

## AMERICAN CLASSICS

*The golden age of the classics in America: Greece, Rome, and the antebellum United States.* By Carl J. Richard. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. Pp xiii + 258. ISBN 978-0-674-03264-4. £33.95.

On 3 March 1829, John Quincy Adams left the White House. He was sixty-one, had been in public service for thirty-five years, had failed as president, and had little idea of what to do with himself, except to retreat to his ancestral estate in Quincy, there to tend the garden (he loved plants), write a biography of John Adams (a task he did not fancy), and fight off ‘indolence and despondency and indiscretion’. His family offered little prospect of consolation: he had a difficult marriage, his children feared him, and seven weeks later his eldest son would disappear off a boat on Long Island Sound and would be presumed a suicide. Adams was bitter, though it took him nearly two years to admit to any ‘agony of mind’. There was a verse, long stuck in his memory, which captured how he felt and ‘in the year 1829 scarce a day passed that did not bring it to my thoughts’. It came from a French opera about Richard the Lionheart, in which the minstrel Blondel sang under the walls of his king’s prison, ‘O, Richard! O, mon Roi! / L’univers t’abandonne.’<sup>1</sup>

In these darkening circumstances, where might comfort be found? Mostly, in the classics. In the ensuing months, Adams read and re-read Cicero’s *Philippics* and letters to Atticus, as well as Plutarch, Horace, and Valerius Maximus. Even when disconsolately riding out, his mind ran on antiquity. Along his way there were ‘frogs ... croaking brekekekex, koax koax koax, which I remembered was the language of frogs in Homer’s day; and this reminded me of what old Mr. Dumas once told me, that the Greek Eta was pronounced like the French gravely accented è, because Aristophanes, to express the bleating of sheep, writes it β η’.<sup>2</sup> Doubtless the *Philippics* assisted Adams in working out his aggressions, but mostly this reading was exquisitely soothing, because the classics were old friends, who posed problems Adams knew how to solve.

At this point, it would be customary to observe that this is unlikely to be how George W. Bush is now spending his time in Dallas. American historians of classical reception like a sad tale of decline and the tart reminder that once upon a time there were philosopher presidents who knew their Tacitus. For the purposes of such elegy, Adams’s departure has been iconic, because the man who expelled him from the presidency was Andrew Jackson, who knew no Greek or Latin,

<sup>1</sup> Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, comprising portions of his diary from 1795 to 1848* (12 vols., Philadelphia, PA, 1874–77), VIII, pp. 106, 246–7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, p. 124.

wished to know none, could barely spell, and was loved by the American people for being one of their own.

It is a curiosity that even now there are Americans, not professional classicists, who care about Adams and his melancholies. To be sure, for most, antiquity is little more than a consumer choice – Doric columns for a suburban home, a night out in Las Vegas at Cleopatra's Barge Nightclub, a DVD of *Gladiator*, a bracelet of writhing snakes for a wedding anniversary.<sup>3</sup> But a surprisingly large number, perhaps proportionately more numerous than their British counterparts, are persuaded that the classics matter to American culture, usually as the predominant element in a package of 'great books'. In the recent culture wars, now abating, they were recommended by the likes of Allan Bloom as the texts most crucial to the desperate task of fighting off postmodernism, relativism, and the death of civilization. Conversely multiculturalists like Lawrence Levine were delighted that the classics were being expelled from collegiate requirements. Depending on your point of view, Plato's *Republic* was either 'the book on education' or malevolently the heart and soul of 'the traditional and exclusive system that once governed American colleges'. In either case, the stakes were high, because the issue bore upon what Bloom, with rapt commitment, called 'the American moment in world history, the one for which we shall forever be judged'.<sup>4</sup>

The modern uses of antiquity have been immensely various, but the classics have been deployed in the discourse of cultural nationalism in two ways relevant here. The crudest was establishing legitimacy by claiming inheritance; Moscow as the Third Rome, for example, or *fin-de-siècle* Vienna as Athens *redivivus*. The less obvious use was that classical texts, because they were thought to embody immemorial truths, were supposed to help a culture defy time. The more a society nurtured itself upon Thucydides, Aristotle, Homer, and Cicero, the more likely it was to beat the odds of history, because the classically trained possessed themselves of a wisdom which transcended ephemeral particularity. Such paragons might make worlds lasting a thousand years, maybe more. Since 1750, different cultures have accepted this strange logic to varying degrees. Notoriously, as Nietzsche savagely insisted, the Germans suffered from an extreme fever of neo-classical imaginings. Despite the grip of the classics on public schools and Oxbridge in the nineteenth century, the British had a milder case. But what of the United States, partly governed from a Capitol, with a constitution which proclaims perpetuity?

For some years, there have been scholars who have considered this matter of Americans and the classics. Their founding father was Meyer Reinhold, creator of Boston University's Institute for the Classical Tradition. The institute mostly studies the ancient world itself, but has a steady interest in modern reception.

<sup>3</sup> On this, see Margaret Malamud, *Ancient Rome and modern America* (Oxford, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Allan Bloom, *The closing of the American mind: how higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students* (New York, NY, 1987), pp. 381, 382; Lawrence W. Levine, *The opening of the American mind: canons, culture, and history* (Boston, MA, 1996), p. 53.

While Europeans have tended to study great scholars like Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Americans have been more interested in, not the New Jersey equivalents of Joseph Scaliger, but American *philosophes* like Thomas Jefferson and in measuring, as Carl Richard puts it, ‘the success of the classics according to the proportion of the American public that consider them relevant to their daily lives’. Such interests encourage scholars who abjure writing with allusive wit about recondite folios (in the manner of Anthony Grafton) and instead prefer the plain style, by way of suggesting that the classics are the people’s friend. Reinhold himself, oddly for a member of the Old Left who suffered at the hands of McCarthyism, was inclined to believe that what was good for the classics was good for the American people, and vice versa. Hence it was right to mount, as Reinhold said, ‘a celebration of the role of the Classics in the formation of our national traditions’. Richard writes in this amiable tradition, which promotes the view that, if ‘the classics ... played a leading role in shaping the nation’s values during its formative years’, American prospects were the better.<sup>5</sup>

So *The golden age of the classics in America* is a quiet move of some temerity in the debate over how much neoclassicism the United States has had, and for how long. Richard’s earlier book on the classics and the founding fathers was, by comparison, a safer work. No one was disposed to quarrel with the proposition that the American Enlightenment was learned about and fascinated by antiquity; several generations of scholars had amassed indisputable evidence. But it has been usual to think that, by the presidential election of 1828, that cultural moment was exposed as dead or dying, except in, what Henry Adams was later to call, ‘very old-fashioned communities’ such as his own Quincy and ‘troglodytic Boston’.<sup>6</sup> Richard will have none of it. He briskly demotes the late eighteenth century to a silver age and proclaims the antebellum years golden, because then classical influences reached deeper into the social system (the middle classes, women, African-Americans) and more widely into cultural practices and discourses. The ancient texts remained foundational to curricula in old and new institutions and classical pedagogy got better, at least in colleges. Greek received more imaginative attention. Mass market textbooks made translations widely and cheaply available. Female academies and schools for free blacks studied their Herodotus. Neoclassical architecture, especially the Greek Revival, became a norm of the physical landscape. Political rhetoric was soaked in classical allusion and, likewise, political ideology – Jeffersonian, Federalist, Whig, proslavery, and antislavery – took antiquity as a persistent referent.

So, lots of neoclassical stuff, piled high. As an enthusiastic *catalogue raisonné*, Richard’s book roughly works. As an argument, it is less successful, in part because he is tweaking a standard historical narrative which is problematical. It is

<sup>5</sup> Richard, *Golden age*, pp. xiii, xii; Meyer Reinhold, ed., *The classic pages: classical reading of eighteenth-century Americans* (University Park, PA, 1975), p. viii.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Adams, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (Boston, MA, 1913), p. 382; Henry Adams, *The education of Henry Adams: an autobiography* (Boston, MA, 1918), p. 5.

usually assumed that the relationship between classicism and modernity is intrinsically tense and dialectical. The social mission of the classics, as understood by Bloom (and my sixth form Latin master, the waspish Mr Nicholas), is to save an anti-intellectual modernity from its loutish self, while fending off attacks from that same modernity. Caroline Winterer, the most accomplished younger historian of the American classical tradition in the nineteenth century, has argued that the presumption of this tension and the articulation of this mission commenced not long after 1800, when a newfangled historicism posited a discontinuity between ancient and modern, sharper than that articulated in the *querelle des anciens et des modernes* of the seventeenth century. (Obviously, in societies where the classics are ubiquitous, classicism does not have a special mission and cannot even be understood as classicism.) Richard accepts this logic, but claims the transition occurred after 1865 and, hence, antebellum Americans lived before the fall.

One of many troubles with this interpretation is that, by insisting that earlier there were only odd pockets of resistance to the authority of the classics – a few politicians indifferent to Demosthenes, some tourists bored rigid by marble torsos in Rome, occasional evangelicals scandalized by pagan philosophy – Richard is hard put to explain why the classics lost ground so quickly later. His solution is to see the Civil War as an abrupt watershed. Before 1861, there was agriculture, pastoralism, slavery, and scepticism towards utilitarianism. After it, there was industry, technology, science, and cities. This change, Richard says, created ‘a great crisis for both Christian theism and classical humanism, which shared an emphasis on the existence of a universal moral order’.<sup>7</sup> Yet very few social, political, and economic historians of antebellum America would accept this portrait, certainly not Daniel Walker Howe, whose *What hath God wrought: the transformation of America, 1815–1848* (2007), the best synthesis we have of those years, firmly locates the origins of American modernity in the early decades of the nineteenth century. If Howe is right, Richard must be wrong, because the latter seems to presume the classics can only have compelling authority in a pre-modern society. The presumption seems very dubious. Before 1861 the proponents of the classics thought ancient knowledge was nimbly adaptable to social change. Antebellum engineers, after all, happily designed Greek Revival steam engines.<sup>8</sup> Over the last two centuries, with timely adjustments to the canon, the classical tradition has been effectively used for conservative, liberal, radical, and fascist purposes, in societies of unimpeachable modernity. Today classicists seem as alert as ever to the need to adapt, if Melissa Lane’s forthcoming book, *Eco-republic: ancient ethics for a green age*, is a reliable sign, as it is.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Richard, *Golden age*, p. 206.

<sup>8</sup> John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the machine: technology and republican values in America, 1776–1900* (Harmondsworth, 1977), p. 151.

<sup>9</sup> See [www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/may/20/plato-philosophy-capitalism-economic-crisis](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/may/20/plato-philosophy-capitalism-economic-crisis) (accessed 30 June 2009).

While it is true, as Richard rightly says, that antebellum American fathers often expected their sons to like Xenophon and that Fourth of July orators invoked Thermopylae, it is also true that classicism was only one of many influences, self-consciously in competition to possess American minds. (It was the dubious accomplishment of Romanticism that it reconfigured classical literature into a sort of honorary race or nation possessed of a manifest destiny, like France, Anglo-Saxons, or Texas.) It might seem impressive that Herman Melville owned thirty-seven volumes of *Harper's Classical Library* and self-consciously re-deployed classical mythology in *Moby Dick*, but less impressive if you happen to know, as Andrew Delbanco has explained, that 'Melville's writing bore the marks of wide and eclectic reading, which included Montaigne, Defoe, Coleridge, Dante, Schiller, Thackeray, and Seneca, as well as those seventeenth-century prose masters Robert Burton and Thomas Browne.'<sup>10</sup> The difficulty, of course, is that a listing of classical influences, in and of itself, proves little, unless one can measure their cultural power in relation to non-classical influences. The settlers of Ohio may have given classical names to thirty towns – including (comprehensively) Antiquity, Ohio, and (gnomically) River Styx, Ohio – but hundreds more had un-classical names.

My own sense is that the antebellum period did see a weighty challenge to the cultural authority of the classics, that believers in their value understood the gravity of the situation and made a briefly successful effort to shore up and extend their position, but that many disinterested observers knew that the handwriting was probably on the wall. The Yale Report of 1828, often interpreted as the last moment when the old guard carried the day, by reaffirming the classics as an indispensable part of the college's curriculum, shows how sharply the scale of the problem was already grasped, because its authors constantly asserted that they had no problem with progress, commerce, or new scientific knowledge. 'The charge,' they said, 'that the college is stationary, that no efforts are made to accommodate it to the wants of the age ... and that the college is much the same as it was at the time of its foundation, are wholly gratuitous.'<sup>11</sup> They were already taking their stand upon the contentions that the classics disciplined reasoning, offered useable knowledge and insight, and might civilize modernity, but they nowhere asserted that the classics offered an alternative to modernity. Not all Yale graduates, even those versed in the classics, agreed even with this compromise. In 1831 Thomas S. Grimké of Charleston was bluntly dismissive:

The precepts and examples of the Gospel, not those of Classic Antiquity ... the plain, strong sense, inherited from an English ancestry, not the taste and acuteness of an

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: his world and work* (London, 2005), p. 116.

<sup>11</sup> *Reports on the course of instruction in Yale College; by a committee of the Corporation, and the Academical Faculty* (New Haven, CT, 1828), pp. 45–6.

Athenian people, have wrought these [our American] achievements, not for us only, but for the ignorant and degraded posterity of boasted Greece and Rome.<sup>12</sup>

As his friend and intellectual opponent, Hugh Legaré, regretfully admitted, Grimké's view of the classics as 'good for nothing' was not idiosyncratic: 'We have frequently heard the same opinions expressed by persons of scarcely less authority and influence in the southern states, to say nothing of occasional essays in the newspapers and periodicals, and discourses before the philosophical and literary societies of other cities.'<sup>13</sup>

There are many ways to judge whether Richard or Winterer is right about the moment when classical authority began to slip away, but examining political rhetoric is as helpful as any and Abraham Lincoln helps more than most. In Carl Sandburg's artfully folksy day, it was usual to see Lincoln as a plain Westerner uninformed about the classical tradition, except for a few scraps. In 1992 Garry Wills audaciously snatched Lincoln back into the classicist camp, by arguing that the Gettysburg Address captured the spirit of Greek oratory and was formally a Periclean oration. Whereas, for Sandburg, Lincoln's 'outwardly smooth sentences were inside of them gnarled and tough with the enigmas of the American experiment', for Wills, the oration had 'the chaste and graven quality of an Attic frieze'.<sup>14</sup> As one might expect, Richard follows Wills's interpretation, for it would be awkward for his argument if, at the climactic moment that vindicated the early republic's meaning, the classics were irrelevant.

The closest student of these matters, Kenneth Cmiel, gave no support to Wills, because his *Democratic eloquence* argued that the pomp of classical allusions had gradually been banished from antebellum oratory and most politicians did not care and often did not know whether their effusions were Ciceronian, Attic, Rhodian, or Asiatic. Upon Cmiel's account, Lincoln possessed not classical but 'Saxon eloquence', a plain English style, and Edward Everett, who gave the main oration at Gettysburg – which begins, 'It was appointed by law in Athens, that the obsequies of the citizens who fell in battle should be performed at the public expense, and in the most honorable manner' – was by 1863 an anachronism.<sup>15</sup>

The truth may lie somewhere between Cmiel and Wills. Eighteenth-century politicians like Jefferson and Madison were formally knowledgeable about the techniques of ancient rhetoric, but they never gave speeches to large audiences. It was the subsequent emergence of mass politics that occasioned a brief flourishing of an oratory fond of classical allusions, especially to the Greeks. (The founding

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Smith Grimké, *Reflections on the character and objects of all science and literature* (New Haven, CT, 1831), pp. iv–v.

<sup>13</sup> Hugh Swinton Legaré, 'Classical learning', *Southern Review*, 1 (1828), p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: the war years* (2 vols., New York, NY, 1959), 1, p. 413; Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: the words that remade America* (New York, NY, 1992), p. 55.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic eloquence: the fight over popular speech in nineteenth-century America* (New York, NY, 1990), p. 116; *Address of the Hon. Edward Everett at the consecration of the National Cemetery at Gettysburg, 19th November, 1863* (Boston, MA, 1864), p. 29.

fathers had preferred Rome, Sparta, and black broth.) The victor of the most populist presidential campaign of the antebellum period, William Henry Harrison (he of the chant, ‘Tippecanoe, and Tyler, too’), began his inaugural address in 1841: ‘It was the remark of a Roman consul in an early period of that celebrated Republic that a most striking contrast was observable in the conduct of candidates for offices of power and trust before and after obtaining them.’<sup>16</sup>

From the first there was resistance to this style, because many did assume that neoclassical rhetoric was undemocratic, if learned eloquence implied social hierarchy. Hence, for those entering public life from the 1830s, the signals were decidedly mixed. To Lincoln, caught between Illinois constituents who mistrusted Aristotle, his own rough diffidence, and a respect for the oratory of Everett and Daniel Webster, the solution was to employ the techniques of classical rhetoric, but abandon explicit erudition. One might safely use anaphora, epiphora, antithesis, or apostrophe, but never admit to it and never refer to the ancient world and its luminaries, unless they occur in the Bible. This middle ground became a standard for American oratory which to this day, as Barack Obama’s silken rhythms demonstrate, has retained nineteenth-century cadences long since vanished from British political speeches. This new standard was not invented by Lincoln, only perfected by him, a fact which suggests that the classics were forced significantly to yield ground long before 1865.

After reading a Fourth of July oration by the young Edward Everett, John Quincy Adams (not yet a failure as president) wrote complacently in his diary: ‘There is ... in this Commonwealth [Massachusetts] a practical school of popular oratory, of which I believe myself to be the principal founder ... which, with the blessing of Him who reigns, will redound to the honor and advantage of this nation and to the benefit of mankind.’ As it turned out, practical oratory would not, as Everett did in 1826, refer to ‘the polished and intellectual arts of Greece’, but to what was but ‘four score and seven years’ old.<sup>17</sup>

JESUS COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

MICHAEL O’BRIEN

<sup>16</sup> Online at [www1.bartleby.com/124/pres26.html](http://www1.bartleby.com/124/pres26.html) (accessed 30 June 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Adams, *Memoirs of JQA*, VII, p. 138; Edward Everett, *An oration delivered at Cambridge on the fiftieth anniversary of the declaration of independence of the United States of America* (Boston, MA. 1826), p. 47.