# EPILOGUE

The reinvention of classical antiquity in nineteenth-century America played an important role in determining the role of the ancients in the twentieth century. It is not my object in this epilogue either to endorse or to bemoan these developments but rather to reflect on how the Victorian inheritance shaped the modern reception of antiquity. From the perspective of the eighteenth century, the resolute modernity of the twentieth is remarkable, and yet some of the major intellectual monuments of this century have been shaped by the classical tradition. Freudian psychology, the literature of James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, modern revisions of classical tragedies (by Jean Anouilh, Bertholt Brecht, and others), stunning archaeological finds and their popularity in museums, and various architectural revivals of classicism testify to the classical world's ongoing presence in the twentieth century.

More central to our purposes, however, is the fate of classicism within higher education and how its position there connects to modern notions of citizenship and selfhood. There, I would argue, the Victorian notion of classical antiquity as uniquely cultivating has been unable to weather the general trend of twentieth-century education, which is toward ever more egalitarianism. This is a radical simplification, of course, and there are many other factors that have contributed to undermining the position of classical antiquity in the modern university. But there is clearly a fundamental incompatibility between the egalitarian ethos of the twentieth-century university and the elitism traditionally associated with classicism. This conflict has its roots in the late eighteenth century and continues today to animate debates over the canon.

By 1915 the major trends in American higher education had been set,

and developments later in the twentieth century reinforced and expanded upon these. Most significant was the continuing expansion and democratization of higher education. There were 563 institutions of higher learning in America in 1870; 1,409 in 1930; 2,000 in 1960; and 3,595 in 1990. The number of students also continued to climb. In 1870, 52,000 students were attending college in America; by 1990 there were 15.3 million. The percentage of the college-aged population attending institutions of higher education grew from barely 1 percent in the late nineteenth century to 40 percent by 1990.[1] Clearly, higher education in America no longer serves just the elite, as it did even into the late nineteenth century, but an ever-growing sector of the population. Within the universities, trends that began in the Gilded Age have continued unabated: an elective system at the undergraduate level; graduate schools that produce specialists; the reorganization of knowledge into autonomous disciplines organized along professional lines; the consolidation of research rather than pedagogy as the chief goal of the university; the separation among both faculty and students of scholarly work from the private practice of religion; the expectation that faculty have a doctorate in their field and publish in order to advance professionally; and a flourishing administrative structure.

The classical languages, now confined entirely to educational institutions, have continued the decline that began in the late nineteenth century. For a while, Latin held its own in the high schools. In 1915 Latin still accounted for the largest enrollments of any subject besides English, history, and algebra, and nearly every public high school and private academy offered Latin. (By contrast, Greek ranked twenty-eighth in popularity in the list of thirty subjects offered by high schools in 1915).[2] The strength of Latin in the high schools was in part a consequence of its being required for admission to American colleges and of its popularity as a major among college women destined for high school teaching. The popularity of Latin also testified to a renewed interest in Rome between the world wars. Anti-German sentiment in the context of World War I diverted some attention away from the ancient Greeks, who for so long had been identified with German New Humanism. Two of the major American classical scholars of the early twentieth century—Paul Shorey, of the University of Chicago, and John Adams Scott, at Northwestern University—vociferously opposed Germanic scholarship, which they associated



with cultural narrowness and excessively specialized scholarship.[3] By the 1960s, however, Latin was beginning a sharp decline in the high schools, from nearly 7 percent of enrollments in 1960 to just 1 percent in 1978. In colleges, enrollments in Latin shrank over the same period from about .7 percent to .2 percent.[4] The number of college majors in classics likewise declined by 30 percent in the two decades after 1971. One observer has estimated that of the 1 million bachelor's degrees awarded in 1994 only 600 were granted in classics.[5]

As classics enrollments continued to subside, so did the idea that Greek and Latin were uniquely cultivating. One testament to the chastening of classicism's pretensions appeared in that monument to twentieth-century notions of liberal learning, Harvard University's *General Education in a Free Society* (1945). "The somewhat mystical superiority of intellectual discipline which has been claimed for these languages, especially Latin, may be largely false," intoned the authors in 1945, grouping classical languages with other foreign languages. This statement also reflected the collapse of the sanctity of the B.A. as the degree that symbolized immersion in classical antiquity. In the 1940s many universities adopted the B.A. as *the* undergraduate degree, regardless of whether a student had learned a classical language. Whatever programs they offered, colleges asserted that everyone deserved the B.A. for completing their university studies: everyone was cultured, whether they had had contact with the classics or not.[6]

Yet it would be a mistake to assume that classical antiquity vanished from the colleges and universities in the twentieth century. It thrived, in fact, in the compulsory Western civilization courses that flourished at many colleges and universities between World War I and the 1960s. These courses were responses to several factors, most importantly the loss of the common classical core and the proliferation of electives, which had left many students and faculty feeling somewhat at sea. In 1890, 84 percent of a student's courses in college were prescribed; in 1940 only 40 percent was prescribed.[7] The erosion of Greek and Latin as a common core spurred the creation of courses that would ostensibly provide commonality and unity in the curriculum. These courses, which typically occupied the freshman year, presented to students a historical sequence of the "rise" or "progress" of "Western civilization" from classical antiquity (or even before) to