

BEAUTY AND WISDOM

*From a lecture to the young generation read in London,
the 14th of December, 1919, by Professor N. Roerich.*



O the sacred ideals of nations in our days the watch-words: 'Art and Knowledge' have been added with special imperativeness. It is just now that something must be said of the particular significance of these great conceptions both for the present time and for the future. I address these words to those whose eyes and ears are not yet filled with the rubbish of everyday life, to those whose hearts have not yet been stopped by the lever of the machine called 'mechanical civilization.'

Art and knowledge! Beauty and wisdom! Of the eternal and still renewed meaning of these conceptions it is not necessary to speak. When but starting on the path of life, every child already instinctively understands the value of decoration and knowledge. Only later, under the grimace of disfigured life this light of the spirit becomes darkened, while in the kingdom of vulgarity it has no place, and is unknown. Yes, the spirit of the age attains even to such monstrosity!

It is not the first time that I have knocked at these gates and I here again appeal to you:

Amongst horrors, in the midst of the struggles and the collisions of the people, the question of knowledge and the question of art are matters of the first importance. Do not be astonished. This is not exaggeration, neither is it a platitude. It is a decided affirmation.

The question of the relativity of human knowledge has always been much argued. But now, when the whole of mankind has felt directly or indirectly the horrors of war, this question has become a vital one. People have not only become accustomed to think, but even to speak without shame about things of which they evidently have not the slightest knowledge. On every hand men repeat opinions which are altogether unfounded. And such judgments bring great harm into the world, an irreparable harm.

We must admit that during the last few years European culture has been shaken to its very foundation. In the pursuit of things, the achievement of which has not yet been destined to mankind, the fundamental steps of ascent have been destroyed. Humanity has tried to lay hold of treasures which it has not deserved and so has rent the benevolent veil of the goddess of Happiness.

Of course, what mankind has not yet attained it is destined to attain

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in due time, but how much man will have to suffer to atone for the destruction of the forbidden gates! With what labor and with what self-denial shall we have to build up the new bases of culture!

The knowledge which is locked up in libraries or in the brains of the teachers again penetrates but little into contemporary life. Again it fails to give birth to active creative work.

Modern life is filled with the animal demands of the body. We come near to the line of the terrible magic circle. And the only way of conjuring its dark guardians and escaping from it is through the talisman of true knowledge and beauty.

The time when this will be a necessity is at hand.

Without any false shame, without the contortions of savages, let us confess that we have come very near to barbarism. For confession is already a step towards progress.

It matters not that we still wear European clothes and, following our habit, pronounce special words. But the clothes cover savage impulses and the meaning of the words pronounced, although they are often great, touching, and uniting, is now obscured. The guidance of Knowledge is lost. People have become accustomed to darkness.

More knowledge! More art! There are not enough of these bases in life, which alone can lead us to the golden age of unity.

The more we know, the more clearly we see our ignorance. But if we know nothing at all, then we cannot even know we are ignorant. And that being so, we have no means of advancement and nothing to strive for. And then the dark reign of vulgarity is inevitable. The young generations are not prepared to look boldly, with a bright smile, on the blinding radiance of knowledge and beauty. Whence then is the knowledge of the reality of things to come? Whence then are wise mutual relations to arise? Whence is unity to come — that unity, which is the true guarantee of steady forward movement? Only on the bases of true beauty and of true knowledge can a sincere understanding between the nations be achieved. And the real guide would be the universal language of knowledge and of the beauty of art. Only these guides can establish that kindly outlook which is so necessary for future creative work.

The path of animosity, roughness, and abuse will lead us nowhere. Along that way nothing can be built. Does not a soul, does not a conscience, still remain in human nature? The real being in man still seeks to attain justice.

Away with darkness, let us do away with malice and treachery. Mankind has already felt enough of the hand of darkness.

Let me tell you, and, mind you, these are not platitudes, not mere

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words, I give voice to the convinced seeking of the worker: the only bases of life are art and knowledge.*

It is just in these hard days of labor, in this time of suffering, that we must steadily recall these kindly guides. And in our hours of trial let us confess them with all the power of our spirit.

You say: "Life is hard. How can we think of knowledge and beauty if we have nothing to live on?" or "We are far away from knowledge and art; we have important business to attend to first."

But I say: You are right, but you are also wrong. Knowledge and art are not luxuries. Knowledge and art are not idleness. It is time to remember this: they are prayer and the work of the spirit. Do you really think that people pray only when over-fed or after excessive drinking? Or during the time of careless idleness?

No, men pray in the moments of greatest difficulty. So, too, is this prayer of the spirit most needful, when one's whole being is shaken and in want of support, and when it seeks for a wise solution. And wherein lies the stronger support? What will make the spirit shine more brightly?

We do not feel hunger or starvation; we do not shiver because of the cold. We tremble because of the vacillation of our spirit; because of distrust, because of unfounded expectations.

Let us remember how often, when working, we have forgotten about food, have left unnoticed the wind, the cold, the heat. Our intent spirit wrapped us in an impenetrable veil.

"The weapon divideth it not, the fire burneth it not, the water corrupteth it not, the wind drieth it not away; for it is indivisible, inconsumable, incorruptible and is not to be dried away; it is eternal, universal, permanent, immovable. . . . Some regard the indwelling spirit as a wonder, whilst some speak and others hear of it with astonishment; but no one realizes it, although he may have heard it described."— *Bhagavad-Gîtâ*, ch. ii

Of what does the great wisdom of all ages and all nations speak? It speaks of the human spirit. Penetrate in thought into the deep significance of these words and into the meaning of your life. You know not the limits to the power of the spirit. You do not know over what impassable obstacles your spirit bears you, but some day you shall awake, unharmed and everlastingly regenerated. And when life is hard and weary and there seems to be no way out, do you not feel that some helper, your own divine spirit, is speeding to your aid? But his path is long and your faint-heartedness is swift. Yet does the helper come, bringing you both the 'sword of courage' and the 'smile of daring.' We have heard of a family which in despair put an end to their lives with fumes

*From the standpoint of Theosophy, art and knowledge are but secondary aspects of the real basis of life. The basis of all life, conscious or unconscious, is the essential divinity underlying all, and of which the universe itself is a manifestation. See the three fundamental propositions in *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, pp. 15-18, by H. P. Blavatsky. Art and knowledge in their highest sense are manifestations of this essential divinity.— EDITOR.

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of charcoal. Now this was intolerably faint-hearted. When the coming victory of the spirit arrives, will not they who have fled without orders, suffer fearfully because they did not apply their labor to that to which they should have applied it? It matters not what labor. The drowning man fights against the flood by all possible means. And if his spirit is strong, then the strength of his body will increase without measure.

But by what means will you call forth your spirit? By what means will you lay bare that which in man is buried under the fragments of his everyday life? Again and again I repeat: by the beauty of art, by the depth of knowledge. In them and in them alone are contained the victorious conjurations of the spirit. And the purified spirit will show you what knowledge is true, what art is real. I am assured that you will be able to call your spirit to your aid. That spirit, your guide, will show you the best paths. It will lead you to joy and victory. But even to victory it will lead you by a lofty path, whose steps are bound together by knowledge and beauty alone. . . . An arduous trial awaits the whole world: the trial by assimilation of truth. After the mediaeval trials by fire, water, and iron, now comes the trial by assimilation of truth. But if the power of the spirit upheld men against fire and iron, then will that same power raise them also up the steps of knowledge and beauty. But this test is more severe than the trials of antiquity. Prepare to achieve! Prepare for that achievement which is a matter of daily life. Meanwhile have care for everything that serves to advance the perception of truth. Approach with special gratitude all that shows forth the stages of beauty. At this time all this is especially difficult.

And for us Russians, besides the knowledge pertaining to the whole world, stand apart our own Russian art and Russian learning. For us this universal language of the soul is of infinite importance. And it is with special care and tenderness that we should speak the names of those who realize in life that of which we are justly proud.

There are many serious questions before us, but among them the question of the true culture of the spirit will be the cornerstone.

What can replace this spiritual culture? Food and industry are but the body and the digestion. But it is enough for men to reach out temporarily to the body and the digestion while the spiritual life starves. The spiritual level of the nations has sunk. And in the face of all that has happened, in the face of the threatening indubitable return to savagery, any farther sinking of the level will be fatal. In the whole history of mankind neither food nor industry, nor intellect unenlightened by the spirit, have ever built up true culture. And it is with especial care that we should treat everything that yet may raise the level of the spirit. I am not dreaming, but asserting.

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In every process of reconstruction the level of education and beauty should be raised; in no case should it be forgotten even for a moment. This is not an abstract judgment; on the contrary it is the task before us.

A great period of reconstruction awaits humanity. You of the new generation — apart from all your daily needs, prepare for the achievement of true joyous labor.

In Sweden I said: "We know that Russia has not ceased to be a great country; after enlightened reconstruction on popular principles it will assume a fit place in the sphere of culture, based on its spiritual and natural wealth. We know how incomprehensibly uninformed the West is concerning Russia — even the best of its people; we know with what injurious incorrectness they judge Russian possibilities. But while respecting all the cultural attainments of the East and of the West, we feel that we too can justly set forth truly universal treasures and in them express the cultural physiognomy of the great Russian people. For the language of art and knowledge is the only true and international language, the only language of a firmly established public life. In our internal reconstructions we must, under the benevolent standard of enlightenment, indefatigably introduce beauty and knowledge among the broad masses of people; we must introduce them firmly and actively, remembering that what now lies before is not ideology, not the work of formulating, but work itself, creation — the essence of which is clear and comprehensible, without saying many words about it. Not words, but deeds! We must remember that the image of beauty and knowledge will heal the people of slackness of thought, will inspire them with the bases of personal and public resources. It will make plain the essence of work and show the people, in a more comprehensible light, the path to the lofty attainments of the spirit.

"But to attain to these simple, basic forms of assimilation the Russian intelligentsia, despite the smallness of its numbers, must show, self-sacrificingly, mutual goodwill, union, and respect toward the manifold ways of spiritual searching.

"The intelligentsia must spiritually guard itself against the vulgarity and savagery surrounding it. Out of the fragments and the precious stones lovingly discovered it must build up the Kremlin of a great freedom, lofty beauty, and spiritual knowledge."

Again, we know that the material side of life has treacherously seized on mankind, but we do not conceal the fact that the intelligentsia must seek out the path of achievement.

And here in London it has already been said:

"We must by all means seek to proclaim and widely realize in life the tasks of true art and knowledge, remembering that art and know-

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ledge are the best international language, remembering that the strength of a people lies in its spiritual might, which is reinforced from sources of living water. Recollect the wise popular tale: the spring of dead water, *i. e.*, all that exists only for the body, caused the limbs of the body to be broken in pieces, but the body could only be brought to life again when sprinkled from the spring of living water. Those sacred springs must be laid open for the healing of Russia. There are no lookers-on, there are only workers.”

We have to speak in plain clear language, as if we were in the open street. Now life is filled with the old banners of political parties, worn out like defaced, useless coins. Now life is filled with innumerable conventional names. Now ‘man’ is forgotten. Human words are plain and clear, but yet plainer and clearer is the universal language of creative effort with all its mysterious convincingness.

The young generation has before it the task of bringing art and knowledge into life. Art and knowledge have often existed in life like locked libraries, like pictures turned with their faces to the wall. But the generation of the young must approach this task actively, vitally, in an ideal way; and their work, the simplest everyday work, must be illuminated by searchings and victories. The paths of art in their age-long stratification lie so deep and are so innumerable, and the sources of knowledge are so bottomless! What a life of joyous labor lies before you, — you, who are beginning to work!

Beauty and Wisdom! It is the prayer of the spirit that will raise the countries to the level of majesty. And you, young men and women, can demand the opening of these paths by all means. That is your sacred right. But for the realization of this right you yourselves must learn to open your eyes and ears and to distinguish truth from lies. Remember clearly: what is needed is not ideology, but effectual effort.

Iron rusts. Even steel is eaten away and crumbles if not vitally renewed. So does the human brain ossify, if not allowed to perfect itself indefatigably. And therefore learn to draw near to art and knowledge. These paths are easy later, but difficult in the beginning. Surmount them! And you, young people, have before you one of the most wondrous tasks: to raise the bases of the culture of the spirit; to replace mechanical civilization by the culture of the spirit. Of course you are witnesses of the cosmic process of the destruction of mechanical civilization and of the creation of the foundations of the culture of the spirit. Among national movements the first place will belong to the re-valuation of work, the crown of which is a widely understood creation and knowledge. Moreover only these two motive powers make up that international language of which feverishly-seeking mankind stands in such need. Creation is the pure prayer of the spirit. Art is the heart of the people.

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Knowledge is the brain of the people. Only through the heart and through wisdom can mankind arrive at union and mutual understanding. Now to understand is to forgive. The new governments will inscribe on their banners "the prayer of the spirit, art and knowledge," and will understand that he who bears with him the true spirit of national life must not even for a moment forget the achievement of spiritual life. Otherwise the builder will have no path before him and ruin will await him.

You, the young generation, have the right to demand from the governments the opening of the paths of art and knowledge. You must be able to say with clear conscience that even when circumstances were hardest you did not forget those great foundations of life — beauty and wisdom; that you not only remembered them, but according to your powers you realized in your lives this achievement which replaces the joy of destruction by the true joy of creation. And in the consciousness of this lies the guarantee of a brighter future for you. You know that outside of art religion is inaccessible; outside of art the spirit of nationality is far away; outside of art science is dark.

You also know that the achievement of the life of the spirit is not the privilege of hermits and anchorites alone. It may be achieved here, in our midst, in the name of that which is most sacred and nearest to the Great Spirit. And the consciousness of the achievement of life will open out to you new and daily possibilities of creation.

And so now I speak to you of the young generation about art and knowledge. I know that you, the knights of the people, the knights of the spirit, will not remain in the city of the dead; you will build up a country which will be bright and most beautiful and full of wisdom. Every word should end not in destruction, but in upbuilding. We know how mighty is creative thought. So now, in the presence of great searchings we must speak words which proceed from the best sources: "Put aside all prejudices; think freely!" And all that is thought in the name of beauty and wisdom, will be beautiful.

And again I will say unto you. Remember that the time has now come for harmonizing the centers. This condition will be of the first importance in the conflict with 'mechanical civilization,' which sometimes is erroneously called culture. The spirit, buried under the petty details of everyday life and barbarously ground down is already raising its head. Its wings are growing. O my young friends! preserve your bright enthusiasm and your eye of kindness.

There is no other way, O friends now scattered! May my call penetrate to you. Let us join ourselves by the invisible threads of the spirit. I turn to you, I call to you: in the name of Beauty and Wisdom, let us combine for struggle and work.