

REVISTA

DE

ESTUDIOS HISPÁNICOS

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CONTINENT AND ISLAND *

ON BEHALF of the universities of continental North America, I beg to express our high appreciation of the welcome extended to us by this University of Island America and of the opportunity to join with it in celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of its founding. To have a part in this significant occasion is not only to enjoy a privilege and an honor, it is also to have the imagination stirred by a vision.

Continent and island—the geographer may find in the contrast little more than a matter of size, but the explorer or the philosopher is sure to find in it the expectation of an experience. For islands, isolating themselves on the map like strayed fragments of a mother-land, punctuate themselves in the imagination as places with an individuality, a secret and a charm all their own. Poets frequently tell us of the Isles of the Blest, but rarely of the Continent of the Blessed. The soul can be careless of the body's size and be content with a little one, because horizons and views depend on where one stands, and too much wandering about to win a point of advantage may end in losing the prospect which may be seen from one's door. So islands may look out upon the world, I will not say necessarily with a clearer or better vision than a continent can, but

* Reply by the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy of Columbia University on behalf of the universities of North America to the Address of Welcome on the occasion of the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the University of Porto Rico.

possibly with a vision more single and more precise. It may be expected, therefore, that islands have something to say and that an island university, on becoming twenty-five years old, should have become conscious of its horizon.

Islands have played a conspicuous part in man's history. One gave Napoleon to the world, and two, the British Commonwealth of Nations. Spain sent out three little ships under the command of Columbus and found an island—the outpost of a new world. It was indeed a new world—two vast continents which nature had kept almost untouched by that struggling ambition of man which had given to the old world great civilizations, but which had also fettered it by customs, institutions, and prejudices which were its bane. If, however, anything was to be made of the new world, it had to be made by men from the old. They came, bringing with them the heritage of their past and bringing also those divisions of faith and language and institutions which made them see themselves as aliens to one another and competitors for new found sources of power. Was all that had scarred the old world with bitter division and envious rivalry to be reenacted in a new world which nature had kept a garden of possibility? There has been the perpetual threat of it. Men sought America for many reasons, for adventure, for conquest, for wealth, for freedom, to colonize, to exploit, and to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Many found what they sought and accomplished what they intended. They baptized places with names suggestive of their memories and their hopes—Porto Rico, San Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, New York, Montreal. The spirit of the new world must have smiled a little, for she had other things for them to do. She had given them nature and a fresh start.

It is an old belief of mankind that places have their local gods. They may apparently be superseded for a time, but, in their seclusion, they still watch over their land, patiently waiting to receive their rightful worship. So I like to believe that the gods of the new world have been patiently waiting for their homage. Whatever men have done to

America, America has certainly done something to them. She has repeatedly reminded them that a new world means something else than the repetition of the old. Through her forests, her plains, her mountains, her rivers, her unmeasured resources of wealth and prosperity, she has made it clear to them that their supreme task is the conquest of herself in the service of man. She did not lure men here to keep on trying to conquer one another. She would have them conquer herself and raise on that conquest that supreme form of empire of which Francis Bacon dreamed, the empire of man over nature. For such a conquest, I like to think, the gods of America patiently wait. If America has any distinct and special contribution to make to the world's civilization, that contribution is not to be defined in terms of the varied and often conflicting ambitions which men from the old world have brought to her shores; it is to be defined in terms of what her promise was before the first stranger saw her outpost island rising from the sea. She defined a fresh start, a new opportunity; and in all the problems which American states face today, she is still pressing home that definition. The difficulties we find in our way and the misunderstandings we cause and suffer, are all, I like to think, but so many incentives to see more clearly that, no matter how diverse we are in temperament, in ancestry, in cultural heritage, and in religious faith, we have, as Americans, one task to perform in common. At bottom, we all have the same job. That job is not to make a new England or a new France or a new Spain or a new Portugal or a new Germany or a new Italy. It is to make America. And to make America is, first of all, to turn the abundance of a new land into forces that work for the happiness and prosperity of men. In proportion as our vision of that is clear and our devotion to it steadfast, we may confidently hope to behold in one another laborers in one vineyard.

The real makers of America are, first of all, those who thrill at the prospect of making nature man's servant, to whom forest and plain and mountain and river are a

challenge. They have a new land, but they are not new men. America which had no ancestry and almost no history, has given herself to men who have both in abundance. Shall we not say that here, too, her gods knew what they were doing? Must the new land wait for a history and a culture until by the toil of centuries she had made her own? America had wealth to give; there was also wealth for her to receive. She did not ask for gold. Of that she had enough for the digging. She did ask for the goods of the soul. She did ask that those who conquered her should embellish that conquest with the best that they could bring. And who will say they have not brought it richly? We have a new land, but we claim the cultural heritage of the past with a claim that breaks down all barriers of nationality, of language, of ancestry and even of faith. We want the best. In our eagerness to get it we may often do foolish and ridiculous things or give to the stranger the appearance of extravagance and display, but we want the best, not boastfully nor blatantly, but as of right. We would deliberately rob nobody, but we have the right to remember the rock from which we were hewn and the pit from which we were digged. The civilization of the old world is not the less ours because we live in the new. We would, if we can, avoid its blunders and mistakes and we would have as much of its glory as we can rightfully make our own. We would have it here with all the varied beauty of language, custom and expression which great age has given to it. Our birthright, no matter where we came from, is too precious to let go. It is the more precious, because, sublimated in a new land and supported by our common job, it can flourish without jealousy. Surely if America means anything as a new world, it does not mean a world in which the past is forgotten, left behind or despised. It means rather a world in which the past is utilized in a new spirit, a world in which nature has asked man to conquer her and not one another and to beautify that conquest by nobly supporting the best in their age-long heritage.

I have not forgotten islands. I have not forgotten this

island or this university. This island and this university have influenced me in saying what I have said in response to your welcome. A year and a half ago, I visited this place for the first time. Before I came, I must confess that Porto Rico meant little more to me than the name of a place on the map. Since I came this island and this university have been for me a symbol of what America means. When I came, I expected to find a political experiment going on. I was not disappointed. Such an experiment is still going on and wiser heads than mine must see that it goes on well. But I saw another experiment going on, an experiment to the spirit of which political considerations seemed to be wholly irrelevant. I saw an island with its people and its university bent on making that island healthful and productive, beautiful and convenient, and on making it something more. Here, in this little island, the changes and chances of this mortal life had brought two great civilizations together. I found here expressed in what I saw and heard, not simply the hope, but the eager effort, that the meeting of these two civilizations should not end in discord but in harmony, that the rich heritage of neither should be lost, but should be utilized to make this island an illustration of the conquest of nature adorned by the fruits of the spirit. That is a very great ambition. But it is like islands to be ambitious. They like to point out to continents the latter's proper business. They can make themselves reminders of things too easily forgotten when sheer magnitude lies heavy on the mind. They see the prospect from their own door. What does this island see? Itself, of course, its own troubles and worries; but it sees also continental America, North and South, and knows that their troubles and worries, especially as they face each other, are like its own. But here, these troubles and worries are a matter of daily concern. Here they are not left for occasional conference and adjustment. They make up the ever present problem of the people of Porto Rico. Who can doubt that this island and this university are right in thinking that their handling of this problem

is of unique significance? Who can fail to rejoice that they see it clearly? These twenty-five years have been rich in achievement. They are richer still in promise. Size has nothing to do with the matter. A model, however small, is a model of what can be done in the large. The universities in whose behalf I have the honor to respond, greet this university with affection and esteem. They pray for its increased prosperity. It is an island lighthouse, the light of which makes clear to those who sail the often stormy seas of human affairs a safe course which leads to the haven of good-will.

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