Let us begin with a few suggested definitions.

1) The classics are the books of which we usually hear people say: "I am rereading..." and never "I am reading...." This at least happens among those who consider themselves "very well read." It does not hold good for young people at the age when they first encounter the world, and the classics are a part of that world. In other words, to read a great book for the first time in one's maturity is an extraordinary pleasure, different from (though one cannot say greater or lesser than) the pleasure of having read it in one's youth. Youth brings to reading, as to any other experience, a particular flavor and a particular sense of importance, whereas in maturity one appreciates (or ought to appreciate) many more details and levels and meanings.

2) We use the word "classics" for those books that are treasured by those who have read and loved them; but they are treasured no less by those who have the luck to read them for the first time in the best conditions to enjoy them. In fact, reading in youth can be rather unfruitful, owing to impatience, distraction, inexperience with the product's "instructions for use," and inexperience in life itself. Books read then can be (possibly at one and the same time) formative, in the sense that they give a form to future experiences, providing models, terms of comparison, schemes for classification, scales of value, exemplars of beauty—all things that continue to operate even if the book read in one's youth is almost or totally forgotten. If we reread the book at a mature age we are likely to rediscover these constants, which by this time are part of our inner mechanisms, but whose origins we have long forgotten. A literary work can succeed in making us forget it as such, but it leaves its seed in us. The definition we can give is therefore this:

3) The classics are books that exert a peculiar influence, both when they refuse to be eradicated from the mind and when they conceal themselves in the folds of memory, camouflaging themselves as the collective or individual unconscious. There should therefore be a time in adult life devoted to revisiting the most important books of our youth. Even if the books have remained the same (though they do change, in the light of an altered historical perspective), we have most certainly changed, and our encounter will be an entirely new thing. Hence, whether we use the verb "read" or the verb "reread" is of little importance. Indeed, we may say:

4) Every rereading of a classic is as much a voyage of discovery as the first reading.

5) A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say.

6) The classics are the books that come down to us bearing upon them the traces of readings previous to ours, and bringing in their wake the traces they themselves have left on the culture or cultures they have passed through (or, more simply, on language and customs). All this is true both of the ancient and of the modern classics. The reading of a classic ought to give us a surprise or two vis-à-vis the notion that we had of it.

7) A classic does not necessarily teach us anything we did not know before. In a classic we sometimes discover something we have always known (or thought we knew), but without knowing that this author said it first, or at least is associated with it in a special way. And this, too, is a surprise that gives a lot of pleasure, such as we
always gain from the discovery of an origin, a relationship, an affinity. From all this we may derive a definition of this type:

8) The classics are books that we find all the more new, fresh, and unexpected upon reading, the more we thought we knew them from hearing them talked about. Naturally, this only happens when a classic really works as such—that is, when it establishes a personal rapport with the reader. If the spark doesn't come, that's a pity; but we do not read the classics out of duty or respect, but only out of love. Except at school. And school should enable you to know, either well or badly, a certain number of classics among which—or in reference to which—you can then choose your classics. School is obliged to give you the instruments needed to make a choice, but the choices that count are those that occur outside and after school. It is only by reading without bias that you might possibly come across the book that becomes your book. In this way we arrive at a very lofty and demanding notion of what a classic is:

9) We use the word "classic" of a book that takes the form of an equivalent to the universe, on a level with the ancient talismans. With this definition we are approaching the idea of the "total book,"

10) Your classic author is the one you cannot feel indifferent to, who helps you to define yourself in relation to him, even in dispute with him. I think I have no need to justify myself for using the word "classic" without making distinctions about age, style, or authority. What distinguishes the classic, in the argument I am making, may be only an echo effect that holds good both for an ancient work and for a modern one that has already achieved its place in a cultural continuum.

11) A classic is a book that comes before other classics; but anyone who has read the others first, and then reads this one, instantly recognizes its place in the family tree. At this point I can no longer put off the vital problem of how to relate the reading of the classics to the reading of all the other books that are anything but classics. To be able to read the classics you have to know "from where" you are reading them; otherwise both the book and the reader will be lost in a timeless cloud. This, then, is the reason why the greatest "yield" from reading the classics will be obtained by someone who knows how to alternate them with the proper dose of current affairs. This does not necessarily imply a state of imperturbable inner calm. It can also be the fruit of nervous impatience, of a huffing-and-puffing discontent of mind.

12) A classic is something that tends to relegate the concerns of the moment to the status of background noise, but at the same time this background noise is something we cannot do without.

13) A classic is something that persists as a background noise even when the most incompatible momentary concerns are in control of the situation. The classics help us to understand who we are and where we stand. The only reason one can possibly adduce is that to read the classics is better than not to read the classics. If anyone objects that it is not worth taking so much trouble, then I will quote Cioran (who is not yet a classic, but will become one):

*While they were preparing the hemlock, Socrates was learning a tune on the flute. "What good will it do you," they asked, "to know this tune before you die?"*
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