

Speech at the Scientific and Literary Athenaeum (Conservatoy of Music) May 19th 1921

Ladies and Gentlemen: Our president of the Scientific Athenaeum has expressed my feelings exactly.

This title, which he calls humble, is a great honour for me and is received with affection by one who began in this house as a literary apprentice.

Today's celebration brings back happy memories of when I read my first novels at the Athenaeum meetings.

At this event, I experienced the surprise of someone who began as a modest recruit in this regiment of knowledge and who is now receiving the rank of colonel.

How gratifying it is, when I am in the midst of life's journey, to see young people everywhere; glorious young people, full of promise, with whom it is not possible to evoke the past, but to smile at the future which lives in the beautiful springtime of life!

But, here I am, speaking at this event, talking to you once again. I want to speak to you about something concrete - not just words of gratitude - and I am going to share with you my impressions of the trip I recently made to the United States, where I took part in many events like this one, where I spoke many times, even though I was not always understood.

I am going to give you the reason why that country is the one with a splendid present and with a glorious future for mankind.

History has followed a geographical movement from East to West in the course of the centuries, and thus the Centre of the world has moved from old Europe to young America. The Centre of the world has stood through time in the ancient Asiatic monarchies in Egypt, Greece and Rome. In Spain with Charles V and the colonial empire. In France with Louis XIV and the Revolution. In liberal and modern England, and it nearly stood in Berlin, when a movement of barbarity sought to impose the universal dominance of Germany.

Now the Centre of the world is in Washington, the capital of the United States; the White House, where a man lives who is neither a soldier nor a swordsman; but a humble farmer, a lawyer or an ordinary teacher.

He governs many people and assumes the roles of leader and director over the most powerful and richest democracy of mankind.

When I was walking in front of the White House in Washington and saw the man who ruled a nation of 120 million inhabitants, who in the midst of war was concerned with feeding the rest of the world, saving freedom in Europe and trying to impose peace in the world,

leave in a simple vehicle. I thought to myself that a hundred years earlier, in 1812, a man called Napoleon had died.

And thought: if Napoleon came back to life and saw that a hundred years after his death a fellow countryman, a humble and civil man, was the most powerful ruler on earth, he would die again, thinking that this world was absurd and what had happened should never have happened.

And this great miracle of history takes place amidst the ignorance of all of us, of ourselves who do not know the United States well, about whom we have preconceived, false ideas - as I had them myself - and which prevent us from seeing that mighty nation for what it is.

This is nothing special, because the same is true of them, and they too, because of false preconceptions, do not really see Europe.

It seems as if the nations have always lived under this horrible obligation to ignore each other, feeding slander and kindling hatreds and wars, which would be avoided if all nations knew each other!

I attribute all the calamities that cause men pain to the fact that we know little geography. I will explain: we all know what we might call material geography, and we know the rivers, seas and mountains of the world; but we ignore what I call ethnic or psychological geography.

We have preconceived notions of the men of other countries and we make buffoonish symbols against the nationalities.

For the generality, even for the enlightened plebs; an Englishman is a man who wears a checked suit, is blond and serious, eats three meals a day and is always drunk on whisky; an Italian is dark and talkative, always has a noble title, plays the ocarina (small flute), has long hair and eats macaroni; a Frenchwoman will always be imagined with a glass of champagne in her hand and one leg held high, whilst a Frenchman will be a tireless talker and of little formality. And this caricature that the common people of Spain make of the men of other countries, they make of us.

When we show abroad the portraits of our wives and daughters, they say to us with surprise: "They are dressed in the French fashion; they wear hats! We thought that Spanish women always wore shawls!" and they do not dare to add: "...and a razor in their garter".

And the same for them, a Spaniard is a dark, slim, religious man, who has come to be able to suppress food and who dances the fandango or the bolero.

This small genre geography, which makes us laugh, is anchored in our brains, even if later study, travel and reading destroy this comical image of our first impression given to us by the vulgar and mistaken geography of the psychology of a people.

It makes the American people look, from afar, like a people without poetry, devoted to the pursuit of the dollar, with a life of automatons in which spontaneity and spirit have died

to give way to material brutality and the envy of money. This is as false as the legend of the religious, hungry, dancing Spaniard.

In America, men are like everyone else in the world. It is precisely the great lesson provided by the modern means of communication to learn about this great similarity between all men, which will make them more fraternal.

People are the same everywhere and it is the environment that changes.

It is said that there is no intellectual life in the United States. What a great mistake!

I can affirm that there is a more intense intellectual life than elsewhere.

The United States has made a glorious contribution to the world of literature, not as extensive as Spain and France, old nations of splendid literary tradition, but astonishing because it only has a century of existence, a short life that imposed the enormous sacrifice of colonisation, which distracted the activities of a glorious plethora of sculptors, painters and men of science.

Who says the United States has no literary life? There was born the most imaginative and fanciful novelist of all those ever born, whose imprint is still latent in world literature and on which all of us writers have bitten to feed our imagination. I refer to Edgar Allen Poe, author of those marvellous tales with which we are all familiar.

He has produced thinkers like Emerson and glorious poets and artists.

Why is that? Because the American nation is made up of a purification of all the races of the world, and of course you cannot speak of an American race, but of a nation.

People from all over the world flock there. Who are the most imaginative people in the world: the French, the Spanish, the Italians...? Well, all the most imaginative people from these countries go there. Those who suffer hunger and misery here, eat there and enjoy freedom. With these elements, will the American nation have an imaginative and artistic spirit?

It is also said that those people do not love science. To say this! I have to tell you that in the United States there is no Ministry of Public Instruction, and if an American citizen were told that he needed such a ministry to provide culture for the people, he would feel offended, as if he were told that someone else was going to provide him with the air and sunshine he needs to live.

Public education is considered a private duty, and apart from the primary schools supported by the municipalities, all other educational establishments are to private initiatives. Several gentlemen get together and pay a subscription of \$10,000 or more a year to support a university, as if it were a club.

In this way more than 500 universities and many libraries and museums and laboratories have been created.

There is no intellectual life there, where the rich leave 93 per cent of their fortunes to create universities and libraries! Does this happen in Europe? Here the rich leave their for-

tunes to their children, encouraging freeloading, or at most to found a hospital, provided it bears their name, and in a spirit of ostentation rather than charity.

I know of American millionaires who have bequeathed 600 to 700 million dollars, of which only one went to each son. The rest they devoted to the creation of universities and museums, or to the pensioning of scholars who would render a service to science.

And when money offers this kind of competition to science and the arts, can it be said that it is not a people of intellectual life?

I am going to tell you something else. You know that the United States is a true republic of women, because there, for the first time in life, women are playing the role that history has given them and which we men have taken away from them for so many centuries.

It is not that the women there are paragons of wisdom, but frankly they do not live in the state of barbarism to which men have subjected them too here; graceful, seductive and beautiful barbarism, but barbarism nonetheless.

Here there is still the barbarous concept, which beats deep down in everyone's heart, that education can only open for women the road to their downfall.

Not there; there education is equal for all human beings and women can commune at the altar of science just like men. There, women make up 50 to 60 per cent of the university population, and there are even women's universities.

The American University is not an ostentatious palace, but a comfortable mansion, in a park of 20 or 30 acres, with a lake in which the students can exercise the sport of rowing; where the student can make such a placid and amiable life that when he leaves the University he finds life tasteless and wishes to return to the placid refuge of his studies.

In the United States woman plays an important part; she is the art, the literature, the intellectual life of that great people, its most beautiful and sweetest attraction.

Men surrender themselves to the sacrifice of expertise, and so the American learns what he learns, and learns it well. The man works all day long, eats outside his home, and does not look for books of art and spirituality in his hours of rest, but only for those which will help him perfect his skills.

At home, women read books, play the piano, attend lectures and study. In this regard, I am going to tell you an interesting anecdote. I was invited to lunch by a famous American banker. We had lunch in a hotel and when we finished he said to me: "I would like you to come to my house to talk to my wife. I don't know anything about literature. You talk to me about finance, but my wife knows as much about literature as you do".

And this is true. I've known women who said to me: "Now I'm studying Spanish, because I've finished studying another language".

-And what language were you studying? -I asked her.

-Well, Japanese," she answered simply.

I have seen women who read the novels of Aristophanes in Greek, and so women are the driving force behind the culture of that people.

Under these conditions, how can that country not occupy first place in the world? I am confident that Spain will also achieve this progress. When? When it happens there, when there is no fear of ridicule, of what people will say. Because we have been slaves to an Inquisition, to a state of barbarism, as happened in all countries, but progress ended with that slavery and now we suffer the slavery of fear of what people will say.

How many noble and heroic things would be done if this fear of ridicule would disappear! Eighty per cent of our evil deeds are the product of our cowardice; oh, if only we would follow only the noble and quixotic impulses of our heart, without fear of the opinion of others! We were a great people when our representative type was that Don Quixote who made us laugh, but performed the greatest deeds of altruism and generosity.

We live under the tyranny of a phrase of which our people have made their gospel: to take the piss, a phrase that has done more damage to Spain than twenty invasions.

How many brilliant and luminous phrases, how many generous actions remain unpublished for fear of being made a fool of!

We live a small-scale existence; our people are not afraid of bullets, of danger, but they are afraid of jokes, of being made fun of.

Blessed is the nation that does not fear ridicule when it defends the idea it believes to be true and scorns the yapping of the hounds that come out onto the street!

The true human greatness lies in women, who should enjoy the same rights as we do; why should not the woman who conceives us, who gives birth to the man, the soldier who is to die for the fatherland, have the right to take part in the government of that same fatherland?

But since we do not have fair and logical arguments, we oppose their reasons with fear of ridicule and mocking jokes.

Women will achieve the great aspiration of their rights if they do not give up. I know that in that country they will not give up, because women there have no ear for jokes.

I remember that in July last year I attended the meeting of the Republican Convention in Chicago to elect Mr. Harding as their candidate for President. It was attended by women who demanded the suffrage of all the United States – later, saying! “the whole of the United States “

Suffice it to say - and allow me this digression - that to travel from New York to San Francisco, from East to West, it took me six days and six nights, travelling by rail. Do you know what this represents? Whoever has made the voyage from Spain to America knows that every day of navigation the clock has to be put forward one hour, because each day means the crossing of a meridian. Well, on the voyage I am telling you about, the clock has to be put forward six times because six meridians were crossed.

As I was saying, in the vicinity of the Chicago meeting there were thousands of women, who, to distinguish themselves from the others, were all dressed in white, with short skirts, as the fashion demanded, and a belt in the national colours. Among these women not only were there slender and beautiful young women, but also old matrons of 150 kilos, with red wigs and shell spectacles, who looked as if they had the eyes of sharks. I remembered then that the European woman would have given up her suffrage and her rights for not wearing a suit “that doesn’t go”. And those women at the rally, when Harding, the current president, stepped out of the car, unfurled signs that read, “The woman who produces the soldiers has the right to rule the nation.” “Women represent the Christian and conservative spirit in the family, etc.”

Those women suffered for five or six hours all sorts of physical hardships and I, who at first laughed at them, because I saw them with European eyes, like ignorant people who laugh at ideas they do not understand, had to prostrate myself before those women who bore in their eyes the fire of martyrdom and heroism, the two great virtues that give life to ideas.

In the world, that half of mankind which now demands from the other half the rights it should have and which we have denied it for centuries will triumph.

It is said that the United States is the country where everything is commodified, which lives in perpetual chase for the dollar, where nothing is done without demanding reward. This is false. The people who have given us the most extraordinary and romantic spectacle in history cannot be said to be the materialistic people of the dollar.

Two years ago, history had been interrupted and the world was to be rebuilt on a mystical medieval concept, the shadow of Frederick Barbarossa roaming the earth, on a beautiful conception of progress, and those people, whom we believe to be metaphysical, took up the work of saving mankind.

The intervention of the United States was the decisive card, the straw that broke the camel’s back.

It could have been quiet, enjoying the peace that Europe did not want, but the woman, impressed in her reading by the great drama of the war, pushed those people towards Europe.

What did the United States stand for in the war? Every twenty-four hours ten thousand American soldiers arrived in Europe, with all their astonishing equipment, each American soldier carrying enough for seven French soldiers.

Thus two million Americans arrived, carrying even their railway lines with which they flooded the soil of France, representing the labour of thousands and thousands of men.

And in the last two months of the war 120,000 American soldiers died, which represents a higher death toll, in proportion to the time, than that of other nations.

These people had come to Europe to save the freedom of the world, and when the enterprise was won, they crossed the sea again without asking for anything. The Europeans as-

ked with astonishment: “Do you want anything: rewards, territories? And America replied: “I want nothing. I have saved the freedom that was in danger and that is enough for me”.

What other Don Quixote has accomplished such a romantic and noble feat as the Don Quixote of the land of the dollar?

And that exceptional country is the melting pot where the virtues of all the races that emigration brought there have fused.

Bismarck said that he feared one emigration more than three wars, because in these wars the weak and the strong, the brave and the cowardly die, and in emigration only the bold, the best, the most florid and energetic, the men of the greatest will and genius are lost. And so Spain has brought its best blood to America and the United States is the product of all the energies of humanity.

Thus, the people who had 30 million inhabitants in the 19th century have 120 million people of all races in the 20th century.

I believe that the peoples who fulfil a historical destiny are not the peoples of ethnic unity but the peoples of amalgamation.

Spain, our people of Jews, Moors and Christians, a people of amalgamation, achieved the greatness of the Middle Ages, discovered America and accomplished great feats, just like the Rome of antiquity, not the Rome of the emperors, but the Rome that conquered the whole world at that time with men of various races.

Never could the unified nations reach where the amalgamated nations have reached. They do not reach perfectibility, because it does not exist, because perfection is an illusory ideal, to which Christian mysticism and socialism aspire, but without achieving it because nobody is perfect and nobody can be perfect.

We are imperfect like everything else in the world, and we are dominated by externals to the point of being like an electric battery that reflects the state of the atmosphere. In the most daring and heroic men there is half an hour of cowardice and the most cowardly are capable in an incomprehensible moment of the greatest heroic folly.

The great advantage of man is that the human forehead is made of flesh and blood, for if it were made of glass we would be frightened when we read each other's thoughts, and we would look at each other in fear, fleeing in different directions.

And if the individual is not perfect, can peoples be perfect? No, never. Doctrines and ideas based on human perfectibility live on sand. We should only aspire to be less imperfect, both individuals and peoples.

And this is what I meant when I said that the United States, without being a perfect people, had the advantage over others of being less imperfect than others.

The horses are bigger than here; the men who are dedicated to being tall are taller than those here, and the women are also gymnasts and strong. From their greatness, they see things in Europe, in the whole of Europe, as very small, because for them, France, England,

Italy and Spain are the same. They see us as the same. They cannot perceive the differences in our greatness because they see us from a great height, like someone who looks at a town from the top of a bell tower and sees the humble house of the worker as small as the mansion of the potentate.

Those people also have great defects, enormous defects, but those that exist today will not exist in five years' time because they will be corrected and purified.

The progress of that great people sets all things in motion and renews even the defects. Here, in the old world, no; for defects do not die, nor change, nor grow; they crystallise and turn from fluid into rock, and endure through the centuries.

When something is done badly, nobody dares to change it: "My parents found it this way and I must keep it".

This is how we conceive the sanctity of tradition and history, without contributing anything to glorify it.

Blessed are those people far removed from movable defects, who pass like the waves of the sea without crystallising, marking with their passage the march of progress! Blessed are those men and peoples who, unable to be perfect, aspire to be as little imperfect as possible!