

REFLECTIONS ON FRENCH CIVILIZATION

L. FARRINGTON*

ON the inscriptions of the war memorials in France we read "Morts pour la civilisation". For Frenchmen civilization and France are synonymous. To be a civilized man is the equivalent of the English gentleman and the German seeker of knowledge. But what exactly "civilized" implies is difficult to explain. However, it is essential for those who are seriously trying to understand the French outlook, so very different from our own, to try to give an answer to it.

It might be summed up in the idea of a connoisseur. To be a connoisseur is to be able to distinguish, compare and estimate achievements and refinement of feelings, to appreciate and understand the subtlest nuances of form. It is connected with the idea of "taste" and is, like taste, concerned with both the intellect and the senses; it applies both in gastronomy and in criticism. Such an ideal is, of course, that of a mature mind, just as civilization itself is the expression of a "late" culture. And the maturity of the French mind is expressed in many ways and is an explanation of the most outstanding characteristics of the race. The famous "sagesse française" is a wisdom, not of a religious or metaphysical kind, but a wisdom of life, gained through knowledge of the world. Youth and the youthful virtues are not looked on as admirable qualities, as they are here. The French youth sees himself far more as the man he is going to be. He develops more quickly and assumes an assured and self-sufficient outlook.

This maturity shows itself in every field of activity. French literature, for instance, appeals above all to the developed and experienced mind. The chief element of youth in literature is enthusiasm and vigour, the idealistic, the dreaming and longing, all that we associate with the term "Romantic". This extremely strong influence in all our lives plays little part in the French outlook. There was a Romantic movement, it is true, which we studied at school. But was it Romantic at all in our sense? Its essential characteristic was opposition to the outmoded classical rules, to which it opposed a set of rules of its own. Victor Hugo himself compared it to liberalism in politics. Yet Romanticism, as we know it, is not the least concerned with politics and is impossible to express in rules or formulae. The

*Principal of Clarke's Harbour School, Shelburne County.

French ideal is that of the connoisseur, or "finisseur". It is mastery of the art of literature, like mastery of a handicraft. It is marked by long and careful practice and polish, as we see in Racine and Flaubert.

Similarly the French are conservative. When the war was over we said to ourselves, let us build a new and better world. The prevalent feeling in France was "Our old world still exists." When we think of building a town, for instance, we think like the town planners, of new streets running in new directions. This is not so in France. French law forbids it, and the inhabitants of a town do not desire it. They want each individual house to be built up again on the old foundations, without special regard for economy or uniformity. This can be taken as an analogy of the general French point of view. Frenchmen consider themselves individuals rather than social beings—as individuals who have developed their powers for subtle enjoyment of the pleasures of life rather, we may be inclined to add, than in accordance with the ideal of self-discipline in our ethical outlook. We may object that efficiency and social co-operation are essential in our present complicated mechanical state, but to demand that the French copy our concept of the moral citizen would involve a denial of the true French character. So France insistently opposes her ideal of personal happiness to the different conceptions of collective well-being that animate other countries. That is why in their heart they hate progress as they hate and distrust the machine. For the idea of progress damages the permanence of the standards of the arts and pleasure of living. The machine destroys the individual element and runs quite counter to the pleasure in handicraft, inherent in the ideal of the connoisseur and man of taste. Not that all machines are badly run in France; the French are a very able people and quite capable of understanding them. But they are much less likely to regard the machine as an object of idolatry, because they still realize that it is only justified if it ensures man more leisure. Machines, like the idea of work itself, are regarded as an inevitable evil, which has to be endured but which is firmly subordinate to the business of living. It is the skill and devotion that the French give to this most delicate of all problems, the art of living, that is the source of the charm and attraction they have for us.