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What makes an American "classic"?

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American "classics," and "classic" definitions of America and its people, are often tied to an apparently inescapable, ineffable sense of greatness. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN has resurfaced as the mantra of 2025, with the newly elected President's promise to restore a broken nation, elevating it above time, and in defiance of his own criminal record, even above the law. The slogan echoes some of the tones, if not the politics, of the preface of *Leaves of Grass* (1855), when Walt Whitman wrote, "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem…"

Whitman's celebratory conflation of the literary and the political is reduced to a hollow stylistic exercise in the bombastic propaganda of today's political leaders. As Harvard Professor Marjorie Garber remarks on "greatness" in her *Symptoms of Culture* (1998):

> "Greatness" as a term is today both an inflated and a deflated currency, shading over into categories of notoriety, transcendence, and some version of the postmodern fifteen minutes of fame. The modern cultural fantasy about heroes and greatness is a symptom of desire and loss: a desire for identifiable and objective standards, and a nostalgia for hierarchy, whether of rank or merit. (9)

Framing "greatness" less as a question "of elegiac loss" and more "of the political uses of nostalgia," as Garber does (42), allows us to see this superlative for what it truly is: a phantom of plenitude, strategically summoned whenever something is actually felt to be "missing" or slippery, and which is ultimately sought in the inuring comforts of the present rather than through serious confrontation with a problematic past. Against any meaningful critical reflection on history as something "written backwards" (see **Alexander Manshel**'s contribution to this journal issue), what the populists and their *trump*eters seem to preach instead is "Forward!" as the only conceivable, if reckless, mode of progress. It matters little what gets crushed along the way,

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as an iconoclastic D. H. Lawrence anticipated in his *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), when he dismissed Whitman’s optimism by dramatizing its racist undertones and its technophilia:

> ONE DIRECTION! whoops America, and sets off also in an automobile. ALLNESS! shrieks Walt at a cross-road, going whizz over an unwary Red Indian. ONE IDENTITY! chants democratic En Masse, pelting behind in motorcars, oblivious of the corpses under the wheels. (248)

By describing the greatness of “classic American literature” as a motorcade gone out of control, Lawrence draws our attention to the price of progress and the violence, often racial violence, implicit in nostalgia. He also raises the question of what makes a classic a “classic.”

In this special issue and in Lawrence’s footsteps, we aim to retrace and further articulate what appears to us to be a familiar tension: while “America” has often positioned itself as beyond accountability, above history—or even as willfully indifferent to certain parts of it—there are equally striking moments when its cultural machinery has revealed and continues to reveal a profound self-awareness, a keen and productive critical spirit. Consider these verses in Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (1856):

> It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
> I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence….

Art critic and historian **Rochelle Gurstein**, one of our contributors, opens her latest book, *Written in Water* (2024) with these lines of Whitman’s as an exemplar of what she calls (though almost immediately challenges) “the miracle of the timeless classic,” a work of art that “endure[s] over vast stretches of time” (1). Indeed, the poem seeks to capture the shared universals of an idealized human experience, resisting the tides of time and (re)presenting itself as unfailingly meaningful, generation after generation. However, there is also a moment of self-reflection in the poem, where Whitman seems to question his own greatness: “*My great thoughts as I supposed them, were they not in reality meagre*?” This surge of doubt calls into question the timelessness of Whitman’s poem. Here the “classic,” far from being immutable or forever moored, appears, as the title of Gurstein’s book suggests, to have been

"written in water." Such is the disruptive fluidity of the sea—a symbol for the impermanence of letters—that Lawrence himself described as "blue and ghostly with the end of immemorial peoples," an engulfing force that submerges and erases all that was once deemed unforgettable (Lawrence 197).

Struck by the timeliness of Lawrence's observations in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, we began work for this special issue with an intention to discomfort ideas of universalism, querying the notion of the "timeless classic" which transcends the supposed provincialism of age, place, and taste. Claims of objective "greatness" in art and literature are difficult to reconcile with arguments about cultural positioning. If the greatness of the classic is predicated on complex intersections of identity and lived experience impacting the ways in which narratives are constructed, disseminated, and received, then perhaps nothing is really timeless.

Our own choice of title—asking not what *is* an American classic, but what *makes* one—intentionally avoids hunting for universalizing qualities and instead invites an examination of the institutions and methods of production central to canon formation. Publishing houses, educational establishments, literary criticism and prizes, advertising, and the vagaries of private and public funding all come into play in this issue. There are also specificities to be taken into account when considering an *American* classic—something which as two Europeans we have sought to approach with consideration, learning a great deal from the experiences of our contributors.

Our shared academic background in Classics inevitably influenced early conversations on this project. Whilst on the whole we have sought to interrogate the term more broadly, the afterlives of classical antiquity and its sway on the development of more modern "classics" are explored by several of our contributors (and further in this introduction). There are cues to be taken from the self-reflection which Classics as a discipline is currently undergoing: Should the term continue to be used at all, given its assumptions of objective "greatness," and the implications of whom or what has historically been excluded from such categorization?

Setting aside the specificities of the discipline for a moment, this special issue positions itself as a thought experiment: What would it mean to continue using the term “classic” (again, with a small “c”) as a more expansive, relational concept, rather than accepting it at face value? After all, there seems to be an enduring cultural impulse toward the special, the influential, the emblematic—what American classicist Glenn W. Most refers to as the “saved remnant” (7) from a particular moment in time and what one of our own contributors, cultural historian **Joseph Horowitz**, similarly describes as the “old aplomb” of the classical (*Classical Music in America*, 537).

Among the manifold critical stances and approaches to the American canon that we have gathered in this special issue, we hope in this introduction to offer a complementary and holistic view of the subject—seizing the opportunity to examine how “classicizing impulses” might be navigated in a way which neither panders to problematic notions of exceptionalism nor consumes itself into oblivion. What if one were to consider “classics” as works which are accorded importance by a complex intersection of factors, and with differing levels of significance (and positivity of association) depending on whose opinion one asks?

The world and “classic” American literature

In his influential *Why Read the Classics?* (1999), the Cuban-born, Italian writer Italo Calvino notes the specificity of “‘your’ classic,” whilst also expressing its importance in more open-ended terms: “a book to which you cannot remain indifferent, and which helps you to define yourself in relation or even in opposition to it” (Calvino, *Why Read the Classics?* 7).

For MIT Professor of East Asian Literatures Wiebke Denecke, Calvino played a pivotal role in reframing the debate from “what is a classic?” to “why read the classics?” This shift and Calvino’s answer, Denecke notes, “opens our eyes to a hitherto disregarded dimension of the classic question, namely the question of a ‘comparative’ or ‘comparable classic’” (Denecke 33). By the late twentieth century, as the stature and centrality of the Greco-Roman classic(s) in Western curricula could no longer be taken for granted, the question evolved: Why do readers and institutions still feel compelled to immerse

themselves in a bygone tradition? For Calvino, the answer lies in a certain transnational spirit. To fully grasp the meaning of one's existence and sense of belonging (as explored in Caterina Domeneghini's conversation with **Edwin Frank** in this issue), one must momentarily step beyond domestic borders, "to compare Italians with foreigners and foreigners with Italians" (Calvino, "Why Read the Classics?"). Calvino sees a "classic" as a way to bridge diverse geographical spaces, much as Whitman and others saw it as a means of bridging different times; "classics" are as illustrative of where the dominant cultural thought is looking to next as of where it has been before.

Between 1959 and 1960, Calvino embarked on his first long, quasi-initiatory voyage to the United States, which he later chronicled in *Un ottimista in America* (1960). More than a mere travelogue, the book provides valuable insights into Calvino's exploration of the worldliness of the world—a worldliness that is somewhat reminiscent of the "classic" itself, always on the move and never the same. Upon his return to Italy, Calvino confided to Professor Carlo Bo that the impetus for writing the book stemmed from his desire to capture the *mutevole essenza* ("mutable essence") of the country. Even stronger, however, was his *desiderio di conoscenza e di possesso totale di una realtà multiforme e complessa e 'altra da me'* ("desire for the knowledge and total possession of a reality manifold and complex and 'other than me'")—a feeling, he admitted, that no other foreign land had ever inspired in him so deeply (Calvino, *Un ottimista*, 7). The latent tension between wanting to know more and knowing better, and the potential dangers of knowing too much, reflects the ideals and contradictions embedded in the concept of "America" itself. Calvino's reflections resonate with the contested notion of "optimism"—hovering just a step, even a stumble, away from "idealism"—that animates the American dream.

The same themes underpin a 2024 poem by United States Poet Laureate and Pulitzer Prize winner Kay Ryan, who takes her cues from one of the staple "classics" and aphorists of the Western canon, Michel de Montaigne. Published in *Revel* (Issue 1, Winter 2024), "Even on the Greatest Subjects Too Much Can Be Said" invites us to leave some things understated, implicit, barely whispered. Ryan is interested in protecting whatever remains in the

world that has still some capacity to surprise us. In a slight tweak of Gurstein’s book title mentioned above, writing *about* water becomes, in Ryan, a metaphor for the innate human desire—a “built-in hair-trigger”—“to understand” the vastness of oceans. And yet, Ryan warns, “the less said the better.” Like Calvino, she sees the “classic” as offering an encounter with the unknown, or the partially known.

It is difficult not to read the italicized verse, “*the wet beyond the land*,” as a tacit allusion to colonial expansion—an image evoking a modern version of John Keats’s Cortés, gazing “with eagle eyes” at the Pacific. Keats, the same Romantic poet who famously had “writ in water” inscribed as his epitaph, compared the transformative experience of reading Homer in Chapman’s English translation to the awe-stricken vision of Spanish conquistadors beholding new lands. From the Pacific to the Atlantic, the “classic” has often served as a proxy for empire—among many other, never neutral, imaginaries.

At once the nourishing element that separates (and liberates) the American people from their European “masters” and the harrowing route that brought countless enslaved men and women to its shores, the ocean endures with its endless dangers and possibilities as a “classic” image in American literature. It is no coincidence that in Lawrence’s *Studies* we find two essays dedicated to Herman Melville, one of which establishes *Moby Dick* as “a great book, a very great book, the greatest book of the sea ever written” (237). As Robert Combs argues, “the sea, for Lawrence, symbolized a disintegrative force necessary to break down the moribund forms of consciousness brought over from the Old World” (Combs 65). And the ship becomes an emblem of democracy’s imperfect machinery: “Many races, many peoples, many nations, under the Stars and Stripes. Beaten with many stripes. Seeing stars sometimes” (Lawrence 222).

Still, for Lawrence—our preferred starting point for interrogating and simultaneously reinvigorating the category of “classic”—American canonical texts were never merely “writ in water.” Instead, he deplores earlier generations of readers for treating them as if they were ephemeral or superficial—little more than juvenile literature—and insists: “You *must* look through the sur-

face of American art and see the inner diabolism of the symbolic meaning. Otherwise, it is all mere childishness" (122). Lawrence was among the first writers to expose the tensions defining American "classics": the shallow idealism (as he viewed it) and self-proclaimed exceptionalism embodied by figures like Benjamin Franklin, contrasted with the real torments and primordial forces forming the bedrock of American identity, which Lawrence points out is always racialized. These complexities, however, can only be revealed by getting one's hands dirty, by immersing oneself in the murky waters beneath the surface:

> it is perhaps easier to love America passionately, when you look at it through the wrong end of the telescope, across all the Atlantic water, as Cooper did so often, than when you are right there. When you are actually in America, America hurts, because it has a powerful disintegrative influence upon the white psyche. It is full of…unappeased aboriginal demons, too, ghosts, and it persecutes the white men like some Eumenides, until the white men give up their absolute whiteness. (73)

Lawrence himself felt he could no longer view America "through the wrong end of the telescope" if he wanted to fully capture the country's inner contradictions. First published as a loose series of essays in the *English Review*, the material that ultimately became *Studies in Classic American Literature* was radically reworked after Lawrence migrated to the United States in September 1922. As he confessed to his literary agent, James Pinker: "I can't write for America here in England" (quoted in Banerjee 469). His now canonical (yet still strangely underappreciated) study of "classic" American authors was therefore the product of several changes of heart and of homes over a period of five years. Crossing the Atlantic allowed him to experience a reality beyond parochialism, one which, in his view, Melville captured most profoundly: "To get out, out! To get away, out of our life. To cross a horizon into another life. No matter what life, so long as it is another life" (Lawrence 197). There is, of course, a pinch of irony in Lawrence's confident assertion that the task of great literature is "to kick over our ideals in time" (211), whilst still proclaiming that *American* writers have been unrivaled in doing so ("There is a new voice in the old American classics," he writes in *Studies*, and "an alien quality, which belongs to the American continent and to nowhere else"; 1).

And yet this ambivalence, much like the tension between immaculate idealism and organic dirtiness—or even a sense of foreignness, the "alien quality" described above—must be considered integral to the American literary experience. Lawrence was quick to recognize what Paul Giles, in "Transnationalism and Classic American Literature," dubs the "structural duplicity through which…the national and the transnational can be seen as uncomfortably interwoven" (64). Indeed, it is notable that while the writer of *Studies* celebrated Melville as one of the greatest American "classics," his approval was nonetheless conditional, extending only to those segments of Melville's work which had very little to do with Americanism in the traditional sense. "[W]hen he ceases to be American," Lawrence tells us about the author of *Moby Dick*, "when he forgets all audience, and gives us his sheer apprehension of the world, then he is wonderful" (216).

Metaphorically, one could even venture to say that what makes "classic American literature" so influential is its persistent obsession with "the water," rather than what is written on it. It is all about fluidity and movement. As Calvino's geographical images and Whitman's own "Brooklyn Ferry" exemplify, a "classic" never speaks to fixed identities; instead, it is a mile marker and a way station at the borders of identity.

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The uneasy yet fundamental shift "from exceptionalism to transnationalism" in American literary studies—one to which Lawrence's own *Studies* should be reappraised as conducive—was only formally recognized in the 1990s. In a pioneering article on the subject, Robert A. Gross explained that this move effectively entails "reject[ing] the ideological pretense that Americans are exempt from the constraints of time and place that affect everybody else" (Gross 387–88). "To lose the sense of the United States as a privileged and protected space," Paul Giles further adds, "is to lose the sense of it harboring exemplary or exceptionalist qualities of any kind" (Giles 64).

In this light, the main concern of this special issue is to show how, in order to effect such a shift—and account for its backlashes—agents and institutions in the American cultural and educational landscape inevitably had to lose their

sense of "*the* classic" as something conveying transcendence and incomparable grandeur, to register its slow but incontrovertible transformation from an arbiter of greatness to a pliable cultural category—one of many—that has been deployed for and from different ends.

Our approach is indebted to Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen's groundbreaking and much-contested edited collection, *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (1986), which was published amid the "culture wars" of the 1980s and 1990s. These followed directly from the post-World War II rise of the liberation movements, among which were postcolonialism, feminism, and the civil rights movement (Morrissey 6). In commenting upon the contributions of "Black Studies and Women's Studies…to American literary scholarship" in particular, Bercovitch observes in his afterword how their most decisive intervention "has been ideological." As a result of these new trends in criticism, he argues, "we will [n]ever again be able to feel so pure about our acts of canonization, or so innocently to claim that our models of literary development embody the American Spirit" (423).

In contrast to this naively unexamined sense of purity, as Jehlen adds in her introduction, the anthology promotes "a heightened awareness of the world beyond the United States, and in the United States, of multiple Americas, none of them transcendent" (15). This is not to deny the special power of literary and cultural artefacts to connect people on a deeply existential level, beyond the specificities of one's language, culture, and socio-economic conditions; it is "to affirm that power in all its manifold capacities, including its capacity to conceal, exclude, and repress" (423).

The contributors to this special issue have revealed very different approaches to the question of what a "classic" is or does. For cultural historian and critic **Joseph Horowitz**, for example, the "classic/al" of classical music inevitably "refer[s] to a moment now past and to its attendant prestige and influence," while still retaining some capacity to impart exemplary lessons (Horowitz, *Classical Music in America*, 537). In fact, it almost shamefully stands as the antithesis to "American"—a missed opportunity to crystallize an authentic and idiosyncratic "American school" and to canonize a solid autochthonous repertoire "privileging the black vernacular" and other

homegrown voices, rather than being “built on…European sand” (Horowitz, “New World Prophecy”; see further Huizenga).

In his essay for the issue, Horowitz observes how groundbreaking yet neglected composers like Charles Ives brought a plurality of voices and traditions—“plurality” being a term also cherished by Rochelle Gurstein—to the American musical landscape, functioning as “a memory cloud” of extraordinary cultural significance. Yet the enforced exclusion of Ives (and many others, from Florence Price to William Grant Still) from the Western canon, for aesthetic as much as political reasons, coupled with the rise of new mass media and technologies, gradually exacerbated the schism between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” art. These forces also diminished the time and curiosity listeners once devoted to the classics. As Horowitz previously argued in *The Post-Classical Predicament* (1995) and explores further in his present contribution: “In the United States since World War II, ‘classical music’ has been largely reconceived as a species of pretentious popular entertainment masquerading as fine art….Today the term itself is either a misnomer or an anachronism” (Horowitz, *The Post-Classical Predicament*, 12).

Alexander Manshel, whose new book locates the site for the creation of “value” in the realm of the institutional rather than the aesthetic, considers this same negotiation of timelessness by pursuing the goal outlined in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*: namely, to “bring the term classic, and indeed the term ‘American,’ down from the realm of universal and back into history” (423). This is certainly a tension present in concerns over the politicization of the “classic”—need timelessness equate with greatness? How best to ensure that a shift to pluralism is expansive rather than fragmented? As editors of this issue, we seek to emphasize how this shift equally necessitated demoting the “classic” and its derivatives from their privileged and exclusive association with Greco-Roman antiquity and its central place in American intellectual life. As Lawrence caustically summarized, this process involves rejecting the notion of an “eternal truth”: “Truth,” he wrote, “lives from day to day, and the marvellous Plato of yesterday is chiefly bosh to-day” (Lawrence 2).

A short history of classicism in North America

It is hardly possible to disassociate the term "classic" from classic*ism* and all the heavy cultural and intellectual baggage that comes with it. In a North American context—our focus here—it can be understood as foundational. In *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life*, 1780–1910 (2002), Caroline Winterer notes that "next to Christianity, the central intellectual project in America before the late nineteenth century was classicism" (1). As colonial settlements developed, imposing and establishing systems of politics, education, and art, they did so with the political, educational, and artistic legacies of classical antiquity front of mind. Harvard, as the first American college, modeled itself on European university traditions and established a curriculum which stressed the importance of Latin, ancient Greek, and Hebrew; later colleges followed suit.

An emphasis on classical precedent and motifs would have been apparent to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Americans whether they were college educated or not, particularly from the mid-eighteenth century, as the ideological bases for the American Revolution and subsequent Constitution saw a strong foundation in classicism. (Indeed, George Washington was famously praised as an "American Cincinnatus" for his subordination to the will of Congress). Winterer highlights the impact that college education—that is, *classical* education—had on other burgeoning institutions in the formation of public opinion during this period: newspapers, libraries, and organizations promoting "useful knowledge" and "civic improvement" (16). The role of the American education system in shaping canonicity is explored further in this issue by **Susan Hegeman**, a well-established voice on cultural modernism and the politics of higher education in the United States. In her examination of "classical education" as a traditionalist educational model, she notes a throughline back to this "explicitly eighteenth-century understanding" of "civic virtue" as classically-coded.

Constanze Güthenke's contribution considers a cultural implication of this shift in classicism's locus of reception across the Atlantic: The role of the classic*ist* in promulgating, contextualizing, and rearticulating classicism in

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their contemporary climate. Her case studies take us into the nineteenth century, situating the established (and establishment) figures of Basil Gildersleeve and Paul Shorey alongside Helen Magill—the first American woman to get her PhD in Classics. Whilst indebted to the classicism of the previous century, these nineteenth-century Classics *specialists* reflect a considerable change in American attitudes to the classical past.

Winterer presents a pre-nineteenth century form of social unity around the Greco-Roman classics, which by the nineteenth century was beginning to lose its central positioning and locate its home somewhere more recognizable to today’s reader: classicism found itself “pooling instead in the esoteric byways of elite, high culture” (1). As elsewhere, educational institutions can offer a microcosmic parallel, mirroring the shifting patterns of engagement with classicism seen across American culture more widely: classical languages were essential requirements for college admission for over two hundred years until the late nineteenth century, when one can observe a penchant for these subjects.

In “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” (1989), Toni Morrison—who had tellingly planned to call her lecture “Canon Fodder”—traces the pivot from a classical canon to a different form of canonicity and, indeed, a more expansive notion of what it means to be “classic.” As the centrality of classical studies began to wane, the discipline ceded its supreme influence to “what was considered a strangely arrogant and upstart proposal: that English literature was a suitable course of study for an aristocratic education, and not simply morally instructive fodder designed for the working classes” (Morrison 371). The apparent abruptness of this redirection and the outcry it elicited from its detractors is worth remembering as a counterpoint to contemporary “culture wars” and fears from certain quarters that to deprivilege is to obliterate entirely. (Consider the pushback faced by Harvard President Charles W. Eliot—founder of the Harvard Classics series examined by **Emily Coit** in this special issue—after replacing the classical curriculum with an elective system in the late nineteenth century). Gerald Graff conveys this eloquently in *Beyond the Culture Wars* (1992), noting that at the time of his writing “the college literary canon

has been changing, as it had for a century, by accretion at the margins, not by dumping the classics" (24).

Similarly, Lawrence W. Levine, in *The Opening of the American Mind* (1996), argues that the best way to comprehend the history of the modern American university is "to begin with the classical curriculum" (37). His is a voice strongly implicated in considerations of the American "classic"—the title of his book being a clear retort to Allan Bloom's reactionary criticism of the educational system in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). Indeed, the relationship between classics and canon, and how these might in turn be understood expansively or restrictively, is something that has dogged the question of classicism across time (la *Querelle* among the seventeenth-century French *literati* is but one example).

In an American context, this is exemplified by what is often referred to as "The Stanford debate," itself one among many similar clashes between a tradition of literary conservation and a contemporary desire for reassessment. In 1988, a protest at Stanford University by those seeking to diversify reading lists led to the resignation of William Bennett, American Secretary for Education, who had compiled a report titled "To Reclaim a Legacy" three years prior. The protestors favored a more representative selection of American authors, including Black, indigenous, and female voices, something which Bennett denounced in his report as endangering what Thomas Healy, in his contribution to the *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism* (1990), describes as "a desired civilized inheritance under threat" (967). Healy continues: "The Stanford controversy demonstrated that the classics, rather than providing the criterion for civilization, have become only one element in a much broader and plural conception of what constitutes the century's important cultural heritage. It also reveals the way in which the classics have been caught up in larger social, political and cultural debates about the construction of modern civilization" (968).

The nature of a "classic," then, is less about objective fixity and more about what is deemed worthy of preservation and continued significance. There is also a distinction to be drawn here between "timeless" and "ancient"—that which is old-fashioned may not automatically be considered classic, and vice

versa. There is, rather, a looking ahead on the part of cultural institutions, not only at what might continue to be maintained from the past but also what from the present moment might warrant preservation for the future.

From classic(s) to canon(s)

As John Guillory notes in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993), recently reissued in a new edition introduced by Merve Emre (2023): “The word ‘canon’ displaces the expressly honorific term ‘classic’ precisely in order to isolate the ‘classics’ as the object of critique” (6). For many advocates of the so-called “Great Books,” who instantiated democratic yet partisan and Western-centric views of world literature in their Great Honors courses, “classic” now took on “a wrong and forbidding connotation”—so Mortimer J. Adler ominously put it. In *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education* (1940), Adler wrote that this approach was “wrong in the sense of referring to antiquity, and forbidding in the sense of sounding unreadable” (55). Tweaking Mark Twain’s humorous definition of a “classic” as “something that everybody wants to have read, and nobody wants to read,” Adler urged his readers and fellow educators to replace “classics” with “great books,” as living civilizing forces summoned to outweigh the “moldy monuments of a past culture,” “the great has-beens” (332).

Garber views this reconfiguration of classical heritage as the key ideological ground on which American pundits from Allan to Harold Bloom sharply part company with the British literary intelligentsia. Even with English Literature available for study on both sides of the Atlantic, “[t]o study ‘Greats’ at Oxford and Cambridge is to read the ancient classics; for this generation of Americans, however, the greats have been updated—slightly” (Garber 29). The adverb provides an all-important caveat to what Guillory denominates “the modernization of the curriculum,” which he views as a multi-phase historical process: from the displacement of many Greco-Roman works from the traditional syllabus with a view to “*making room* for such later writers as Locke or Rousseau” (*Cultural Capital*, 32; original emphasis); to “generic modernizations of the canon, [such as] the inclusion of the novel in syllabi of the later nineteenth century, or film since the 1960s” (15). This offers a

corrective to the politics of representation from which radical anti-canonist positions have often drawn in protest. In Guillory's words, "By defining canonicity as determined by the social identity of the author, the current critique of the canon both discovers, and misrepresents, the obvious fact that the older the literature, the less likely it will be that texts by socially defined minorities exist in sufficient numbers to produce a 'representative' canon" (ibid.).

Yet if the term *canon* enables the critique of cultural authority embedded in the very choice of "classics," exposing it as a product of ever-shifting historical and institutional factors, a "canon" presents problems of its own. After all, the seemingly innocuous "later writers" mentioned by Guillory, from Locke to Rousseau—along with Voltaire—are critically contested and ultimately rejected by the enslaved Jim (who renames himself James) in Percival Everett's new novel, *James* (2024), precisely *because of* their ambivalent politics. In this reworking of Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the slave-turned-protagonist reflects with irony on the imaginary conversations he has had with these Western philosophers in his readings: "How strange a world, that one's equal must argue for one's equality…that one cannot make that argument for oneself, that premises of said argument must be vetted by those equals who do not agree" (Everett 52). In his analysis of the novel for our special issue, **Robert Stepto** uncovers the ambivalence of literacy as an access route to freedom and eventually "humanity." To be literate, in Guillory's terms, is to gain cultural capital; yet to be truly human, to fully own one's name, also requires critical suspicion of the sugarcoated narratives imposed by a ruling elite resistant to social change. But it is even more than that: beyond critical reading, James's radical act of *writing* in the novel reimagines literary predecessors as empty vessels, as canvases washed clean—both literally and metaphorically—by water. As his books "become soaked and fairly ruined" along the journey (102), James scribbles in the margins and covers the pages with his own writing and his own story, asserting himself as a *homo faber* (FABER being the label he finds stamped on the pencil a fellow slave bravely steals for him).

Returning briefly to Morrison’s “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” she draws a distinction between “humanism” and “scholasticism” that aligns well with our own trajectory from classics to canon (Morrison 373). If “humanism,” for Morrison, represents the flip side of “scholasticism”—in a process that gradually replaced Latin letters and theology with ancient Greek, and later vernacular English—one must question what lies behind the ostensibly neutral category of the “human” that underpins the epistemological bloc collectively known as “the Humanities.” This also raises the question of which set of works should be prioritized to inspire such human feelings in the students who read them. The ambivalence of the term, along with its underlying mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, has been powerfully contested by Henry Louis Gates Jr, a pioneer of African American studies and criticism:

> Since the *trivium* and *quadrivium* of the Latin Middle Ages, “the humanities” has not meant the best that has been thought by all human beings; rather, “the humanities” has meant the best that has been thought by white males in the Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian traditions. A tyrannical pun obtains between the words humanity, on the one hand, and humanities, on the other. (Gates, *Loose Canons*, 113)

In both his scholarly and editorial work, Gates is concerned with opening the canon to a more diverse range of vernacular writers—a process which, for Allan Bloom and other conservative critics, had irremediably caused a “closing of the American mind.” For such defenders of the Western canon, a return to the pre-culture wars *status quo* was the only viable antidote to what they perceived as widespread intellectual impoverishment, since, as Bloom infamously put it, “the Muses never sang to the poets about liberated women” (Bloom 65). Gates’s chapter “Integrating the American Mind” in *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (1993), from which the excerpt above is taken, offers a witty rebuttal to such polemics. The “loose canons” of the title underscores the unpredictability of literary selection and consecration, as Gates remarks: “The canon that we define will be ‘our’ canon, one possible set of selections among several possible sets of selections” (32). Something will always need to be left out.

Gates's own role as general editor of Penguin African American Classics has made him sharply aware of such limitations: "[T]he politics and ironies of canon formation" (*Loose Canons*, 32; on Penguin's African American Classics, see "Henry Louis Gates Jr. on What Makes a 'Classic' African American Text"). This awareness aligns his work with Guillory's understanding of *the* canon as "an *imaginary* totality of works," while the syllabus or list merely stand as an "institutional instrument" (*Cultural Capital*, 30; original emphasis). It is only when we fully grasp this difference, Gates comments, that "we can begin to appreciate" the "ever-changing configuration" of literary canons "in relation to a distinctive institutional history" (*Loose Canons*, 34).

For both Guillory and Gates, any serious attempt to comprehend the processes of canon formation and revision must account for the role of institutions in regulating access to literacy and the canonical practices of writing and reading. By the end of the eighteenth century, schools had supplanted the cultural authority of the church and "that body of writing historically characterized by an inherent logic of closure—the scriptural canon" (Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, 6). Yet, as **Susan Hegeman** reveals in her contribution to this issue, the scriptural and classical canons have forged a new alarming alliance in several secondary schools and colleges across contemporary America, a movement championed by conservative governors such as Ron DeSantis. "Classical" here refers not to timeless greats but to a canon formed by institutions at a distinct historical moment—now weaponized to celebrate not so much a literary tradition as the normative conditions and social structures that are retrospectively cast as that moment's origin.

This push for a "classical education" movement within Republican circles was also briefly addressed in a recent episode of *Critics at Large*, a podcast from the *New Yorker*. In the words of co-host Vinson Cunningham, the episode "The Modern-Day Fight for Ancient Rome" focused on how "the Roman Empire," along with ancient Greece and "classics" at large, "shows up in the culture over and over and over again," from entertainment to politics (Cunningham et al.). Reflecting on this persistence, Hegeman's take is that the modern "culture wars" are less about identity politics and more about "failures of institutional authority." Schools and universities are increas-

ingly perceived as incapable of “mediat[ing] conflicts over values and social goods,” making them particularly vulnerable to political and ideological manipulation. Within this heated context (and contest), Hegeman shows, an education rooted in the “classics”—typically male, able-bodied, white, and straight—has been weaponized as a boogeyman against “wokeness.”

Another challenge confronting educational institutions today, stemming from a similar “logic of closure,” is the self-imposed separation of the professional scholar from the so-called “lay” reader—another analogy drawn from scripture. This issue is central to Guillory’s new study, *Professing Criticism* (2022), in which he argues that professional academics often overestimate their own importance or “greatness,” in effect disavowing their marginal position and even irrelevance to society at large. Guillory traces the development and consolidation of literary studies as a discipline, identifying the rise of New Criticism in the United States (building on I. A. Richards’s criticism in the UK) as a pivotal moment when universities increasingly withdrew from broader public engagement (*Professing Criticism*, 50; see also *Cultural Capital*, 165). There is a conversation to be had here around how institutional and public opinion intersect, and how each might influence the other when it comes to canon formation. Certainly, the top-down model of institutional authority feels increasingly unhelpful and oftentimes out of touch with how patterns of cultural interest and discourse operate outside the realm of “professional criticism.”

Following Guillory’s invitation to examine “the way in which academics read literature…in relation to the larger world of reading practices,” our special issue rejects such scholarly insularity (*Professing Criticism*, 101). Instead, it seeks to explore the intersections between various modes of “reading” texts and artworks, both within and beyond the academy.

Cultural institutions and the makers of classics

Perhaps rather typically of two academics, we have hitherto focused on the roles of scholarship and educational institutions in shaping canonicity and establishing the markers of a “classic.” Whilst these interventions are significant, scholars all too often overlook the reality that classics are established

not in reified academic spaces but by the very people who view, read, and participate in them. Publishing is a significant asset in this regard, with buying patterns fundamentally shaping their bottom line as much as they themselves are driving the presentation and popularization of certain modes of reading (again, consider **Emily Coit**'s remarks on the Harvard Classics and its much-debated list). Reviewers, cultural journalism, and awarding bodies also demand consideration—something we see in our conversation with **Alexander Manshel**, where he notes the interrelation between these institutions: "publishers work to winnow the vast field of what could circulate publicly into the select few novels that will. But as they do this, those same publishers also have an eye on the kinds of books that win major prizes, garner sustained scholarly attention, and get taught in high school and university classrooms. In this way, contemporary canon formation is not a linear process but a kind of dynamic circulatory system of cultural value." Percival Everett's *James*, discussed thoughtfully by **Robert Stepto**, was itself shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the National Award for Fiction in 2024.

Public cultural spaces such as theaters, concert halls, museums and art galleries also hold the power to consecrate. **Rhodessa Jones** and her team discuss what it means to connect one's lived experience with a "classic" story in an opera house—itself a space which, much like a canonical work, can simultaneously claim to speak for all whilst not necessarily managing to welcome everybody in. **Rochelle Gurstein** considers paradigm shifts in artistic taste around what constitutes a "classic" in art historical terms, both in her contribution here and in a 2021 piece for *Salmagundi Magazine*, entitled "Rethinking the Culture Wars," where she revisits the uproar around Roger Fry's 1910 exhibition "Manet and the Post-Impressionists"—now understood as a revolution in interpreting artistic form. A recent point of comparison might be the major retrospective of Mark Rothko's works organized at the Foundation Louis Vuitton in Paris (October 2023 to April 2024). Rothko's work offers a key point of engagement with the very same debates over aesthetic tradition and artistic merit: "some people gaze up at a Mark Rothko painting and see heaven, hell and the human comedy depicted with knee-trembling grace. Others see an IKEA colour chart with an eyewatering price tag and think, 'yeah, the human comedy indeed'" (Taylor). Yet the core of the 2024 exhibi-

tion was Rothko’s so-called “classic” period (1950–1970). The exhibition curator, François Michaud, mentioned that he had been discussing the origins of the word “classic” extensively with Mark Rothko’s son Christopher. David Anfam, author of the *catalogue raisonné*, uses “classic” to define “recognizable” Rothko, a term which according to Christopher marks the transition from six rectangles to four on the canvas. What does it mean to characterize a modern artist’s most identifiable works as “classics”?

What to expect from this special issue

We have divided this special issue into four sections, comprising different aspects of the “classic” question and differing voices within it—from scholars to creative practitioners. Our first section, “**Classical liberal education and its discontents**,” considers the role played by American educational institutions in establishing classicism as central to cultural development and learning, and what it now means to query elements of this. **Constanze Güthenke**’s essay ponders “what makes an American classicist?” by looking back to the nineteenth century and how the profession of classical scholarship developed in North American institutions. She considers the external influences apparent on the self-conscious self-fashioning of the discipline from the legacy of German Philhellenism to post-Civil War narratives of progress and decline. **Susan Hegeman** takes this legacy of classical education to confront its entanglements in the “culture wars,” not only in isolation but at every step of the educational system: “Classical Education is more than a pedagogy, curriculum, and educational philosophy. It is also a ‘K-20 ecosystem’…as such, it mirrors what conservative critics see as the educational ‘pipeline’ of the ‘progressive Left.’”

The section **“Publishing and canonicity”** takes on another major institutional force at play in shaping American “classics.” **Emily Coit** looks at the interplay between “high” and “low” culture in the outcry elicited by an inaccurate advance list of the contents of the Harvard Classics in 1909, and the views expressed by commentators of the time regarding canonical status and literariness. Popularly known as “Dr Eliot’s Five-Foot Shelf,” the contents of the collection notably did not change over fifty years of publica-

tion—cementing the canonicity of many texts. In the first of several interviews throughout the issue, co-editor Caterina Domeneghini discusses the impact of today's publishing culture with **Edwin Frank**, founder and editorial director of the New York Review of Books Classics. Frank comments on the rationale behind the series, the possibility of offering classic texts without canonizing, and attitudes to translation in America.

Our **Poetry** section comprises three poems by poet and critic **David Lehman**, founder and series editor of *The Best American Poetry*. "Frost at Midnight," "Negative Capability," and "Bloomsday" all differently address canonical literary figures, with Lehman's trademark playfulness. **Constance Everett-Pite**, a doctoral candidate in Classics at the University of Oxford, then invites us to consider how the categories of "American" and "classic" are explored in the work of Amy Clampitt (1948–1994), setting the scene before interviewing poet and writer **Willard Spiegelman** about his 2023 book, *Amy Clampitt: A Biography*. As we read in the conversation, Clampitt poses "an important political/ecological question with heightened relevance in our current century: What is the meaning of 'indigenous'? Who and what belongs where?" **Cultural commentary** introduces the angle of classical music with former music critic for the *New York Times* **Joseph Horowitz,** looking at its role in shaping (or eroding?) cultural memory. Back to the contemporary literary environment, Professor Emeritus **Robert Stepto** offers his reflections on Percival Everett's 2024 novel *James*, addressing themes of literacy and agency through the eyes of the enslaved man in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.

Finally, we move to **Interviews and selected chapters**. Co-editor Claire Barnes reached out to **Nancy Rabinowitz** about her long-standing working relationship with theater director **Rhodessa Jones** and her team at The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women/HIV Circle. Rabinowitz discusses the theater company's latest production *MAZE: Life on the Swerve* and how it uses classical mythology to highlight the inconsistencies in healthcare faced by Black women in today's United States. **Alexander Manshel** has kindly given permission to reprint a chapter from his 2023 book *Writing Backwards: Historical Fiction and the Reshaping of the American*

Canon. The excerpt focuses on American historical fiction shaping WWII narratives, opening back out into themes of nostalgia and ephemerality in an interview with the editors. “Ephemerality” brings us back to **Rochelle Gurstein** with whom, along with Manshel, we opened this introduction. Her reprinted chapter from her 2024 book *Written in Water: The Ephemeral Life of the Classic in Art* considers the future of the “classic” in light of its ultimate subjectivity, and in a further interview with us she discusses situatedness, the paradox of tradition, and—once again—the slipperiness of definition when terms such as “classic” or “timeless” are brought into play.

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As we began work on this special issue, we knew that publication would likely coincide with a new President taking office. Writing now, at the very beginning of 2025, the cultural tensions and questions of exceptionalism and identity raised throughout by our contributors feel all the more relevant. In the already mentioned episode of the *New Yorker*’s podcast *Critics at Large*, the presenters discussed the idea of not only canonicity but specifically the *Classical* canon—once again we are returning to how the “idea of Rome” continues to shape, in certain quarters, contemporary American attitudes. This comes after a year which saw two blockbusters considering notions of classical empire, decline, and parallels in today’s America: *Gladiator II* and, more explicitly, *Megalopolis*. In the podcast, critics Vinson Cunningham, Naomi Fry, and Alexandra Schwartz note that in America “we too have this mythology that on some level we have a right to empire, a right to leadership that goes beyond our borders, because of the originary idea of society” (Cunningham et al.). These ideas of tradition and ephemerality have been mainstays of not only cultural analysis, but of political thought, too.

Cunningham, Fry and Schwartz go on to discuss the political weaponizing of Classics and the narrative of stability brought about through a return to classical education (precisely what is identified by Susan Hegeman in this issue). More optimistically, they consider how this “idea of Rome” (or for our purposes the culture of the “Classic”) might instead operate more neutrally: for every classical story bolstering the justification of Trumpian supremacy there is one that might do just the opposite, in an instance of

what American critic Van Wyck Brooks notably calls a “usable past” (Brooks). Consider the other stories just as present in the classical past: non-hegemonic stories, queer stories, stories which remind us that “classical antiquity” itself is a constructed term representing a wide variety of—not necessarily white—people and cultural output. They end with an invitation which seems particularly apt for our purposes: What if we were to “make ancient Rome strange again”? Immediately adding: “not just Rome, but the Classics in general.”

There is opportunity here, we feel, to approach the “classics” (with a large or a small “c”) with curiosity, with critique, and without a necessary impetus to valorize tellings of them which have been shaped by institutional pressures along the way. Can we acknowledge the influence of a piece of work without pushing it into the categorization of objective timelessness? Can we explore its impact using a more nuanced set of critical tools? Can we make the American Classic—and the conception of America itself—strange again?

Caterina Domeneghini and Claire Barnes[1]

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Claire Barnes is writing up her DPhil in classical reception at the University of Oxford, supervised by Professor Fiona Macintosh and supported by St Catherine’s College. Her project, entitled *Only Connecting? Authenticity in Revisitings of the Classics (1900-present)* considers the use of “classic” and “authentic” as constructs signifying value, and how both emerge in the socio-political and intellectual climate of the early 20th century—then examining the evolution and impact of thinking around authenticity and classics down to the present day. She has a particular interest in how authenticity resonates in the work of Christopher Logue, Kae Tempest, and EM Forster, and has published on the latter. Claire co-presents the podcast *Reimagining Ancient Greece and Rome*.