

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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WHICH ARE THE CLASSICS?

Mortimer J. Adler

Which authors of our century will endure?
Whose works deserve the designation “classic”?
A noted philosopher and editor nominates his candidates
and invites Center members to nominate theirs.

Mortimer Adler is Director of the Institute for Philosophical Research, Chairman of the Board of Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, and Editor of Great Books of the Western World.

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As we move into the fourth quarter of the twentieth century, it seems fitting to ask ourselves about books of lasting humanistic significance that have left their mark on the development of thought and culture in the last seventy-five years.

My interest in the question is prompted by the fact that Great Books of the Western World, which Robert M. Hutchins and I edited, was published in 1952 and so celebrates its twenty-fifth anniversary this year. Since the most recent authors in that set of books are William James and Sigmund Freud (the only two whose writings straddle the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), I ask myself what authors and books should now be thought of as representing the major artistic and intellectual contributions, the outstanding and seminal works, of the present century.

The term “great books” should not be a stumbling block. We used that term rather than the word “classics,” for the latter has the unfortunate connotation of an enduring cultural monument rather than a perennially contemporary work. If we say that a good book is a book that is worth reading carefully once, and that a better book than that—a great book—is one that is worth reading carefully a second or third time, then the greatest books are those worth reading over and over again—endlessly. The last 2,500 years of Western

civilization have produced few that can measure up to that standard. I cannot think of more than fifteen at the most.

But that is too high a standard for judging the major contributions or seminal works of the twentieth century; that would require us to assess them as having the perennial humanistic significance of the writings of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Dante, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Kant. Let us instead ask ourselves what twentieth-century authors and works we would nominate as joining the larger company of important books of lasting significance even if they are not inexhaustibly rereadable.

I acknowledge the cultural parochialism of confining ourselves to Western culture in drawing up a list of nominees. No one has yet compiled a list of the world's great books, adequately representing its five or six major cultural streams; nor has anyone yet tried to determine the books that would belong to the common cultural heritage of mankind when those five or six cultural streams become confluent to constitute a unified world cultural community. So, for the moment at least, let us limit ourselves to asking about the significant contributions to Western culture made during this century.

It is also necessary to recognize that this century is not yet completed, and that its first seventy-five years are far from being homogeneous or all of one piece. As one considers the contributions to literature, to philosophy, science, and history, since 1900, one becomes acutely aware that the century breaks sharply into two culturally heterogeneous periods—the first being the period from 1900 until the end of World War II; the second being the period between 1945 and the present. Whether the years from 1977 until the dawn of the twenty-first century will be homogeneous with the second of these periods or will constitute a differing third segment, is anybody's guess. When I come to nominating my own candidates for selection as outstanding twentieth-century works, it will become immediately obvious that it is much easier for me to name authors and works from the first than from the second period. That may be due in part to the fact that we are further removed from them in time and so have a better perspective on them; but I also tend to think that there is another reason for it.

The major works that appeared between 1900 and 1945 were written by authors whose own education and cultural inspiration still drew heavily on the literary and intellectual achievements of the nineteenth century. Consequently, the important books of this first

period arc much more akin in their general character to the outstanding works of the pre-ceding century. That is not as true of the authors and works since 1945. In fact, the difficulty in suggesting as many names and titles for this second period may be due not only to its recency, as compared with the first period, but also to the basic cultural rift between the first and the second period, resulting in a radical change in the criteria for judging what is of lasting humanistic significance.

For another thing, while the production of major works in literature and in philosophy has the same general character during the first period of the twentieth century that it had in the nineteenth century, a remarkable change seems to have occurred in the natural and social sciences. The great scientific contributions have tended to take the form of highly technical and specialized monographs not intended for the average, curious, intelligent layman. Lavoisier's *Elements of Chemistry*, Faraday's *Experimental Researches in Electricity*, Darwin's *Origin of Species* and his *Descent of Man* can be read by the non-specialist layman with pleasure and profit. There are few, if any, works in the natural sciences of that character in the twentieth century; nor are there many in the 'behavioral sciences comparable to William James' *Principles of Psychology* and Freud's *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*.

Thus, when we come to name the scientific works of the present century, we must employ an additional criterion over and above that of intrinsic worth. That additional criterion is their intelligibility to and readability by the intelligent but non-specialist layman.

Finally, one other preliminary consideration deserves attention. It concerns the number of works we might reasonably expect as the products of the twentieth century that will endure because of their lasting humanistic significance. Here we are somewhat helped by the count derived from the preceding twenty-five centuries. We can take Great Books of the Western World as providing one fairly good indication of that count. In that set, thirty-eight authors represent the two thousand years or more from Homer to the dawn of modern times, and thirty-six represent the last three hundred years. Of these, twelve belong to the seventeenth century (often called "the century of genius"), thirteen to the eighteenth century, and eleven to the nineteenth century. In view of the fact that many more books have been written and published in the twentieth century than in all preceding centuries put together, one might expect that, out of such a vast production, there would be more eminent and outstanding

works in this century than in any preceding one.

In considering the candidates to be nominated, let us, therefore, aim at selecting at least twenty authors from the twentieth century. However, in doing so, let us remember that the names we are considering are drawn only from the first sixty-five or seventy years since 1900. We must leave room for the last thirty years or so; to do that, we should perhaps limit ourselves to selecting not more than fifteen from those nominated.

Having laid down these conditions, I am willing to stick my neck out by nominating the authors and works from which a selection should be made. I hasten to confess that my nominations are likely to be biased by the fact that I am myself a product of the first period of the twentieth century and that my own intellectual and cultural formation probably has more affinities with the nineteenth century than it does with the currents of thought and the winds of doctrine that have been prevalent since the end of World War II. Nevertheless, for whatever it is worth, here are my candidates, proceeding from easy to hard: that is, naming, first, authors and works from the period between 1900 and 1945, and, second, authors and works since 1945; also in each of the two periods, naming, first, the outstanding contributions to literature (plays, novels, and poems), then, outstanding contributions to philosophy and theology, and finally, outstanding contributions in the field of the natural and the social or behavioral sciences and in the field of history.

FROM 1900 TO 1945

Literature (plays, novels, and poems)

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

Man and Superman
Major Barbara
Heartbreak House
Saint Joan

JAMES JOYCE

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man
Ulysses

MARCEL PROUST

Remembrance of Things Past

THOMAS MANN

The Magic Mountain
Joseph and His Brothers

JOSEPH CONRAD

Nostromo
The Secret Sharer
Heart of Darkness

WILLIAM FAULKNER

Sartoris
The Sound and the Fury
Light in August

D. H. LAWRENCE

Sons and Lovers
Women in Love

T. S. ELIOT

Murder in the Cathedral
The Cocktail Party
The Wasteland

FRANZ KAFKA

The Trial
The Castle

and an anthology of lyric poetry including the poems of **WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS, ROBERT FROST, EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON, T. S. ELIOT, and RAINER MARIA RILKE.**

Philosophy, Theology, and Religion

JOHN DEWEY

Democracy and Education
Human Nature and Conduct
Quest for Certainty
Experience and Nature

ALFRED N. WHITEHEAD

Introduction to Mathematics
Science and the Modern World
Adventures of Ideas

BERTRAND RUSSELL

Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy

The Problems of Philosophy
Proposed Roads to Freedom

JACQUES MARITAIN

The Degrees of Knowledge
Freedom in the Modern World
Man and the State

GEORGE SANTAYANA

The Life of Reason
Skepticism and Animal Faith

ETIENNE GILSON

The Unity of Philosophical Experience

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

Being and Nothingness

JOSE ORTEGA y GASSET

Revolt of the Masses

Natural Science

MAX PLANCK

Where Is Science Going?
Philosophy of Physics
Scientific Autobiography

ALBERT EINSTEIN

Sidelights on Relativity
The Meaning of Relativity
The Method of Theoretical Physics

NIELS BOHR

Atomic Physics and Human Knowledge

A. S. EDDINGTON

The Nature of the Physical World
Stars and Atoms

ERWIN SCHRODINGER

What Is Life?

JOSEPH H. WOODGER

Biological Principles

Social or Behavioral Science and History**LEON TROTSKY**

History of the Russian Revolution

NICOLAI LENIN

The State and Revolution

MAX WEBER

Essays in Sociology

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

R. N. TAWNEY

The Acquisitive Society

Religion and the Rise of Capitalism

JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES

The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money

HENRY ADAMS

Education

Degradation of the Democratic Dogma

CARL JUNG

Analytical Psychology

Psychological Types

Modern Man in Search of a Soul

So much for the first period of the twentieth century. Before I turn to the second period—from 1945 to the present—perhaps I should report my list of also-rans, from 1900 to 1945. They include: Henri Bergson (*Creative Evolution; The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*); Andre Malraux (*Man's Fate; Man's Hope*); Andre Gide (*Tin' Counterfeiters*); Heinrich Böll (*The Clown*); Ernest Hemingway (*The Sun Also Rises; The Old Man and the Sea; For Whom the Bell Tolls*); Virginia Woolf (*Mrs. Dalloway*); Eugene O'Neill (*Mourning Becomes Electra; The Ice Man Cometh*); Anton Chekhov (*The Three Sisters; The Cherry Orchard*); V. Nabokov

(*Lolita*); Thorstein Veblen (*The Theory of the Leisure Class*); Reinhold Niebuhr (*The Nature and Destiny of Man*); Michael Rostoftzeff (*The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*); Karl Polanyi (*The Great Transformation*).

Now let us consider the much sparser list of names and works drawn from the second period of the twentieth century—from 1945 to the present.

FROM 1945 TO THE PRESENT
Literature (plays, novels, poems)

ALBERT CAMUS

The Plague
 The Fall
 The Stranger

GEORGE ORWELL

Animal Farm

ALEXANDER SOLZHENITSEN

Cancer Ward
 The First Circle

SAUL BELLOW

Mr. Sammler's Planet
 Herzog

SAMUEL BECKETT

Waiting for Godot
 Endgame

Philosophy, Theology, and Religion

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

Philosophical Investigations

MARTIN HEIDEGGER

On Time and Being
 The Question of Being

What Is a Thing?
 What Is Philosophy?

KARL JASPERS

Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Time
 Reason and Existence

MARTIN BUBER

I and Thou

PAUL TILLICH

The Courage To Be
 Love, Power, and Justice
 What Is Religion?

Natural Science

WERNER HEISENBERG

Philosophical Problems of Nuclear Science
 Physics and Philosophy
 Physics and Beyond

JACQUES MONOD

Chance and Necessity

Social or Behavioral Science and History

ARNOLD TOYNBEE

A Study of History
 Civilization on Trial
 Change and Habit: The Challenge of Our Time

TEILHARD de CHARDIN

The Phenomenon of Man

CLAUDE LEVI-STRAUSS

The Savage Mind
 The Raw and the Cooked
 Totemism

My nominations of authors and titles from 1945 to the present seem

to me woefully inadequate. Could it be that my nineteenth-century mentality enables me to discern appraisingly the literary and intellectual productions of the first forty-five years of this century while, at the same time, blinding me to the merit of works that represent the artistic and intellectual culture of the last thirty years, with which obviously I am not as much in sympathy? If that is the case, as I suspect, then I need help from others, especially from those younger than I who are more in tune with turns of minds and imagination that have dominated the more recent period.



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Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher Emeritus

Elaine Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Phone: 312-943-1076

Mobile: 312-280-1011

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

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