

The Relevance of Pythagoreanism in the Poetry of Zambrano

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In this paper, we are interested in pointing out the importance of Pythagoreanism as a possible philosophical path to sustain Western thought, according to María Zambrano's criteria. In her *El hombre y lo divino*, Zambrano questions the decisions that philosophy has adopted in its origin and proposes an integrative reason that is capable of including the feeling and the becoming of life in consideration of thought. From this perspective, we will point out the original contribution of Pythagoreanism, its dependence on the "sacred core," and its expression through alternative forms of language that reflect perceived but not generated harmonies. We will highlight the Orphic basis of thought since its fundamental notions serve the meanings Zambrano prioritizes. We will also point out the consonances between Pythagoreanism and poetic reason, on which the author proposes a different way of thinking from current European systems.

Keywords: Zambrano – Pythagoreanism – sacred core – mythical language – poetic reason

María Zambrano is identified, for existential reasons, as a thinker in exile (Sánchez Cuervo 2004); while this is historically true, it is no less true methodologically. When she decides to contribute to philosophy, she does not follow conventional paths but seeks to expand the boundaries that the discipline has attributed to itself. For this reason, and within this broad training, she prefers authors linked by the influence of Pythagoreanism, such as Plato and Plotinus, and all literary styles with a symbolic key; pseudo-religious, pseudo-poetic, pseudo-musical languages, inspire her writing.

Regardless of the specific themes that she deals with, her gaze is attentive to the development of interiority and the search for the ultimate foundation.

The path that I have followed, which not without truth can be called Orphic-Pythagorean, should in no way be attributed to Ortega. However, he, with his conception of *logos* (expressed in the “*logos de Manzanares*”), opened up to me the possibility of venturing along such a path in which I found myself with poetic reason; reason, perhaps, the only one that could make philosophy find breath once again to save itself – in the manner of a circumstance – from the distortions and traps in which it has been trapped (Zambrano 1986, 123).

In *El Hombre y lo Divino* an overview of her interests is presented: a) A unified vision of origin before the subdivision applied by the various disciplines of knowledge. b) The encounter with germinal forms of language. c) The location of the crossroads where modern thought is defined. This last point refers to the distinction between Aristotelianism and Pythagoreanism. From this separation, on which we will dwell, Aristotelianism becomes synonymous with philosophy because it takes over the hegemony of a type of *logos* that displaces poetry and the elaboration of the concept of “substance” as a way of overcoming the Pythagorean notion of “number.” Platonic philosophy is in the middle. Plato stands between poetry and philosophy of essence as postulated by his disciple Aristotle, and he is also the Pythagorean concerned with the soul’s salvation through ascensional knowledge. The Stagirite was neither interested in saving the soul nor in its relationship with the gods but in founding knowledge in man and formulating the validity of logical judgement.

I. The Mythical Paradigm

In search of a better interpretation of man and history, Zambrano accepts the mythical substratum as the starting point of thought, that is, that kind of prior intelligence of archaic cultures (Ortega Muñoz 1982). This perspective of understanding occupies a secondary place in the face of consolidated philosophy in which the evolutionary idea of transit from myth to *logos* predominates. However, the crisis of modern reasoning pointed out at the time favors the consideration of forgotten methodologies to reach vital, non-theoretical answers. It is a question of a new understanding of the real man.

The valorization of myth in the 20th century presupposes a hermeneutics that points out the limits of scientific reason, although it does not entirely

question it. In this direction, we can point out extraordinary theoretical coincidences with the work of Otto, Kerényi, Eliade, Jung, Bachelard, Corbin, Ricoeur, Durand, among others, which establish the complementary relationship between religion, philosophy, and arts through the similarities of discourse; for them, as for Zambrano, the image, figure, or symbol constitutes the interpretative center, which multiplies its meaning in the transcultural transit. The representation of the real that characterizes the mythical narrative is extended and disseminated. However, the myth is contemporarily degraded; since it is reproduced in a secularized world, it has not lost its primary level of evocation (Maillard 1992). Among European reactions, Zambrano's poetic reason is one of the renovating models in Spain.

Thinking according to the mythical mode leads Zambrano to question scientific-technical triumphalism and the question of the principle, as a starting point, of what we consider to be known. Revaluing the knowledge of myth exposes two dangers: one, the fact of identifying a problem within the apparently solved; the other, accepting that such a problem is not only solved within the framework of profane discourse, par excellence scientific discourse, but that it opens up to consider the transcendent dimension of the real. In her narrative forms, the incorporation of myth fulfills an essential feature of Zambrano's concern to recover the space of sacred discourse.

Thus, when Zambrano proposes a way of rethinking European culture, she starts from the Greek model but points out that Aristotelianism has been partialized. The author considers it essential to recover the Gnostic-type traditions that remained lateralized, because their contents cannot be rationally synthesized, and they accept the contraposition of principles as constitutive; she points out among them, Orphism, the Eleusinian mysteries, Pythagoreanism, the Islamic world, the mystical perspective (Ortega Muñoz 1991; Carrillo Espinosa 2018). All this constitutes the scope of what she called "religion of light" at the end of her life, integrated by St. John of the Cross, the Gospel of St. John, Plotinus, the first fathers of the Church, Nietzsche, Spinoza, and Scheler, especially in the notion of "*ordo amoris*" (Moreno Sanz 1996, 183).

II. The Problem of the Sacred in a Positivist Framework

In the skeptical imperative of positivism, understood as the supreme mode of civilization, Zambrano's thought proposes the notion of the holy as a philosophical matter linked in a complex semantic field. This question makes the thinker's formal framing difficult (Lizaola 2008).

Man exists in mystery, even if his profane way of living leads him to forget this foundation. It is not enough for the philosopher to be able to point it out at some point with clarity; it is also necessary to recover the dimension of mystery with feeling. This requires a particular method capable of delving into the diversity of the real; if it is only approached from a logical perspective, the reality is reduced to the quantitative, and its original properties are lost. The proposed method has its center in the heart, an image of diffuse and unreliable semantic limits; for Zambrano it is urgent to incorporate sensibility and, consequently, the sensitive dimension of the real as a matter of knowledge. But how is it possible to access this sacred center, which is the source principle of genuine and whose access would give a more profound answer to man's way of being in the world?

In the first place, just as Unamuno and Ortega call for a revision of the idea of philosophical progress, Zambrano demands overcoming the reductionism imposed by a reason that guarantees an order that it itself creates, without embracing the metaphysical dimension, in other words, without explaining the background of life. Positivism generates products but does not account for reality; its overabundance of results leads to a secularized view of life and the displacement of the notion of God from the cultural space. By becoming independent of the consideration of the divine and moving forward without a presence that gives a measure of the real, autonomous reason becomes the ultimate authority; the results cast a shadow over Zambrano's contemporary culture. However, history shows that living by this model of reason is impossible. This is marked by the continuous dissatisfaction that springs from a solid and personal vital feeling in contact with different realities.

Everything that is not bound by the immobile limit of the datum, which is characterized by heterogeneity, also defines the real. Mystery cannot become a meaning exclusive to religious faith because it is in the things surrounding man; it is made present, not by a concept, but by a feeling. Things reveal themselves in truth, and an experimental demonstration cannot conceive this saying. The undeniable character of this experience moves Zambrano to develop a way of thinking that is apt for approaching the "entrails," the silenced vital center (Zambrano 2011, 54).

III. *El hombre y lo divino*

In *El hombre y lo divino*, the ideas of which we will follow in a certain order in this exposition, the author warns about the delimitations that condition the course of philosophy; when specific ideas define realities – by an apparent

intellectual superiority – they are marking the future of life: “...and it is clear that one cannot live the same if such a reality is defined in one way or another” (Zambrano 2011, 101).

Likewise, as there are realities that are defined in one way, others are not and remain in a kind of limbo of thought. The incorporation of much of later thought into the Aristotelian systematization does not absorb the Pythagoreans, who will be treated with “disdain” and will be confused with a “multitude” of philosophers (Zambrano 2011, 102). In this mistreatment of Pythagoreanism, the last Plato and some followers of the Academy are involved due to the opposition between the Aristotelian idea of substance and that of Platonic ideas, especially considered as numbers (Zambrano 2011, 103).

In this respect, Zambrano clarifies that Plato never managed to be “only a philosopher” because he was interested in the soul – an Orphic and Pythagorean subject – and wanted to awaken it to its true essence. The notion of Pythagorean memory that rescues the soul from its history, to make it recognize itself in its origin, becomes the fundamental idea of Platonic reminiscence. All Platonic thought, although it is philosophy, serves a prior religious design which is to save the soul through knowledge (Zambrano 2011, 119). Therefore, the burden of Plato’s later works will be to “mold a thought of musical structure, in the manner of discursive reason” (Zambrano 1987, 113).

There is a sustained dialogue with Platonic and Neoplatonic thought since Zambrano “does philosophy” from the religious influence that works on those currents; in this conceptual structure, undoubtedly, the theme of the soul opens a significant space for reflection, both in the notion of fall and in the status of the body, which radically modifies it in that fall. Plotinus adds a new perspective: the human soul, as a consequence of its descent, finds itself deeply interrelated with the body, with the difficulties that this entails for contemplation, i.e. the soul’s forgetfulness of its origin (D’Ancona 2003, 22 – 25). Philosophy, as we understand it, is not born from Pythagoras. Aristotle cannot deny the existence of mathematics and music, but he can deny their “interference in the territory of being, of the being that is *logos*” (Zambrano 2011, 103). And there is philosophy only if being is *logos*; otherwise, if the structure of reality were expressed by a number, things would be “disembodied harmony” (Zambrano 2011, 103).

IV. The Discovery of the Soul

José Luis Abellán points out that Zambrano’s great merit lies in the discovery of the soul as the privileged space of philosophy; the soul is in the middle

between the human self and the cosmos, it is neither one nor the other, and this mystery is its very being (Abellán 2004, 313).

The Pythagoreans defeat the mythical Cronus, who consumes his offspring, with the myth of the poet who travels to the underworld. In this story, Orpheus exchanges the devouring savagery of time for the illusion of song through a process of rationalization, measurement, and harmonization of time (García Gual-Hernández de la Fuente 2015). Neither poetry nor music eliminates the imperfection of becoming or denying the reality of death, but they evoke an earlier state of unity in which the soul recognizes itself. Orpheus dilates time, suspends death, and sustains memory with poetry and song; his head, which continues to sing after his ill-fated journey, bears witness to this (Colli 1995).

These philosophers of number are the discoverers of the idea of soul and immortality, albeit under the condition of reincarnation; this point is crucial for Zambrano: "The discovery of soul, a revelation of Orphic inspiration, was not discovered by the philosophers of the word, and we do not know if they would have done so" (Zambrano 2011, 114). The birth of the idea of soul is based on an "original feeling," therefore passive, which is joined by a growing demand that becomes implacable (Zambrano 2011, 129). First, the Greek feels the soul; then, they think about it. Unlike the Egyptian world, in which possessing a soul is the privilege only of the pharaoh, in the West, we have lived with the obviousness that every man has his soul; this possessing precedes the intellectual demand to discover it (Zambrano 2011, 130).

In the wisdom stories of early cultures, the struggles of gods and mortals are mixed to explain why man is "tainted"; the Orphic theogony inspires the Pythagoreans (Zambrano 2011, 132). The Orphic image of the hero-poet who travels to the nether world and must fulfill a condition is a simile of the descent into one's entrails in search of hidden knowledge. In the journey, sacrifice is a basis for revelation; the understanding received is not linear but winding, not conceptual but poetic. The figure of Orpheus teaches that the soul must be rescued from darkness as a necessary condition for life. For Zambrano, the soul, as a center of dark light, unifies all possible knowledge; moreover, it is the only one that knows because it is in tune with the heart, the central core that makes the others silenced in the depths, speak (Carrillo Espinosa 2015). In an independent line of studies (the reception of Orpheus in early Christianity), Jourdan (2010, 18 – 21) and van der Meeren reach conclusions close to Zambrano, since they point out that Orphism meant a space in which cultural models were exchanged that leave consequently a new model of thinking as poeticizing and

of poeticizing as thinking, until reaching the development of Christian theology (Meeren 2002, 616).

The journey of the soul pointed out by Pythagoras marks human life; first, the soul descends into the hell of a body, which contains the double abyss of time and death, because to have a soul is to have the right to have memory, and then, history (Zambrano 2011, 130 – 131). “History” here does not refer to scientific knowledge but to feeling that we have been thrown out of our place of origin, to feeling “shipwrecked.” To recognize oneself within history is to identify oneself as a wanderer; at the same time, if within this state, something or someone who is not a wanderer were to appear, it would be a relief and would constitute at the same time a “manifestation of the unknown and an inculcation” (Zambrano 2011, 131). This recognition of difference introduces the notion of guilt, the direct cause of wandering, and although it is terrible, it is also what allows the self to be recognized. It implies a way of being someone: “...on this original feeling will settle the eschatology of guilt and expiation that has its roots in the night of Orphism” (Zambrano 2011, 132).

A vital point differentiates religious experience from philosophical experience and marks where the paths of each open: it is the feeling of anxiety. Man suffers from the initial persecution and confrontation with the gods and from the encounter with the sacred (Zambrano 2011, 44). The religious feeling translates into sacrifice, while the philosophical process produces a question: “...philosophy begins in the most antipoetic way with a question. Poetry will always do so by an answer to an unformulated question” (Zambrano 2011, 88).

In first, there is no explanation because offering one is impossible; however, philosophy rationalizes the human reaction to the sacred. The anxiety of facing the sacred is the way to recognize a reality that surpasses reason; it opens an abyss that must not be palliated. From there begins the conscience, in the soul of man, both personal and communal. Anxiety, perceived and contained in the soul, constitutes an inner vision that cannot be summarized in another language, nor can it be eliminated in terms of a synthesis. Pythagorically speaking, this anxiety cannot be contained in words but is resolved through music. It expresses the attempt to translate the disharmony produced by pain into harmony. Music therapy seeks to attune the soul’s detuned energies to the universe’s order. This is not possible through a concept of reason that excludes feeling (Cánovas Martínez 2022, 531).

V. The Problem of Language: Another Reality, Another Language

Delirium, an uncontrolled discourse by nature, corresponds to the preliminary and chaotic state of perception that proceeds according to the *pathos* experienced as a poetic reaction; it has no previous formula because it reflects the first-time man stands before the divine. But this being is not yet a state of re-ligation; the relationship is sacrificial rather than ritual. Man, before the gods for the first time, is linked through sacrifice; without that relationship, there is no contact with the sacred, nor is there any way to generate an answer to the question of the divine (Zambrano 2011, 44).

The Pythagoreans teach that the language to refer to the indemonstrable via instrumental reason is made of poetry, intuition, revelation, metaphor; every form of creation that links non-being, non-concept, that accepts the inexpressible (Revilla 1998): "The operative truth, which carries with it on a par with knowledge a transformation of knowing, is expressed by symbol, necessarily.... Symbols are the language of the mysteries" (Zambrano 2011, 137). The reason that they sustain, reason of number insofar as it responds to a measured order, does not require a system to be transmitted as it does from Parmenides, philosopher of the *logos*, to Aristotle, method of the reasoned and written word. This ties in with a theme widely developed in Zambrano, which is the problem of method and her idea of poetic reason (Maillard 1992, 102 – 107; Maillard 1997, 61). The Pythagorean form and pre-Socratic form, in general, are testimonials.

Thinkers of Pythagorean inspiration, of the *logos* of number – of time, – are not obliged to give a method, a path of reasons; they coin aphorisms, musical phrases, equivalent to melodies or perfect cadences that penetrate the memory or awaken it; "remember" or so that you "remember," they seem to tell us...or they make catechisms or manuals because the method they offer is not only of the mind, but of life: the whole of life is the way of wisdom, life itself (Zambrano 2011, 110).

It is not a path of reasons but condensed expressions, sustained in their rhythmic resonance, whose musicality sets memories in motion. The ancient mnemonics of oral wisdom provide for vital, non-theoretical learning. These forms need to be completed in the face of the system, whose aspiration is to say everything and leave unquestionable resolutions. However, pre-Socratic aphorism speaks of the whole from the part because it touches an evocative center and, by the law of proportion, only analogies are necessary to continue understanding. Fragmentary knowledge is inductive and is assembled at the pace of the life that becomes, not of the mind that understands in the abstract. In this

questioning of the function of the concept, she emphasizes the function of silence, which is closer to the “*logos* of number and music” (Zambrano 2011, 111).

VI. Pythagoreanism and Poetic Reason

The origins of Zambrano’s notion of poetic reason can be traced back to the language claimed by Nietzsche, to the essays of Unamuno, to the poetry of Machado, to the intuitions of Zubiri, to the narrativity of Ortega; in turn, through the authors, as mentioned earlier, the presence of Max Scheler, who is in the background of her first theoretical experiences and on whom she forges the conception of her poetic reason in *Hacia un saber sobre el alma* (Revilla 2007, 64 – 65). It is also possible to go back to Pythagoreanism to find points in common in all these experiences of thought. The aim is to identify the deviations into which Western thought has fallen and to propose how to redirect them (Ortega Muñoz 1996).

The notion of poetic reason identifies Zambrano among his contemporaries; the influences and coincidences with analogous positions do not detract from her originality (Moreno Sanz 1996, 9 – 193; Moreno Sanz 2014, 47 – 126; Pino Campos 2004, 187 – 308; Pino Campos 2005). This methodological notion will be one of her mainstays, elaborated throughout her work. It is complex to approximate a definition; this is congruent with its nature, as it refers more to a cognitive attitude than an invariable formula. The proposal of a different model of reason aims to separate itself from the languishing structures of positivist rationalism and to open up to other human ways of expression through the valuation of forms of language considered minor. The poetic reason is a reason that is reborn, not by making the world to its own measure, but by allowing itself to be renewed by it; it is about initiating a *poiesis* of the world by recreating man’s link with the sacred center of things. This attitude is immediately archaic and specifically pre-Socratic.

The proposal of a new model of reason does not exclude the previous one but precedes it; it is a “submerged *logos*” that is felt but not exposed, that is active and personal, and that requires language because it is strained between silence and expression (Zambrano 1989b, 130). One way of perceiving it is passive reception, for the attempt to grasp it is always analogous, and thus, the symbol is its possible manifestation (Moreno 1995, 175).

Zambrano believes that the historical necessity of poetic reason is prepared by the very “sterility” of the dominant reason; its failure leaves sensibility to advance, and “we are left with only one avenue of hope: feeling, love, which, repeating the miracle, re-creates the world” (Zambrano 1996, 269). At this point

the influence of Max Scheler's "knowledge of salvation" resounds, which is proposed as a counterweight to the tendency of history (Blanco Martínez 1997, 48). The knowledges centered on the life of feeling is not assumed as psychological and individual facts but as forms open to reality and life, lost in the rationalist closure. The cosmic dimension of feeling proposed by Scheler confronts the anxiety of subjectivity; man possesses his "place in the cosmos" (Revilla 2007, 68). Far from remaining in the negativity of the diagnosis, the author focuses the action on the force of creative feeling and generates a method that she outlines clearly from the early 1930s, strengthened by the experience of personal exile (Bundgård 2005, 38).

Among the qualities that this reason assumes is incorporating a pre-logical and pre-linguistic stage to approach an integrative understanding of the world; the descent into interiority is a condition, the listening to inner silence and the rescue of what this silence wants to say. Within a semantic field of solidarity, Zambrano develops the idea of the "entrails" as centers of perception of unique and valid emotions and of the "heart" as their unifying nucleus. These symbols operate as mediators of a flow of knowledge that must guide thought as part of an understanding that is always approximate and never complete because it is open to reality (Zambrano 2011, 35).

Poetic reason does not claim to be conclusive or absolute but rectifying, capable of including the knowledge that the soul carries to rethink a history in which the idea of man has been compressed by the concept of man's reason (Zambrano 2011, 52). It thus gives rise to what reason has discarded because of its mobile character, the world that is not bounded by substance, that is not definable. The characteristics required by poetic reason were together at one point in the history of Greek philosophy, but that model did not prosper as a victorious discourse but succumbed to Aristotelianism; nevertheless, its subterranean triumph is present at key points, and mainly, it is part of the design of its renewed idea of reason:

The fate of the reason of the vanquished is to become a seed that germinates in the land of the victor....And it will always be like that for any Pythagorean seed, it will be born in another soil, under another name (Zambrano 2011, 115).

If rationality in the author's time is showing signs of crisis, poetic reason from its very origin proposes to vitalize the agony by strengthening it with complementary reasons that cannot be humiliated and that had a clear and very effective function in other times:

...man is once again the question, a wandering creature who seems to have lost his 'place in the cosmos' must rediscover the reason that will make his own life accessible to him, the reason that will rescue his many souls lost in history and that will make his time, his own, as clear as possible... (Zambrano 1989c, 73 – 74).

The seed of Pythagoreanism is reborn in poetic reason: acceptance of previous stages of manifestation that have prelogical discourses, a sacred center that is perceived, expressed, and seeks to make itself known in the secret of the soul, the journey of an entity that knows itself to be wandering, guilty and nostalgic, the silent truth in the dark center of the depths, the emergence of the voice, between silence, music, and the poem, new forms for new realities, which are old, unsystematic forms for realities in waiting, omitted.

VII. Conclusions

In all the moments in which philosophy has been born or reborn, there has been this regression to a more original situation than that which existed at the corresponding historical moment, a regression, we might say, to the first ignorance; to the original darkness (Zambrano 2011, 89).

Undoubtedly, what is most Pythagorean in Zambrano is her inclination to understand through mythical expression the unity between religion, philosophy, and poetry. Only the harmony achieved in the tension of non-assimilable opposites can account for the proportion of being. Her metaphysics glimpses the contradiction that underlies reality and resists all delimitation; hence it is not a rational metaphysics but a mystical one.

To contact and then communicate what is perceived from within, it is necessary to achieve a thought sustained in the inner vision, in what the consciousness experiences in its vital *logos*, a view that feels. The expression of this thought produces a liberation; when that which emerges from the dark interior is made known, there is self-encounter and knowledge.

The whole of reality, and man as the center, is in the sacred. Man inhabits the sacred and is the only one capable of coming out of that core by becoming conscious. Zambrano's original thought says that encountering one's own being implies transforming or recreating oneself. From the recovery of the vital possibilities of one's own background, it is possible to ascend to the discovery of reality, which already existed but which had to be related to this personal, singular life and give it form.

We can glimpse in this thinking of Zambrano the path towards a new humanism, permeated by poetic reason, thanks to which human beings can pre-feel and pre-sense themselves. For Zambrano, pre-feeling harbors a sense of hope under the integrality of a being who is possessed of spirit as well as intelligence.

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