II

THE PERSONALITY OF FRANCE

IN time of war, our energies are all directed to the channels of action. Our minds are pardonably engrossed by the problems of behavior. We judge nations, as we judge men, according to what they do. To speak of the personality of France is, then, to study the part she plays in the world; to review her deeds in the great struggle of the peoples.

But her share in the common heroism and sacrifices of the Allies has been appreciated by her American friends so readily, so generously, that it is hardly possible to add anything to that tribute of praise; and least of all does it behoove a Frenchman to try.

Victory has liberated our souls; it should set our minds free. The time has come when our attention may return to the disinterested problems of moral research. Are we not attracted, once more, by the mystery of that national character of France, which lies behind her long-suffering sublime patience? What is the source of the spiritual energy that she has displayed? Was the world right in looking upon it, at first, as something of a miracle? And if there subsists no enigma in the sudden emergence of what is a fund of indestructible strength, as old as the hills, does there not exist in the French temperament something unique, an originality, which so far has been given to none else?

We are thus led on to study the personality of France more or less in the plane of a psychological disquisition. It is impossible to deal summarily with such a matter, without

losing the substance of concrete realities. We must imaginatively substitute the rich, teeming life of innumerable men and women, with their individual traits, their shades and manners of being, for the dry outline of an analytical scheme.

One more word of apology may be required. There was a time when, to treat a subject like this, a Frenchman felt bound to renounce the critical outlook of the student. To speak of France was to vindicate her, to glorify her. Had not her sons to dispel, with words as with deeds, the cloud of lies and deceitful illusions which had gathered about her, and for which she was herself, no doubt, partly responsible?

That time, again, is past. We may allow our hearts and minds to relax from the sacred one-sidedness of patriotic anxiety. To think or speak is no longer to act, but to prepare the way for future action; and toward the fruitful activities of peace, the safest way lies through the cool, dispassionate investigations of the student. To see things as they are is now our primary duty. What Frenchman was ever afraid to look his country in the face? Our gaze can be no less tender and respectful while it assumes the perfect candor of the seeker after truth.

Truth, indeed, like honesty, is ever the best policy. It should be the proud belief of a Frenchman that his country stands to lose nothing by being better known. The sympathy most Americans feel for her is precious to us; and that is why we would be happy to offer it a safe basis to build upon. Nothing threatens it, except the recoil from self-deception. Our American friends must not be inclined some day to bear France a grudge because they found her other than we had allowed them to think she was.

Is not the best preventive against such disillusionment to meet it, or the possibility of it, half-way, and to throw fearless light on the inner reality of our nature? One hears con-

tradictory maxims about the compatibility of love with clear-sightedness. It may be that the god of love is to remain blind, or lose all his power; but this is not true of the friendship of collective beings, of nations, which must be solidly founded on facts.

Let us, then, preserve our sincerity at any price, and show, when dealing with France, that fine respect for truth which is one of the ambitions, and perhaps one of the merits, of the French mind. We do not want to love our country at the expense of truth, because truth is quite as venerable, and even higher, than our country. Let not our country be loved because her real self is hidden; but let her be loved, like a human personality, for the attractive combination of her virtues and oddities.

A personality—such is its distinctive trait—must be organized; but it is so more or less markedly and perfectly. That of France has always been described as logical, and we might expect its outline to be rounded, its disposition harmoniously balanced. We know, at the first glance, that this is not the case. The logic France has in her mind is not the ruling principle in her whole self. She shows us not a few complexities; a many-sidedness which is sometimes disconcerting. Poets will say she is a woman, and speak of the eternal feminine. . . . But her complexities are not exactly contradictions. There is in her a rather stable equilibrium; she obeys an inner law of evolution. Revolutions there have been, indeed, in her history, political and social; but few really startling moral changes.

The character of France revolves round an axis, firmly set, and to all appearances unchanging. What is that root-idea, that central aspiration and striving, which binds all things together? A spiritual principle of culture. To be French is to care particularly, in various and subtle ways,

for some values of the mind and the senses. This principle results in fellowship among seekers after the same refined joys of life, the same lucid perception of truth. It results in love for the common basis of those joys and that perception: the national body and soul, in which all Frenchmen move and have their being.

One may successively consider the working of that tendency, that seeking after culture, in the several planes of the human mind—the intelligence, the feelings, the will—without, of course, attaching any clear-cut distinctiveness, or scholastic meaning, to those points of view on the unity of the consciousness.

Our culture realizes itself chiefly through the intelligence. We owe it the characteristic tone of our national originality. Critics have very often pointed out the part it used to play, and still plays, in the life of France. With us the innate, irrepressible tendency of the individual is still to understand things. We prize high all intellectual gifts and tastes and ambitions. This is the light that awakes first in the eyes of the French child; the young man dreams of a system, a theorem, a formula, to reduce the complexities of the world to intelligibility. To the traditional French mind, things only grow real, acceptable, as they are understood and organized with previous knowledge. The "intellectual" is not a recent French type; its roots are deep in the past. France is a byword among the nations for the stamp which a striving after clearness, order, deduction, has set on her constitutions, her laws, her administration, her social and moral activities.

That stamp is not necessarily a badge of honor; it has been sometimes denounced as a brand of shame; as the sign of an overbold endeavor to fly in the face of nature, of a Promethean attempt to ravish fire from heaven. It has been often criticized as a practical inferiority.

Over-intellectualism, with us, is not only a possible fault, but sometimes a real one. The pleasure of understanding things will be preferred to that of feeling or to the duty of doing them. Such a habit, of course, plays havoc with life. Nature is apt to show her stubborn spirit, and refuse to yield to system. The consequences are, on the one hand, an over-detached, critical, fastidious bent of mind among too many individuals, prone to forget that they are men and citizens; that they are to act, and act together. On the other hand, the signal disappointments and failures of the deductive, *a priori* tendency of the French mind, at its worst, in matters practical, political, social. In spite of fine victories of reason over matter, the world with all its weight has now and again crushed us for our premature attempt to dissolve it in light. The concrete, experimental genius of the Anglo-Saxons has always nursed a grievance against us on that score; and fate on a few occasions has seemed to justify it.

Is it still justified? To some extent, perhaps. The war, with all our splendid achievements, has shown us a prey, in several fields, to over-deductive inertia: an inertia born of an exaggerated assurance that things will conform to our preconceived ideas; an inertia which is to us the deepest warning of danger.

But we have heard much about that fault of ours; we have realized it more and more clearly. We have organized our notion of it with the very web of our consciousness. In the atmosphere of present thought and life, the coming generation breathes a caution against it. Our newest philosophical tendencies are entirely colored with our knowledge of it, our opposition to it. The pragmatist movement has struck root in France. A Frenchman, Bergson, is giving its most complete expression to the world revolt against the tyrannical sway of nineteenth-century intellectualism. Our young

men are all for action, experience, the concrete. They no longer dream of enclosing the universe in their clear-cut systematic concepts; they want to force their will upon things through energy, efficiency, adventure. The popularity, the prestige of intelligence has been declining. The exaggerations of a few show which way the wind blows: it is fashionable in some circles to denounce not only the abuse, but the use of reason as an instrument of fruitful thinking.

This reaction, in spite of its superficial excesses, is deep and significant; its effects will be lasting. But it will not, it cannot be more than a complementary influence, an inevitable swing of the pendulum. The intellectual personality of France will chiefly reside, henceforth as of old, in a striving after clearness of analysis and realization. The joy of conceiving a whole, of organizing ideas together, will keep its hold upon us. That tendency is part and parcel of our inmost national originality: it transmutes things into intelligible, communicable elements; it makes the agreeable sociable intercourse of minds a possibility.

Our literature, our art, will always bear its stamp. And in this field, indeed, the intelligence is no enemy to life. In the atmosphere of intellectual sensuousness, of intellectual activities enjoyed for their own sake, art thrives as an instinct, a spontaneous impulse. The fresh vigor, the still renewed fecundity of artistic creation in France, should give pause to the popular outcry against rationalism as a sterilizing influence. The time has come to reconsider Matthew Arnold's famous pronouncement: "France, famed in all great arts, in none supreme." . . . One may demur at this implied notion of supremacy. Our æsthetic judgments hardly admit of such dogmatic hierarchy. Hegemony in art bids fair to go the way of political and military hegemony, leaving the field to the parallel, free expansion of flourishing

national geniuses. The only acceptable description of excellence is a very high level of attainment; and in that sense, many nations can be supreme at the same time. Whatever the practical deficiencies of France's record may be, her exalting pursuit of the white light of pure ideas has not divested the concrete world of its color and imaginative appeal. Inspiration has fed on emotion, on the vivid realization of things; but an element of intellectual endeavor has sublimated, not paralyzed it. The literature of France has been since the middle ages a continuous growth of unabated vitality. Her painters, her sculptors, her architects, are today second to none. Her musicians, after a temporary eclipse, again show a wonderful faculty of initiative and creation.

When we come to feeling, we naturally ask ourselves whether, and how far, it is compatible with a high development of intellectualism. Some of our enemies, indeed, have been heard to say that the heart of France was apt to be hollow and insincere and starved; but few, if any, will concur in such censure, among those whose judgment is not hopelessly biassed. That error was born of the hard-heartedness which went with the logical mania of some French revolutionary sects; it was fostered by a prejudice against the sanity of intellectual culture; by the superficial cynicism of wit and brilliancy in some typical circles of historical France. Is feeling with us only a matter for enjoyment and dissection? In fact, the tendency to refine and improve on elementary feelings does exist with us. For one thing, the emotions of the heart are freely expressed and confessed; they are not kept down under a seal of reserve as in Great Britain; the Frenchman is not afraid to give himself away. This has made of the feelings a matter for art, social intercourse, criticism; and the all-pervading habit of intellectual analysis has wrought upon them. The dissection of the heart in con-

versations, plays, novels, poems, was of old a feature of France; it has remained so to our day. The easy, frequent formulation of feeling has had a double effect: some of its most spontaneous and deepest forms have found a refuge in silence and secrecy; married love, and family attachments, have withdrawn upon themselves; the closeness, the jealously guarded intimacy of French family life is partly due to an instinctive reaction against an over-inquisitive tone of social manners. On the other hand, in its more superficial aspects, feeling has striven to renew itself through delicacy of shade and fineness of expression. Ever since the middle ages, and the "cours d'amour," there has grown in France and flourished a hankering after subtlety in sentiment.

To the point of artificiality? Sometimes, no doubt. In the quest for the rare and new, the morbid has been found. In the analytical process, the reality of the emotion has been known to evaporate. This will be, now and again, an almost unavoidable consequence of the playing of the intellect upon the heart. A scrutinizing gaze may detect, through the history of France, some crises in the healthy course of natural feeling. The latest instance would be the "decadent" phase of literature and life, in our "yellow nineties." It was not, for that matter, an exclusively French, but a European phenomenon. It never went deep, and was mostly restricted to a set of bohemians and snobs in the main centres of artistic life. Its very frankness, while rather lessening its danger, magnified it, to foreign eyes, into a national trait. Great wrong was then done to France, as the finger of scorn was often pointed at her, and she was a scandal among the nations. Still, there was an evil wind blowing over the spiritual waters at the time. Whoever was then a youth can remember the sickly cast of faces and hearts; the uneasy fretting of the sensibility, and the whole being. . . .

The tremendous gale of the war, with its destructive and

purifying gusts, has blown away the last dissolving remnants of that hot, unhealthy atmosphere.

It has brought us back, like a sudden awakening, to the deeper tradition of our moral history.. The intellectualization of feeling, with us, does not only result in its refinement and analysis; it brings about, or at least makes possible, its exaltation. In the French mind, where the free play of the intelligence has swept down all the barriers, all the limits, of timidity, narrowness and selfishness, the highest passions of the soul find an unsurpassed vastness of scope. As a consequence we are called upon to witness, not only our "revolutionary fever," but the great examples of our emotional idealism. A characteristic trait of France has always been her enthusiasts of feeling, who went, if necessary, to the extremity of self-sacrifice. They possessed the strength and the clearness and the purity and beauty of a type. It is enough to mention Joan of Arc, the Crusaders, the Knights; the saints of our Church, the martyrs of the Revolutionary era; Lafayette, and the highest pitch of chivalrous disinterestedness; the million inarticulate, humble heroes of the present war.

The genius of France is not in the least unfeeling. But feeling with us is an accepted, natural fact; and so it is neither hidden, nor taught, nor idolized. It is steeped in intelligence, and aims often at refinement; it is sometimes apt to lose strength in achieving delicacy. The romantic movement somewhat upset our psychological balance, and made the influence of feeling upon life more direct and unrestricted. But our ingrained, instinctive wisdom is to discipline it, keep it in order—apart from the outbursts of exalted passion. Religion, family honor, social decency, rational clear-sightedness and serenity, more or less contribute their respective shares to that discipline; and the

fine poise of a cultivated soul is an element of the ideal of the "honnête homme." The French usually show their feelings in an unashamed, simple way; at the same time, they keep them under command. It is rather by his ideas that a Frenchman will, occasionally, be carried away; but that does not mean that he has no heart. His proper, distinctive aim is to give both head and heart their due.

As for the will, the subject is of a particularly complex nature. It is hardly possible to conceive of it in the abstract; time and the national evolution are paramount. France, in the past, through twelve centuries of an eventful career, had been a radiating focus of energy and force. But some of her best friends would say, before the war, that there were symptoms of a partial failing in her formerly inexhaustible fund of strength. Had she wasted herself away in ages of exertions, and achievements, and bleeding, and suffering, and enjoyment? Did her intellectualism undermine in her the roots of the will?

Resolute action, in psychological experience, is certainly not the *forte* of such a temperament, inclined to be æsthetic and critical before everything, to dream away or enjoy away or analyze away life. And if the past showed the expansion of an irrepressible national vigor, there was a tendency to languor or torpor in some of the pre-war generations.

A relative inertia of the will loomed ahead as a threatening danger. Hedonism, and dilettantism, and weakness of purpose, have been known to bring their doom on other more sensuous ideals of culture. The course of modern French civilization runs parallel to the brink of careless self-abandonment. Our triumph was still to avoid it, while boldly harnessing our chariot to an intellectual star. Were we, but yesterday, drawing nearer to the precipice?

In the political world, some observers noticed an undue

tendency to economy of effort; a disgusted indolent scepticism which allowed unworthy men or sets to have their way. In the economic field, American sympathizers would point out that we often allowed ourselves to rest on the old-established positions; that we ceased fighting, adapting ourselves, developing and improving with the times. . . . Our society was not entirely a progressive one. Was in it the inmost, deepest spring of progress unstrung, or broken?

The war has answered, and vindicated the soundness of the race. French energy has known how to act, and how to endure; let nothing be added to the beautiful recognition it has received from a world startled or moved to more exact understanding and more fervent sympathy. Indeed, there is in France, whatever the relaxations of the surface, a never-failing principle of strength: it is the readiness, the capacity to be at one in perception or feeling. At a crisis, a revulsion is sure to take place. When her life is in danger, France makes up her mind clearly and well, because her vision is clear, and the elemental will to live gushes forth. From an individualistic dispersion, she awakes to unanimous, strong resolves.

But what about the prosaic, commonplace, every-day efforts which go to make the success of a nation? Let us not forget the source of strength which some of our most acute foreign friends have so intuitively found out; there is in France a vast, unnoticed reserve of moral, social, economic energy: it is the stubborn, stoical devotion to professional duty—be it art, handicraft, or drudgery; the patient acceptance of grinding toil; the self-discipline of scrupulous attention to good work well done. Our peasant men and women, in the trenches or in the plough-fields, have stretched that old, dogged obstinacy of labor to its utmost limits. Conscientiousness of purpose, and gift of realization, will

keep the French workman above the dead level of merely quantitative competition. Our industrial methods may be, for a time, unduly conservative; but so long as our industry is fed by those inner springs, it cannot fail. What it may lose through the slowness of its adaptation, it will regain through the finish of its products.

And it is bent on quickening the pace of its adaptation. France realizes that she must enter on a new phase of resolute, strong action. The impetus of the war is making itself felt in all her national activities. The younger generation, through their very intelligence, have risen above the formal worship of a futile intellectual brilliancy; they aim at strengthening their practical hold upon things. Does a voluntary cultivation of the will mean an implied contradiction? Not in the least. The modern man knows that he can, to a very large extent, make himself; and Americans will join us in that optimistic, buoyant faith. The France of to-morrow will show us a rejuvenation of energy in all its forms. Force of character is honored, sometimes with an exclusive, undue predominance. When a durable equilibrium is reached, the proportion of the elements will have been shifted, but the balance will be restored within the organic law of the national personality. There is no deviation from the type in such a case, when constant oscillations are included in the type itself.

Has that type been made at all clearer, as a result of a rather elaborate psychological scheme? The personality of France is her living being, which escapes the meshes of a commonplace analysis.

French men and women, while showing a family likeness, have their own different individualities. It is only through contact with them, experience of them, that the bare outline here sketched out, so slight, so incomplete, may

be filled up and become a picture. The future of the friendship between America and France is dependent on a more real understanding, and thus on a closer interpenetration of the two peoples.

A personality is unique. And so are, when attentively studied, the characters of all nations; but personalities are more or less original. Now, among foreign observers there is pretty general agreement that the personality of France is to a high degree marked and rare. She owes her distinctiveness to the unity, and to the homogeneous, relatively stable quality, of her psychological being. And her rarity she owes to her charm, which is an indefinable something; a subtle essence, as our friends say, pervading everything French. Unless one tries and seizes something at least of that elusive charm, one has entirely missed the real personality of France.

Let us look for some of its more tangible elements in the tendencies and traits which constitute her moral nature, and from which the spontaneous unity of her sons grows. . . .

There is a self-forgetfulness in the very self-seeking of a universal aspiration to culture; a culture which is an effort, and at the same time an instinct: an effort towards intelligence and light and appreciation of all things; an instinct of the laws and combinations of forms which make of expression in all cases a complete whole—an organization of ideas, a work of art, a planned out and finished thing. That self-forgetfulness has an appeal, and even an ethical value, as its product most often possesses an artistic merit.

At the root of it all lies a preference of the ideal to the material; in a way, a refined idealism; the idealism of culture, if not exactly that of religious, moral endeavor. That idealism of culture creates such a bond among the human beings who are united by it, that they find it in them

to die when the life of France is at stake. The personality of France is not only an attraction for the like-minded or sympathetic peoples of the world; it constitutes an irresistible call for the love and devotion of her children, who dimly recognize in it an exalted, sublimated essence of themselves.

Each of them naturally tends to endow the idea of France with features akin to those he or she possesses; and out of those innumerable, partly conflicting fancies there rises a composite image which one might expect to find general and cold, devoid of life and significance. It is a remarkable fact that the abstract personality of France, on the contrary, in the common notion of all, has some of the attributes of a real, concrete character; that we so easily think of her as of a human being; and that the symbol and the reality closely agree and shade off into each other. France is a person, and a woman: changeful but one, puzzling and attractive. That play of fugitive moods and hues is a reflection of the rich, varied life of mind and senses and soul in the people; and no clumsy disquisition will ever seize and fix their fluttering evanescence.

France is intensely personal. She was not, however—she is not—self-centred and selfish. A faculty of enthusiasm, an eagerness to make the causes of others her own, have always saved her from an undue narrowness of outlook. She will be the more inclined to preserve that traditional breadth of sympathies as she takes to her heart and treasures the magnificent proof of disinterested friendship and love she has received from the American nation.

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