

Then And Now: Cultural Europe in Agony on Zambrano's Thought

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A B S T R A C T

In 1945, María Zambrano came out with the book The Agony of Europe (although it had initially appeared as an article in 1940), delivering some major ideas about what she considers to be an agonizing Europe, that is, the crisis in which Europe is steeped. Those writings are mainly about what was happening in Europe between the years 1940 and 1945, and three elements can characterize that scenario given by the philosopher reflection: 1) the malaise of civilization, 2) the construction of Europe as a history of violence, and 3) the interference of religion at the European cultural crossroads. She proposes, as a way of overcoming this agony, the need for a new man, an inner man. If it is true that her critical thinking remains current and helps us understand the phenomenon of the European crisis, does her solution remain current? This paper will reflect on the agony of Europe nowadays and his social, political and cultural problems with Zambrano's thought in the background.

K E Y W O R D S

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Thinking Europe is an urgent task today as it was in the time of Kant. The main concerns we find today, except for a few minor differences, seems to be the same: from Hegel to Denis de Rougemont, from Edmund Husserl to Victor Hugo, from Saint-Simon to Proudhon, arriving at Ortega y Gasset and his disciple María Zambrano, culminating in a George Steiner or in a Peter Sloterdijk, the agony — of a (de)construction — of Europe seems evident. In this sense, and because many of the reasons for this cultural crisis (which are in line with the social, economic and political ones) are already thought of by these authors, it makes sense to recover the thought of María Zambrano for this purpose.

One might initially think that María Zambrano's works are just poetic philosophy, but in fact they sink into the heart of political philosophy. In Zambrano's philosophy, man is at the heart of reality (which means that he is always making the world happen), and therefore he also emerges in his political circumstances. Man is in a world of relationships, in a world where his participation unfolds and is marked by historical and political events. Zambrano is aware of the place of politics in the active life of man, and it will not be by chance that her first book, from 1930, is *Horizontes del Liberalismo* (Horizons of Liberalism), where the beginnings of the philosophical-political thought begin to be drawn, according to the concepts of life, man and reason (Zambrano, 1996, p. 207). In this book, she begins to advocate a third way or 'revolution', which can be translated into a sort of readjustment of the liberal economy - with a critique of capitalist liberalism and bourgeois individualism - so that greater social justice is eventually possible. (This criticism of liberalism will also serve as a motto in the *Agony of Europe*, precisely to reveal a decharacterized Europe.) Note that Zambrano warns, however, to safeguard what liberalism has best to offer, ie, freedom in culture, freedom of thought, freedom to inquire and educate.

This commitment of the philosopher with her historical time - of which we find the record in the author's biographical works (Martínez and Muñoz, 1997, p. 14) — is thus well self-evident in her demand for a serious reflection on the crisis of the West, which, as we all know, begins by establishing the basic

¹ J. Moreno Sanz, in the "Introductory Study" of (cap. III- "El Templo del Pacto", 119) *Horizontes del Liberalismo*, points out that the philosopher's trajectory is reflected in this consonance of political thought with the formation of his general philosophy.

principles of a democracy: freedom and solidarity. Therefore, it is not surprising that reflection on Europe arises as a natural consequence in the attention of our Philosopher.¹ Zambrano is aware of the cultural and political movements of Europe and the world at

large: the consequences of World War I were still happening and political ideologies were already boiling in a second phase.

The book *The Agony of Europe* came out in 1945 (although it had first appeared as an article in 1940, and Zambrano described it a few years later as a set of essays of unpretentious fragments). The philosopher wrote it moved by the impulsivity of feeling (Zambrano, 2012, p. 21). This impulsivity and/or emotional courage lies in the summer of 1940, with the unfolding of the new war, and in particular with the Nazi invasion of Paris (where some of Zambrano's family was living at the time). With this emotion, Zambrano starts a political dialogue with her time. Our author begins with a commonplace which is the affirmation of the decadence of Europe, not to subsume itself in this premise but to highlight the ethical unconsciousness that has been reached (Zambrano, 2012, p. 23).

In this framework of hidden social and political consciousness, resentment, rancour, the cult of success (Zambrano, 2012, pp. 24-25), and some currents of thought have led Europe to the point where it finds

itself, that is, of its agony. As our author points out, during troubled periods, during periods of crisis, man appears in the open, putting his life in the open because “every disaster gives people the possibility of manifesting themselves in all their raw reality - it is the means of a more exact revelation of all who are known” (Zambrano, 2012, p. 23). This idea is present throughout her reflections, of which we find an echo in a work published five years later, *Hacia un saber sobre el alma* (Zambrano, 1987, p. 37).

This crisis of Europe can be translated into a civilizational malaise, that is, in the realization that European thought moves in an enigmatic and mysterious climate, where terror and fear reign, within an excessive trust in an unknown monster — a monster created by naturalism, which generates a passivity dictated by the facts, which leads to a destruction of the capacity for abstraction, to the distance from truth (Zambrano, 2012, pp. 26-27), to blind trust in the given world; and a social monster which in the path of naturalism settled through liberalism (Zambrano, 2012, pp. 28-30), not knowing how to safeguard the human person nor the power of creation. The blindness of both the critics and the defenders of liberalism also contributed to the fragility and paralysis of European thought (Zambrano, 2012, 31), which the Greeks had given such noble birth to, as Husserl had advocated in *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transzendente Phänomenologie* (1954). (Husserl emphasizes the importance of Greek cultural tradition and the role of philosophy in the constitution of spiritual Europe.) However, philosophy enabled the withdrawal of subjectivity, and the lack of unity of philosophy has contributed to the crisis of science and to the European crisis. So, the German philosopher defends a return to subjectivism in his conference entitled “The Crisis of European Humanity and Philosophy”, in Vienna in 1935, echoing in the work of María Zambrano (although Greek philosophy occupies a different place in history). European thought would have defined its own roots, which means that philosophy itself (like literature and painting) has become an agonizing place, that is, a place where art betrays itself, where its principles are forgotten and embrace the “black void”.

In such a scenario, the philosopher recognizes that where there is life there must be hope. This is probably one of the key concepts of the author’s thinking, and in 1953 she wrote in *Delirium and Destiny* that “agonizing is not being able to die because of hope” (Zambrano, 1987, p. 244). This agony thus appears as a sort of revelation of the inner feeling which is hope and which ‘animates’ man, as she would also declare a few years later (Zambrano, 1994, p. 20). The philosopher tells us: “But even in the midst of terror, love does not resign itself and continues to ask if this historical reality of life and culture has died, this tradition we call Europe, which has already emigrated from its scarce territory” (Zambrano, 2012, pp. 36-37). So, the question then will be: what is irrevocable in what constitutes/constituted Europe, or, “what was Europe? From its complex and very rich reality, what cannot be renounced?” (Zambrano, 2012, p. 37).

Zambrano claims the impossibility of the death of Europe, “because Europe is perhaps the only thing - in History - that cannot die totally, the only thing that can be resurrected” (Zambrano, 2012, p. 49). How to resurrect Europe from its (transient) death? The philosopher, not falling into the temptation to embrace nostalgia, responds with the painful lucidity of knowing that it is necessary to recognize what has constituted it (what allowed for the creation of the European lifestyle in its density, multiplicity and wealth).

Zambrano inquires into the origin of violence in Europe. The answer is already contained in the question: in the constitution of Europe, violence has always been found (as she says, “violence was in every aspect

of his life”, Zambrano, 2012, pp. 54-55). This answer also raises another fundamental question for the philosopher, one that is about the domain of religion: the European God is a unique god with unique characteristics, the “God of a “elected people” by himself to save the whole universe.” (Zambrano, 2012, p. 56). This placement of a people glorified by the Creator God would make the European people a people with a thirst for divinity - unlike the Oriental, who would be incapable of such violence (Zambrano, 2012, p. 66), but would also be the people who would make Christianity triumph (Zambrano, 2012, pp. 56-57).

This relation of transmutation of the creative God into the creative man (Zambrano, 2012, p. 59) enveloped the European in his excessive reliance on judging himself based on image and likeness. Regarding this, St. Augustine is called to debate, to give us the dimension of the agreement between religion and philosophy, in order to situate ourselves within the framework of understanding the immense decadent difficulty that Europe has reached (see Romero, 2003, p. 134); but, according to Zambrano, the conflict “that Europe has arrived at its violence is religious and philosophy cannot solve it on its own. Before a new philosophy emerges, in this European tradition, the conversion of man must take place, there must be an acceptance of reality in a revealing way” (Zambrano, 2012, p. 72). Only with the appearance of a ‘new man’, the philosopher tells us, can Europe resurrect. Or rather, only with hope and mercy (the “confession” that St. Augustine introduces is decisive for the realization of the interiority of man) will we see the way out of the agony of Europe. And that is why the European man is the protagonist of History, the man who can, in his duplicity, embrace the rebirth of Europe and open the way to the transparency of the heart, that is, to restore lost dignity (Zambrano, 2012, p. 90). Zambrano announces the new man as the inner man (almost in an Nietzsche way), the man who has regained his interiority, who embraces life in its novelty: “The European man was born with these words. The truth is within: it realizes, for the first time, its interiority and therefore it can rest in it; so it is independent, it is free. Recover his interiority” (Zambrano, 2012, p. 92).

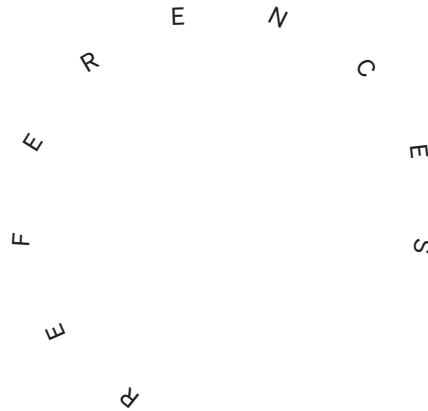
This man of “unfathomable interiority” brings hope to resurrection, to purity of heart, to the end of the conflict between himself and the world he manages; the Christian person is the incarnation of these values:

The Christian person, on the other hand, has no limit, neither for his strength, nor for his life nor for his death. There is something in man that transposes and transcends everything: to be a man is to possess this inabarcable interiority. That is why a person, a Christian, is like an infinite perspective that is never exhausted in any of his acts, not even in all of them together: it is what is always beyond - it is deep, deep. (Zambrano, 2012, p. 93)

The concept that marks Zambrano’s philosophy starts being drawn here, and perhaps, as Ana Mendonça points out, the author will bring the thought into a *poetic reason* as a possible figure and a framework for a new rational discourse (see, Mendonça, 2004).

Given Zambrano’s reflections and plunging into the reality of today’s Europe, how to reconcile the humanitarian sense of mutual help and unity with the growing fascist ideological movement? How to be supportive in an Europe that is caught up in the rise of extreme right-wing parties? Could the new Zambrano man be a solution to this continued crisis in Europe? As Zambrano realized, the ghosts of the past that built Europe - violence and terror - are the same ones that today threaten the solidarity

and humanitarian sense that should characterize a real European Union. Maybe art and culture can be a solution: as Nietzsche said, only art can save us from ourselves. To deal with different cultures it is not a sign of fragility but instead a sign of recognition of humanity; to accept differences is to build a richer world, even if this world is constantly changing, in agony.



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