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Writing as a ghost: Zambrano's "Carta sobre el exilio"

Escrivint com un fantasma: la «Carta sobre el exilio» de María Zambrano *Escribiendo como un fantasma: la «Carta sobre el exilio» de María Zambrano*

Abstract

This article takes as its point of departure the hybrid format of María Zambrano's "Carta sobre el exilio", which takes the form of a letter but fulfils the function of an essay. In order to answer the question of why Zambrano may have chosen to do so, I consider the spectral qualities of the letter writer by homing in on the image of "El Niño de Vallecas". In addition, the notion of trauma is brought to bear on the need for an addressee.

Keywords

Exile, letter, ghost, trauma, Velázquez.

Resum

Aquest article té com a punt de partida el text de format híbrid, la «Carta sobre el exilio» de María Zambrano. Tot i que pren forma de carta, compleix la funció d'assaig. Per respondre a la pregunta de per què Zambrano es va decantar per aquest gènere, parteixo de les qualitats espectrals de l'autora de la carta des de la imatge del text, "El Niño de Vallecas". Així mateix, la noció de «trauma» en relació a la necessitat de la figura d'un destinatari.

Paraules clau

Exili, carta, fantasma, trauma, Velázquez.

Resumen

Tomando como punto de partida el formato híbrido de la «Carta sobre el exilio», el artículo intenta averiguar por qué Zambrano se decantó por ese género, dado que el texto ofrece más bien una reflexión ensayística acerca del exilio. A través de un enfoque en la imagen de «El Niño de Vallecas» se plantean las cualidades espectrales de la autora de la carta. Asimismo, la necesidad de un destinatario queda vinculada a la noción del trauma.

Palabras clave

Exilio, carta, fantasma, trauma, Velázquez.

1. For instance, the third part of Valender, James, (editor and contributor), *Homenaje a María Zambrano: estudios y correspondencia*, Mexico: El Colegio de México, 1998 offers a glimpse of her wide-reaching correspondence, ranging from Alfonso Reyes, Manuel Altolaguirre and Concha Méndez to Luis Cernuda, Emilio Pradós and José Bergamín.

María Zambrano was not only a prolific writer, but also, like many of her generation, a prolific writer of letters, as is well documented by the various sets of correspondence that have survived her, both published and unpublished.¹ We can only assume that her exilic condition made the writing of letters even more of a necessity, as her friends, family and acquaintances were scattered around the globe and a letter was often the only (affordable) means of staying in touch. Obviously, Zambrano also wrote abundantly in a variety of other genres too, not least the essay. Taking as its point of departure the hybrid format of her "Carta sobre el exilio", which takes the form of a letter but fulfils the function of an essay, this article will consider the spectrality of the letter writer by homing in on the image of "El Niño de Vallecas", while also examining the need for an addressee.

In the introduction to *El exilio como patria*, Juan Fernando Ortega Muñoz explains that Zambrano was working on a book on exile in the 1960s whose draft contents indicate that the “Carta” was to form the first chapter of the first section.² This project never saw the light of day, even if large parts of it were later rescued and published as part of *Los bienaventurados*. The question that remains, however, is: if Zambrano was planning to write a book, as seems plausible, why then did she choose the letter format to open it? Even the publication of the *Carta* as a standalone text in *Cuadernos del Congreso para la libertad de la Cultura* in 1961 does not in and of itself explain why she resorted to writing a letter. In general, a letter follows certain conventions that make it recognisable as such. We would expect an addressee, a date, some sort of greeting at the end. In spite of this loose formulaic framework, Matías Silva Rojas suggests that the letter’s appeal for Zambrano can be found in its lack of a systematic form, counting the letter among other genres preferred by Zambrano such as the guide and the confession,³ and establishing a correlation between the form and the content of Zambrano’s thought. In fact, in this particular case, I agree that the choice of the letter goes beyond the fact that it is lacking in systematicity and that the form is intrinsic to what Zambrano wants to say.⁴ For Silva Rojas, the crux of the matter resides in the letter’s ability to bridge the different temporalities and convey the temporal dislocation that form the core of exilic existence. According to him, the main purpose of the letter is:

[...] la creación de un tiempo común real. Es la vivencia del tiempo del exilio, que divide a exiliados y no-exiliados, la que hace necesaria la construcción de ese tiempo común. Esta es la acción que la Carta quiere lograr respecto del tiempo y que, desde la perspectiva que venimos analizando, representaría su núcleo metodológico ‘en tanto que’ género literario.⁵

Notwithstanding the relevance of this interpretation, we must bear in mind that the letter is also a literary genre with a long tradition. This is most evident when we consider the popularity of epistolary novels and poems. In addition, letters are ubiquitous in novels that do not themselves take the epistolary form, and play an important role in many of their plots, ranging from *Doña Perfecta* or *La Desheredada*, both by Zambrano’s beloved Galdós, to Unamuno’s *Niebla*. An interesting example to consider in the context of Zambrano’s “Carta” is Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer’s *Cartas literarias a una mujer* from 1861, the reason being that they take the form of the letter while they really constitute much more of an essay that lays out Bécquer’s poetics. They offer an interesting parallel, as Francisco López Estrada points out that Bécquer evokes the epistolary genre by employing: “la carta fingida, aparentemente dirigida a un destinatario específico, una mujer en este caso”.⁶ López Estrada notes the influence of Larra on Bécquer, because he was consciously writing the letters for publication in a newspaper.⁷ Larra famously created

2. Zambrano, María, *El exilio como patria*, Juan Fernando Ortega Muñoz (editor and introduction), Barcelona: Anthropos, 2014: xxx-xxxI.

3. Silva Rojas, Matías, “La ‘Carta sobre el exilio’. Método, exilio y memoria en María Zambrano”, *Las Torres de Lucca. Revista Internacional de Filosofía Política*, 7: 12, 2018, pp. 125-155 (131), <https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/LTDL/article/view/76955>

4. Silva Rojas puts it as follows: “Si el potencial de transformación de la escritura lo tiene la verdad comunicada, la acción propia que el escribir ejecuta estará circunscrita a la forma en cómo esa verdad se comunica”. *Idem*, p. 134.

5. *Idem*, p. 150.

6. López Estrada, Francisco, *Poética para un poeta: Las “Cartas literarias a una mujer” de Bécquer*, Madrid: Gredos, 1972, p. 17.

7. *Idem*, p. 18.

8. Francisco López Estrada comments: "Todos los asuntos caben en las cartas", *Idem*, p. 19.

9. *Ibidem*.

10. *Op. cit.*, pp. 15-26.

11. *Idem*, p. 3.

12. *Ibidem*.

13. *Idem*, p. 4.

14. *Ibidem*.

the figure of Fígaro as the speaker of his *costumbrista* articles. The form of the letter enables Bécquer to create both a persona for the speaker as well as an addressee, the supposed "woman". It stands to reason that Zambrano was attracted to the letter because it afforded her similar textual and rhetorical strategies.

One hundred years after Bécquer, Zambrano would publish her letter for the first time in a periodical. Much like him, she takes advantage of the fact that the letter is an open, versatile genre into which any topic can be inserted.⁸ While time and memory are certainly vital to Zambrano's understanding of exile, there are also some very direct rhetorical benefits that the letter offers and that might have prompted Zambrano to use it. Again, comparison with the Romantic poet is helpful in that regard. López Estrada says about Bécquer: "aunque propiamente escribiese lo que es una carta pública, que la han de leer los lectores del periódico, finge que está sea personal, diré más, privada, y hasta de un grado de intimidad".⁹ In calling her text a letter, Zambrano taps into the same readerly expectations of intimacy. Yet the contrast with an actual letter written by her from exile is eye-opening. In Ortega Muñoz's edition this becomes eminently clear, since the "Carta" is immediately followed by a letter written by Zambrano in 1946 to her mother and sister from Cuba.¹⁰ In it she details the practical conditions of living in exile very clearly, discussing the economic situation as well as the climate. None of these issues receives any attention in the "Carta" and, in spite of the presence of a "yo" as the author of the letter, personal intimacies and details are scarce. Instead, the "yo" here enumerates the different position in which she has found herself as an exile, from "un héroe superviviente" to "un enigma".¹¹ These categories are not necessarily personal, even though they are backed up by lived experience, but rather universally applicable to any exile.

This brief reference to the author of the letter, who states of herself: "he conocido todo",¹² soon fades into the background and gives way to a much more impersonal analysis of the experience of the exile. It is as if Zambrano created the illusion of intimacy by introducing the first-person author of the letter, only to then retreat behind an altogether more impersonal observation that is more generally valid. This is in line with her view that exile crystallizes the core of the human condition. However, in another turn, this general treatment of the exile suddenly gives way to the emergence of a "nosotros". At this point, the "yo" identifies as the member of a group of exiles, opposed by another group, namely "los que ocasionaron nuestro exilio".¹³ On the one hand, this alludes undoubtedly to the concrete political conflict that brought about Zambrano's exile, since the victory of the Francoist side forced the Republicans into exile at the end of the Spanish Civil War. On the other hand, she aligns herself with a particular response to that situation: "la de irse despojando de sinrazones y hasta de razones",¹⁴ which is less clearly attached to a

particular historical event. Once more, this represents a powerful rhetorical move, since “el silencio de los exiliados”¹⁵ is perhaps not the first reaction that comes to mind when considering the political activists and cultural agents in exile. Having said that, it is fair to assume that this is probably a reflection of the common experience of exile. Paradoxically, the letter enables her to break the silence, to speak about exile, to name it and to explain it.

In breaking the silence Zambrano is, above all, also challenging the expectations heaped upon the exiles, the way they should act and should respond. She is rejecting the identities foisted upon them by others, these inauthentic “máscaras” that she mentions. Instead, the “nosotros” are united by the common experience of marginality. In addition, the letter enables Zambrano to work through the trauma, both of the exiles and those left behind, by voicing it for the first time. While she herself does not use this term and much has been made of her rejection of psychoanalysis, her description of the Civil War as a caesura echoes the idea of a traumatic rupture: “In the most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena”¹⁶.

Zambrano views the war as leading to a historical discontinuity which prevents the new generations from moving forward: “[s]e quedaron sin horizonte”, “no han despertado de aquel sueño de la guerra civil [...], que están bajo el detenido, bajo esa pesadilla”¹⁷. Her depiction of the situation evokes the idea of the traumatic disruption of time. Those left behind in Spain are trapped in a constant present, rejecting the past, whereas the exiles are seen as souls in purgatory, equally trapped, but this time in the past. These different temporalities of exile and non-exile are explored by Silvas Rojas, as follows:

De esta forma, el problema que la ‘Carta’ vendría a enfrentar, su exigencia metodológica, es la división o quiebre temporal que genera el exilio, ya que tiene como fin poder dar a conocer una evidencia que, por estar viendo su propia historia el exiliado puede conocer pero que, por vivir en el olvido y sin horizonte histórico, el no-exiliado no vislumbra.¹⁸

Notwithstanding this insight, what he names the creation of a common time could also be seen as the act of working through what has been repressed. The necessity of accepting the past, even if from a critical vantage point, is seen as a way of restoring the flow of time “para que la historia sea historia humana y para que la patria propiamente exista, para que la patria sea patria y no un lugar ‘ocupado’ por los que llegan en virtud de la fuerza o en virtud de la fuerza de la edad”¹⁹.

15. *Ibidem*.

16. Caruth, *Cathy, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 11.

17. *Idem*, p. 10.

18. *Op. cit.*, pp. 148-149.

19. Zambrano, María, *Op. cit.*, p. 10.

20. See Marx, Karl, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Champaign, Ill, Project Gutenberg, 1998, [online]. [Accessed: 07-09-2022], Available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1346/1346-h/1346-h.htm#chap01>, p. 5.

21. Zambrano, *El exilio como patria*, p. 11.

22. *Idem*, p. 12.

23. Caruth, Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 17.

In contrast, traumatic repression manifests as the desire to forget the past. In Freudian terms, rather than mourning and coming to terms with the past, repression leads to inevitable repetition, since the trauma has not been dealt with in a conscious way. Zambrano here adds an uncommon observation of her own, since, according to her, tragedy does not repeat itself, because if it continued to repeat itself, this would be proof that it were still the identical tragedy unfolding, that is to say the original one. She differs here from the commonplace idea of a tragic chain of events, and seems to disavow the Marxian dictum too, that history repeats itself first as tragedy then as farce.²⁰ What she refers to is a kind of historical paralysis in which the same tragic story is lived through over and over again, perhaps picking up on the idea of Spain experiencing a range of fratricidal conflicts, a cycle of violence which the country is condemned to repeat. Nonetheless, she also refers to the exiles having to descend to hell, "a pasar y repasar la historia de su patria",²¹ living through a number of dark moments in Spanish history. The question that arises here is whether this means that they are senselessly passing through history and repeating it or whether their passing through it is actually a way of working through it in order to move forward. By giving cognizance to these tragic episodes and conceiving of them as prior exiles, the paralysis may be resolved so that the process no longer has to be repeated.

Zambrano is also aware that wilfully forgetting in order to repress the trauma is impossible:

Se teme de la memoria el que se presente para que se reproduzca lo pasado, es decir, algo del pasado que no ha de volver a suceder: Y para que no suceda, se piensa que hay que olvidarlo, hay que condenar lo pasado para que no vuelva a pasar. La verdad es todo lo contrario.²²

This observation resonates with recent trauma theory. Thus, Cathy Caruth goes even further by locating forgetting at the core of the original experience of trauma and considering it intrinsic to it. She writes:

The experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself. The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all.²³

Some of this rings true in Zambrano's description of exile in her letter, at the core of which there remains something unknowable. The experience of exile is ongoing and cannot fully be put into words that would inevitably miss the essence of it. As for the other side, those not in exile, even for them the voluntarily chosen act of oblivion is an oxymoron. Zambrano rightly points out that in

choosing to forget, one is not ensuring that the past does not repeat itself, rather this repression is the precondition for the return of ghosts that will come to haunt one later: “Lo pasado condenado — condenado a no pasar; a desvanecerse como si no hubiera existido — se convierte en un fantasma. Y los fantasmas, ya se sabe, vuelven”.²⁴ Again, Zambrano taps into common ways of viewing trauma that speak to the popular imagination. As Colin Davis summarises:

The dead man returns because he has not been “duly laid to rest”. The duty of the living to bury the dead has not been performed according to established practice, and the rite of passage remains incomplete. So the dead return in part because their affairs on earth are not yet complete.²⁵

The dead that return as ghosts embody the Freudian acting out of trauma. Zambrano relates this phenomenon clearly to the prevailing attitude towards the past elsewhere:

Pues que el fantasma en que se recoge lo obsesionante de una realidad — para un determinado sujeto — fija el ánimo y lo suspende, lo confina dentro de un espacio, dentro de una especie de círculo mágico. Lo aparta del contacto y comercio con otras realidades, aun con la realidad de la que el fantasma procede: lo hechiza. Lo hechiza, sobre todo, porque, procediendo de esa herida en lo que nombramos corazón cobra su sustento: la voluntad. Un fantasma es, sí, un *revenant*, uno que vuelve, una sutil venganza de lo que sufre y padece, de lo que siente y anhela; puede ser una forma de rencor, o más simplemente del anhelo; puede ser el modo de insinuarse algo muy poderoso y que no se tiene en cuenta.²⁶

Despite these musings on ghosts occurring in relation to Spanish painting and art, they are of relevance here. Zambrano links them to an injury, a wound, a trauma that has not healed and is not openly dealt with. Who then has to come to terms with unfinished business? Who are the revenants not being taken into account? Surely, this is an apt description of the exile’s condition. Is Zambrano writing here from the perspective of a ghost? After all, we are dealing with a disembodied voice that does not seem to be located clearly in space and time, a voice that haunts those who would rather forget, a voice that has been to hell and back. Like the souls in purgatory, this voice does not yet belong to the dead, nor does it fully belong to the living.

It may come as a surprise then that, at one point in the letter, Zambrano does propose an identity for herself when she reintroduces a reminder to the reader of who is writing the letter, referring to “quien esto escribe”.²⁷ The image that she can identify with is that of “El Niño de Vallecas” or “El Bobo de Coria”, two dwarf court jesters portrayed by Diego Velázquez. Although Zambrano pays attention to the bodily presence of “El Niño”, his corporeality is not referred

24. Zambrano, *El exilio como patria*, p. 12.

25. Davis, Colin, *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, and the Return of the Dead*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 2.

26. Zambrano, María, *Algunos lugares de la pintura*, Pedro Chacón Fuertes (editor and introduction), in *Obras Completas IV Tomo 2 Libros (1977-1990)*, Barcelona, Galaxia Gutenberg/Círculo de Lectores, 2019, p. 198.

27. Zambrano, *El exilio como patria*, p. 9.

28. See Zambrano, María, *Algunos lugares de la pintura*, p. 233.

29. *Idem*, p. 254.

30. El Museo del Prado, "El Niño de Vallecas", [online]. [Accessed: 14-07-2022]. Available at <https://www.museodelprado.es/coleccion/obra-de-arte/el-nio-de-vallecas/5a304c42-2eee-49da-b34e-3468b8cb7fbo>

31. Zambrano, María, *Algunos lugares de la pintura*, p. 247.

32. Zambrano, María, *Los bienaventurados*, Karolina Enquist, Sebastián Fenoy and Jesús Moreno (editors and introduction), in *Obras Completas IV Tomo 2 Libros (1977-1990)*, Barcelona, Galaxia Gutenberg/ Círculo de Lectores, 2019, p. 358.

33. Zambrano, María, "Un capítulo de la palabra: 'El idiota' (Homenaje a Velázquez)", *España, sueño y verdad*, Barcelon, Edhasa, 2002, p. 220.

34. *Idem*, p. 243.

35. *Idem*, p. 654.

36. Obviously, their image deploys force in the face of Zambrano's thoughts on reason. However, a thorough consideration of this line of thinking would go beyond the scope and focus of this essay.

37. Zambrano, María, "Carta", p. 9.

38. Unamuno, Miguel de, *En torno al casticismo*, Jean-Claude Rabaté (editor and introduction), Madrid: Cátedra, 2020 p. 129.

39. This can perhaps be explained by Unamuno's idiosyncratic style and the fact that the essays were first published in a newspaper.

to by her in the terms we might expect, especially considering that his body differs from the able bodies associated with the "norm"; instead she depicts his body as astral and luminous.²⁸ As a result, his description is akin to that of an apparition. The connection between his portrait and the spectral is also made explicit by Zambrano herself: "Los mejores retratos pictóricos — ejemplo: Velázquez — tienen siempre algo o mucho de aparecidos; fantasmas que reiteran su presencia en cada instante, que han de luchar con el tiempo que los gastería; y de ahí, esa magia persistente en la pintura".²⁹ Notwithstanding the fact that both jesters had obtained a certain degree of standing at the court of Philip IV, these paintings still depict marginalised characters, even if "[a] lo largo del siglo xx, sin embargo, se reelaboró una interpretación humanista de los retratos, subrayando el sentimiento solidario del pintor ante el sufrimiento ajeno".³⁰ Importantly, Zambrano associates Francisco Lezcano, "El Niño de Vallecas", with being in exile from courtly life,³¹ an association which is reinforced by counting him amongst the "bienaventurados"³² as well as by his condition of "errante".³³ She also considers that the "enanos, idiotas y bobos" were portrayed by Velázquez "como seres en quienes lo divino resplandece".³⁴ Pedro Chacón Fuertes adds that "[p]ara Zambrano, ese rostro iluminado por el sol de un bufón sentado a los pies del árbol le remite a un saber inocente y no contaminado, previo incluso al lenguaje".³⁵ There is no doubt that Zambrano recognized herself in their suffering.³⁶ At the same time, in the "Carta" she also suggests that this image of herself coincides with how others see her, implying that they considered her a marginalised being, at best pitying her. Yet the interpretation she offers of the Jester Calabacillas and Francisco Lezcano is as an image "de lo pasado".³⁷ Their exilic state also gives them an otherworldly status. While Zambrano rejects the label of hero because it means an integration into history, she willingly accepts that of "El Niño de Vallecas" as someone exiled from humanity and cast out from history.

Following these thoughts on the author of the letter, let us turn briefly to the recipient. What most distinguishes the letter from the essay is that the letter makes explicit the need for an addressee. Even if it is not unusual to address the reader in an essay, as Unamuno for instance does in his *En torno al casticismo*,³⁸ this is certainly not what would be identified as essential to the genre of the essay.³⁹ It is also not a procedure favoured by the more austere philosophical style of Ortega y Gasset, for example. In the case of Unamuno, this rhetorical device serves to establish a proximity between the "expert" writing the essay and the layman who is reading it, creating the impression of openness and the possibility of dialogue. This may also be the reason for Zambrano's choice of the letter format, since, from the outset, it makes evident the need for an addressee and a dialogue of sorts. In that sense, her letter does not fit the category of an open letter, as one might expect. It is not broadly addressing everyone but attempts to evoke an intimacy that binds together the writer and the recipient of the letter: "el autor de la carta imagina

que el destinatario está junto a él, y esto que parece paradoja, la presencia ausente, señala el tono en el que se redacta la pieza”.⁴⁰ This is a very fitting way of imagining Zambrano’s addressee. She is clearly driven to write by the wish to establish a connection with the unnamed addressee. Nonetheless, there is unmistakably a great distance between them, not just physically but also when it comes to their worldview. Mari Paz Balibrea, Francis Lough and Antolín Sánchez Cuervo contextualise the letter and explain:

The politics of “Carta sobre el exilio” lies in its address to the new generation of Spanish non-conformists who, at that time, had begun to demand reforms in Franco’s Spain with a view to a possible transition to democracy, but framed around an idea of “national reconciliation”, that is, at the cost of forgetting the losers in the Civil War and those Republicans forced into exile.⁴¹

While this is accurate historically speaking, beyond the specifics, the addressee is also deeply needed in order to trigger the answer that the letter constitutes. Zambrano opens the letter with the acknowledgement that “[t]oda carta tiene un destinatario”.⁴² Rather than writing an essay or opinion piece, Zambrano’s turn to the letter allows her to call for a conversation and for the interlocutor, her addressee, to listen to her. The presence of this other, acknowledged by expressing the need for a “destinatario”, is similar to the need for an interlocutor in Carmen Martín Gaité’s *El cuarto de atrás* from 1978. Her creation of “el hombre de negro” makes visible the need for someone to listen and serves as a stimulus to dialogue, regardless of whether this interlocutor exists in reality or not. Zambrano’s letter starts by evoking the presence of this addressee who gives the writer, a kind of Lazarus, a new lease of life by lifting the shroud of silence.⁴³ This clearly marks a dependency between the author and the addressee, even if the addressee “no es necesariamente un amigo; puede ser hasta lo contrario”.⁴⁴

Like Bécquer’s *Cartas*, which ostensibly were written to answer a question (“¿qué es poesía?”), so Zambrano’s letter responds “a esa pregunta formulada o tácita de por qué se es un exiliado”.⁴⁵ As she tries to keep channels of communication open even as the questions cease (“Pero ahora ya apenas al exiliado se le pregunta nada”),⁴⁶ she does really imagine a conversation, defending her position as the question transforms into: “¿Qué hacen, qué están haciendo, qué han hecho en todos estos años?”.⁴⁷ This attitude seems to distinguish her from Bécquer, whose letters

son una especie de diálogo que nunca se enlazó, que él imagina pudiera tener con ‘una’ mujer. Bécquer escribe y escribe en las *Cartas* lo que es casi un monólogo, pues la mujer sólo pregunta: ¿qué es la poesía? [...] La mujer en las *Cartas* representa sólo el estímulo de estas preguntas, una hermosa presencia que sirve para que el poeta se sumerja más y más en sus reflexiones de índole literaria.⁴⁸

40. López Estrada, Francisco, *Poética para un poeta: Las “Cartas literarias a una mujer” de Bécquer*, op. cit., p. 19.

41. Balibrea, Mari Paz, Lough, Francis and Sánchez Cuervo, Antolín, “María Zambrano Amongst the Philosophers. An Introduction”, *History of European Ideas*, 2018, 44(7), pp. 827-842, p. 839.

42. Zambrano, *El exilio como patria*, p. 3.

43. *Ibidem*.

44. *Ibidem*.

45. *Idem*, p. 5.

46. *Idem*, p. 8.

47. *Idem*, p. 9.

48. López Estrada, Francisco, *Poética para un poeta: Las “Cartas literarias a una mujer” de Bécquer*, op. cit., p. 19.

49. Felman, Shoshana; Laub, Dori, Testimony: *Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York, Routledge, 1991, p. 57.

50. Zambrano, María, "Un capítulo de la palabra: 'El idiota' (Homenaje a Velázquez)", *España, sueño y verdad, op.cit.*, p. 225.

The addressee in Zambrano's "Carta" is not merely a pretext for asking questions, as we can see from her immediately tackling this issue at the opening of the letter. In light of the traumatic legacy of exile, the creation of an addressee is of utmost importance. If Zambrano's intention is to break the silence to establish communication, then it is vital that she be listened to, hence her choice to write a letter makes perfect sense. In the case of trauma, "[t]he listener [...] is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time".⁴⁹ In the absence of an ideal listener, Zambrano goes on to imagine a "destinatario". She is trying very hard not only to put across her own point of view but she also shows increased awareness of this not necessarily being shared. In her reflections on "el idiota" she zeroes in on the unwillingness of others to go to the extreme of attempting to experience the polar opposite that he represents. This could likewise be applied to her position and the position of the exile more generally as expressed in her letter.

Y lo extraño es que la extrañeidad o extranjería en que el simple se encuentra radicado, como en la invisible patria que arrastra consigo, no despierte en los demás —verdaderos residentes y aun ciudadanos— extrañeza alguna acerca de sí mismos. Que no haga pensar al no simple acerca de su composición, compostura y demás derivados de su natural y establecida preeminencia. ¿No habrá nadie que quiera, querría o quisiese abandonarlo todo para ir a donde está el simple, por lo menos para ver? Para ver un poco qué es eso que se ve desde allí, desde ese lugar de la pura simplicidad.⁵⁰

In likening the exiled writer of the letter to "el Niño", she is inviting her addressee to interrogate their own position in the world. The emphasis on strangeness, even its juxtaposition to the proper citizenship in the world of those who are not "simple", strongly echoes the liminal position of the exile. The format of the letter thus provides a more straightforward way of acting upon the world than a more conventional essay would, by incorporating the kind of questions that Zambrano thinks her interlocutor is asking and should be asking themselves. This reading is further supported by cross-referencing how Zambrano would like us to look at Velázquez's portrait, encouraging us to see it in a participative manner which requires a particular skill:

Saber contemplar debe de ser mirar con toda el alma, con toda la inteligencia y hasta con el llamado corazón, lo cual es participar, la esencia contenida en la imagen, volverla a la vida. Y entonces ya se está más allá de la memoria del olvido, en otro tiempo pues, más 'sustancial', donde se crea. Nos hemos alimentado de la imagen habiéndola rescatado de su prisión donde aguardaba ser vista en su verdad, ser tomada en alimento. Y eso debe ser la tradición: liberación del hechizo del pasado, liberándolo a él de su propia imagen, sacándolo de ser

pasado para ser futuro, el futuro por [el] que clama todo lo que fue cumplidamente.⁵¹

The underlying idea that we have to look actively in order to make use of the past for the future particularly resonates with what Zambrano states in the “Carta”, as discussed. The association between the “Carta” and Zambrano’s opinion of the Velázquez painting is by no means tenuous. Tellingly, she incorporates the same León Felipe quotation in both her essay “España y su pintura” as well as using it to draw the “Carta” to a close.⁵² The exile and the “Niño” both lead a spectral existence, they need to be seen for who they are. They are “fantasmas de la vida — los que ella arroja en su resaca — y del existir mismo; de ese ansia del ahogado en el tiempo que sale a ver, y sobre todo, a ser visto, del que sale a que Dios y el mundo lo vean, así como aparece”.⁵³ In this instance, the need to be seen is equivalent to the need to be heard that the letter can answer more successfully than any other genre. Only together with the addressee can the exiled writer of letters make her descent to hell “para rescatar de ellos lo rescatable, lo irrenunciable, para ir extrayendo de esa historia sumergida una cierta continuidad. Somos memoria, memoria que rescata”.⁵⁴ It is at this point that Zambrano’s letter “viene a ser como la pieza de un proceso”.⁵⁵

51. Zambrano, *Algunos lugares*, p. 196.

52. *Idem*, p. 210 and Zambrano, *El exilio como patria*, p. 13.

53. *Idem*, p. 200.

54. Zambrano, *El exilio como patria*, p. 11.

55. *Idem*, p. 3.

