

# Beauty Will Save the World

by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

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Like that bewildered savage who has picked up a strange object... perhaps something thrown up by the sea, perhaps disinterred from the sands or dropped from the heavens... an object intricate in its convolutions, which shines first with a dull glow and then with a bright shaft of light... who keeps turning it over and over in his hands in an effort to find some way of putting it to use, seeking some humble function for it, which is within his limited grasp, never conceiving of a higher purpose...

So we, too, holding art in our hands vaingloriously considering ourselves to be its master, undertake brazenly to give it direction, to renovate it, reform it, to issue manifestoes about it, to sell it for money. We use it to play up to those who possess power. We employ it at times for amusement—even in music-hall songs and night clubs—and also at times, grabbing hold of it however we can, for



*Chad Kyojun Kleitsch*

transient and limited political and social needs. But art is not desecrated by our carryings-on. It does not lose sight of its own origins because of them. And each time and in each mode of use it sheds on us a portion of its secret inner light.

But can we embrace all that light? Who is there so bold as to proclaim that he has *defined* art? That he has enumerated all its facets? Yet perhaps in ages past someone did comprehend and define it for us, but we grew impatient: we listened in passing and paid no heed and discarded it immediately in our eternal haste to replace even the very best with something else just because it is new! And then later on, when what is old is restated, we forgot that we heard it before.

One artist imagines himself the creator of an independent spiritual world and takes on his shoulders the act of creating that world and its population, assuming total responsibility for it—but he stumbles and breaks down because there is no

mortal genius capable of bearing such a load; just like man, who once declared himself the center of all existence but was incapable of creating a balanced spiritual system. And then, when failure occurs, it is all blamed on the external disharmony of the world, on the complexity of the shattered contemporary soul, or the stupidity of the public.

Another artist realizes that there is a supreme force above him and works away gladly as a small apprentice beneath God's heaven, even though his responsibility for everything he draws or writes and for the souls which perceives it is all the more strict. But still: it was not he who created this world, nor is it he who provides it with direction, and he has no doubts of its foundations. The artist is only given to sense more keenly than others the harmony of the world and all the beauty and savagery of man's contribution to it—and to communicate this poignantly to people. And even in the midst of failure and down at the lowest depths of existence—in poverty, prison, illness—the sensation of a stable harmony will never leave him.

However, all the irrationality of art, its blinding twists and turns, its unpredictable discoveries, its soul-shaking impact on people are too magical to be contained within the world-outlook of an artist, in his conception or in the work of his unworthy fingers.



*Harrison Mitchell*

Archaeologists have not yet discovered any stage of human existence without art. Even in the half-light before the dawn of humanity we received this gift from Hands we did not manage to discern. Nor have we managed to ask: Why was this gift given to us and what are we to do with it?

And all those prophets who are predicting that art is disintegrating, that it has used up all its forms, that it is dying, are mistaken. We are the ones who shall die. And art will remain. The question is whether before we perish we shall understand all its aspects and all its ends.

Not all can be given names. Some of them go beyond words. Art opens even the chilled, darkened heart to high spiritual experience. Through the instrumentality of art we are sometimes sent—vaguely, briefly—insights which logical processes of thought cannot attain.

Like the tiny mirror of the fairy tale: you look into it and see—not yourself—but for one fleeting moment the Unattainable to which you cannot leap or fly. And the heart aches...

Dostoyevsky once let drop the enigmatic phrase: “Beauty will save the world.” What does this mean? For a long time it used to seem to me that this was a mere phrase. Just how could such a thing be possible? When had it ever happened in the bloodthirsty course of history that beauty had saved anyone from anything? Beauty had provided embellishment certainly, given uplift—but whom had it ever saved?



However, there is a special quality in the essence of beauty, a special quality in the status of art: the

- conviction carried by a genuine work of art is absolutely indisputable and tames even the strongly opposed heart. One can construct a political speech, an assertive journalistic
- polemic, a program for organizing society, a philosophical system, so that in appearance it is smooth, well structured, and yet it is built upon a mistake, a lie; and the hidden element, the distortion, will not immediately become visible. And a speech, or a journalistic essay, or a

program in rebuttal, or a different philosophical structure can be counterposed to the first—and it will seem just as well constructed and as smooth, and everything will seem to fit. And therefore one has faith in them—yet one has no faith.

It is vain to affirm that which the heart does not confirm. In contrast, a work of art bears within itself its own confirmation: concepts which are manufactured out of whole cloth or overstrained will not stand up to being tested in images, will somehow fall apart and turn out to be sickly and pallid and convincing to no one. Works steeped in truth and presenting it to us vividly alive will take hold of us, will attract us to themselves with great power- and no one, ever, even in a later age, will presume to negate them. And so perhaps that old trinity of Truth and Good and Beauty is not just the formal outworn formula it used to seem to us during our heady, materialistic youth. If the crests of these three trees join together, as the investigators and explorers used to affirm, and if the too obvious, too straight branches of Truth and Good are crushed or amputated and cannot reach the light—yet perhaps the whimsical, unpredictable, unexpected branches of Beauty will make their way through and soar up *to that very place* and in this way perform the work of all three.

And in that case it was not a slip of the tongue for Dostoyevsky to say that “Beauty will save the world,” but a prophecy. After all, he was given the gift of seeing much, he was extraordinarily illuminated.

And consequently perhaps art, literature, can in actual fact help the world of today.

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