CONCLUSION

CHAPTER LX

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE POMPEIAN CULTURE

The ideals of a nation—the true index of its culture—find expression alike in its laws, its literature, its art, and the environment of daily life. They are a common heritage, which one generation passes on to another with its own increment of change, and their influence extends as far as that of the people whose spirit is manifested in them. Thus it happens that the conditions of culture found in a single city, unless that city, as Athens, had an independent development as a state, are not isolated but are determined in the main by general movements and tendencies, and are reproduced, with local differences, in all places having the same racial and political connections. The local element was more pronounced and more characteristic in ancient than in modern cities; yet, unless the surroundings were exceptionally favorable, we should not be warranted in expecting to find in a small city an isolated development of special significance in art or taste. Pompeii forms no exception to the rule.

The situation of Pompeii was unfavorable to the growth of an indigenous culture. Founded by Samnites, a primitive folk, it lay in the overlapping edges of two great zones of influence, Greek and Roman. It was a small town, which never rose to the dignity even of a provincial capital. It was a seaport, which through marine traffic kept in touch with other cities, especially those of the East, from which fashions of art, religion, and life travelled easily westward. The political institutions of the Pompeians were at first those which they shared in common with the Samnite and Oscan cities of the mountains and the Cam-
POMPEII

panian plain, later those imposed upon them by the forceful and levelling administration of Rome. The literature which they read, as we learn from quotations scratched upon the walls, consisted of the Greek and Roman writers of their own or previous periods; not a single line of an Oscan drama or poem has been found. Their art was a reproduction of designs and masterpieces produced elsewhere,—at first under Hellenistic, later under Roman influence,—on a scale commensurate with the limited resources of the place. Finally the countless appliances of everyday life, from the fixed furniture of the atrium to articles of toilet, were not rare and costly objects such as were seen in the wealthy homes of Rome or Alexandria, but those of the commoner sort everywhere in use. Any one of fifty cities might have been overwhelmed in the place of Pompeii, and the results, so far as our knowledge of the ancient culture in its larger aspects is concerned, would not have been essentially different.

The representative rather than exceptional character of the remains at Pompeii makes them either of less or of greater value, according as we look at them from different points of view. If we are seeking for the most perfect examples of ancient art, for masterpieces of the famous artists, we do not find them. Many of the Pompeian paintings appeal to modern taste; yet it would be as unfair to judge of the merits of ancient painting from the specimens which are worked into the decorative designs of Pompeian walls as it would be to base an estimate of the value of modern art upon chromos and wall papers. For the noblest creations of ancient art in any field we must look not to provincial towns, but to the great centres of population and of political administration, where genius found encouragement, inspiration, and adequate means. No large city, fortunately for its inhabitants, was visited by such a disaster as that which befell the Campanian town; and the wealth of artistic types at Pompeii bears witness to the universality of art in the Greco-Roman world.

Since these remains are so broadly typical, they are invaluable for the interpretation of the civilization of which they formed a part. They shed light on countless passages of Greek and

CONCLUSION

Roman writers. Literature, however, ordinarily records only that which is exceptional or striking, while here we find the surroundings of life as a whole, the humblest details being presented to the eye.

Pompeii, as no other source outside the pages of classical authors, helps us to understand the ancient man.