

# The New Criterion

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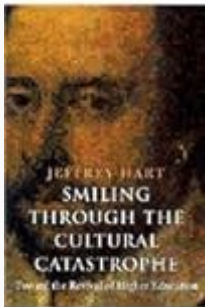
## Our spiritual legacy

by Hilton Kramer

~~Hart, Jeffrey Hart~~ *Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe: Toward the Revival of Higher Education* by Jeffrey Peter;

*A review of Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe: Toward a Revival of Higher Education, by Jeffrey Hart.*

### BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Jeffrey Peter; Hart, Jeffrey Hart

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

Yale Univ Pr, 0 pages,

Our spiritual legacy *Jeffrey Hart*

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

Yale University Press, 261 pages, \$26.95

To grasp the purpose and scope of Jeffrey Hart's new book, which is designed to serve as a refresher course in a close reading of the ideas to be found in the literary classics that have shaped the intellectual and spiritual character of Western culture, it will be useful to turn first to the author's afterword. For while the main body of the text in *Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe* makes only passing reference to the "catastrophe" alluded to in its title, the afterword succinctly summarizes the nature of the political assault on the humanities that has prompted Mr. Hart's own spirited defense of the Western canon in this book.

"Needless to say," he writes, "the villain [in this assault] always turns out to be variously white, male, Western, racist, imperialist, sexist, or homophobic—or, with luck, all of them together." Of the so-called "multicultural" imperative that is central to the assault, he correctly observes that it is

an ideological academic fantasy maintained in obvious bad faith. It really amounts to a form of anti-Westernism. That is, all cultures are to be respected and valued except the civilization of the West, to which, not surprisingly, the actual inhabitants of those other cultures are trying to migrate in large numbers.

It is Mr. Hart's optimistic belief that the cultural catastrophe that has resulted from this assault is now, as he says, "coming to an end, though with agonizing slowness." In the face of the anti-Western bias that has now been codified in significant segments of the academy, the media, the arts, and the entertainment industry, opinion will inevitably differ about an impending "end" to the *Kulturkampf* that has been raging now, with devastating consequences, for a quarter of a century. But that is a disagreement about the future, not about the tremendous losses we have suffered in the recent past.

It is in the hope of reversing these losses and recovering a true understanding of the West as a civilization that Mr. Hart has written this engaging survey of its essential texts and tenets, and done so with a clarity, conviction, and élan that give the entire exposition a primer-like authority. This is a book that the parents of all college-age students ought to equip them with as a defense against the ideological blather they are likely to encounter in their classes. Parents, too, would do well to pay the book close attention as a measure of what their kids are getting—or not getting—from their expensive and often wasteful classroom instruction. *Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe* is, in this respect, a reliable consumers' guide to what is really meant by a liberal education.

Appropriately, Mr. Hart begins his account of what he calls "the narrative of Western civilization" with a close look at both the *Iliad* and the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. "So far as the chronology is concerned," he writes, "we could start the narrative of Western civilization either with Homer's epics or with the Hebrew Bible. They are the primary documents." It is thus in Athens and Jerusalem, the subject of Mr. Hart's first chapter, that the fundamental dialectic—or, if you like, the fundamental tensions—of Western civilization is found to have been firmly established.

Readers familiar with the discussion of Hebraism and Hellenism in Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) will readily recognize the genealogy of the argument, and Mr. Hart is quick to disclaim any originality on this score. "The Athens-Jerusalem paradigm is not exactly a commonplace, and certainly not one in the discussion of literature," he writes,

but enough philosophers have argued for its centrality to have made this a kind of consensus. Whatever their differences in detail, such philosophers recognize that Athens and Jerusalem amount to a dialectic, and that the consequences of their interaction have been decisive for the character of Western civilization, setting it off from other cultures and civilizations both past and present.

Yet he is right to remind us that today this consensus is “not part of the intellectual equipment of the educated reader, and neither professors nor their students appear to be aware of its dynamic significance or its presence in the important books we will be discussing here, beginning with the *Iliad* and Exodus, fundamental works for Athens and Jerusalem.” (These other works range from Plato’s *Symposium*, the New Testament, Augustine’s *Confessions*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, to Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*.) “Indeed, with very few exceptions,” writes Mr. Hart, “these and many other works to be discussed here are but residually present today, if at all, even to professors of the liberal arts.”

What, then, do Athens and Jerusalem signify as distinct ways of looking at the world? In Mr. Hart’s characterization,

they are metaphors referring to philosophy/science and to the disciplined insights of scripture. The philosopher begins like Socrates by saying “I know nothing” and pursues knowledge through an investigation of the world. The scriptural tradition bases its view of the world on a series of received insights into the constitution of actuality.

Matthew Arnold, addressing readers who could more confidently be expected to have a close familiarity with both the Bible and the Greek classics, stated the matter somewhat differently. “The final aim of both Hellenism and Hebraism, as of all great spiritual disciplines,” he wrote in *Culture and Anarchy*, “is no doubt the same: man’s perfection or salvation.” He then made the following distinctions:

At the bottom of both the Greek and the Hebrew notion is the desire, native in man, for reason, and the will of God, the feeling after the universal order,—in a word, the love of God. But, while Hebraism seizes upon certain plain, capital intimations of the universal order, and rivets itself, one may say, with unequalled grandeur of earnestness and intensity on the study and observance of them, the bent of Hellenism is to follow, with flexible activity, the whole play of the universal order, to be apprehensive of missing any part of it, of sacrificing one part to another, to slip away from resting in this or that intimation of it, however capital. An unclouded clearness of mind, an unimpeded play of thought, is what this bent drives at. The governing idea of Hellenism is *spontaneity of consciousness*; that of Hebraism, *strictness of conscience*.

Exactly how this divided spiritual legacy has been reflected in, modified by, and otherwise morally debated and transformed in the classic works of Western literature is Mr. Hart’s great subject here, and to its revival as the basis of a liberal education he has made an impressive contribution. He brings to the task both a long history as a teacher in the classroom—mainly as a professor of English at Dartmouth College—and as an editor and writer in the larger arena of public debate—mainly as senior editor of *National Review*. His principal method throughout is the traditional one of *explication de texte*, which he commands with an exemplary fluency and imaginative sympathy. (His brilliant discussion of *The Great Gatsby*, for one example, is the best I have ever read.) I am not myself as optimistic about a revival of liberal education as Mr. Hart may be, but there can be little doubt that if such a revival were to be seen anytime soon, it will be accomplished along the lines laid out in this book.

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Hilton Kramer (1928–2012) was the founding editor of *The New Criterion*, which he started with the late Samuel Lipman in 1982.

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