
Jeffrey Hart. *Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe: Toward the Revival of Higher Education*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. 271p.

DOREEN ALVAREZ SAAR
DREXEL UNIVERSITY

Jeffrey Hart's *Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe: Toward the Revival of Higher Education* appears to promise an interesting discussion of the issues modern universities face. However, in the place of thoughtful and engaged scholarship, *Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe* proffers old wine—the old ideas of the Great Books curriculum—in the new bottles of right-wing harangue.

In his preface, Hart makes the dramatic announcement that there is a cultural catastrophe that “is evident to anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear” (xii). After this ringing denunciation, the reader is puzzled by the fact Hart neither discusses, analyzes, nor even touches upon the great problems of the day. The reader learns that, for Hart, the only evidence of our immediate cataclysm is the “growing incoherence in the university curriculum, a loss of point and a loss of seriousness”: one that finds “one ‘lifestyle’ as good as another” (xii). Even if we grant Hart's contention that there is a cultural catastrophe, it is hard to imagine accepting the “growing incoherence” of the “university curriculum” as the central problem in our culture. It is sad that in his insistence on this point Hart resembles the stereotype of the university professor who believes nothing outside of his discipline is of any real importance. Unfortunately, while Hart's evidence of catastrophe is laughable, his solution approaches the ludicrous. Hart argues that the catastrophe can be remedied by the introduction of a two-semester, great books course modeled on the freshman Humanities I-II at Columbia (introduced in 1919) in every American university. The “growing incoherence” of our culture is not merely limited to curriculum but appears to be limited to the curriculum of a single discipline. While it is difficult to take Hart's position seriously (even when I sit in one of the endless curriculum discussions with which all university faculty are familiar, I do not link curriculum with catastrophe), his silly point masks Hart's real interest: fighting the secularization of the university. Hart fails to muster the intellectual honesty to present his real interest as his premise: that simple act would have made the work approachable and allowed the reader to participate in rational discussion. Ultimately, one of the most disturbing elements of *Smiling* is Hart's lack of candor about his premise coupled with his desire to cloak his ideology. (Hart, a professor emeritus at Dartmouth, is a senior editor for the *National Review*.)

There is a disjuncture between the ballyhoo of Hart's opening salvos and the rest of the work. The largest portion of the book is comprised of chapters that are oral in style and read like Hart's classroom lectures for the great book course. In Homeric epics; portions of the Bible concerning Moses, Jesus, and Paul; Socrates' writings; Augustine's *Confessions*; *The Divine Comedy*; *Hamlet*; Moliere's *Misanthrope*, *Tartuffe*, and *Don Juan*; *Candide*; *Crime and Punishment*; and *The Great Gatsby*, Hart claims that students will find the "distinctive excellences" of "Western civilization" (xii). Hart's catchphrase is not mere rhetoric: he asserts these distinctive excellences as a counterweight to postmodern literary theory by giving the West (read America) ownership over the universal intellectual tradition. "Western science and mathematics are universal and essential to modern development. There is no Chinese mathematics or African physics" (245). Hart's syllabus is a traditional one (modeled on one proposed in 1948 by Columbia University's president) familiar to many of my generation as the course we took as freshmen. In proposing this syllabus as an antidote to our cultural catastrophe, Hart ignores the fact that this syllabus did not prevent many of those educated in the fifties and sixties under its aegis from becoming the very people Hart is railing against.

Hart believes that these works present the best of Western civilization as understood through what he calls the tension between Athens and Jerusalem, or the two poles of truth: "philosophy/science" and the "disciplined insights of Scripture," a description of whose roots are in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, and Leo Strauss, the University of Chicago philosopher and prominent Neo-Platonist. Quoting the German philosopher Herman Cohen, Hart's argument is "Plato and the Prophets are the most important sources of modern culture" (126). Is the Bible truth as Hart posits? In this instance, Hart must intend only to argue to the converted since he offers no evidence to support this proposition: he says merely "scriptural tradition bases its view of the world on a series of received insights into the constitution of actuality. The insights are not true because they are recorded in scripture, but they are recorded there because, finally, they are true" (4). The most direct ancestor of Hart's metaphor of two poles of truth is Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). *Culture and Anarchy* was intended to bring the Non-conformists of Victorian England into harmony with the Anglican establishment much as Hart would like to bring the multiculturalists of the academe to the realization of the truth of what he calls "received insights" or Biblical truth. I do not wish to be unfair to Hart's acknowledgement of Nietzsche as an intellectual ancestor. Given the events of WWII, like Strauss, Hart finds it necessary to explain the perceived excesses of Nietzsche's position by noting that Nietzsche's *Übermensch* (thought by many to be the intellectual underpinning of German

Fascism) sought to “unite Jerusalem and Athens at the highest level” (9) and that the maintenance of, rather than the resolution of, the tension is essential to Western civilization.

The individual chapters reveal the discordance between Hart’s ideological intention and what he actually delivers. First, Hart does not act as an educator in these chapters. He alleges “few [of these works] are part of the intellectual equipment even of the professors in the liberal arts today, much less their students.” Given this premise, if Hart was attempting to act as an educator, he would offer compelling, well-researched, and scholarly arguments for the works while attempting to persuade the reader of the truth of his position. Instead he falls back on clichés about the assumption that “a strong and lasting consensus judges all [of these works] to be absolutely fundamental” (11) and these works “make the case for their own importance” (242).

Hart seems to be unable to draw on any real classroom experience. The statement that the works “make the case for their own importance” makes this experienced teacher (who has taught most of these texts) wonder whether Hart actually spent much time in the classroom since he envisions every student as a Lockean blank slate awaiting the Word, a stance that removes the reality of both student and teacher. His vision denies the student’s experience of our culture in the same moment as it reduces the role of teaching to purveying a sacred text. For Hart, these texts will automatically compel the attention of students as a lightening bolt or hanging might rivet their attention.

Hart’s picture of faculty is seriously flawed. For Hart, faculty are “hostile to Western civilization itself” (246). He gives no evidence of this hostility. Indeed, the faculty’s sin seems not to be failing to teach these great works but to be “interrogating” the works, that is, questioning the assumptions of the works. He also wants faculty to be purveyors of not just an intellectual but a moral tradition since his curriculum is held together by the Greek idea of *paideia* or character-shaping curriculum. Although he does not make this point directly, it seems obvious that if faculty are going to teach morality in the curriculum, they are going to have to be vetted in some way by some one of “high” moral standing. (Perhaps Hart has a particular clergy member in mind for this job?)

Hart’s cheerleading for the “greatness” of the great works leads him into an intellectual ahistoricism. There are many examples of Hart’s surprising intellectual squishiness. For example, in a discussion of the Homeric epics, he says they “have features and themes in common with such other ancient epics as *Beowulf*, *Roland*, *Nibelungenleid*, and *Gilgamesh*.” It does not require a historian to point out that only *Gilgamesh* and the Homeric epics are truly “ancient” texts in the

manner that he suggests and the others belong to later and historically different eras. His comment that “the Homeric epics became fundamental” because “Homer possesses enormous talent. *Beowulf*, *Gilgamesh* and the others cannot compete” (15), had I seen it in a freshman essay, would cause me to shudder. Finally, the structure of his philosophy makes Hart more comfortable with the Christian world before the Enlightenment. It is amusing to see the great difficulty he has accepting Locke:

Indeed, what Locke cautions against, and in his theory of knowledge excludes, may well concern the deepest of human matters, the ideas of good and evil, the nature of the universe, the ultimate bases of civilization, the goals of life. From the perspective of traditional philosophy, Locke was an ‘antiphilosopher.’ (190)

In fact, since Hart’s philosophy is rooted in the merger of Christian religion with the Greek intellectual heritage as found in St. Paul (121), most of his discussions of works during and after the Enlightenment lack coherence and sympathy.

I recommend this work to all university faculty because if we do not learn to respond to and defend ourselves from this kind of attack, we will truly find ourselves in a cultural catastrophe: a society where scholarship, rigorous thought, intellectual freedom, and social and religious tolerance will not be permitted. ✱