Talk at the Internado Nacional Barros Arana, of which Mr. Aylwin was a student. July 24, 1941

I have chosen a topic to speak with you about this afternoon that I believe may interest you, because it refers to something about our own destiny: I mean the destiny of us the youth.

I want to describe to you something of the tremendous crossroads at which we find ourselves, and which you—I am sure—are beginning to feel as a distressing question. I do not seek to clear up this question or to provide a recipe for its solution; that would be far too vain an undertaking. I only intend to raise a few problems for you, with the aim that you reflect upon them and commit your thoughts and your hearts to the task of facing them properly.

Renan, the illustrious French thinker, has said: "Youth is the discovery of an immense horizon which is life." And the fact is that life opens up before us under very difficult conditions. One might say that the horizon appears dark, filled with storm clouds and threatening tempests; it does not allow us to orient ourselves easily, nor does it give us any sense of security.

Ours is indeed a very strange circumstance. Never before had the world offered man a more multifaceted repertoire of possibilities; never has any generation awakened, as we have, in a circumstance that offered it so many material means, so many instruments of power, so much comfort.

And yet, our generation is not satisfied; it seems fearful, insecure, distrustful.

We know from our parents and grandparents, not to go back any further, that they lived in a scarce and extremely impoverished worlds, and by dint of determination and sacrifice, of tenacity and grit, they built beautiful destinies for themselves and their own, and made their world progress.

Such undertakings seem to us, under our current circumstances, little short of impossible. Is it that life truly presents itself as harder and more difficult for us than for the men of the past century, or is it that the generations of today lack the spiritual and moral mettle that enabled the old generations to triumph? I think it is a bit of both.

The last century denotes a progress in the world that could not have been dreamed of before and that, viewed from today, is truly astonishing. This progress has benefited us by giving us a thousand conveniences, offering us comfort, providing us with enjoyments that men of other times could not have known. But at the same time, it represents an enormous complexity and complication of life, such as has never occurred before.

Contemporary life has more problems than any previous era, and these problems of its own are more complex than any others. Consequently, it demands from the man who faces it physical and spiritual qualities that were not necessary in other times.

The man of today does not find himself equal to this superior demand.

It is not that he is inferior in human quality to any other man; it is simply that he has not known how to adapt to the extraordinary complexity of the world in which he must live. It has caught him by surprise, and though he has learned to enjoy the unusual benefits it offers, he has not yet understood the special responsibilities it imposes upon him. He wishes to overcome the difficulties of these days with the minimum dose of effort that was required in other times to achieve success in life, and, failing to do so, he abandons himself to discouragement and imagines the obstacles to be insurmountable. He feels disoriented and, no matter how much potential energy he carries within himself, he finds nothing to direct it toward in a permanent manner, or he does not resolve to make the effort to bring it seriously into play.

If we were asked to point out the fundamental characteristic of modern man in a single phrase, I would venture to say it is this: the softening of character. It is not that he lacks good intentions, beautiful desires, or noble purposes; he is bursting with them. What he lacks is an effective will to realize them; what he lacks is that *willingness* of which Ortega y Gasset speaks when he tells us: "Willing to do something requires that we will all the things necessary for its achievement, among them endowing ourselves with the indispensable qualities for the enterprise."

This softening of character leads him, even if he does not realize it, to view life as little more than a bad joke, one that does not seem to be taken very seriously. Hence, very often, instead of facing circumstances, he prefers to be carried away by them.

This, my fellow schoolmates, is the face that life presents to us as we enter it. A paradoxical world that offers us splendid conveniences and places difficult obstacles in our path; men who possess within or outside themselves a thousand tools to triumph, yet who cannot or will not employ them. This is what we see. Behold the circumstance in which we will have to live.

What must we do? How are we to react to this circumstance? I believe this is the most difficult and decisive problem we are forced to face. And upon how we resolve it depends not only the destiny of our own existences, but also the destiny of modern society.

Permit me to dwell a moment on this point, and not in the abstract, but very concretely, relating it to our special situation; to the situation of Chilean youth.

I am not making a dramatic phrase, as you well know, nor do I wound our sense of patriotism by saying that Chile is a country in decline. The history of our homeland in the past is an entirely glorious epic. There is an era in which the life of Chile has the pulse and the mettle of solemn and supreme moments; it is a moment prolonged in time for nearly an entire century. It is harsh and difficult, for the country is poor in resources and organization; deeply impoverished; nothing exists, everything must be created. Independence is but the first of a series of conquests achieved thanks to immense sacrifices. The Nation had to be given an organic structure that reconciled liberal principles with the needs and possibilities of meager circumstances; it had to be prepared, through education, so that it could govern itself wisely and enjoy, without abusing, a freedom it did not know; it was necessary to exploit the

harsh Chilean land and laboriously tear from it the riches imprisoned deep within its core. Everything was done, and while the other peoples of the Americas floundered in internal strife and vegetated in disorganization, Chile became a model to the world as a well-constituted and progressive State. All this was achieved solely through muscle and brain, effort and sacrifice, labor and resolve, thanks to the extraordinary qualities of character of which the Chilean showed himself capable.

In our day, it is common to attribute a quality of legend the toughness and strength of our working-class *roto* and our rural *huaso*; but in addition to a thousand facts which are so many proofs to the contrary and which I could recall here, the very manner in which Chile emerged and grew in the past century is the most categorical affirmation of the qualities of its race. The Chilean is then a rugged and brave man, hardworking and resolute, devoted with all his energies to the supreme task of building the nation (*Hacer Patria*).

Turning our gaze toward the present, there is a contrast that necessarily troubles our spirit. We see how back then an enterprise was carried out, a Nation was built, and how years later, in a sensation of fulfillment, arms dropped and works ceased to begin the enjoyment.

The effort of past generations bore fruit, and nature rewarded them generously with the immense wealth of saltpeter; the Chileans of this century were born into an environment of relative ease. And in general, it can be said that they have led a more or less soft, more or less lukewarm existence, whose principal goal has been the satisfaction of selfish appetites. They have forgotten the future and lived day to day, concerned only with making the most of the enjoyments life offers; the rich as well as the poor, each to the extent of their strength.

On one hand, the result has been today's reality. With the transient wealth gone, affected by grave global crises, the country finds itself, after half a century of shortsightedness and enjoyment, in a situation of extreme poverty, and without new sources of wealth that should have been created during that time and were not.

On the other hand, its people appear worn down, materially and spiritually. They have become accustomed to a relative comfort and do not wish to abandon a more or less easy way of life. The Chilean has lost the qualities of yesteryear: physically, he is weak, if not sick; morally, he suffers from a softening of character, from apathy (*abulia*).

Just yesterday I read, with sadness, in an extraordinary effort by an American journalist, the *Anuario Internacional Americano*, a study on the ten most serious and fundamental problems facing Chile at present, and among them, placed in second stead, is that of a soft and characterless upbringing of its youth, who, it is said—and, unfortunately, with much truth—suffers from an acute weakness of body and spirit, of will, perseverance, character, and personality.

This is the inheritance left to us by half a century of easy, day-to-day living, without great objectives or superior efforts.

A moment ago, I raised for you the inescapable necessity we find ourselves in to face a paradoxical world that offers us a thousand enjoyments and presents us with a thousand difficulties, and in which we find no help from an example, because mature men have no direction to offer us.

Now I have described to you, with absolutely serious traits, free of all exaggeration, the particularities that this imperative problem presents for us, the Chilean youth, so that you may fully understand the tremendous responsibility that binds us.

Chile is, today, a weakened country in decline. It possesses, however, living forces whose proper development ensures it a great destiny, as its glorious history declares; and one of them is its nature, still largely virgin, which, although apparently fierce and harsh in yielding its wealth, holds it in abundance and will undoubtedly give it generously to those who work it with effort and constancy. The other is us; it is the Chilean youth, and upon what we are capable of giving it and doing for Chile depend our destinies. See, my friends, how tremendous is the responsibility that weighs upon our shoulders.

Every human generation has the obligation to enter life with the noble ambition of making its presence felt in it, with the proud gaze of the conqueror, so that through its effort or its activity it leaves behind a footprint marked by a beneficial contribution. Thus we were taught by a great master of the youth of the Americas, José Enrique Rodó, in that cordial appeal that is *Ariel*, a book that is not read by the youth as it should be and which, if you have not savored it, I recommend to you most sincerely.

That obligation acquires, due to the circumstances I have just expressed, an especially imperative character for us, the Chilean youth.