
LISTENING TO THE BREATH,
CHANTING THE WORD:
THE TWO BREATHS
IN MARÍA ZAMBRANO'S
CLEARINGS OF THE FOREST

R a q u e l F e r r á n d e z

A Contemporary Western *Upaniṣad*

How could any word be spoken without intonation or chant?
(María Zambrano)¹

The border between philosophy and poetry represents a dangerous zone of friction for the rigor to which the history of philosophy aspires today, and an inhospitable place, devoid of gods, for the ahistorical eternity of which poetry continues to dream. The passage from metaphor to concept and vice versa has never been a friendly threshold and is not meant to be. The metaphor of the “clearings of the forest” can be traced back to at least three figures in the history of Western philosophy, namely: Martin Heidegger, José Ortega y Gasset and María Zambrano. If we walk through these three “clearings” carefully, we will observe not only the conceptual influences of the German philosopher on the two Spanish philosophers, but also the fundamental singularity of María Zambrano’s clearings, boldly open to the poetic abyss, as opposed to the more cautious, safe, sheltered landscapes of Heidegger and Ortega.

In *Holzwege (Forest Paths)*, Heidegger brings us close to this zone of friction, but he himself never comes to inhabit it, and its reading does

¹ María Zambrano, *Claros del Bosque* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1977), 92. All translations of quotations from Spanish texts to English language are provided by the author.

not demand from us the radical experience of the borderline. The fact that the Heideggerian *Lichtung* is devoid of air, as Luce Irigaray pointed out,² is closely related to Giorgio Agamben's assessment of Heidegger's relation to poetry. For, although the German philosopher recovered for the history of philosophy poets like Hölderlin, he himself never dared to throw himself into this experience: "[Heidegger] was not able to be a poet; he feared the 'rail accident' that he believed was about to happen in his language."³ Having said this, Heidegger has needed neither air nor poetry to show us that there are grandiose ways of aspiring to the original word and to the experience of the clearing, even if it is up to others to complete the song and the atmosphere that traverses them. Air is the music of the elements just as poetry is the music of the word. It is no coincidence that María Zambrano's poetic clearings are full of air, of breaths that split, of words that inspire inward, of a being whose asphyxia can provoke the rupture of vital respiration. The first writing that heads her *Claros del bosque* (*Clearings of the Forest*) tells us that a clearing is not something that can be deliberately sought, but only found. And if when we find it, we hesitate in the face of ecstasy and enter it as intruders, a bird will mock us, reproaching us: "you were looking for me and now, when I am finally favorable to you, you turn to that place where you cannot breathe."⁴

Antonio Colinas, poet and friend of María Zambrano, argues that the path of experience brings us closer to the truth through the rhythmic word, that is, through breathing. There is, according to this Spanish poet, a chain of initiates in the practice of conscious breathing, those who have tried to merge "word, feeling and reflection" to acquire both physical and spiritual health. María Zambrano would be one of the latest additions to this initiatory chain:

And María Zambrano, the last initiate of the chain, did she not tell us that when we breathe, "souls breathe in harmony, breathe in rhythm"? [...] We reconcile ourselves with the Whole by breathing the word, breathing rhythmi-

² Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (London: The Athlone Press, 1999).

³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Fire and the Tale*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 70.

⁴ María Zambrano, *Claros del bosque*, 12.

cally, musically. And we reconcile ourselves with the Whole when we are inspired. And the one who breathes musically with the verse breathes infinitely, merges the extremes. We silence, we breathe, we hear the inaudible music, we write it, we pronounce it in recitation...⁵

Colinas considers that the initiators of this initiatory chain are to be found in Indian and Chinese philosophy. He specifically mentions the *Vedas* for their consideration of the *prāṇa* and the breathing rhythm.⁶ This appreciation is interesting if we take into account the work that concerns us, *Claros del bosque*, belonging to what would be the end of this chain of initiated “breathers.” Published in 1977, this work gathers a series of writings composed between 1964 and 1971, during a period in which María Zambrano, still exiled from Spain, lived in seclusion with her sister Araceli in a house in La Pièce, on the border between France and Switzerland. It was there that her sister Araceli, to whom this work is dedicated, died. Although all of Zambrano’s work is directed towards the original integration of philosophy, poetry and religion,⁷ *Claros* illustrates – as few of her works do – the practical exercise that would correspond to such integration. In *Claros*, the Spanish philosopher dares to make that poetic/breathing leap about which in other writings she had limited herself to theorizing. Consequently, the clearings she offers us are different from those of Heidegger and Ortega, but also different from any contemporary philosophical literary genre. It is not an essay, much less a systematic work, but neither could we consider this work the intimate diary of a thinker, nor a collection of poems. Some of the texts that make up this book are only a few paragraphs long; the titles of the different sections seem to guide us through a kind of transit, but the structure of the clearings is clearly symbolic, and their coherence is not evident to the intellect accustomed to conventional books on contemporary philosophy. And although its format is writing, many of the traces of this work respond to song and orality, they are alive enough to

⁵ Antonio Colinas, *El sentido primero de la palabra poética* (Madrid: Siruela, 2008), 33.

⁶ Colinas, *El sentido primero*, 32.

⁷ “Philosophy, poetry and religion need to clarify each other, to receive light from each other, to recognize their reciprocal debts, to reveal to the man half suffocated by their discord, their permanent and lively legitimacy; their original unity.” María Zambrano, *Hacia un saber sobre el alma* (Madrid: Siruela, 2005), 57.

become inner music in the reader. “In *Claros del bosque*, when I was so liberated from the word without music, from the word without song, from the abstract word, although from the liturgical one I never was, I heard the grass singing...,” María Zambrano would confess years later.⁸ As would we, the readers/listeners, if we repeatedly walked these paths and were open to the original listening; we would come out with certain thoughts turned into oracular music, as for example: “It is necessary to fall asleep up in the light,”⁹ or “[i]rremediably, the first sky that has to light our night, is the night itself.”¹⁰

Because of its condition of poetic centers or clearings, Zambrano presents in this work the fruit of an unusual cultivation of thought in contemporary philosophy. A cultivation that lends an ear both to the idea and to the rhythmic sense of the word from which it cannot be separated, for ideas here are not independent of the way in which they are expressed, just as our breathing is not independent of the air that feeds it. The literary genre of this work makes it uncomfortable in the eyes of institutional philosophy because of its unclassifiable and experimental character, heretical to both poetry and philosophy – just as it is not easy to teach *upaniṣadic* philosophy in contemporary Western university classrooms without stripping it of that state of mind conceived in union with the whole, of the sacred aspects of being, without which the words of the inspired are meaningless.

The initiatory chain of “rhythmic breathers” to which Colinas refers could still have a continuity, albeit transformed, if we were to contemplate Zambrano’s text in the mode of a contemporary Western *Upaniṣad*. We encounter here the double daring of poetry and mysticism. In 2005, Daya Krishna wondered during a conference addressed mostly to an Indian audience, why no one dares to compose *Upaniṣads* in contemporary times anymore. “But why have the *ṛsis* ceased? Has god forsaken us? Are we not intelligent enough? Are we not sensitive enough?”¹¹ His conclusion is that human beings in our days are prey

⁸ María Zambrano in Antonio Colinas, *Sobre María Zambrano: Misterios encendidos* (Madrid: Siruela, 2019), 186.

⁹ Zambrano, *Claros del Bosque*, 39.

¹⁰ Zambrano, *Claros del Bosque*, 140.

¹¹ Daya Krishna, *Nostalgia and Utopia* (New Delhi: Sage, 2012), 230.

to a fear of which the Vedic poets, creators of marvelous compositions made in that sacred state of being, in harmony with the whole, do not partake.¹²

The fear to which Daya Krishna refers might be in sympathy with the fear to which Giorgio Agamben alludes when he affirms that “modern philosophy failed in its political task because it betrayed its poetic task; it did not want to put itself at risk in poetry or know how to do it.”¹³ Thus, philosophy lives from and for concepts, but no longer dares to listen to the inner breath of the word; it collects arguments, but does not dare to initiate itself into the song that every language carries with it, to the rhythm that every idea is incubating. That would be to go beyond what is reasonable, beyond what is debatable and, sometimes, beyond what is communicable. “We are still here and you have wanted to make the leap to the beyond,” José Ortega y Gasset said to his disciple María Zambrano, after reading her work *Towards a Wisdom of the Soul* (1950).¹⁴ Certainly, by addressing the breath of the word, Zambrano had dared to leap beyond the “vital reason” proposed by her teacher. And the difference between the two “reasons” can already be perceived in the treatment that both philosophers gave to breathing. Ortega invites us to recognize thought as a vital function, just as breathing is, while Zambrano has the courage to think about the breath of being and invites us to harmonize it with vital respiration. In the following pages, my purpose is to listen to the *Claros del bosque* from a respiratory paradigm, that is, taking into account the fundamental role played by breath, inspiration, asphyxiation, and respiration in all its dimensions, from the beginning of the mystery to its end.

¹² “Why don’t you write your own *Upaniṣads*? Why don’t I write? Friends! It is a sad thing that at least in the thirteenth century in this country nobody was afraid of composing a new *Upaniṣad*, and yet we feel that something is wrong in writing a new *Upaniṣad* today. Imagine the presumption: ‘How can I write an *Upaniṣad*? Only the ṛṣis could do it’. But there was a time when nobody was afraid. Take the case of the Vedas themselves. Anybody who has attempted to read the Veda, even slightly, would be amazed at the fact that *suktas*, new *suktas*, have been composed all the time.” Daya Krishna, *Nostalgia and Utopia*, 230.

¹³ Agamben, *The Fire and the Tale*, 70.

¹⁴ Colinas, *El sentido primero de la palabra poética*, chap. “Sobre la iniciación: Una conversación con María Zambrano,” 363.

Centers of the Forest: Breathing beyond the Others

Zambrano's clearing is a center that comes to meet us by way of revelation. Whoever seeks it finds nothing, or once there, finds nothing within it; and those who manage to enter, without having sought it, suspend all questions there and find in the emptiness that presents itself to them a "new life," an unforeseeable beginning. "Every method jumps out like an 'incipit vita nova' that reaches out to us with its alienable joy."¹⁵ Every philosophical method has its origin in a luminous instant of consciousness, the method being something that aspires to continuity, and consciousness by its nature discontinuous, hence the misunderstanding that occurs between the two, according to Zambrano. But even in the face of the most logical and reductionist of methods, the Spanish philosopher invites us to listen to the melody of its triumphal birth in consciousness: "Hallelujah is heard in the Cartesian discourse."¹⁶ This idea-verse-thought brings us viscerally close to Zambrano's conception of philosophy. Precisely because of the disparity that her "poetic reason" manifests in relation to Cartesian methodical rationalism, one would expect to find a critique of the French thinker's philosophy. However, every philosophical quest goes back to an origin that now in the clear we can hear and celebrate, regardless of its later development. "Not unlike Nietzsche," claims Armando Savignano, "the will to system is, for Zambrano, the will to lie, for it is about totalizing attitudes that cannot account for the multiplicity and richness of the real."¹⁷ Embracing the multiplicity of the real implies also embracing the birth of that which does not accept such multiplicity, which reduces the possibilities that the human being has before the question and belittles their own capacity to breathe. Lenart Škof and Petri Berndtson have shown the oblivion of breathing manifested in the Cartesian *Meditations*. In his famous exercise of isolation with the world, Descartes simulates the arrest of all his sensory functions, but does not take into account that the being thus isolated is still in communion with the air that makes it

¹⁵ Zambrano, *Claros del bosque*, 14.

¹⁶ Zambrano, *Claros del bosque*, 14.

¹⁷ Armando Savignano, *María Zambrano: la razón poética*, trans. Fernando H. Llano Alonso (Granada: Comares, 2005), 24.

possible for him to remain alive, that is, to remain a “thinking thing.” “Descartes is not at all conscious of every breath he takes during the process of thinking. His cardinal sin of ‘forgetting breathing’ leads to a completely fictitious philosophical description.”¹⁸ Far removed from this oblivion are Zambrano’s *Claros del bosque*. Because of its initiatory nature, this work places breathing in the foreground of all that is born – including the breathing of the Cartesian method itself.

What does this “Incipit vita nova” that every method, however strictly logical, instrumental it may be, really mean? It can only respond to the joy of a hidden being who *begins to breathe and to live*, because at last they have found the adequate means to their hitherto impossible or precarious life.¹⁹

Every method, even the one that refuses to breathe, has its origin in breathing, it has its own unique relationship with the air that feeds it. If we really want to start thinking from a new respiratory paradigm, we cannot limit ourselves to denouncing the oblivion of air in the most important thinkers of modernity. It is also necessary to enter into the heart of this oblivion and hear it beat in its particular “Hallelujah,” to decipher the thread of air that gives life to all these thinking oblivions. Heidegger did not take air into account and yet his metaphysics breathes in a unique and vibrant way; the same is true of Cartesian philosophy. Breath may be absent in their ideas, but not in the words that support them, not in the human being who manifests them. Adopting this hermeneutic turn would lead us to celebrate the triumph of life in the very immediacy of its negation, following the steps that Zambrano sketches in *Claros*: “Only the method that would take charge of this life, at last destitute of logic, incapable of establishing itself as in its own milieu in the realm of the accessible and available *logos*, would be successful.”²⁰ In this last stage of her exile, in which the writing of *Claros* takes place, the question of “method” will be particularly important for Zambrano. The third section of *Claros*, entitled “Pasos” (“Steps”) begins with a text of barely two paragraphs in length, entitled “Método” (“Method”).

¹⁸ Lenart Škof and Petri Berndtson, “Introduction,” in *Atmospheres of Breathing*, eds. Lenart Škof and Petri Berndtson (New York: SUNY Press, 2018), xiii.

¹⁹ Zambrano, *Claros del Bosque*, 15. (Emphasis added by author.)

²⁰ Zambrano, *Claros del Bosque*, 15.

It is necessary to fall asleep up in the light [...] Up in the light, the heart abandons itself, surrenders itself. In the light that embraces, where one does not suffer any violence, because one has reached that light without forcing any door and even without opening it, without having crossed lintels of light and shadow, without effort and without protection.²¹

The method proposed here by Zambrano seems to tell us: “Let yourself be defeated and you will triumph.” In the heart of the clearing, we expose ourselves to the openness of being, without effort, without violence, without safeguard. And this light in which we are invited to fall asleep, without resistance, is directly related to breathing. Joy, love, and breathing are three symbols that, together with light, are representative of *Claros* according to Antonio Colinas. Perhaps because of his own condition as a poet, Colinas has been able to see with lucidity the weight that Zambrano gives to breathing in this work, and he also knows the importance that the practice of conscious breathing had in Zambrano’s life.

Because of this eagerness to breathe consciously, I placed María Zambrano [...] in the last step of that chain in the time of those who have found the light of being in the *light*. Breathing is a precious aid that not only gives us life, but also unifies us and fuses us with the forest-world. “Breathing is the most threatened thing today” she had written [...] She highly values this practice when returning from her walk, already back home, in bed, under the light of her sister Araceli’s lamp: “Then I continued lying down watching the beautiful evening as it was falling, and calming myself in its silence and in mine I said to myself: we must let the soul breathe in the nameless.” Hers is an extreme lucidity in this phrase, which brings together an absolute feeling and thinking.²²

But is this eagerness to breathe a new and singular contribution of Zambrano’s philosophy, and were not the Spanish philosophers whom she admired so much – such as José Ortega y Gasset and Miguel de Unamuno – themselves great breathers? The answer is ambiguous: yes and no. Yes, insofar as they reconciled, in their own way, philosophy with life, and for this it was necessary to restore breathing to its rightful place in thought. However, they never took breathing beyond life, at

²¹ Zambrano, *Claros del bosque*, 39.

²² Colinas, *Sobre María Zambrano*, 197–198.

least not as Zambrano does in *Claros*, going back to the first breath of being. The year 2023 marks the centenary of one of Ortega's fundamental works, *The Modern Theme*. There we will find an essential exposition on "vital reason" with which Ortega dethrones abstract thought from its fictitious heights to place it at the level of vital functions, including the respiratory function.

Thought is a vital function, like digestion, or the circulation of the blood. The fact that the latter are processes active in space and among bodily tissues, while the former is not, makes no real difference so far as our particular theme is concerned. When the nineteenth century biologist refuses to consider as vital phenomena those which do not possess corporeal character he admits, at the start, a prejudice which is incompatible with any strict positivism. A doctor treating a patient has before him with equal immediacy the phenomenon of thought and that of respiration.²³

As a "heterodox" disciple of Ortega, María Zambrano knows well this reason that does not fear life but invokes and embodies it. Ortega's vital reason could be considered the threshold of the "poetic reason" that she will develop in her own way over time. In the first stage of her exile spent in Mexico, Havana and Puerto Rico in the 1940s, Zambrano devoted lectures and courses both to the philosophy of her teacher and to the thought of Miguel de Unamuno. The first lecture of the course on the philosophy of Ortega y Gasset that she gave at the University of Havana began by reflecting on the fundamental role played by the figure of the teacher in our lives: "If we have truly been his disciples, it means that he has achieved from us something apparently contradictory: that, by having attracted us to him, we have become ourselves."²⁴ This reflection can serve to illustrate the relationship between Zambrano's philosophy and that of Ortega. Attracted to the vital reason, Zambrano reaches that beyond which constitutes her particular proposal in the reform of understanding, the "poetic reason." She herself confessed, in an interview with Antonio Colinas, that for a long time

²³ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Modern Theme*, trans. Lázaro Carreter (New York: Torchbook, 1961), 36.

²⁴ María Zambrano, "Ortega y Gasset: Filósofo español" in María Zambrano, *España: Sueño y Verdad* (Barcelona: Edhasa, 1983), 93.

she thought she was doing “vital reason,” when in fact she was already exercising poetic reason.²⁵

Zambrano’s admiration for the irreverent thought of Miguel de Unamuno was reflected in the numerous essays she also dedicated to his work. Unamuno, unlike Ortega, has no will of system and we could even say, no will of philosophy. His thought embraces contradictions, takes as its origin the tragic feeling of existence and is an existentialism with a marked religious anthropology in which recovering the “human being of flesh and blood” is a *sine qua non* requirement to think honestly. According to Zambrano, Unamuno’s literary genre would undoubtedly have been tragedy, were it not for the fact that the Basque philosopher did not compose any tragedy. In one of his most famous works, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, one can read a very common criticism in Unamuno’s writings against “professionalism” in the philosophical field, namely against the tendency to specialization that makes one forget to think and live integrally.

There are, in fact, people who appear to think only with the brain, or with whatever may be the specific thinking organ; while others think with all the body and all the soul, with the blood, with the marrow of the bones, with the heart, with the lungs, with the belly, with life. And the people who think only with the brain develop into definition-mongers; they become the professionals of thought.²⁶

To this tendency towards philosophical specialization – which usually underestimates feeling in favor of reasoning, establishing an artificial frontier between the two – Unamuno calls it derogatorily “cerebralism.” Following the premises of “cerebral literature,” our vital functions are also contemplated from their specificity, as if the organism did not live holistically. However, Unamuno insists that “we think, feel and

²⁵ “I thought, then, that I was doing *vital reason* and what I was doing was *poetic reason*. And it took me a while to find its name. I found it precisely in *Towards a Wisdom of the Soul* (1950), but without yet having much awareness of it. I took this essay, which gives the book its title, to José Ortega himself, to the *Revista de Occidente*. After reading it, he told me: ‘We are still here and you have wanted to make the leap to the beyond.’” Zambrano in “Sobre la iniciación: Una conversación con María Zambrano,” in Colinas, *El sentido primero de la palabra poética*, 363.

²⁶ Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and in Peoples*, trans. J. E. Crawford Fritch (London: Macmillan & Co, 1921), 2.

will with our total *human constitution* (to use scholastic terminology), although we think by the ministry of the brain, just as we breathe with the whole organism, although by the ministry of the lungs.”²⁷ With Unamuno, it is no longer only a question of recognizing that thought is a vital function just as breathing is – as in the case of Ortega – but of recognizing that one thinks with the lungs, with the liver and with the skin as much as with the brain. The forgetfulness of breathing in modern Western philosophy is related to this philosophical cerebralism that Unamuno denounces, with the belief that thought can be located only in a specific organ. By reducing the thinking being to a minimal part of itself, it reinforces the dangerous abstraction of the person himself, of the life that passes through them and of the environment that surrounds them.

Following this respiratory thread, with Zambrano it is no longer only a matter of assuming this organic integration, the person “in flesh and blood” of Unamuno, but of seeking in ourselves the original breath, that is, the breath of being, in order to verify how united or split it is from our vital breath. In the second section of *Claros de Bosque*, entitled “El despertar” (“The Awakening”), Zambrano dedicates one of the texts to inspiration. I allow myself to reproduce it here at length given the absence of English translations of this work. As can be seen, Zambrano enters at the same time into the metaphysics and the phenomenology of breathing, which are alien both to Ortega’s vital thought and to Unamuno’s vital feeling.

The first thing in breathing has to be the inspiration, a breath that is then given in a sigh, because in each expiration something of that first breath received remains feeding the subtle fire that ignited. And the sighing seems to restore it, already washed by the very fire that it has sustained, the invisible fire of life that appears to be its substance. An ungraspable substance formed from the first inspiration in the initial breath, enchains the individual that is born with the breathing of all life and its hidden center. And in the image and imitation of that center of life and being, the breathing is rhythmic, within the innumerable rhythms that form the sphere of the living being. But the being, forced to be individually, will remain in a certain emptiness on the

²⁷ Miguel de Unamuno, *Obras Completas: Tomo III: Ensayos* (Madrid: Afrodísio Aguado, 1950), 326.

one hand and at the risk of not being able to breathe on the other, between excessive fullness and emptiness. And it will have to struggle to breathe, oppressed by the excessive density that surrounds it, that of its own feeling, that of its own thought, that of its dream that constantly surrounds it. And then it sighs, calling out, invoking a return even more powerful than that of the first breath, which now, at the very moment, crosses all the layers in which its hidden burning is enveloped, which are sustained by it. A new inspiration that sustains it, itself and all that weighs on it and on which it is sustained.²⁸

Being and Life: The Two Breaths

Inspiration constitutes a struggle for the being. Forced to breathe individually in order to be born and to give itself to life, it strives to overcome nothingness, emptiness, on the one hand, and, on the other, the density that suffocates it. Petri Berndtson has shown that Merleau-Ponty, in a writing that was published only a few years before that of Zambrano's *Claros*, briefly mentions the inhalation and exhalation of "Being" and invites us to take this literally. However, Berndtson points out, "Merleau-Ponty does not say anything else about this ontology of 'inspiration and expiration of Being'."²⁹ Berndtson wonders if it is possible to find an ontology of breathing, and who could serve as inspiration for such an ontology. In *Claros*, Zambrano not only speaks of the breath of being, but understands that all being is already in itself "breathing," "pulsating life."

A "being" in a certain way is a pulsation, a palpating presence: life. Something elusive, blowing, breathing. [...] A wound without edges that turns being into life. It arises in the immediacy that with being does not fit in the human or in any living being. An unlimited gift, a pledge received as if it were one's own, this palpitation that is neither being nor only life, but living already and since now. Since when? A congenital breath with the birth, which is received from the darkness that sustains when the light is somehow made.³⁰

²⁸ Zambrano, *Claros del bosque*, 24.

²⁹ Petri Berndtson, "The Possibility of a New Respiratory Ontology," in *Atmospheres of Breathing*, eds. Lenart Škof and Petri Berndtson (New York: SUNY Press, 2018), 29.

³⁰ Zambrano, *Claros del bosque*, 30.

One of the fundamental themes that can be appreciated in this work is the split between the vital, physiological breath and the breath of the being that lies hidden and is, in truth, sustaining the breath of life. In one of the texts entitled “Solo la palabra” (“Only the Word”), Zambrano explicitly thematizes these two breaths, their longed-for unity and the consequences of their splitting for life and for being. Significantly, Zambrano points out that the direct manifestation of being is the word. At this point, the breath of being and the breath of the word are unified, for through the breath of the verb we can access the breath of being. This appreciation is also closely related to the song that Zambrano recognizes as inherent to the word in other texts of this work. “There is no history without a word, without a written word, without an intoned or chanted word – how could any word be spoken without intonation or chant?”³¹ Do chants and breaths coincide here? Could it be the inner breathing of the word, through which being manifests itself, the chant that is inherent to it? It is in the stones, writes Zambrano, which lack history because they lack the written word, that we must seek the lost song. “And that stone, so much like the others, could it not be the one that chants? And could not those, these stones, each or all of them, be something like letters?”³² Under Zambrano’s gaze, the mysticism of the word takes a surprising turn to unite with a more solid and opaque mysticism of nature; the air or the inner “breathing” of the word is twinned with the “unwritten stones,” with that solid/earthly element that Luce Irigaray recognized as the favorite of the metaphysical tradition.³³

The presence of the word alone establishes a kind of inner breathing, a breathing of being, of this being hidden in the human that needs to breathe in its own way and that cannot be the way of life alone. Life and being must breathe at least in the human realm making us presentiment that it is so in all realms of being and life distinctly or unitedly.³⁴

³¹ Zambrano, *Claros del bosque*, 92.

³² Zambrano, *Claros del bosque*, 91–92.

³³ According to Luce Irigaray: “As long as Heidegger does not leave the ‘earth,’ he does not leave metaphysics. The metaphysical is written neither on/in water, nor on/in air, nor on/in fire. Its *ek-sistance* is founded on the solid.” Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air*, 2.

³⁴ Zambrano, *Claros del bosque*, 100.

The possible unity or the probable split between these two breaths – that of life and that of being – condition the life of each human being and are at the same time an indicator of his or her own process of self-knowledge. Everything begins with the split, the separate birth of these two breaths. But in this double channel, the breath of life is at the mercy of the breath of being hidden in the human being; although the asphyxia of being is only revealed to us in its affectation of physiological breathing, the relationship between the two breaths is always at play, whether we perceive it or not. Zambrano seems to lament that the ordinary human being believes they have only one breath, the one that is most obviously presented to them, their organic and physiological breathing.

Initially the two breaths – that of life and that of being – are given separately. The breathing of life is under a threat of a cessation that only makes itself felt at certain moments by an immediate physiological cause and so often by the lack of breathing of the being hidden in the human being. [...] *And it is rare that the lack of breath of the being does not fall back on the breath of life* as it is rare or impossible that any ailment of the being does not affect the ailment of life.³⁵

If we must take literally the idea that the being inhales and exhales, as Merleau-Ponty pointed out, then we must also recognize, following Zambrano, that the inhalation and exhalation of life in us depends on this original inhalation and exhalation, and not the other way around. “The inverse, on the other hand, follows another law. The being hidden by breathing can hold aloft the life of the one in whom it is given, without any preconceived intention or any stimulus from without getting in the way.”³⁶ Therefore the relationship between the two is not equal, for the health of the being determines the health and flourishing of life. Karolina Enquist illuminatingly explains Zambrano’s cosmological ontology in which this particular relationship between being and life can be appreciated:

In Zambrano’s ontological rendering of the cosmos, being is a fundamental concept of totality defined by potentiality, nothingness and the need to

³⁵ Zambrano, *Claros del bosque*, 100.

³⁶ Zambrano, *Claros del bosque*, 100.

come into presence. Being is an eternal potential presence, because it is also nothingness. Located within being is life. Life is all that is enmattered and which for that reason participates in a space-time structure that it has in common with others. Life is the continuous process of expressing and representing being, conducted by the soul in the human case.³⁷

This poetic phenomenology of the two breaths aims at reunification, at restoring their original unity. However, the rhythm of these two breaths constitutes a transcendent instant that few people are able to experience, and, in most cases, it only remains a form of longing. Zambrano's description of this rare state of union transports us to a mystical plane charged with the symbols of emptiness, nullification and silence. It is the breath of being that gives meaning and depth to the breath of life, and when both breaths are unified, the word/breath of being, which is its "most direct incalculable manifestation" unfolds the entire language to unify it as well, resulting in the destruction and nullification of the word itself in silence. The last breath of being, in this longed-for unity, produces the last word that precedes the ultimate silence.

And, at last, in some human beings the union of the two breaths is fulfilled. [...] The inward breathing of being, if considered from that surface that life inexorably offers. For life is by principle superficial, and only ceases to be so if its breath is joined by the breath of the being that, hidden beneath it, is deposited on the first waters of Life, which our living barely touches. [...] Everything is transcended by the breath of being and thus its word, the single, unknown and prodigious, miraculously identified word, raises in its unique impetus all the words together and unifies them, destroying them irreversibly. For in the human being that which transcends, it nullifies. And this action also manifests itself doubly. The nullification that proceeds from the being, pledge of the union, and that other supreme way that proceeds not from the cessation of the vital breathing, but from the extinguishing of the breathing of the being that is more hidden with greater impetus, breathes, giving then its only word. Only its word before opening the silence that transcends it.³⁸

³⁷ Karolina Enquist Kälgren, *María Zambrano's Ontology of Exile* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 127.

³⁸ Zambrano, *Claros del bosque*, 101.

These fragments will be enough to notice that in *Claros* we are in the plane of a phenomenology, not only poetic or metaphorical, but opaque and mystical, whose purpose is to transport us to that breathing, to that chant, to that union of the two breaths, rather than to invite us to think about them in a reductionist way with the help of a single specific organ. The “cerebralism” that Unamuno denounced, so frequent in the institutional philosophy of our days, would completely prevent the joy, the ecstasy, the love and the light to which this work invites us. And yet it gives the impression that the work itself, in its vibrant vitality, knew how to protect itself against unwanted visitors and was designed to respond differently depending on the visitor’s state of being. For anyone who tries to approach *Claros* as if it were a piece of cerebral literature will find it inaccessible and unbreathable, the words will close the way and hide its clearings from the gaze of the uninitiated.

Conclusion

Numerous writings on the thought of María Zambrano focus on the geographical frontiers that this philosopher crossed physically, by virtue of her exile from Spain after the end of the civil war in 1939. Her stay in Mexico, Cuba, Italy or Geneva, among other locations, extended a situation of uprooting in which Zambrano took root through what she would later call “poetic reason.” However, in this essay I wanted to focus not on the external frontiers, but on the inner frontier between poetry and philosophy, between the word and its chant, between the breath of being and the breath of life, which Zambrano thematizes in *Claros del bosque*, resorting to a whole symbolic universe. Thus, she invites us to a thought whose word chants and breathes, whose word speaks to us explicitly of chant and breath. Zambrano’s clearings lead us to the encounter of a truth that cannot be calculated, systematized, or even deliberately sought. What clear and distinct method can there be to unite the breath of being with the breath of life? Or to restore the lost chant of the word? What method to fulfill a consciousness that is by nature discontinuous? Of course, the germ of this mature work can already be found in her extensive previous bibliography, since Zambrano’s work maintains a coherence throughout her life. In this sense,

her way of understanding philosophy was always related to the symbols that – in *Claros* – enjoy a life and a body of their own. In a lecture she gave at the University of Havana, during the first period of her exile, she asked her audience what philosophy consisted of, and she herself recognized that the answer she was about to give may not only sound strange, but also “old.”

Philosophy is a form of love, the only form of love that is not a passion, for it is intellectual love. And so, being love, it partakes in the qualities of intelligence; indeed, of the very essence of thought. And in turn, thought, being love, participates in the intrinsic quality of love, which is its capacity to transcend. Love and thought are thus saved by each other: love is saved from being a passion, that is to say, from being passive and basically immobile, limited. Thought is saved from remaining in that cold region that floats above life, from being sterile, from not having the capacity to engender a form of life.³⁹

Love and thought, saved one by the other, will both be brought back to the symbol of light so dear to Zambrano’s poetic reason. “Intellectual love resolves itself into light, that is, into vision; it is above all a hunger to see.” In turn, in *Claros* this vision will be reconnected to breathing: “The fact that breath and vision are given together – and not as a simple possibility but in act – is already a high, pure heaven.”⁴⁰ Vision, breathing, light, love or joy, are some of the symbols that María Zambrano’s heaven gives us, generous in clearings, and therefore, in enigmas and questions, more than in answers. It is a heaven worthy of being breathed and, at the same time, a challenge to the breathless frenetic rhythms of the academic philosophy of our days. These clearings cannot be breathed in a single breath, nor can they be traversed by shoes that already know where they want to go in haste.

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³⁹ María Zambrano, “De Unamuno a Ortega y Gasset,” in *Unamuno* (Barcelona: Penguin Random House, 2023), 163.

⁴⁰ Zambrano, *Claros del bosque*, 143.

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