don’t believe this, just imagine Roald Dahl reading from a newly released Arabic translation of *My Uncle Oswald* to a group of scholars at Al-Azhar. (Note to Peter Needham: a Latin version of *My Uncle Oswald* would earn you the eternal thanks of undergraduates, who could use another comic classic in the syllabus.)

While I find humorous bright spots in other places such as the *koshare* of the Hopi, the gentle haiku of Issa, or the Sufi stories of the wise and hilarious Nasrudin, I still think Europe *uniquely* fortunate to have been the heir of Greco-Roman humor. Through the darkest days of the Dark Ages, this tradition survived thanks to the bad boys of the clergy who recog-

*Being pure is not  
the same thing as  
being concerned  
about being pure.*

*The former is  
the quality that  
makes saints.  
The latter is what  
makes inquisitors.  
Neurotics can't  
tell the difference.*



neurotic view of what it means to be the maker and epitome of the human species.

THE HARRY POTTER books, though delightfully playful and full of that English wit that is the envy of the rest of Europe, are not primarily comic. They are fantasy, a genre that seems to have found especially fertile soil on the Britannic fringe of Roman culture. Rowling is the true heir of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, Hugh Lofting, and George MacDonald, whose likes, as in the case of Aristophanes, are not to be found in the Near or Far East. Nor will we find the likes of the German Romantics Eichendorff, Novalis, and Hoffmann, to whom George MacDonald in particular was indebted.

To the extent that the novel is a modern art form, and by and large it is, one shouldn't press the classical connection with *Harry Potter* too hard. Nonetheless, the best pre-modern precedent for the fantasy novel is in fact a piece of Latin fiction, and interestingly it is also a moral tale about the use of magic (can fantasy not be about magic, I wonder?). I'm speaking of course about Apuleius's *Golden Ass*. To this, one might add the smaller, less fantastical Greek romances or novellas, *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, *Leucippe and Clitophon*, *Daphnis and Chloe*, Xenophon of Ephesus's "Ephesian Tale," Heliiodorus's "Ethiopian Story," and Pseudo-Callisthenes's *Alexander Romance*. *Harry Potter* is heir to these not only in the limited sense of being an extended work of fantasy but also in the sense that it is the product of a culture, which, like Greece and Rome, values playful imaginative expression and, above all, individual expression.

The other pre-modern book that could claim status as prose fiction on the scale of a novel, though it isn't fantasy, is Petronius's bawdy classic, *The Satyricon*. Petronius and the

Greek romances reveal a dimension of Roman, but especially Greco-Roman, play, which, thanks to the youth of its protagonist, is largely absent from *Harry Potter*. This is sexuality in its myriad artistic sublimations: the art and sculpture of the nude, outright erotic art and even pornography, bawdy comedy, and romantic fiction. Our models for all of these are largely classical. If a chaste fantasy such as *Harry Potter* is impossible to conceive without the classics, how much more so is an adult fantasy such as George MacDonald's *Phantastes* or its German Romantic precursors? Without the tutoring in matters of sex-as-art provided by Greece and Rome, European arts and letters would scarcely be recognizable. We would have, of course, no Michelangelo or Rodin, no Ingres or Bernhard (Ruth), no Shakespeare or Joyce. We would also have (for better or worse) no Freud or Jung, no Kinsey or Hite. And, we'd have none of the thousands of their kin whose like is not to be found outside the Roman pale.<sup>3</sup>

The cultural life of Europe, especially from the Renaissance on, presents us with a thousand and one reasons for cherishing its humanism, seedy, seditious, and sublime. One might cite, for example, Albinoni, Bach, Buxtehude, Vivaldi, Telemann, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Schumann, Brahms, Wagner, Dvorak, Grieg, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Verdi, Puccini, Fauré, Debussy, Chausson, Ravel, Duruflé, Strauss (times two), Elgar, Barber, Howells, Quilter, and Vaughan Williams. Or Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, Donatello, Lippi, Alberti, Castagno, Della Francesca, Verrocchio, Botticelli, Bellini, Michelangelo, Da Vinci, Bramante, Raphael, Correggio, Titian, Tintoretto, Palladio, Vasari, Van Eyck, Bosch, Holbein, Dürer, Bruegel, El Greco, Rubens, Van Dyck, Vermeer, Hals, Bernini, Velazquez, Wren, Rembrandt, Watteau, Hogarth, Piranesi, Gainsborough, David, Turner, Ingres, Goya, Delacroix, Seurat, Degas, Renoir, Cézanne, Rodin, Van Gogh, Monet, Gauguin, Klimt, Picasso, Klee, Chagall, Matisse, Moore, Le Corbusier, Wright, Van der Rohe, Pollock, Wyeth, Weston, and Adams. Or Napier, Newton, Leibniz, Fermat, Euler, Lagrange, Laplace, Bernoulli (times four), Gauss, Hamilton, Boole, Riemann, Fourier, Möbius, Poincaré, Russell, Cantor, Whitehead, Hilbert, Gödel, Turing, von Neumann, Mandelbrot, and Wolfram. For the sake of paper and the reader's patience, I'll forgo the list of headliners in the history of science and technology, a list that would take pages. But, I'll highlight one inventor, Johannes Gutenberg, because his creation, after writing and the alphabet, is perhaps the most pivotal. It's the one that makes books like *Harry Potter* and magazines such as SUNSTONE even thinkable, much less affordable.

I tax the reader's patience with this list because it's important to see all of these names together in order to appreciate the sheer magnitude of what starts to happen in Europe in the Renaissance. It's a creative explosion, the likes of which the world had never seen. But it's not happening in China or Japan, and it's not happening in the Middle East. From the last of these areas, in particular, what we hear is silence, broken only by the insect-like murmur of millions of children reciting verses from the Qur'an.<sup>4</sup>

This gets to the heart of what I consider to be the true legacy of Greek and Roman culture to the world. Within the

limit of its franchise, and this was by no means universal, Greco-Roman culture valued individual human creativity to a degree that was unique until the rise of modern Europe. And as we approach the modern age and the classical ideal of the individual asserts itself more and more, we find the European world full of interesting individuals whom we know intimately and by name. In what other literary culture would we find such treasures as the vision of St. Perpetua, the letters of Jerome, the neurotic confessions of Augustine, the dream diaries of Hildegard of Bingen, the mystical sermons of Meister Eckhart, or the journal of Marjorie Kempe, just to name a few of the hundreds of remarkable, sometimes nutty, individuals whose writings have come down to us. In what other modern literature do we find the likes of Shakespeare, Swift, Molière, Voltaire, Sheridan, Austen, Dickens, Twain, Bierce, Joyce, Shaw, Wodehouse, or Abbey?

I fully recognize that the Western tradition does not have exclusive patent rights on either individuality or creativity. But there can be no argument that until the opening of cultural boundaries in our own time, due in large measure to Western influence, the West has indeed put far greater emphasis on the individual and has given individuals a far greater scope of action than in Near and Far Eastern cultures, in which social conformity has been raised to the level of divine ideal or in which the greatest expression of human action is inaction. Harry Potter makes no sense as hero of either a Confucian or a Buddhist fantasy, if such a thing existed. And his life at an Islamic *madrasa* wouldn't even make a story.

When all is said and done, the *Harry Potter* novels are just good stories. What the West has done better than other cultures is to give individuals and their stories, imaginary or not, an opportunity to develop in ways truly *unimagined* elsewhere. If additional proof of this point is needed, I offer this observation. We have yet to see, even with the benefit of Western influence and the explosion of global marketing, a native Chinese, Japanese, Indian, or Arabic *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings*. Before too many tomatoes start flying my way, let me hasten to add that fantasy is by no means the last, nor even most important, word in artistic activity. The East has given us many wonderful cultural gifts of other kinds. Zen and its arts in particular are a priceless bequest to a West whose aesthetics seem primitive by comparison. I for one would much rather read Basho than Byron. If exiled to a desert island, I'd infinitely prefer to have Shiki in my backpack than Sylvia Plath. The Far East has made, and I hope will yet make, if it is not entirely overrun by Western commercial culture, unparalleled contributions of its own to the fund of human creativity. But the East's gifts have not included, and probably won't, products of pure fantasy.

Of the Middle East and its future contributions, expectations at present are singularly low. They're low not principally because America, the birthplace of modern democracy, has, through its support of dictatorships such as the Shah of Iran and the Saudi royal family, for decades waged war against democracy in the Middle East, nor because Europe waged similar wars against Islam for a millennium, but because of problems inherent in Muslim society that Muslims as a whole have

yet to acknowledge, much less to address. It's not my purpose here to discuss these at length, only to offer a few observations as they pertain to the issue of the life of the imagination, of which *Harry Potter* is here our emblem. What this Middle East observer (whose Hebrew and Arabic were once far better than his Latin) finds so disappointing and increasingly disquieting is how the region's always present but frequently quiescent neurosis is now manifesting itself pathologically. Neurosis, beautifully defined by psychologist Thomas Moore as a lack of imagination, is our overidentification with a particular idea of self. When a political leader, for example, forgets the distinction between his person and his office, he becomes neurotic. He also probably becomes a criminal. Louis XIV's *l'état c'est moi* is perhaps a factual description of the state of France at the time. As a psychological profile of France's top man, it's a recipe for disaster, as his even crazier grandson was to learn. Leadership seems to be an especially fertile ground for neurosis. But there are plenty of ways in which the rest of us can get some neurotic action. When my sense of who I am derives largely from such airy abstractions as nationality, ideology, or dogma, I become neurotic. When a church handbook or encyclical or a mufti's fatwa can define my notion of good and evil, I become neurotic. In fact, nothing induces neurosis like the life religious. The desire to be the purest, most orthodox, or most faithful is in itself *always* a gateway to neurosis. The reason? Being pure is not the same thing as being concerned about being pure. The former is the quality that makes saints. The latter is what makes inquisitors. Neurotics can't tell the difference.

Because it is a limitation of the imagination, neurosis is always, even in inflation such as Louis's, a diminishment of self. The more neurotic the self (or group or nation), the more simplified reality, which isn't simple, becomes. In its most extreme form, neurotic simplicity becomes positive simplemindedness, and it ends in suicide bombings. The prevalence of these in Muslim society today says something profound about its utter imaginative bankruptcy. As an expression of neurosis, however, suicide bombings are not that different from the murderous fatwa against Salman Rushdie or the threats directed against Naguib Mahfouz for *The Children of Gebelawi*. And they differ only in degree of rabidity from the attacks on J. K. Rowling herself from the Christian Right in America. Behind all of these is the inability to think imaginatively, and therefore to understand and tolerate those who do.

Imagination, as I've used the word here, is more than just a quality of playfulness of mind. It is, in essence, the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes, whether that person is real or imaginary. Imagination expresses itself in empathy and understanding. It is an extension and expansion of self. As the negation of these, neurotic simplemindedness is therefore a diminishment of one's ability to feel compassion, and no one is less compassionate than the ideologue for whom a single idea or objective defines how he or she relates to the rest of the world. That electrifying, defining idea may be the rights of the unborn, the righteousness of *laissez-faire* capitalism, or the untouchability of the sacred land of Saudi Arabia. The murderous

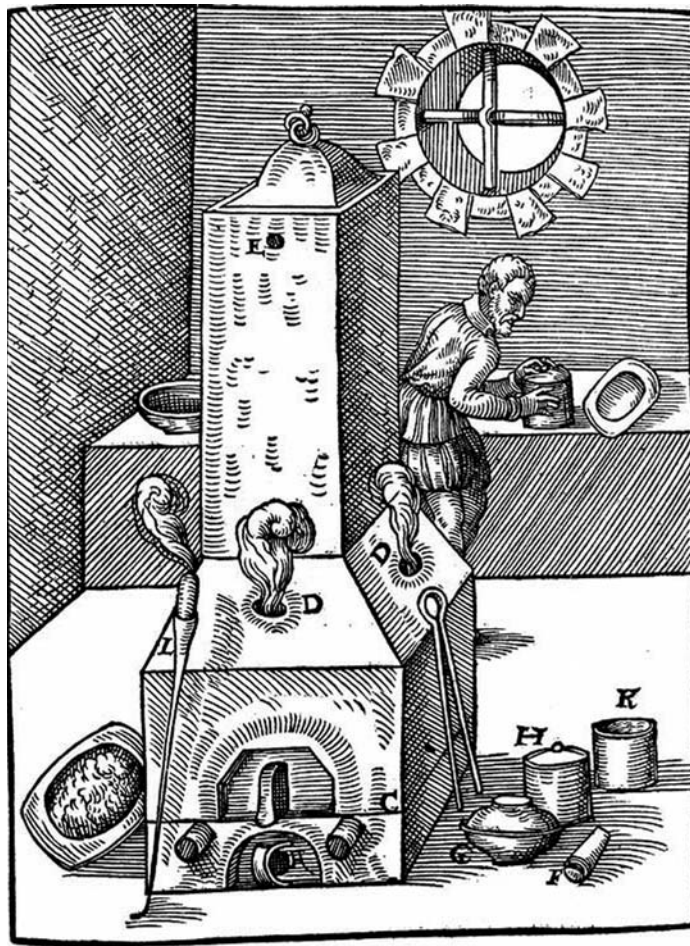


*I don't think one should try to evade evangelical criticism of the magic in Harry Potter by simply dismissing it as superficial or just a prop for the story. If Jung's alchemical studies have demonstrated anything it is that one man's garbage is another's treasure, one man's magic, another's religion. Your hail-fellow-well-met gentleman's cult is my temple endowment.*



consequences of buying into these neurotic gospels are apparent for all to see. Shortly before 9/11, the dean of Western scholars of the Muslim Middle East, Bernard Lewis, set out to explain what has gone wrong in the Muslim world—what has caused the culture that led the world in Baghdad during the eighth century and in medieval Spain during the eleventh and twelfth centuries to become the hiss and byword of the twentieth.<sup>5</sup> The answer to Professor Lewis's question—this is my own view on the matter but Professor Lewis seems to take a similar line—lies in the absence of a tradition of secular governance. The inseparability of religion and governance, which was as true of the Muslim world in its golden age as it is of that world in its long contemporary decline, was tempered early on by the fact that all governments everywhere were highly inefficient and limited in their ability to impose uniformity on the governed. But state-enforced religious orthodoxy or indeed religiosity, when the state has all of the economic, data-gathering, police, communications, and military powers that modernity offers, is terror incarnate.

Here, then, is the key to what went wrong. Whereas European nations progressively dropped their religious



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agendas in the course of modernizing and flourished as a result, Islamic states did not. The result was a no less impressive descent to the bottom of the political heap, with every advance in government power and efficiency progressively increasing the reach of state religion and correspondingly diminishing individual imaginative freedom. The fact that the classical texts that have played such a role in the rise of Europe came in no small measure through the intermediacy of Muslim translators, and that modern mathematics and science might well not exist without the Arabs—who, among other things, invented algebra and gave us a useable number zero—makes this turn of events all the more shocking. Europe made culture-shaping, world-changing use of these things, and Islam did not. And why did Islam *not* seize on them as Europe did? Because, at least in part, it was bound by the increasingly limiting strictures of religious orthodoxy.

In Europe, the strong traditions of secular law and secular notions of human rights, coupled with the tradition of individual creativity, have helped to moderate our own tendencies toward neurosis in matters of the spirit. The Middle East has never had such counterbalances to its religious fervor. As a Westerner, I therefore find myself saying of the Middle East, "There but for the grace of Rome go I." And as one living in the most overtly and sometimes extremely religious Western nation, one that from time to time calls to mind the Middle East, I say of Bible Belt, "There but for the grace of Roman unbelief go I." I pray for help in my unbelief, but not quite in the way of Jesus's would-be disciple. The moment America yields to its neurotic impulse to become a Christian nation, as the Sudan is an Islamic one, instead of being a nation that respects and values Christianity, *Harry Potter* and the rest of our imaginative life will join Darwin on the scaffold erected each year by the Kansas City school board to toast great ideas.

At present, however, even benighted school districts in the U.S. teach a syllabus that is worlds apart from what has been until comparatively recent times, and in many places still is, the traditional education of the Muslim Middle East. Even in medieval times, European education was secular. It consisted of the Trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the Quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music). The basis of the Trivium in particular was not the Bible, "so

little read in so many places at so many times” (Thomas Greene), but pagan Latin classics such as Cicero and Virgil. The traditional Muslim *madrasa*, on the other hand, focuses exclusively on the Qur’an, memorization of which is the core of the curriculum. While European students were testing their wits against Aristotle, their counterparts in Cairo were getting scripture pounded into their heads.

**M**Y WISH FOR *Harry Potter* is therefore that it may be the messenger of the Good News of imagination to places like the Middle East and the American Bible Belt, where imagination is in short supply; that it may nudge a few of the millions of kids whom it has already taught to enjoy reading to seek out some of the sources of its magic. And since J. K. Rowling herself studied classics, we may safely assume that at least a few of these sources will originally have been in the tongue of Cicero.

In view of what I’ve said here about the role that Latin has played in shaping the European culture that makes *Harry Potter* possible, it’s no surprise that Needham’s Latin version works as well as it does. But that doesn’t diminish one’s admiration of the result. At a time when all life is threatened by the many manifestations of our neuroses, it’s good to celebrate a sparkling masterpiece of imagination. ☞

#### HARRIUS REDUX

AS THIS ARTICLE was going to press, news reached me that Peter Needham’s translation of Book II of the *Harry Potter* series, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (Harrigus Potter et Camera Secretorum)*, is scheduled for release on 26 December 2006, a year almost to the day since I got my hands on Book I. As unlooked for as Aeneas appearing out of his cloud among the Carthaginians, Harrius, beautified by the breath of a divine translator, reappears! I had hoped, but not dared to expect, that more such treats were in store. What better way to spend another holiday season than enjoying the fruits of those divine fields, *Saturnia arva*, which are white already to harvest?

#### NOTES

1. The Romans themselves sensed that their most important legacy to the world and the justification for their empire, at least in the mind of their greatest poet, Virgil, was to put the whole world under the rule of law, *totum sub leges mitteret orbem* (Aeneid 4:231).

2. Comedy is as characteristic of Greco-Roman literature as Psalms, and indeed religious poetry in general, is of the Bible—a telling isogloss. The contrast works both ways, for devotional literature is no less uncharacteristic of the classics.

3. While we’re on the subject of things missing from *Harry Potter*, one might also mention religion. Magic, as I’ve already noted, can have a religious dimension and may, as in philosophical alchemy or Wicca, be indistinguishable from what people commonly call religion. But that aspect of magic is absent from the *Potter* books, which one might say are religiously as well as sexually chaste. In fact, the absence of overt and even implicit religion seems to be a characteristic of fantasy and fairy tales in general. It’s missing, perhaps, because writers of fantasy are generally imagining a world that is separate from ours, a world that has its own history, laws, and culture. To the extent that it involves magic, it has its own natural laws as well, according to which magic is not a violation of nature but part of it. Even *Harry Potter*, which takes place in contemporary England, unfolds within

a world of its own cordoned off by magic from the non-magical world. George MacDonald begins his *Phantastes* with this quote from Novalis (in my translation from the German) that highlights the quality of separation from the workaday world of the reader that is essential to fantasy:

In a true fairy story, everything must be wonderful, mysterious, and self-consistent; everything must be animated in one way or another. All of nature must mix fantastically with the whole spirit world. Here we enter the time of anarchy, of lawlessness, of freedom, of the natural state of nature, of the time before time. . . . The world of the fairy story is one that contrasts utterly with the real world, and precisely for this reason is utterly like it, as chaos is like the finished creation.

To imagine such a world, to believe in it, as lovers of *Harry Potter*, Aragorn, and Curdie believe in them, is playfulness in its truest sense. It is world-building capable of engaging the whole mind (of adults even more than children). As Tolkien said in his essay “On Fairy Stories,” while we’re part of that world we believe utterly in it or the story fails. Such belief, to those who do not think imaginatively, is a species of blasphemy, for it is to entertain the possibility however remote that the universe, gods included, that they so assiduously construct for themselves is perhaps just a construct. It may therefore not be coincidental that fantasy writing emerges in Europe only after the latter’s religious-spiritual unity had been shattered by the Reformation and deconstructed by the Age of Reason.

4. I am fully aware that a sentence like this, and indeed many of my musings on the Western world’s Greco-Roman inheritances, will raise charges that I’m (1) not being politically correct, and (2) playing the role of unabashed cheerleader for the West. To these charges, I plead guilty. On the second charge, I recognize that there is another side, indeed there are several other sides, to the story of the rise and spread of Western values. And perhaps after I finish my shameless encomium to modernist values, I’ll write my own critique. But of one thing I have no doubt: there are no professorships of postmodern studies in universities sponsored by the Taliban, the Islamic Brotherhood, or Hizbullah. Nor is postmodernism a thriving major at Al-Azhar. If our Western house is made of glass, as the postmodernists assert, we had better be careful about the stones we throw around inside.

To those offended by my decidedly un-PC appraisal of traditional religious education, I suggest that they would do well to consider which truth is the proper target for their ire: that I am politically incorrect, or that education systems and governments based on scripture should exist in the twenty-first century? I single out the Islamic *madrasa* for special recognition, but it is unique only in the degree to which it excludes modernity. One could also mention by way of evenhandedness many a Jewish yeshiva and Christian home school.

Those who take exception to my critiques of such narrowmindedness have the luxury of doing so because they are the product of a culture that believes, at least some of the time, that criticism of authority, even criticism that borders on derision, is by and large a good thing. As Ed Abbey said, “Always question all authority.” Female critics of my Western cheerleading and lack of political correctness might ask themselves where they would be if traditional religious attitudes to women, and you can pick your religion, still applied in the West. Male critics might consider whether they would like their sons prepared for careers in the modern world within the halls of a *madrasa*. There’s reason for outrage here, but the rage would be better directed than at the messenger who is politically incorrect—OK, politically irreverent—enough to call a spade a spade.

5. The Muslim world’s own renaissances in the periods just mentioned are themselves in no small way the result of encounters with Greek and Roman sources. The periods in question, like our Renaissance, were marked by a flurry of translations, in this case, Arabic translations, from Greek and Latin or from earlier Syriac versions of the same, and by attempts to incorporate this classical legacy into Islam. In stark contrast to contemporary Islam, defined as it increasingly is by a repudiation of non-Muslim thought, the golden ages of Islam show a remarkable openness to outside ideas, Greek, Roman, Christian, Jewish, and even Buddhist. (An intriguing, though not certain, case of Muslim borrowing from Buddhism is Sufism, whose similarities to Zen are striking. Sufi borrowing from Neoplatonic and mystical Jewish sources is also possible.) What all of this illustrates is the quite simply breathtaking extent to which the best of world culture this side of India has drawn inspiration from Greece and Rome. I find myself thinking that even Virgil might have been surprised by the truth of Jupiter’s prophecy of the Romans, *his ego nec metas rerum nec tempora pono | imperium sine fine dedi*, “On these I place no limits in space or time. I’ve given them an empire without end” (Aeneid 1: 278-79). Virgil was as keenly aware as anyone of the cost in human suffering that this empire would entail, starting with the life of his own suffering and ambivalent hero. Virgil, as Jackson Knight observed, “always sees two sides of everything.” But on balance, like Virgil, I think the imperium has just possibly been worth the price.