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Europe’s Frenzy

European and Spanish Universality in María Zambrano

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In his Vienna lecture of 1935, entitled “Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity,” Husserl acknowledges the widespread sense that Europe is undergoing a spiritual crisis: “The European nations are sick” (1970a, 270). Although physicians may be able to cure bodily ailments using their knowledge of the mechanisms of nature, there as yet exists no widely accepted analogous figure to address spiritual illness. For, Husserl says, the humanistic sciences, which relate to the human spirit as the natural sciences relate to nature, have yet to establish solid foundations for a theory that differentiates them from the natural sciences. Hence, instead of an entire tradition of trained individuals to practice and further develop techniques of “spiritual” healing, the European mind is accosted by quacks who rely on an unexamined tradition and their own idiosyncratic intuition to effect a cure. More than these spiritual medicine men’s irrational responses to the European crisis, Husserl expressed concern about “a misguided rationalism” (290). In particular, he mentions a “one-sided rationality,” one that disparages
the humanistic sciences for their failure to measure up to the certainties of
the natural sciences. Unfortunately, this rationalism “is taken for philosophical
rationality as such”; this mistaken rationality, he admits, is “characteristic
of the philosophy of the whole modern period since the Renaissance” (292).
The history of this mistake, which he calls “objectivism” or “naturalism,” is the
theme of The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenol-
ogy proper.

Instead of discarding rationality as a dead end, Husserl will attempt to
remedy “man’s now unbearable lack of clarity about his own existence” by
returning to “genuine rationality” (1970a, 297). Such a rationality does not
merely restore the humanistic sciences to a place of prestige beside the
natural sciences; rather, the theory of the spiritual sphere accounts for the
natural sciences and their success. “The spirit is not in or alongside nature,”
he writes; “rather, nature is itself drawn into the spiritual sphere” (298).
Scientists must learn that their very ability to see the natural world as a set
of phenomena that appear to them as objects presupposes their immersion
in a particular “surrounding life-world” (295). That “life-world” is specific
to a particular place and time, and the task of defining and comprehending
lifeworlds falls to the humanistic sciences. The failure on the part of
the natural sciences and other sciences in thrall to them to recognize their
dependence on a “spiritual sphere” carries with it other consequences, such
as ignorance of what Husserl calls “the soul in its own essential sense, which
is, after all, the ego that acts and suffers” (296). In Europe, or the Infinite
Task, Rodolphe Gasché refers to modern science’s inadequacy as an “ethico-
philosophical error” that Husserl means to correct with the concept of the
lifeworld (2009, 72).

Although one gets the sense that Husserl’s exposition is motivated by the
urgency of crisis and the desire for a remedy, Gasché, in his exegesis of the
Crisis, becomes interested in another, more affirmative facet of Husserl. It
is also a less obvious one. Namely, by shifting the realm of universality from
nature to spirit or intellect (Geist), elements and laws that explain nature and
human existence take on a clearly historical perspective to take into account
the temporality of human being. Rather than timeless truths, the ideas that
are born of theoretical speculation in general make up “a fund of premises
for an infinite horizon of tasks as the unity of one all-encompassing task” (Husserl 1970a, 278). As Gasché insists, this “fund” and the shared, universal discourse it comprises are “in the making,” requiring constant renewal and revision to retain any right to their ambitious project. Of course, the project also has a name. *Europe, or the Infinite Task* describes this project as it develops from Husserl through the phenomenological tradition; Gasché takes stock of the radicality of Husserl’s thinking and follows it through a series of transformations of the idea of the project and universality of Europe. That is to say, rather than following thinkers who joined in creating a “theory of the essence of spirit purely as spirit” (Husserl 1970a, 273), the thinkers analyzed in *Europe, or the Infinite Task* radicalize the understanding of the fundamental event, the emergence of the idea of Europe in ancient Greece. One could imagine, at least, a humanistic science that accepted the task of correcting the age-old prejudice against the humanities and of setting in motion a process of continual refinement of concepts and methods for producing certain, exact understanding of human activity and achievement, in a way analogous, but not identical, to the work of the natural sciences. Such a science, Husserl envisions, would therefore also play a role in the orientation of government, society, and the arts. I would venture to say that if the sense of crisis has been transformed in the last century, it is not owing to the emergence of a unified theory of the human sciences.

The phenomenological tradition that Gasché examines, however, continues to delve deeper than Husserl did into the very possibility of Europe, into the possibility of a universal, apodictic knowledge. For Heidegger, we could say, Husserl’s history of philosophy and a descent into one-sided rationality is one possible history of universality, the one that concludes with the technical domination of the world. More “universal” than the intersubjective community of scientists is that very event that set Europe on its course toward completion in the epoch of *Technik*. Heidegger does not set parameters for a new orientation or a retrieval of some original potentiality of the Greek beginning; he does not say what the thinking of Europe might achieve or should achieve in a new era; to do so would be to acquiesce to the very epoch from which he wanted to detach himself. Rather, he tries to clear the space for a new founding event. Patočka, by contrast, returns to the history
of Europe and to Husserl’s idea of detecting the resources in this history for overcoming ethico-philosophical shortcomings that have led to a European crisis. If Husserl frees the human sciences from the tyranny of a concept of knowledge thoroughly defined by its elaboration with regard to the natural world, Patočka frees the conception of responsibility from an ethical thinking that sees itself grounded in knowledge. Europe’s task has been and continues to be the gradual overcoming of the Platonic dominion of knowledge through a radical Christianization. Derrida insists that Patočka’s Christian theory of Europe must be viewed as one of the strands of a varied European inheritance from which no absolute break is possible, but within which a radical new thinking must be invented and assimilated. Derrida is very much where we are now, and in Gasché’s book we see an effort to meet the challenge of Derrida’s thinking, perhaps most visibly in the decision to juxtapose four ideas of Europe without evaluating or proposing a conclusive idea of his own. Indeed, whether it is even legitimate to speak of property rights when it comes to ideas—let alone the idea of Europe—is one of the stakes of the theme of universality. If Derrida—or perhaps Jean-Luc Nancy, who figures prominently in the Introduction and Epilogue—appears privileged, it is because each is a later thinker who has established his relationship to the other three.

My treatment of Spanish universality might seem especially strange in this context, then. For one thing, the thinkers I’ll discuss had only remote knowledge of the phenomenological tradition. Miguel de Unamuno’s religio-philosophical ideas were forged at about the same time as Husserl’s major works, though his idiosyncratic conception of philosophy and thinking led him to readings of philosophers—Spinoza, Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche—in which he concluded that there was no more to find in philosophy than in classic Spanish literature. José Ortega y Gasset’s German philosophical training predisposed him toward epistemological questions of the post-Kantian school, the historicism of Dilthey, and the aestheticism of Bergson. María Zambrano, too, in her synthesis of religion, poetry, history, and a narrowly conceived philosophy, appears to have absorbed relatively little of the phenomenological tradition. Moreover, discussions of universality in Spanish thinking occur precisely in traditions that are said to be concerned about
Spanish particularity, especially the so-called Generation of ’98. One scholar has said that Spain is the country most obsessed with defining its “collective soul” (Bundgård 1998, 42), and this concern has been documented in studies and anthologies such as Salvador Madariaga’s *Englishmen, Frenchmen, Spaniards*, Julián Marías’s *Understanding Spain*, and Ramón Menéndez Pidal’s *Spaniards in their History*, just to name a few titles in English. It is true that this concern created many superficial characterizations of Spaniards as arrogant, fiercely individualistic, unsuitable for scientific thought, and lacking in political solidarity. Such studies survey Spanish history and isolate the constant characteristics, often coinciding with traits of European icons like Don Quijote and Don Juan, or with stereotypes like the bullfighter, gypsy, or conquistador.

Whether for reasons of geography or perhaps because of the intensity of these supposedly universal traits, Spain had a consciousness—documented in literature, the arts, and popular discourse—of being on the margins of Europe, of never quite fitting in with the rest of the continent. This marginalization, granted, is sometimes a source of some confusion. As Zambrano notes, Spain contributed two key pieces to the emergence of modern Europe, the modern nation state (with the Iberian union of Isabel of Castile and Ferdinand of Navarre) and the discovery and exploitation of the Americas; however, its decadence began immediately thereafter (2004b/1939, 118). It is commonly said that, caught up in the fervor of the Counter-Reformation at precisely the moment—the reign of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V—when Spain’s territorial possessions included most of Western Europe, Spain never had a Renaissance but rather took over the place of Rome as the champion of Christendom. Even before it became a playground for citizens of the member states of the European Union, it was a destination for travelers seeking the exotic, the margins of Europe, where violence and passion were openly displayed. By a similar token, it is commonly said that Spain has produced no thinkers or scientists of note, although this is belied by several examples of Nobel prize winners like Ramón y Cajal and Severo Ochoa.

Though this conception of Spain grows out of a survey of Spanish history and a sense of crisis different from that of Europe, it is not simply irrelevant to the phenomenological conception of Europe as an “infinite task.” There
also emerged in Spain a discourse on Spain and Spanishness or “Hispanicness” (*Hispanidad*) that pretended to a deeper universality or at least one that complemented the scientific project associated with the mainstream of Europe. As we will see, this something is thematized by twentieth-century Spanish thinkers as poetry, religion, materialism, or simply life. That is to say, whereas the name “Europe” came to mean the transcendence of a particular set of customs, beliefs, and values associated with a geographical and cultural site—especially but not exclusively the one called “Europe”—the name “Spain,” too, signified a breaking away from the particularly Spanish toward a universal humanity. And it signified the promise that such a possibility was within the reach of human beings by virtue of their humanity and regardless of their national or cultural identities. If this often appears as a kind of Spanish privilege, this is not only because the thinkers might have been motivated to raise the status of their beleaguered nation, but also because they felt, like Europeans, that fate had endowed them with a unique ability to articulate universal human experiences. We will see that these universals are in fact quite different from the European “infinite task” found in the phenomenological tradition. My intention is to begin to assess the relationship of Spain with that tradition.

Spanish thinkers have claimed to possess two special abilities when it comes to thinking: a keener sense of sight and a steadier regard for death. Ortega y Gasset’s *Meditations on Quixote* attempts to think the essence of Spain through its literature; in its published form, the primary reference point is that mentioned in the title, though oddly enough, he mentions other authors—Baroja, Azorín—as much as he neglects to arrive at more than a few passing comments on Cervantes’s novel. For Ortega y Gasset, Spain was never simply a matter of the country called “Spain.” It was originally a Mediterranean culture, and by this he means to contrast it with Germanic cultures (among which, apparently, he counts Greece). He begins by evoking the nineteenth-century philologist Menéndez y Pelayo’s dichotomy between “Germanic mists” and “Latin clarity” (1961, 75). Ortega initially suggests that Mediterranean cultures are a product of living alongside and facing the sea, implying in a striking description of sailing that Mediterraneans master the tension between wind and water to cleave the dividing line between the
depths and the heavens (74). Possibly because this ability would be characteristic of any seafaring people, Ortega ultimately settles on a description of Mediterranean cultures in terms that tie their peculiarities to the contingencies of climate and geography, in particular, the light of the Mediterranean shore. He includes among Mediterraneans all the ancient cultures gathered around the coast of the inland sea, including those of the Iberian peninsula, the African coast, and the islands of Sicily and Crete, while excluding Greece for being in the Aegean. These cultures excel in vision and hence are credited with a superior relationship to the surface of the world: “Nos oculos eruditos habemus. What in seeing belongs to mere impression is incomparably more energetic in the Mediterranean and for this reason people here find it usually sufficient” (84). Germanics, on the other hand, including the Greeks, prefer the essence of things: “For the Greek, what we see is governed and corrected by what we think and only has value when it rises to be a symbol of the ideal” (82–83).

The Greek/Germanic impulse to see the ideal in the real is not, for Ortega, an achievement; it does not appear as an event that renders the Greek or the German especially strange to her or himself. Rather, it is one of two attitudes toward a world conceived in two ways, as an abstraction and a concrete thing. *Don Quixote* represents, for Ortega, the extremity of Mediterranean visuality: “in Cervantes this power of vision is literally incomparable: it reaches such a point that even without aiming at the description of a thing, the true colors of the thing, its sound, its entire body, will slip now and then into the course of the narrative” (1961, 82–83). Apparently, Cervantes did not even have to try; Ortega’s language goes so far as to forget the linguistic nature of the novel, to speak as though it provided immediate access to nonlinguistic phenomena. One could take his comments further and note that, although *Don Quixote* has been understood as a dreamer for whom ideals are more important than reality, in fact, the opposite is true. The knight of La Mancha (though it is hardly on the Mediterranean coast!) subordinates his ideal to his visual experience of reality. As an aficionado of surfaces, Don Quixote doesn’t have to see that the windmills are windmills. He doesn’t have to identify what they are; he responds with passion to their size, their movement, and the blow dealt him by a swinging mill blade, and his passion is perfectly commensurate with
his energetic perception. To put it in Kantian terms, apperception trumps understanding.

What determines the Mediterranean character for Ortega is some mixture of light and the gaze directed at the open horizon. Unamuno credits the Spaniard with “the tragic feeling of life,” an intimate sense of one’s own mortal “flesh and bone” existence. Through the hundreds of meandering pages of Unamuno’s *The Tragic Sense of Life*, he insists again and again upon the primacy of feeling in spiritual-intellectual life; great philosophers, he will maintain, pursue their rational projects as a result of an anxiety for their own existence. Even the reader is brought into play: “this means your essence, reader, mine, that of the man Spinoza, that of the man Butler, of the man Kant, and of every man who is a man, is nothing but the endeavor, the effort, which he makes to continue to be a man, not to die” (1954, 7). In fact, for Unamuno, the very effort to define human being on the basis of a shared experience of rationality only works because of this fundamental feeling; there would be no universality without the individual’s yearning for permanence (10). For Unamuno, the universality of this conception of humanity can be translated unproblematically by one word, “catholicism”; the Catholic church forms a perfect fusion between the Hellenic discovery of death and reason, and the Judaic belief in immortality. Speaking in a tradition that includes Menéndez Pelayo and Ángel Ganivet, Unamuno suggests that Spain is the effective home of catholicism with a small “c,” a universal sentiment that, though felt most acutely by Spaniards, belongs to all human beings as humans:

And since we Spaniards are Catholic—whether we know it or not, and whether we like it or not—and although some of us may claim to be rationalists or atheists, perhaps the greatest service we can render to the cause of culture, and of what is more value than culture, religiousness—if indeed they are not the same thing—is in endeavoring to formulate clearly to ourselves this subconscious, social, or popular Catholicism of ours. And that is what I have attempted to do in this work. (295)

The lower case “c” in the Spanish text (following the Spanish convention of not capitalizing nationality or religion) emphasizes that “catholic” means
“universal,” and Unamuno’s theme of the tragic sense of life corresponds, for him, to the necessity of living in the face of mortality. It could not be clearer that for Unamuno this supposedly Spanish conception of life is in fact a Spanish privilege which other human beings could possibly, with effort, be able to acquire: “What I call the tragic sense of life in men and peoples is at any rate our tragic sense of life, that of Spaniards and the Spanish people, as it is reflected in my consciousness, which is a Spanish consciousness, made in Spain” (285). It is this kind of statement that spurs Juan Goytisolo to say of Unamuno that “as a young man he spoke of Europeanizing Spain, and later he reacts against that tendency and proposes to his countrymen the task of Spanishizing Europe” (2002, 92). In a passage aimed as much at criticizing a trend in the humanities to consider all Europeanization as repressive Eurocentrism as at clarifying the idea of Europe, Gasché notes, “If ‘Europe’ signifies transgressing one’s customs and traditions toward what is universally human, then there can only be self-Europeanization” (2009, 48 n. 6). The same could be said of what Goytisolo calls Unamuno’s concept of “Spanishization”: if it means attending to one’s own particular awareness of mortality, Spaniards and Europeans and every human being would be responsible for self-Spanishization.

Thus, Spain not only has a tradition of privileging its own experience and perspective—this is perhaps not so surprising or unique—but it has done so in a way that connects it with some human experiences that are considered universal. María Zambrano wrote, “when the Spaniard decides to take up his own history, he cannot do so authentically but must do so looking towards what is universal” (1998/1953, 189). That is to say, reflections upon Spain and its place in the world do not focus on Spanish particularity so much as on what in the Spaniard transcends Spanishness. This is what so much work on the concept of Spanishness—carried out by Spaniards and Hispanists, both of which have an investment in Spain’s singularity rather than on the relationship between that singularity and a possible universal—has been lacking.

The point of these Spanish thinkers has been that an understanding of the human being as first and foremost a being possessed of the capacity for reason—that is, for a shared, binding discourse that transcends cultural
limitations—fails to be comprehensive enough. Put another way, to say that what all human beings share is their capacity for reason and that all other communal experiences—such as art, religion, moral-ethical practice, and so forth—grow out of reason is an inadequate way to characterize the human being. In both cases, perhaps, Unamuno and Ortega are motivated, as was Husserl, by a perception of and concern for a crisis in Europe and in Spain. But their reaction to this crisis involves bringing rational discourse into relation with something that it does not and cannot wholly dominate. For Ortega, the Germanic attraction to depth seems to have occurred at the price of neglecting surfaces, sensual contact with the material world, and along with it, appreciation for singularity and temporality. This neglect has invaded the Mediterranean cultures so that, in reality, no modern Mediterranean culture remains (Ortega y Gasset 1961, 78). For Unamuno, the concepts meant to replace religious thinking—oriented by death and immortality—with rational, timeless principles deny and simultaneously manifest a yearning for immortality. To embrace, as Spaniards are said to do, the feeling of mortality and the yearning for eternity might, according to Unamuno, result in a more comprehensive consciousness, one more able to meet the challenges of modern life, or at least to avoid its evils.

It is in the light of this search for a more comprehensive thought of human individual and communal being that we must consider the work of María Zambrano. A student of Ortega and an avid reader of Unamuno, she combines elements of their thinking of Spanishness as a privileged site for the understanding of human nature. For Zambrano, it is the notion of “poetic cognition” that offers a solution to the impasse of European culture by complementing “scientific reason” and thus expanding the range of human achievement.

At the heart of Zambrano’s thinking about Europe is a story she tells about the relationship between philosophy and poetry. The story appears especially in two volumes from 1939—Philosophy and Poetry (Filosofía y poesía) and Thought and Poetry in Spanish Life (Pensamiento y poesía en la vida española)—in the wake of the Republican defeat in the Spanish Civil war and recurs in articles in the 1940s before gaining prominence again in Man and the Divine (El hombre y lo divino, 1955). Though it fades as Zambrano’s
thinking shifts from political and philosophical orientation to the religious, it remains in a text as late as *The Fortunate Ones* (*Los bienaventurados*, 1980), which begins by telling of Greek and Western suppression of vision. What follows is an attempt to gather the major motifs of this story in order to bring out its interpretation of Europe and its relationship to Spain.4

As I have suggested, the turn to the theme of Europe is motivated by the sense of a crisis, something that affects not only Spain but the entity called “Europe.” Similarly to Husserl’s story in the *Crisis* (1970a, 283–87) and Patočka’s in *Heretical Essays* (1996, 12–23), when Zambrano tells of philosophy and poetry, it is part of an effort to take stock of where Europe finds itself at a particular historical moment by returning to the origins. The story of beginnings is meant to “justify oneself,” to understand how one has arrived at the present moment. As we will see, Zambrano describes her historical present as a “rebellion of life” (2004b/1939, 20); we must see the state of things when this repression occurred. In “The Poem and the System,” a 1944 article reprinted in the collection *Hacia un saber sobre el alma*,5 Zambrano writes,

> to justify oneself is nothing other than to show one’s origins, to confront the being that one has come to be with the originary necessity that made it come about; to confront the image of the finished, ‘historical’ being with the originary image, that sort of innocence that remains—the white shadow—behind all historical fulfillment. (2005/1950, 45)

It is worth noting that Zambrano’s language itself is strikingly enigmatic. “The Poem and the System” declares its theme to be the form of philosophical thinking, and in it Zambrano insists that the activity of thinking as embodied in form manifests “the rhythm that we could say belongs to the heart . . . the constant background against which the voice of intelligibility stands out” (44). Throughout Zambrano’s oeuvre we find an intelligible strand—narratives, images, and propositions—against the background of figures of speech and arguments that seem to problematize the clearer propositions. Here Zambrano seems to be saying that the return to origin of the movement that is being completed in the European crisis—later in the essay she calls it “Europe’s death throes”—began as an innocent event. The chance of
a new trajectory lies in the exposure of the origins of the present one, and like Husserl, Zambrano intends to resuscitate a hidden element of Western civilization and restore it to its proper role in the guidance of Europe.

*Philosophy and Poetry*, the first of two major monographs on the relation between philosophy and literature (1996/1939), does not yet include the theme of Spain, but describes the event that separates them, its ethical implications, and the stakes of a possible reconciliation. The provocative first lines insist that these two elements—personified as if they were gods—“[want] the soul in which they dwell to belong eternally to themselves.” (It is for this reason, she warns, that so many promising careers are ruined, because of a failure on the part of an individual to commit himself entirely to literature or philosophy [13].) However, in spite of this conflict, we sense that these are the “two halves of man”: “In poetry we go straight to the concrete, individual man. In philosophy [we find] man in his universal history, in his wanting-to-be. Poetry is encounter, gift, finding by grace. Philosophy searches and this search is guided by a method” (13). Zambrano proposes to bring to light this conflict in order to suggest some solutions, but not surprisingly, the solutions are not simply new possibilities for philosophy or for literature. Rather, what is at stake is “a new world of life and knowledge” (14).

Zambrano expresses unequivocally in “The Poem and the System” that poetry and philosophy once were part of a unity, a single attitude toward the world. In this, she resembles Husserl’s tale in the Vienna lecture of a “natural primordial attitude” (1970a, 281); for the Husserl of *Crisis* as well as *Logical Investigations*, philosophy is a departure from a natural attitude (1970b, 254). In Zambrano, too, there is a tearing away from the world, a violent rending that leaves philosophers in search of that which they already, in a certain way, possessed. From *admiración*, the fascinated looking-upon that Zambrano associates with Platonic thauomazein, philosophers begin “the methodical effort to capture something that we don’t have, and that we need to have, with such hardship that it makes us tear ourselves away from that which we already have without having pursued it” (2005/1950, 16). According to a strange logic, then, desire separates philosophers from the very thing that they possess, so that they might desire to possess it and commit themselves to the pursuit of it. In *The Death Throes of Europe* (*La agonía de Europa*, 2000/1940), she
Stephen D. Gingerich

describes the European as a “conflict”: “When speaking with a European one speaks with a conflict, with someone who lives in order to alienate himself from his life (se desvive por vivir), who erases himself in order to sketch himself out again” (75). With this initial violence, “Philosophy quickly separated itself from Poetry” (2005/1950, 45), and poetry remained “behind” in a sense, unable or unwilling to take the philosophical step:

Faithful to things, faithful to their primitive, ecstatic admiration, they never demanded to disengage from it; they did not manage to do so, because the thing itself had already fixated upon them [se había fijado ya en ellos], it was imprinted upon their interior. (17)

Whereas philosophy is an act of will, poetry appears to be a condition of receptivity, almost of weakness. Zambrano plays here upon the idiomatic expression fijarse en, which means “to notice”; in one sense, the poets are looked upon, noticed by things. But this being-regarded results in things literally “fixing themselves upon” the poets, putting their stamp on them, and rendering impossible the distance that characterizes the philosopher. This lack of violence on the part of the poets confers a kind of ethical privilege in their relationship to things, for the poets refuse to reduce things of the world to a unity of their own making:

And the poet does not properly want everything, because he fears that this everything might not include each and every thing along with all its nuances. . . . the thing of the poet is never a conceptual thing of thought but the exceedingly complex and real thing, the phantasmagoric and dreamt-of thing, the invented thing, the thing that has ceased to exist and the thing that will never be. (22)

The poet is therefore subjected to an overwhelming attraction—afición, or apego—for things real and imagined, remembered and invented. Then there is also the violence of the things themselves: “Appearances destroy each other, they are constantly at war, and whoever lives among them perishes” (20). Ironically, Zambrano says that it is the very violence of appearances
that inspires philosophers to commit their own brand of violence: Because of this violence of poetry, Zambrano will contrast, later in *Philosophy and Poetry*, the clear-headed, certain ethics of philosophy with poetry’s martyrdom (1996/1939, 43).

Although the evocation of martyrdom and subsequent alignment of poetry with Christianity seems to suggest that poetry is the suppressed other of philosophy, Zambrano clearly states in the 1944 article “Nietzsche and the Destruction of Metaphysics,” included in *Hacia un saber sobre el alma*, that like Heidegerrian *Dichtung*, poetry is more primordial than philosophy and can claim parental rights over philosophy. The essay itself does not carry out a very methodical delineation of Nietzsche’s thought; more than anything, Zambrano intends to locate him in the beginning of the death throes of Europe and to acknowledge in him a fellow seeker of origins. Just as the Nietzsche of the *Birth of Tragedy* begins by positing Dionysian and Apollonian drives as complementary and concludes by finding Dionysian passion behind the Apollonian quest for form and tranquility, Zambrano insists that the restricted gaze of philosophy was born out of the openness of the poet:

> Philosophy’s “logos” traces out its limits within the light. Poetry’s “logos” gathers its force in the dangerous limits in which light dissolves in the darkness, beyond the intelligible. But poetry was born as an impetus towards clarity from these dark areas, and for this reason it precedes Philosophy, a merely intelligible language, and it helps give birth to the latter. (2005/1950, 154)

It is tempting to see philosophy and poetry as symmetrical counterparts, as one might see the natural and human sciences. Their relationship is in fact described as a conflict or “dispute,” however, and as we see here, it is the primitive impulse of poetry that drives even poetry’s antagonist. It is easy to see how the suppression of poetry by philosophy fits with the Husserlian idea of one-sided rationality undermining the status of reason in general. It is also striking how poetry participates in its own debasement.

In 1939, Zambrano’s second book to orient itself around the question of literature and philosophy, *Thought and Poetry in Spanish Life*, reiterates the
story from *Philosophy and Poetry*, emphasizing her association of Europe with philosophy and Spain with poetry. Here it begins to be clearer how Spain can appear, on the one hand, to supplement European universality and, on the other, to have privileged access to a universality even more universal than that of philosophy. In the opening chapter, “The Crisis of European Rationalism,” she evokes a vision of Europe based on an “architecture of being that philosophical thought discovered in Greece with such energetic decision”; this “ideal world-behind-the-world [trasmundo ideal],” she says, “has served so that man could feel like the inhabitant of a stable sphere, well-defined though unlimited” (2004b/1939, 97). This is the accomplishment of reason, the creation of the West:

[Philosophy] has given [man] for centuries the just measure of security and insecurity, of clarity and of the unknown, of truth and illusion, and it has done so in such a wise proportion that man was able to sustain himself and move forward in the movement that has engendered the entirety of Western culture. (97–98)

Yet within this world Spain has existed as a “rebellious people, maladapted, glorious and disdained, always enigmatic... a universal enigma, a question posed about the future” (100). The crisis of Europe is, she says, the dissolution of that ideal world, a world that has risen to greatness and begun to falter. And in its failure, it looks to the Spanish margin where, she says, failure has always been a way of life. In *Delirium and Destiny*, she says that “while Europe had found life, had come to know living, we were hanging on to our dying” (1998/1953, 172). Implied, of course, was that Europe had as much to learn from Spain as vice versa.

Before continuing, Zambrano says, it is necessary to recall what is being lost, the “twenty four centuries of reason” that are disappearing (2004b/1939, 100). Here she retells the story of poetry and philosophy to contrast “true, ideal being in opposition to the fluid, shifting, confused and dispersed heterogeneity that is the first contact with life” (101). Spanish indifference to philosophy, we will see, comes from an adherence to this primordial contact
with life. If life is rebelling against Europe, it makes sense to look at the site within Europe where this life predominates; the “rebellious people” are key to understanding the “rebellion of life” (20).

The most relevant chapter for understanding this connection is the one whose title coincides with that of the book, “Thought and Poetry in Spanish Life.” Here, Zambrano explains, Spain has a different “intimate structure” from Europe: “the Spaniard has not reduced reality to anything, he has not reduced it in the first place” (2004b/1939, 147). It is because of this refusal to reduce reality to human categories of thinking that, Zambrano reminds her readers, Spain has not excelled in philosophical system building: “Among all our marvelous churches, there are no cathedrals of concepts; among so many formidable castles in Castile, there is no fortress of thought” (120). But far from considering this a deficiency on the part of Spaniards, Zambrano insists that this is the richness of Spain, what she calls “the ‘other’ of what is called theory” (130), presumably ridiculing the association of Greek seeing (theorein) with the process of reducing reality. Spaniards are “in love with the world”; they are “fanatics of the material world, of the tactile and visual world above all” (142).

The activity associated with Spain and with poetry is thus nothing as concrete as writing or composing poetry. Rather, it is “poetic cognition” (conocimiento poético). Zambrano explains that philosophy was the one extreme of “classical culture,” the one that took over and produced the West. The other extreme, poetry, she associates with the East, with yogis, “men consumed by contemplation, sunken in such ecstasy that they had practically been converted into so many trees; the birds had nested in their shoulders” (156). Spanish culture is not merely poetic, but it possesses “poetic cognition.” That is to say, it is not at one extreme with Europe at the other, but somewhere between the two extremes of West and East: “Spanish culture, with its poetic cognition, rises up between these two extremes” (156). In fact, she will recognize that even for poetic cognition the vision of things is erased or obscured (157). And yet this mode of cognition—for never being definitive and for remaining attentive—keeps the Spaniard connected to the universe.

Zambrano is clearly concerned with the way the scientific attitude detaches itself from the world and is unable to reestablish enough of a
connection for the human being to feel at home or to respect the natural world in its complexity. This is the secret to science’s success. She says, concluding the first section of the book, that Europe is in fact able to diagnose its own rational illness. However,

it does not for this reason cease to display the same evil, the same human compartmentalization that has made the magnificence of technology and even the splendor of science possible, while man grows more and more miserable and ultimately is asphyxiated. (2004b/1939, 160)

The Spaniard at least maintains the sense of living in the world. “Poetic cognition” does not give a thematic understanding of experience but the sense that one belongs. Throughout Thinking and Poetry in Spanish Life, Zambrano reminds us of the specific cultural phenomena that characterize Spain and claims they confirm her point: Spanish mysticism unites philosophy and poetry. In what is really important, it appears that Spanish poetry and literature prevail over science and philosophy. The other great European moment in which the conflict between philosophy and poetry was resolved was Romanticism, and though this did not have a particularly glorious occurrence in Spain, Hispanic culture fascinated other Europeans and Romantics such as Merimée, Dumas, Heine, Byron, and Washington Irving, as if they saw a culture achieving what they attempted to do in writing.

Zambrano’s discussion of Spanishness as a matter of vision might appear very similar to Ortega’s. However, Zambrano goes farther by insisting that this relationship to the world yields a particular feeling, one that has ethical resonance. The intimate attachment to the world, says Zambrano, produces a consciousness shot through with awareness of the impossibility of possessing the world. “But the Spaniard does not live in nothingess; he always has something, for he has his melancholy, he has his absence, he has what is lacking, which is what has disappeared or what he never managed to have” (2004b/1939, 215). Melancholy and hope are the two modes of response to a temporal predicament, one facing backward and the other forward. It appears, then, that Unamuno’s contention that Spaniards have a particular religious experience is grounded in their experience of the world of sensuality
that Ortega emphasizes. It is, ironically, Spanish “materialism” that gives rise to Spanish “spirituality.”

In *Man and the Divine*, the “dispute” between poetry and philosophy is worked into a much grander history, spanning from “the birth of the gods” to the contemporary “death of god” and the advent of “nothingness.” In this version, it is especially clear that the struggle in ancient Greece results in a usurpation of an original experience that belongs more properly to the poets (2001/1955, 72). One sees here an effort that, as Bundgård points out, characterizes Zambrano’s work in general, a movement toward concepts that invoke the divine (2000/1940, 15). In fact, the farther we move from the time of the Spanish Civil War and World War II, the more the theme of the struggle of literature and philosophy falls away and with it the relation of Spain to Europe and the struggle to define the two in relation to universal projects.

After surveying the theme of poetry and philosophy, *The Death Throes of Europe* appears less shocking, as if it were simply another reiteration of the problems with a language that emphasizes that Zambrano’s attention has shifted from Spain—the failure of democratic Europe to come to the aid of the Second Republic and the latter’s subsequent defeat—to Europe—the dramatic rise of the Third Reich. The first, titular essay begins by evoking the sense of a crisis in Europe:

> Without a doubt, Europe has ceased to have a face; without a doubt, it has come loose and its previous firmness has softened. Without a doubt, something hidden in the roots of the principles that gave it life have slowly corrupted these very principles. (2000/1940, 25)

The European crisis does not come about because of the arrival of some new threat, but because of something native to it. The strength and particularity of Europe, she insists, lay “in the capacity for breaking away from reality,” however, that breaking away, as we have seen, alienated Europeans from the source of their vitality (26). Spain, on the other hand, not having fit in to the European project as it grew exponentially from the Renaissance onward, was lost “in the labyrinth of its own overabundance” or “wholly immersed in its frenetic generosity” (29). Her retelling of the story of literature and
philosophy includes, again, its Greek beginning and a description of Europe’s *violent* beginnings and Spain’s indifference to the achievements of philosophical violence. Nonetheless, we once again see that being tied to things without the mediation of philosophy, the Spaniard is, like the poet, buffeted by the primal force of the natural world. “Spain, in its extremism, sometimes displays in the open some deep European roots that Europe, in its sobriety, covers up,” she writes. Spain is “Europe’s frenzy” (59).

Spain is Europe’s frenzy; this means that somehow, within Europe and as one of its possibilities, there occurs this overabundance of stimulation of the mind (*phrenos*) that is frenzy. This statement is in Zambrano’s concluding remarks after citing Spanish poet Quevedo’s well-known sonnet, “Amor constante más allá de la muerte” (“Constant love, beyond death”) in what we could take as an example of the achievement of Spanish poetic cognition. Here Zambrano speaks in the voice of poetry, appropriating without acknowledging it the movement of another well-known Golden Age poem, “Góngora’s Sonnet CLXVI.” Speaking poetically, Zambrano claims to bring to words the sentiment buried in the European. First, she summarizes what she calls Quevedo’s “rebellion,” his sense that, in her words, “man is dust and ash, but these ashes have meaning,” and she continues, “this rebellion originates in an essentially unsatisfied love, an untamable love that cannot possibly be reduced to Platonism” (2000/1940, 57). Greater, now, than the violence that gave rise to philosophy is the violence that seems to precede it and accompany it along its way as a threat. In describing this, Zambrano pushes farther than Unamuno by insisting that it is not even immortality that the human being wants, for the infinite desire of the human is to remain mortal:

> It is man’s greatest violence that he does not resign himself [*no se conforma*] to life because of his insatiable love and because it is followed by death; he does not resign himself to immortality, either, since it means to live on without bones, to separate himself from his own entrails. (58)

Such an experience of one’s own impossible desire for mortality, for a mortality that is at once necessary and desired, and an experience of finitude that
one wishes would be infinite, that is what Zambrano has gleaned from the final lines of Quevedo’s poem, which she finally cites:

Alma a quien todo un dios prisión ha sido,
venas que humor a tanto fuego han dado,
médulas que han gloriiosamente ardido:
su cuerpo dejarán, no su cuidado;
serán ceniza, mas tendrán sentido . . .

Soul whom no less than a god has imprisoned,
veins that have fed such fire,
marrow that has so gloriously burned:
they will leave their body but will not lose their care;
they will be dust, but they will have meaning . . .

Oddly, Zambrano’s commentary hardly evokes the first line quoted, which indicates that this sentiment is poetic and religious, that the soul is what Husserl called the locus of “human activity and suffering” is a priori imprisoned by “no less than a god,” and it would be fruitful to recall Patočka’s insistence that the manifestation of the world reveals something like a divine gift.7 Zambrano leaves out, however, Quevedo’s final line, “polvo serán, mas polvo enamorado” (“they will be dust, but enamoured dust”; Cohen 270); such words would surely fit, since love is one of the metaphors for this relation to the world. (This is the line that most directly suggests that this love is in fact a romantic love, as the title seems to imply, and not an attachment to corporeal existence.) However, Zambrano clearly wanted the emphasis to fall on sentido, “meaning” or “sense.”

As her commentary continues, a carpe diem poem by Góngora begins to insinuate itself into her language. The poem flatters a beautiful woman’s features and exhorts her to enjoy them

antes que lo que fue en tu edad dorada
oro, lilio, clavel, cristal luciente,
no sólo en plata o viola troncada
se vuelva, mas tú y ello juntamente
en tierra, en humo, en polvo, en sombra, en nada.

• • •

before what was in your gilded age
gold, lilly, carnation, bright crystal not only turns to silver or a
broken violet but you and it together (turn to)
dirt, smoke, dusk, shadow, nothingness. (Cohen 213)

Like Quevedo’s poem, Góngora’s acknowledges mortality (though the latter
moves to mortality through the mediator of age). Zambrano evokes Góngora
in the points of contact with Quevedo, dust and consummation by fire, and
brings with them Góngora’s “nothingness”: “Man’s desperation for being a
passenger, for his humiliation before God, for making a world from his noth-
ingness. If man is ash, dust, nothing, he has to create his world as God did
when He was alone” (2000/1940, 58). Zambrano has insisted again and again
that the flaw of philosophy has been to cover the world in a veneer of its own
making. Perhaps it is not too daring to quote Gasché’s description of Nancy’s
rumination of Europe, for a similar task and a more felicitous metaphor:
“Nancy’s aim is to secure a notion of world prior to the world of universal-
ity, one not alienated by the universal, but as the terminology suggests, free
from the universal; and this aim shows him to construe the universal as a
merely oppressive and repressive gown thrown by a particularity around the
world” (1997, 146). Yet, rather than advocating a mere return to a pristine
natural state, Zambrano wishes to begin with the acknowledgement that this
process has taken place: “To make oneself a world is the most intimate and
fervent yearning of the European, a world made out of nothing” (2000/1940,
59). But she says, writing in the wake of the Spanish Civil War, that Spain has
hardly fared better: it is not just Europe’s “frenzy” but a “suicidal people,” one
whose yearning for life is, paradoxically, so strong that they kill each other,
if not themselves as a people.

In sum, Spanish “poetic cognition” perceives and openly declares the
paradoxical nature of human existence, a finite desire for the infinite, a hope
that one may live in order to continue dying. Such a state lies at the origin of the hope to create a secure horizon within which to know the world, to act and to contemplate, and the particularity of Spain, for Zambrano, is to express this without denying it or covering it up. In this sense, the universal that is called “Spain” is not so much, as the title of Bundgård’s recent book on Zambrano has said, “Más allá de la filosofía” (beyond philosophy); it is not beyond but this side of philosophy, not “más allá” but “más acá.” For better or for worse, it aims at the sense of disconnection that Husserl diagnosed as Europe’s illness. As Gasché suggests throughout Europe, or the Infinite Task, the cure for this illness lies perhaps not in some future “spiritual” practice (including, among other things, research) made possible by a universal human science. Rather, the very task of that universal science, if the task of thinking can still be called that, itself constitutes a sort of rehabilitation or convalescence. Zambrano, by contrast, seems to say that without poetry one merely continues to construct a relationship to the world without really feeling the world, and hence without “feeling better.”

Spain is this side of philosophy, and speaking of it requires Zambrano to modulate her writing in ways that are sometimes disconcerting and sometimes, frankly, suspicious. She calls herself a philosopher, for example, telling in Delirium and Destiny of her love for the clarity of philosophical ideas (1998/1953, 41). Yet what she writes lacks methodical exposition, seeming even to defy clarity and trade, as many commentators have pointed out, logon didonai for something more akin to revelation. Her essays bound unexpectedly from literary commentary to metaphor and pastiche, from veiled association to contemporary socio-political events to observations about philosophers and philosophies, religion and history. The critic Stephen Summerhill has called this movement “metaphorical arabesque,” as if to stress its non-European character; it is a meditative method of exposition that does not seek to develop logical or temporal sequences of ideas, but a detailed and prolonged consideration of images and their meaning that doubles back on itself in repetitive loops marked by obscure phrases and unexpected turns from which sudden illuminations of meaning surge forth. (1994, 188)
For Summerhill, this oblique movement and oblique vision leads the reader through a mix of rational and poetic discourse, away from purely rational thinking to valorize what in nonphilosophical thinking is still thinking (190).

Rodolphe Gasché calls attention in the introduction to Europe, or the Infinite Task to the patchwork of meanings that attach to the name “Europe.” Surveying them—as the word comes out of the Semitic “ereb,” the myth of Europa, and Nancy’s questionable evocation of euruopa—Europe appears fortunate to have so suitable, coherent, and even flattering a name. This did not, apparently, have to be the case. John Crow explains that the first inhabitants of “Spain,” having come from North Africa, were impressed with what today seem like the modest rivers of the peninsula. Hence, Iberia comes from the word iber, “river” (1963, 7). As if by chance, Zambrano reminds us in Thought and Poetry of Jorge Manrique’s canonical image from the fifteenth century, encapsulated in the phrase “Our lives are the rivers that go on to the sea that is death,” saying that “this is what the Spaniard primarily feels” (2004b/1939, 148). The Greeks, who set up small colonies in the sixth century BC, naturally called the peninsula the “land of the setting sun,” Hesperia (Crow 1963, 7). This was odd, of course, since one of the origins of Europe refers to it, also, by a similar name; the Phoenecians used the root ereb to designate as “Europe” the “land of the evening (Abendland), or Occident” (Gasché 2009, 12). As we have seen, Zambrano’s thinking unites these two themes as she puzzles out a thought of Spain and its relation to Europe, the West, and in brief moments, their others, if indeed Spain isn’t entirely one of them.

However, a third name imposed itself with the Carthaginians, who brought with them to the peninsula the culture and language of their Phoenecian founders. Seeing a land overrun by rabbits, they called it “Ispania,” from sphan, a type of rabbit or hare. It is from this word that the Romans derived “Hispania,” which ultimately became “España,” “Spain.” Crow concludes, then, with characteristic wit, “the rabbits won out over the sunset and over the rivers” (1963, 7). The rabbit is not entirely absent from Zambrano’s work. We need not follow Crow in his insistence that, “the rabbit, like the Spaniard never moves in a straight line, nor at a steady speed” (7). Nonetheless, Zambrano’s favorite description of Spanish thought coincides with the
rabbit in movement and in its legendary fertility. “Dispersed” (disperso) is the adjective that she most prefers in Philosophy and Poetry and Thinking and Poetry. The word recalls that she is speaking from exile, in Latin America, for these books were written for conferences in Mexico City and Cuba. In her meditations on Spain and European universality, she spoke in the midst of the fecund dispersal of Hispanic thinking.

**NOTES**

1. For clarity’s sake, I have followed David Carr’s translation of Geist as spirit (Husserl 1970a, 271 et passim). It should be noted, however, that the range of meaning of this word extends beyond what in English is normally a somewhat religious connotation. Indeed, it is often translated simply as “mind” or “intellect.” As is well known, Dilthey’s term Geisteswissenschaften, which he proposed to contrast with Naturwissenschaften, was brought into universities in the United States as, variously, "liberal arts,” “human sciences,” or “the humanities” (Dilthey 1883).

2. Two essays give us an idea of Zambrano’s limited engagement with phenomenology. “Antonio Machado y Unamuno, precursores de Heidegger” (1986, 117–19) presents Heidegger merely as a thinker of anguish. “Descartes y Husserl” (2005/1950, 205–11) takes the project of “a return to things themselves” as a clear, unproblematic formula for the phenomenological project.

3. See Pérez’s article (1999) and Abellán (2006, 89–91) on these relations.


5. Information about the original publication dates of the articles in Zambrano’s Hacia un saber sobre el alma are available in the bibliography at the back of Moreno Sanz’s Encuentro sin fin (1996, 566–82).

6. According to the poet Antonio Colinas, Zambrano would have found Henri Bergson in agreement, for he once said that the highest goal of philosophy was reached in the poetry of the Spanish mystics (Colinas 2004, 97).

7. In Europe, or the Infinite Task, Gasché cites Patočka: "My being is no longer defined as a being for me, but as a being in devotion, a being that opens up to being, that lives in order for things to be, in order that things—but also myself and the others—show themselves as they are” (Gasché 2009, 243).
REFERENCES


Dilthey, Wilhelm. [ from Note 1]


