

¶What is behind civilization?

WANTED—A POET

I REMEMBER nearly 10 years ago, shortly after the financial crash, reading in the newspapers that Christopher Morley had had an interview with President Hoover in the White House. He asked the President what he thought in that time of bewilderment and dismay was America's greatest need. The President replied, "America's greatest need today is a great poet." This statement coming from the Chief Magistrate made a tremendous impression. I suppose the President meant that what every nation needs and what every individual needs is culture, in the deepest sense of the word. Culture is not only a civilizing force; it is in its essence spiritual. Carlyle said no nation is great unless it has a voice. Mere size and strength of armaments have never in themselves made any nation great.

Italy is not great because every child is trained to be a soldier with a knapsack for a pillow; Italy is not great because the entire nation is united in an aggressive determination to secure more territory; Italy is great because she has Dante and Petrarch; because she has Raphael, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Andrea del Sarto,

and many other painters. She has added enormously to the culture and civilization of the world.

Germany is not great because she has enlarged her geographical territory; she is not great because she has a large body of trained soldiers and an immense number of war planes; she is great because German composers of music have contributed more to the music of the world than those of all other nations put together and multiplied 10 times. She is great because she produced Goethe, the greatest world poet since Shakespeare and one of the greatest poets of all time, the others being Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare. The foremost private citizen in Germany is Gerhart Hauptmann.

A few years before the World War some newspaper in Germany sent out a questionnaire to thousands of Germans, asking them to name in order of importance the 10 living men who were most necessary to the welfare of the country. Of course, the first vote was given to the Kaiser, but that was a complimentary vote and had no other significance. The second name on the list was Gerhart

Hauptmann, and lower down in the list were Professor Roentgen, who discovered the X-ray which has been of incalculable benefit in all hospitals, and Dr. Koch, whose discoveries have saved millions of children from death. It is interesting that, above these great scientific men of genius, whose discoveries have been so important for the health and well-being of mankind, the majority of German citizens answering the questionnaire should have considered Hauptmann more important, more necessary to the welfare of the state; Gerhart Hauptmann, who never made anything useful—a poet, a dramatist, a novelist.

England is great, not because she has the most powerful navy in the world, but because on a plot of ground no bigger than the state of Michigan she has produced more great poets than any other country in ancient or modern times: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Gray, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Tennyson, Browning—these are the eternal glories of their native land.

Russia is great not because she is gaining in engineering and in industrial work and in the manufacture of implements of war, but because she has Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov.

These authors have nothing to do with either Tsarism or Communism. They are the most important of all Russian productions.

About 30 years ago I asked a Japanese student who had just entered Yale why he had left his native land and come to America. He replied, "When I was a student in Japan, I read in a Japanese translation a book by Ralph Waldo Emerson. I immediately decided, first, to learn English so that I could read that man in the original, and second, to come and live for a time in a land that could produce such a mighty genius."

When I was a freshman in college, our instructor in Latin said that the Romans were the greatest nation in antiquity because they were the greatest in the greatest things—in law, in discipline, in government, in colonization. But, even as a freshman, I knew he was mistaken, because those are not the greatest things. Greece was the greatest nation in antiquity because she produced the greatest poets, the greatest dramatists, the greatest philosophers. Of course, I should be very foolish indeed if I did not admire many works in Latin literature in two large volumes which began by saying that compared with Greek literature, all Latin literature is hardly more than a school exercise. Rome complete-

ly conquered Greece by force of arms in the year 146 B. C. and made Greece a part of the Roman Empire. But no sooner had they overcome the armed resistance of the Greeks than Athens began her bloodless conquest of the conqueror, and Greek literature imposed its eternal sway on the Romans and all the rest of the civilized world.

In every war, whether it is a war between two states or a general war in which many nations take part, there are three things which the war cannot stop or change. These three things are agriculture, love between the sexes, and literature. I have never heard of a war where the theatres did not remain open, and not for purposes of propaganda. In the last years of the terrible war between Sparta and Athens when it was clear that Athens was doomed, Euripides put no one of his immortal masterpieces, a play that is widely read and still acted today.

Man cannot live without bread, but he cannot live by bread alone. His physical existence depends upon food, but his

spiritual life depends upon the things that keep the soul alive: poetry, fiction, drama, music, sculpture, painting, and all the fine arts. War in itself is not history, even though until recently it took up a major part of the space in the history books. War is rather an interrupter of history, a gigantic irrelevancy that for a time disturbs the course of history which is found in the daily life of men and women. The German Goethe was not only the greatest poet since Shakespeare; he was an absolutely civilized man, more civilized than most of us are today. During the war between Germany and France in the early days of the nineteenth century, he was asked to write propaganda against the French, and he replied that he would not write propaganda against the French because the French were a civilized people.

Politics and social questions may seem for the time supremely important, but they are transitory and ephemeral. Poetry deals with those things that are fixed and eternal—the food of the human soul.—*Dr. William Lyon Phelps, condensed from Lister's Digest.*

