

Spain in America

*Written after the destruction of the Spanish fleet
in the battle of Santiago, in 1998*

I

When scarce the echoes of Manila Bay,
Circling each slumbering billowy hemisphere,
Had met where Spain's forlorn Armada lay
Locked amid hostile hills, and whispered near
The double omen of that groan and cheer—
Haste to do now what must be done anon
Or some mad hope of selling triumph dear
Drove the ships forth: soon was *Teresa* gone,
Furor, *Plutón*, *Vizcaya*, *Oquendo*, and *Colón*.

And when the second morning dawned serene
O'er vivid waves and foam-fringed mountains, dressed
Like Nessus in their robe's envenomed sheen,
Scarce by some fiery fleck the place was guessed
Where each hulk smouldered; while from crest to crest
Leapt through the North the news of victory,
Victory tarnished by a boorish jest¹
Yet touched with pity, lest the unkindly sea
Should too much 'aid the strong and leave no enemy.

As the anguished soul, that gasped for difficult breath,
Passes to silence from its house of pain,
So from those wrecks in fumes of lurid death,
Passed into peace the heavy pride of Spain,
Passed from that aching tenement, half fain,
Back to her castled hills and windy moors,
No longer tossed upon the treacherous main
Once boasted hers, which with its watery lures
Too long enticed her sons to unhallowed sepultures.

II

Why went Columbus to that highland race,
 Frugal and pensive, prone to love and ire,
 Despising kingdoms for a woman's face,
 For honour riches and for faith desire?
 On Spain's own breast was snow, within it fire;
 In her own eyes and subtle tongue was mirth;
 The eternal brooded in her skies, whence nigher
 The trebled starry host admonished earth
 To shame away her grief and mock her baubles' worth.

Ah! when the crafty Tyrian came to Spain
 To barter for her gold his motley wares,
 Treading her beaches he forgot his gain.
 The Semite became noble unawares.
 Her passion breathed Hamilcar's cruel prayers;
 Her fiery winds taught Hannibal his vows;
 Out of her tribulations and despairs
 They wove a sterile garland for their brows.
 To her sad ports they fled before the Roman prow.

And the Greek coming too forgot his art,
 And that large temperance which made him wise.
 The wonder of her mountains choked his heart,
 The languor of her gardens veiled his eyes;
 He dreamed, he doubted; in her deeper skies
 He read unfathomed oracles of woe,
 And stubborn to the onward destinies,
 Like some dumb brute before a human foe,
 Sank in Saguntum's flames and deemed them brighter so.

The mighty Roman also when he came,
 Bringing his gods, his justice, and his tongue,
 Put off his greatness for a sadder fame,
 And what a Caesar wrought a Lucan sung.
 Nor was the pomp of his proud music, wrung
 From Latin numbers, half so stern and dire,
 Nor the sad majesties he moved among
 Half so divine, as her unbreathed desire.
 Shall longing break the heart and not untune the lyre?

When after many conquerors came Christ,
The only conqueror of Spain indeed,
Not Bethlehem nor Golgotha sufficed
To show him forth, but every shrine must bleed
And every shepherd in his watches heed
The angels' matins sung at heaven's gate.
Nor seemed the Virgin Mother wholly freed
From taint of ill if born in frail estate,
But shone the seraphs' queen and soared immaculate.

And when the Arab from his burning sands
Swept o'er the waters like a heavenly flail,
He took her lute into his conquering hands,
And in her midnight turned to nightingale.
With woven lattices and pillars frail
He screened the pleasant secrets of his bower,
Yet little could his subtler arts avail
Against the brutal onset of the Giaour.
The rose passed from his courts, the muezzin from his tower.

Only one image of his wisdom stayed,
One only relic of his magic lore,
Allah the Great, whom silent fate obeyed,
More than Jehovah calm and hidden more,
Allah remained in her heart's kindred core
High witness of these terrene shifts of wrong.
Into his ancient silence she could pour
Her passions' frailty— He alone is strong
And chant with lingering wail the burden of her song.

Seizing at Covadonga the rude cross
Pelayo raised amid his mountaineers,
She bore it to Granada, one day's loss
Ransomed with battles of a thousand years.
A nation born in harness, fed on tears,
Christened in blood, and schooled in sacrifice,
All for a sweeter music in the spheres,
All for a painted heaven — at a price
Should she forsake her loves and sail to Ind for spice?
Had Genoa in her merchant palaces
No welcome for a heaven-guided son?
Had Venice, mistress of the inland seas,
No ships for bolder venture? Pisa none?

Was sated Rome content? Her mission done?
 Saw Lusitania in her seaward dreams
 No floating premonition, beckoning on
 To vast horizons, gilded yet with gleams
 Of old Atlantis, whelmed beneath the bubbling streams?

Or if some torpor lay upon the South,
 Tranced by the might of memories divine,
 Dwelt no shrewd princeling by the marshy mouth
 Of Scheldt, or by the many mouths of Rhine?
 Rode Albion not at anchor in the brine
 Whose throne but now the thrifty Tudor stole
 Changing a noble for a crafty line?
 Swarmed not the Norsemen yet about the pole,
 Seeking through endless mists new havens for the soul?

These should have been thy mates, Columbus, these
 Patrons and partners of thy enterprise,
 Sad lovers of immeasurable seas,
 Bound to no hallowed earth, no peopled skies.
 No ray should reach them of their ladies' eyes
 In western deserts: no pure minstrel's rhyme,
 Echoing in forest solitudes, surprise
 Their heart with longing for a sweeter clime.
 These, these should found a world who drag no chains of time.

In sooth it had seemed folly, to reveal
 To stubborn Aragon and evil-eyed
 These perilous hopes, folly to dull Castile
 Moated in jealous faith and walled in pride,
 Save that those thoughts, to Spain's fresh deeds allied,
 Painted new Christian conquests, and her hand
 Itched for that sword, now dangling at her side,
 Which drove the Moslem forth and purged the land.
 And then she dreamed a dream her heart could understand.

III

Three caravels, a cross upon the prow,
 A broad cross on the banner and the sail,
 The liquid fields of Hesperus should plough
 Borne by the leaping waters and the gale.

Before that sign all hellish powers should quail
Troubling the deep: no dragon's obscene crest,
No serpent's slimy coils should aught avail,
Till ivory cities looming in the west
Should gleam from high Cathay or Araby the Blest.

Then, as with noble mien and debonair
The captains from the galleys leapt to land,
Or down the temple's alabaster stair
Or by the river's marge of silvery sand,
Proud Sultans should descend with outstretched hand
Greeting the strangers, and by them apprised
Of Christ's redemption and the Queen's command,
Being with joy and gratitude baptised,
Should lavish gifts of price by rarest art devised.

Or if (since churls there be) they should demur
To some least point of fealty or faith,
A champion, clad in arms from crest to spur,
Should challenge the proud caitiffs to their death
And, singly felling them, from their last breath
Extort confession that the Lord is lord,
And India's Catholic queen, Elizabeth.
Whereat yon turbaned tribes, with one accord,
Should beat their heathen breasts and ope their treasures' hoard.

Or, if the worst should chance and high debates
Should end in insult and outrageous deed,
And, many Christians rudely slain, their mates
Should summon heaven to their direful need,
Suddenly from the clouds a snow-white steed
Bearing a dazzling rider clad in flames
Should plunge into the fray: with instant speed
Rout all the foe at once, while mid acclaims
The slaughtered braves should rise, crying, *Saint James! Saint James!*

Then, the day won, and its bright arbiter
Vanished, save for peace he left behind,
Each in his private bosom should bestir
His dearest dream: as that perchance there pined
Some lovely maiden of angelic mind
In those dark towers, awaiting out of Spain
Two Saviours that her horoscope divined

Should thence arrive. She (womanlike) were fain
Not to be wholly free, but wear a chosen chain.

That should be youth's adventure. Riper days
Would crave the guerdon of a prouder power
And pluck their nuggets from an earthly maze
For rule and dignity and children's dower.
And age that thought to near the fatal hour
Should to a magic fount descend instead,
Whose waters with the fruit revive the flower
And deck in all its bloom the ashen head,
Where a green heaven spreads, not peopled of the dead.

IV

By such false meteors did those helmsmen steer,
Such phantoms filled their vain and vaulting souls
With divers ardours, while this brooding sphere
Swung yet ungirdled on her silent poles.
All journeys took them farther from their goals,
All battles won defeated their desire,
Barred from one India by the other's shoals,
Each sighted star extinguishing its fire,
Cape doubled after cape, and never haven nigher.

How many galleons sailed to sail no more,
How many battles and how many slain,
Since first Columbus touched the Cuban shore,
Till Araucania felt the yoke of Spain!
What mounting miseries! What dwindling gain!
To till those solitudes, soon swept of gold,
And bear that ardent sun, across the main
Slaves must come writhing in the festering hold
Of galleys. —Poison works, though men be brave and bold.

That slothful planter, once the buccaneer,
Lord of his bastards and his mongrel clan,
Ignorant, harsh, what could he list or hear
Of Europe and the heritage of man?
No petty schemer sees the larger plan,
No privy tyrant brooks the mightier law,
But lash in hand rides forth a partisan

Of freedom: base, without the touch of awe,
He poisoned first the blood his poniard was to draw.

By sloth and lust and mindlessness and pelf
Spain sank in sadness and dishonour down,
Each in her service serving but himself,
Each in his passion striking at her crown.
Not that these treasons blotted her renown
Emblazoned higher than such hands can reach:
There where she reaped but sorrow she has sown
The balm of sorrow; all she had to teach
She taught the younger world — her faith and heart and speech.

And now within her sea-girt walls withdrawn
She waits in silence for the healing years,
While where her sun has set a second dawn
Comes from the north, with other hopes and fears.
Spain's daughters stand, half ceasing from their tears,
And watch the skies from Cuba to the Horn.
"What is this dove or eagle that appears,"
They seem to cry, "what herald of what morn
Hovers o'er Andes' peaks in love or guile or scorn?"

"O brooding Spirit, fledgling of the North,
Winged for the levels of its shifting light,
Child of a labouring ocean and an earth
Shrouded in vapours, fear the southward flight,
Dread waveless waters and their warm delight,
Beware of peaks that cleave the cloudless blue
And hold communion with the naked night.
The souls went never back that hither flew,
But sighing fell to earth or broke the heavens through.

"Haunt still thy storm-swept islands, and endure
The shimmering forest where thy visions live.
Then if we love thee — for thy heart is pure
Thou shall have something worthy love to give.
Thrust not thy prophets on us, nor believe
Thy sorry riches in our eyes are fair.
Thy unctuous sophists never will deceive
A mortal pang, or charm away despair.
Not for the stranger's fee we plait our lustrous hair.

'But of thy lingering twilight bring some gleam,
 Memorial of the immaterial fire
 Lighting thy heart, and to a wider dream
 Waken the music of our plaintive lyre.
 Check our rash word, hush, hush our base desire.
 Hang paler clouds of reverence about
 Our garish skies: laborious hope inspire
 That uncomplaining walks the paths of doubt,
 A wistful heart within, a mailed breast without.

"Gold found is dross, but long Promethean art
 Transmutes to gold the unprofitable ore.
 Bring labour's joy, yet spare that better part
 Our mother, Spain, bequeathed to all she bore,
 For who shall covet if he once adore?
 Leave in our skies, strange Spirit passing there,
 No less of vision but of courage more,

And of our worship take thy equal share,
 Thou who wouldst teach us hope, with her who taught us prayer."

SANTAYANA, G. (1979), *The Complete Poems of George Santayana*, A Critical Edition William G. Holzberger, Cranbury, New Jersey, Bucknell University Press.

NOTES

¹ Admiral Sampson said he made a Fourth of July present of the Spanish fleet to the American people, although all the ships had been sunk and none captured.