

Speech at the Valencian Cultural Center

Silk Market

May 16th 1921

Mr. President, members of the Council of Valencian Culture, ladies and gentlemen:

A year ago to this very month I received an academic honour that I consider inferior to this one; despite the fact that it took on grandiose and solemn forms, worthy of the magnitude of the town in which it took place. As I say, a year ago, I was in the United States and the University of George Washington, in Washington, the capital of that republic. They appointed me “Doctor of Letters”, and the ceremony was, as I say, as grandiose as any ceremony in that country. It took place in an immense hall, with room for six to eight thousand people. The Spanish ambassador and the ambassadors and ministers of all the Spanish-speaking republics were present.

In the background there was a colossal flag of Spain, many, many metres long, which filled the entire back of the hall. The fiesta was a Spanish fiesta, a fiesta of glorification for the literature of our homeland, and above all for the greatest of Spanish novelists and of all the geniuses of universal literature, that is to say, for Don Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra.

As it was so great, I experienced immense satisfaction, because it also represented a tribute not to my person - my person was circumstantial - but to Spain, the Spain that represents so much to the history of America and to the history of human progress.

But despite all that, as I have told you, the affection I have for that celebration, I prefer this one, and do not think that I say this because of one of those flatteries proper to the artist, nor because of one of those means that purely circumstantial orators use to flatter the public. I (those who know me certainly know that I prefer this fiesta), I am from Spain, but within Spain I am very Valencian and I will always be Valencian.

Ladies and gentlemen, I will tell you one thing. I have not written any more Valencian novels, I have moved on and I am writing Spanish novels, the novels that we could call international; I am not writing any more Valencian novels, because I considered that the subject had been exhausted. I had written the novel of the bourgeoisie of Valencia, *Arroz y tartana*; I had painted the beach and the sailors and fishermen in *Flor de mayo*; I had written *La barraca*, which is about the people of the huerta; I had written *Cañas y barro*, which is the novel of the Albufera; I dealt with historical Valencia, which is *La defensa de Sagunto*; and after that I started writing novels from other countries, because I found no more themes for novels. Perhaps the people who follow me will find them. I did not find any more.

And I can tell you that the Valencian novel is the one I have written with the most enthusiasm, because at the same time I made the artist live, there was something around me, a

family atmosphere, something sincere and intimate that I must confess I have not found when I wrote other novels.

Other novels I have written with more mastery, with what the French call “*acelier*”. Now, knowing my trade better, and not with the inexperience of when I was younger, they will not have the freshness, or originality that the Valencian novel I wrote with great enthusiasm will have.

As I say, then, everything that refers to Valencia is mine and I am much more grateful for it than for all the greater honours that I may conquer in the future in various countries. So much so, that I must say something of the immense gratitude I have for this Centre of Valencian Culture and of the impressions I experienced only a month ago, when I received, with the appointment of this centre, some publications that it had produced, and of which some of you who are listening to me are the authors.

I recently spoke in Madrid about three novels that I am going to write, novels that refer primarily to Mediterranean life, and which in a certain sense are novels of Bilbao or Aragonese novels, novels of reminiscences, of what we were when the renaissance began for the whole of Europe. What those who later evoked the great adventure of the conquest of America and its colonisation would be like. And I must confess that these novels beat in my imagination, as the sketch of the work he intends to create beats in the imagination of the sculptor or painter. These novels find form by extolling the works of authors who listen to me, who belong to the Society of Valencian Culture, which will serve to give the final touch to this same novel that I carry in my imagination as a simple sketch.

We, gentlemen - allow me to digress a little before I speak of something else - we do not know the Spain in which we live; we are the most slandered people on earth, the most hated people.

I must tell you that I am a man of progress, I who appear, like many people, as a man who does not believe in the past. I am indignant, and when I leave Spain I do nothing more than defend the past.

We may have had our faults, as all peoples have; we may have committed atrocities like those committed by other nations, but, believe me, we have not been remotely like our enemies want to portray us to the rest of the world.

And as far as Valencia is concerned, we have produced in other centuries - and this is what I am going to write about, using the medium of the novel, which is the greatest means of dissemination - we have produced some very great men.

We, Valencia and the Crown of Aragon, have produced some great personalities, eminent personalities, who, for the mere fact of having been Spanish, are slandered by history.

To that multitude, the universal multitude, which has primary learning, who accept a series of lies that have taken on a traditional character, are told about the Borgias and they all shudder and see poisons and daggers and have an operatic illustration and see Lucrezia Borgia murdering people and see Pope Borgia entertaining himself by poisoning someone, like the greatest of monsters.

And yet, ladies and gentlemen, to echo the same ideas as Mr Martínez, who is listening to me, Alexander Borgia, Pope Alexander VI, is the most eminent figure for me in the Renaissance of that period. And the same goes for Pope Pedro de Luna and Calixtus III, all the great figures produced by Valencia and the Crown of Aragon had a universal influence.

As I said, we are slandered. And Spain in all countries, just as it was great in times gone by, has many great enemies. And I understand that. For a century and a half, Spain ruled the earth.

England, which is so grand; England, which has dominated for so long, has dominated for no more than 100 years and still has 50 more to go.

What has happened is that this past greatness has been extinguished by a series of slanders and a series of preconceived intentions against Spain, which are what all of us who go abroad to promote this nation have come up against.

Hence, gentlemen, this Society of Culture, like the societies that exist in other Spanish regions, renders an immense service by retracing the course of history, as if it were in reverse, going to the sources of these national rivers to ascertain the truth, to rectify all the great errors, to demonstrate that we, if we had faults, were nevertheless a people that served civilisation like no other; For Greece may present in the past her great literary and artistic efforts; Rome may present the Law, may present the conquests of the Law, may present all the advantages of Roman civilisation; and so may France, as well as other countries; but no people on earth can present what Spain presented as services to universal civilisation. No people has ever discovered the planet, as we have, and then circumnavigated it for the first time, as Magellan and the Spanish sailors did.

The greatness of Spain, like the greatness of all countries, is made up of the greatness of the peoples that make up that nation. That is why, gentlemen, I have always been a regionalist and even in politics I have been a federalist, without this having made the slightest inconvenience or the slightest diminution of my feeling of being Spanish.

I believe, gentlemen, that the stronger the bricks are when they are joined together, the stronger the house is; I believe that the stronger the pillars are, the stronger the building is; the more we strengthen the spirit of initiative of the peoples that make up Spain, the more we work to live on our own, without asking for alms and without living off the alms of the central powers, the greater the nation will be, just as the family is all the more powerful and richer the fewer parasites it has within it and the more each one knows how to earn a living to support his mother.

I, gentlemen, must confess. I am talking about this, which is not political talk, but for you it is and has been no secret. I have always been a republican; but do not think that I have ever thought of France; I have sympathy for her culture and literature, but it is not my ideal.

I have always loved the United States. It does not date from now, because I have gone there and they have given me a present, but because it is a federal republic. Because each country has its own life, each region has its own physiognomy, even its own traditional legislation, and then all together they form this giant that you all know.

If federalism did not exist there, believe me, this country would not be as big as it is.

That is why I love Valencia. And I don't want this love to be a vague word, a simple rhetorical phrase; love is demonstrated by actions.

In life, the virtue of the phrase "I love you", when one does not sacrifice oneself for it and is not prepared to do even crazy things for it, "I love you" means nothing. You have to prove it with something; and above all you have to prove it in a practical way.

Ladies and gentlemen, for the last two months I have had a concern, a concern that has been growing as I approach Valencia.

I am taking advantage of this opportunity to speak here, in a Society such as this, so large, so literary, so fond of Valencia, to present something that I carry in my mind, and something to which I am prepared to give all my activity and all my enthusiasm.

You know that I am very Valencian. I am as Valencian as one can be. I was baptised there in front of you, in the parish of the rogues, in the parish of San Juan. I was born in the heart of Valencia. I have played in all these streets of the Market.

This morning I remembered when I was inaugurating a public school in Cabañal and the children from the Town Hall schools were singing, and when I heard them singing I said to myself: "I was also one of the children who sang in the school. I belonged to the municipal schools and once I even sang the month of Mary in the church of San Bartolomé.

As I said, I am very Valencian, and I have lived in a Valencia that still kept something traditional that almost no longer exists. And it pains me to see that Valencia, that typical Valencia, that Valencia that exists in the poems of Escalante, that exists in the poems of Llorente and in those of so many writers that Valencian literature has had, that Valencia, which is still respected in some of the paintings of our old painters, all of this is disappearing.

I do not curse this. I know that all peoples need to renew themselves in order not to disappear.

I know that progress in all countries has one disadvantage, which is inevitable, in that it erases the past, and in a brutal, mechanical way. Without paying attention to what is good or what is bad, it erases it, and that is why the effort of rational man is to modify it, to channel that force, something that erases without paying attention to what it erases, to ensure that apart from that erasure, those things that deserve respect are left behind.

I have been astonished to see how little remains of the old city.

Two months ago, I was travelling through Provence, worried about Pope Luna, on a visit I made to Avignon, and I had the opportunity to see something of what I have seen in Provence and what we Valencians must do. And I say we must do it because the first person who is going to worry about this is me, that besides being Valencian, I am the son of Aragonese parents, and I am somewhat stubborn, which is what has been good for me in my life. When I have set my mind to something, I have done it with the enthusiasm and gallantry of the Valencian and the stubbornness of the Aragonese.

Well, as I was saying, there is a museum in Arles, founded by the great poet Mistral, the author of Mireya, which everyone knows.

He has simply made a museum and not any old museum, because it is the work of all Provence, a museum of Provence that has disappeared. Here there are the mounts of the old bullfighters of the Camargue, there are the fishing apparatus of the men of the coast of Provence, there is in miniature a reproduction of the Museum of Provence, there is, as those of you who have been to Paris will have seen, a Gremand museum of wax figures, where there is a large square, several columns and a large glass ceiling, and you can see a Provençal wedding, with very well made figures. There is also the interior of a kitchen and a nativity scene, various manifestations of Provençal life. Apart from this, there are famous books of Provençal life and portraits of all the men who have shaped its literature.

And I think: we who are a people of artists, what museum could we not make in Valencia, a museum that perpetuates Valencian life? This is so lacking here that you can't imagine it.

You know that my novels, by a chance of fortune perhaps, are today translated into almost all the languages of civilised peoples. And I have received numerous letters from French and American ladies who have passed through here and said to me: "I have read your novels with enthusiasm. I was in Valencia and I saw nothing: not even flowers".

And this is true. It has to be said among us Valencians. Valencian life was nowhere to be seen. Fortunately for the city there are new, ideal streets. But where are they going to find the old things? Where are they going to see our traditional customs? There aren't any. I was looking at Provence. Provence, a very interesting city for its poetry, is a poor Valencia. It can't even remotely compare with ours. It is a Valencia of the mountains, with dull costumes; a poor country, a country of olive trees, which is the only thing that is cultivated.

Imagine what a great Museum we can make here in this country, happy for centuries, where the women farmers have dressed in silk brocade like the ladies of Versailles, where the farmers were dressed in silk, where our china has all the pearlescence of the sea, of that Mediterranean Sea that has the gold, the blue and the white of the sunsets and the dawn of our sky.

If this is the most artistic and beautiful people of ancient Greece, which may not have existed and which is painted for us by the poets.

Only that imagined Greece, which is the one we have seen through books, can compare in beauty with the traditional Valencia which has disappeared and which we only see when Carnival arrives, badly represented in a masked ball when the women dress up as farm workers.

No; here we must do something practical: here we must build the Museum of Valencia, where: first, the photographs, modest, small, but like a sort of Parthenon of all the men who have written verses, novels or historical works, of every Valencian who has produced something intellectually, they must all be there. And after that, everything that refers to

our fishing, to our navigation, to our customs, to the croupas when they run the jewel; then life represented by wax figures; imagine with the number of artists that we have here, the things that can be done.

With money you can do a lot of things. The first thing is: we have artists. Represent Valencian life and in this way, after half an hour or an hour's visit, they would find out what Valencia had been like.

You could use miniature figures to represent the things that were big and reduce them, for example, the typical farm implements..., in a word, everything that stands out.

Another aspect of life, is to put figures in authentic Valencian costumes, so that the foreigners could see what the kitchen of the barraca was like at night, when the mother is cooking and the father has come home tired from work and is sitting on a rope chair and the children are playing. You could see what weddings are like, when they make the dowry cards and when the bride is asking for "per a agulletes" among those who are present.

We could talk about his for hours. Imagine what our artists can do, what an interesting museum, and how people, coming here, would say: I have seen Valencian life!

We have to think, gentlemen, of our responsibility. Our responsibility is enormous.

I have seen Valencian life and, now that I am 52 years old, I can't find it anywhere. We could still rebuild it. If we let 30 years go by, with all the money in the world we won't be able to rebuild it. So now is the time.

Right now I am thinking of calling a meeting of all the writers, all the sculptors, all the painters, all the carvers, all the artists who are between art and craft, who have trades that we could call artistic trades, and ask them all to lend themselves to carry out this work.

I would dare to see the Mayor (as if he couldn't hear me. I will ask him for something).

The Town Hall has a very beautiful palace, more beautiful than the Central Market.

The Town Hall, I say, has a palace of what I call Valencian architecture; because I have got it into my head that the architecture is the Lonja and the Hospital of Játiva, which is what can be called Valencian architecture; it is something Byzantine because the influence of Italy on our architecture is undeniable.

You know that the remains of the Exposition are the Municipal Palace, that Municipal Palace where nothing happens, where there are no chairs; that last remnant of the Exposition is used, when someone like me comes, to hold a party. (The laboratory can be placed somewhere else).

The Valencian museum can be built there. A Museum of Valencia, next to the Alameda, surrounded by gardens, where the same Baedeker who brings the travellers would say: "Go and see the Museum of Valencia, which is very interesting". And the travellers who go from Barcelona to Zaragoza and Madrid and leave Valencia outside, who knew that there was an interesting Valencian museum, in which artists like Sorolla, Benlliure and other writers like me had taken part, would come out of curiosity to see what this nucleus of Valencians has

done here, to perpetuate life, and they would come from Spain itself to see the Valencian Museum because it would be very interesting.

And this is the place where we could start to do it.

Then there are American-style means, that I know of, to make money quickly.

Here we must bring together all the theatre and cinema impresarios and swear in the name of Valencia that each of them will give an annual performance for the benefit of the Valencia museum.

I commit myself, wherever I am, to come to any of these performances to take part.

I undertake to give a novel and all the proceeds will go to the museum; I also undertake, as a result of my wanderings in the United States, that I am a friend of all the great millionaires and all the great capitals of the earth. I know Huntington, the great historian and friend of Spain, and I will also get money from him for the museum.

If Valencia, if the City Council gives us the Municipal Palace, which it will, and we all work full of enthusiasm, especially the youth. Then all these associations and the Centre of Valencian Culture would take this and put it under its direction, we will do some magnificent work.

This would be more beautiful than anything we could write about in Valencia's past. Because what is written about Valencia's past has an enormous value for intellectual people; but this museum of ours would have the strength that any plastic representation has because it would be of interest not only to enlightened people, but to all the ignorant.

The simple people would consider the museum of Valencia as a sort of Parthenon because it kept all the glories of our race, all our past and all our artistic present.

And I will finish.

We all have an obligation to work for our past so that it is not lost.

Today in the world there is a kind of pause in which the peoples who have marched through the nineteenth century and part of the twentieth century in an accelerated manner, with a mad zeal for progress, galloping, without seeing what they were running over and without seeing what they were leaving behind them. After the great conflict of the war, after that conflagration, they have concentrated on themselves, and have a kind of inner life that makes them look to the past, not on what is irreplaceable in the past, but on what is useful in the past and deserves to be perpetuated for ever and ever.

Among all the peoples of the earth, we, Valencia, which is part of Spain, which is a component of Spain, we must cultivate and sustain and perpetuate the past in its noblest aspects.

We, as I said before, are hated. Do you know why? Because America represents the future, because America is the youth of the world, and in America, from California to the Straits of Magellan, wherever they scratch the earth, whether they like it or not, Spain emerges.

Men of the other countries of Europe who go there with the desire to take over that world, finds that Spain meets them everywhere with the names of the conquerors, with the same language that is spoken, and so they hate us, they declare war on us and slander us in the face of history. But this work will be useless. These peoples are growing and growing and they are the future of humanity.

You have seen what happens with the great modern constructions. The higher a building wants to rise, the deeper the foundations must be made.

Well, the nations of America, the higher they rise and rise, the deeper the foundations have to be, and the foundations are us, Spain, our history, our language.

I will end, then, by expressing my immense gratitude to the Sociedad Cultura Valenciana.

I have put forward this idea with the desire to serve Valencia, to serve the artistic culture of this country and at the same time to serve the noble and enlightened Society which has honoured me by welcoming me into its bosom.

I am willing to work for everything that benefits Valencia.

Unfortunately, due to the demands of my commitments, of my history, I cannot always live here. Perhaps one day I will come here to die when I lack the strength. Today I still have a great strength that I want to dedicate to the propaganda of the greatness of my country, and this obliges me to go from one place to another. I do not know where I shall be tomorrow.

My aim in the coming year is to go round the world. But wherever I am there will be a Valencian, a great Valencian who is ready to serve his country and to do all he can for its future glory and for its past glory, so that Valencia may be, if possible, the Spanish city of art and perhaps in literature, and so that at the same time our past may shine with all the glories it deserves, as one of the greatest greatnesses of the greatness of the Spanish nation.

I have spoken.