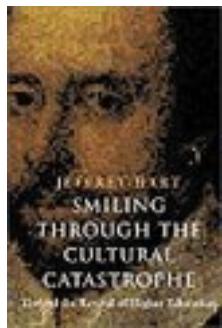


# Smiling through the cultural catastrophe



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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 & the basis for its achievements. Hart focuses on the productive tension between the classical & biblical strains in our civilization--between a life based on cognition & one based on faith & piety. He begins with the Iliad & Exodus, linking Achilles & Moses as Bronze Age heroic figures. Closely analyzing texts & illuminating them in unexpected ways, he moves on to Socrates & Jesus, who "internalized the heroic," continues with Paul & Augustine & their Christian synthesis, addresses Dante, Shakespeare (Hamlet), Moliere, & Voltaire, & concludes with the novel as represented by Crime & Punishment & The Great Gatsby. Hart maintains that the dialectical tensions suggested by this survey account for the restlessness & singular achievements of the West & that the essential books can provide the substance & energy currently missed by both students & educated readers.

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