



Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe: Toward the Revival of Higher Education

Jeffrey Hart

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Although the essential books of Western civilization are no longer central in our courses or in our thoughts, they retain their ability to energize us intellectually, says Jeffrey Hart in this powerful book. He now presents a guide to some of these literary works, tracing the main currents of Western culture for all who wish to understand the roots of their civilization and the basis for its achievements. Hart focuses on the productive tension between the classical and biblical strains in our civilization, between a life based on cognition and one based on faith and piety. He begins with the Iliad and Exodus, linking Achilles and Moses as Bronze Age heroic figures. Closely analysing texts and illuminating them in unexpected ways, he moves on to Socrates and Jesus, who "internalized the heroic", continues with Paul and Augustine and their Christian synthesis, addresses Dante, Shakespeare's Hamlet, Moliere, and Voltaire, and concludes with the novel as represented by Crime and Punishment and The Great Gatsby. Hart maintains that the dialectical tensions suggested by this survey account for the restlessness and singular achievements of the West and that the essential books can provide the substance and energy currently missed by both students and educated readers.

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