

# Journeys of a Mystic Soul in Poetry and Prose

CECILIA DEL NACIMIENTO



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## *Introduction*

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CECILIA DEL NACIMIENTO (1570–1646)

### *A Lost Voice*

Unlike the works of many women in the *Other Voices* series, those of Cecilia del Nacimiento (1570–1646) were unknown for several centuries in any language. Although a few of her poems received critical attention, they were thought to have been written by San Juan de la Cruz and were copied in collections of his work.<sup>1</sup> When scholars in the twentieth century began to study Cecilia's manuscripts, these mis-attributed poems were rightfully recognized as conveying a distinctive perspective; and not the ascetic exuberance that characterizes the famous saint's writing. Cecilia was influenced by San Juan's mystical works, but her writings have their own distinctive style and visionary power.

Writing in a manner that frequently foregrounds her femininity, she creates a direct, personal relationship between herself and Jesus that borders on the erotic, while remaining within acceptable bounds through her judicious choice of words. Using the well-established trope of marriage, with Jesus as her spouse, Cecilia transforms the heated passion of sexual union into a glorious, overwhelming spiritual experience. Cecilia's point of view in her mystical transports is that of a devout woman joined in intimate union with a divine spouse. The matrimonial imagery occurring throughout her writing introduces a dynamic intensity with the godhead. Cecilia's union with Jesus is palpably physical, with all her senses subsumed into the perfect spiritual light of her beloved. In addition to these characteristics, Mother Cecilia's texts stand out for their stylistic sophistication and familiarity with scripture and contemporary religious writing. This is noteworthy for it belies the common assumption that women in post-Tridentine

1. There are very few publications concerning either the life or works of Cecilia del Nacimiento. Much of the information for this section and for her biography is informed by the doctoral dissertation of Blanca Alonso Cortés, "Dos monjas vallisoletanas poetisas," (PhD diss., Valladolid: Castellana, 1944).

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Spain were not exposed to writings that dealt with matters beyond catechism and thus; did not participate in religious discourse among men.<sup>2</sup>

Cecilia's role model in both life and literature was Saint Teresa of Ávila (1515–82), the founder of her order and of her convent in Valladolid, Spain. Saint Teresa's experience of ecstatic transports aided Cecilia both spiritually and aesthetically; through imitations of the saint's raptures, she strengthened her faith and found inspiration that moved her to write. Saint Teresa is often explicitly present in Cecilia's texts, as in this stanza from one of her poems:

Finally your perfections—  
who would be able to count them?  
Your virtues and talents  
through which you have become brilliant,  
Let your Lover tell them he knows them.

Cecilia also chose to represent Saint Teresa as a militant personality, an example of female strength that doubtless sustained her in both her writing and her life. Her texts are not merely a repetition of the mystic saint's legacy, as they reveal a new dimension of mystical delight, refining the ecstasy of Saint Teresa and enriching the imagery of San Juan. Unlike most women of her day, she was highly educated and well acquainted with the latest literary trends. Both her prose and poetry introduce stylistics characteristic of the Golden Age Baroque, giving her texts a decidedly courtly flavor, even though she wrote mostly for her male spiritual advisors, herself and her sisters in the convent, and not for a larger reading public.

As far as we know, Cecilia made no attempt to publish any of her writings. Given the subject matter of her work and the disputes she had with certain spiritual leaders, exposing her creations to others outside the convent or attempting to have them published during the Counter-Reformation fervor of early seventeenth-century Spain could have been dangerous. After Cecilia's death, most of her work was for-

2. This assumption, common in traditional scholarship for most of the twentieth century, is explained in part by the censorship and control placed on women's writing in early modern Spain. For more, see p. 5–6 and 9–13 of this introduction.

gotten and catalogued in her convent's archive along with the rest of the community's varied papers. It was not until the twentieth century that her work came back into circulation. Fragments of her writing and that of her sister's, along with biographical information, were first presented in English in *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Works*. This book also discusses, for the first time in English, Cecilia del Nacimiento's poetry, noting that "she rendered the mystical experience with greater technical proficiency and clarity than most of her male contemporaries."<sup>3</sup>

### *Convent Culture in Early Modern Spain*

Thanks to recent research on convent life in the early modern Hispanic world, we now know that the walls of the cloister did not entirely separate female religious communities from all forms of worldly knowledge or negate their intellectual subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, the convent afforded women a space where they were allowed to exercise a limited amount of control over their own communal existence, and for many women it was not only a place to engage in prayer and meditation but also a haven for intellectual and spiritual exploration. Virtually all convents in Spain required incoming novices to be functionally literate, while others actively encouraged community members to read; and, at times, to write. This was particularly true in the case of the Discalced Carmelite convent in Valladolid that Cecilia and her sister María entered in 1588. Here, daily life was governed by the

3. Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlauf, ed. *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Works*, trans. Amanda Powell (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 143–44.

4. The last two decades have seen a great deal of work on convent writing and women's culture. One of the earliest texts to open this fertile field of investigation is Arenal and Schlauf, *Untold Sisters*. See also Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life, 1450–1700*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Sherrin Marshall, ed., *Women in Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Ronald E. Surtz, *Writing Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain: The Mothers of Saint Teresa of Ávila* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); José Luis Sánchez Lora, *Mujeres, conventos y formas de la religiosidad barroca* (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1988); and Stephanie Merrim, *Early Modern Women's Writing and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999).

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guidelines for reform that Saint Teresa of Ávila drafted a few decades before their arrival.

The Carmelite Order was founded during the middle of the twelfth century, but by the middle of the sixteenth century the Catholic Church throughout Europe was reformed from both within and outside contemporary church structures.<sup>5</sup> One of the most widely experienced reforms was a critical reassessment of each religious order's culture. As numerous detractors attacked the status quo of the Roman Catholic Church, virtually all its different religious orders began to examine the ways in which their rules and conduct had changed over time, as well as the rigor with which these rules were applied in the order's academic pursuits and daily life. Catholic reformers across Europe called for a return to medieval asceticism and a limitation of the intellectual liberty afforded by the influence of Renaissance humanism, anticipating the increasing orthodoxy promulgated by the Council of Trent (1545–63). In Spain, Saint Teresa of Ávila was by far the most vocal critic and active reformer of the Carmelite Order, but her project of reform did not consist only of a return to the order's "traditional values." When she observed community leaders' laxity concerning the order's laws and their indulgence in earthly pleasures, she spoke out in indignation, yet she did not believe that simply tightening enforcement would improve the quality of each religious person's life or aid in each soul's ultimate goal of salvation. Instead she established a new, more rigorous branch of the order, the Discalced Carmelites.<sup>6</sup> The new name, which means "unshod" or without shoes, reflects the austerity and asceticism that Teresa and other reformers like her throughout Europe hoped to establish. The Discalced required community members to lead a life of intense prayer and to embrace poverty, chastity, obedience, and solitude in the hope of in-

5. From Lutheranism and Calvinism in northern Europe to *alumbradismo* and crypto-Judaism in Spain, the Roman Catholic Church was assailed with numerous threats to its hegemony. See below for more details.

6. For more information regarding Saint Teresa and her role in Carmelite reform, see Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Ávila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), and Jodi Bilinkoff, "Teresa of Jesus and Carmelite Reform," in *Religious Orders of the Catholic Reformation: Studies in Honor of John C. Olin on His Seventy-fifth Birthday*, ed. Richard L. DeMolen (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), 165–86.

spiring a larger spiritual transformation of the worldwide Christian community.

At first glance, the reforms introduced by Saint Teresa seem entirely in line with the Catholic Church's increasingly conservative—not to mention misogynistic—politics. Convinced that contemporary challenges to the church's authority were ultimately the result of a lack of rigor and enforcement of its instruction, church leaders sought to limit all citizens'—and particularly women's—opportunities for education and expression of personal autonomy.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, in Teresa's proposals all sisters were expected see themselves as servants to the church's needs, as “negated subjects,” just as all wives were expected to put their husbands' needs ahead of their own. Beyond that, her reforms called for a greater separation between the cloistered sisters and the outside world, thus seeming to check the religious women's potential contributions to the living community of the church. Yet paradoxically, Saint Teresa's emphasis on rigor and asceticism ultimately broadened the sisters' power within the new order. To begin with, the very fact that the new order was founded and controlled by a woman was itself a remarkably novel—and for many church conservatives, quite threatening—idea for the time. And though Saint Teresa viewed the events beyond the convent walls as dangerous and corrupt, she did not believe that separation from the outside world should lead to the community's ignorance of current events. To begin with, Saint Teresa's mission led her all over the Iberian Peninsula. The seemingly meek and fragile woman from Ávila often went on her travels unaccompanied by men and necessarily became involved with the unique political circumstances of the areas in which she founded new convents. Though she eschewed the corruption of the outside world, Teresa envisioned her sisters' removal from society and immersion in prayer and sacrifice as a means to strengthen the Catholic Church

7. Though attitudes regarding women's education varied over the course of the sixteenth century, women's subordinate position in all cultural matters was never put into question. Debates and discussions centered on the degree to which women should be educated, but this degree was always necessarily less than what would be recommended for men. For more on women and education in the sixteenth century, see María Teresa Cacho, “Los moldes de Pygmalión: sobre los tratados de educación femenina en el Siglo de Oro,” in *La mujer en la literatura española*, ed. Emilie Bergmann, et al. (Madrid: Comunidad de Madrid, 1995), 2:177–213.

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in society and fortify its influence in all earthly matters. Thus, all the convent's members had to be aware of contemporary challenges to the church's authority in order to pray effectively for its triumph.

Other innovations within the order also challenged the status quo. The Discalced's disregard for incoming novices' "purity of blood,"<sup>8</sup> its dedication to an egalitarian existence within the community, and its disruption of traditional economic ties and church hierarchies subtly reorganized contemporary notions of community and simultaneously questioned male leadership within a female order. Adversaries of these reforms claimed that each community's increased autonomy was symptomatic of Protestantism and dangerous because of the power it placed in women's hands. These detractors of Saint Teresa argued for a change in the order's management and a cessation of its expansion. Yet perhaps more significant than all the aforementioned changes is the fact that this new Carmelite Order required its female members to define and manage their own spiritual journeys. Discalced convents prescribed reading for all their members. In fact, reading made up a great deal of the nuns' daily lives of meditation and prayer. In addition, the Discalced sisters wrote detailed histories of convent foundations, letters, poetry, music, short and long dramatic pieces, and biographies of other sisters, which they circulated among different convents within the order. Though all textual production was monitored and shaped by superiors, including male clergy and confessors, the Discalced sisters nevertheless created a community of female readers and writers that at times provided profoundly unique and daring interpretations of spirituality. Cecilia del Nacimiento's writing is a perfect example of how creative thinking and expression flourished within the convent environment.

8. With the rise of strict orthodoxy and anxiety regarding diversity and signs of otherness, Spanish cultural institutions were not content only to require that their members be mere Christians. On the contrary, "true" faith became tied to one's blood: having Jewish or Muslim ancestry—despite one's conversion to Christianity—was seen as an indicator of a potential atavism that might contaminate the social body. *Conversos* (converted Jews) and *moriscos* (converted Muslims) were always regarded as a potential source of disease and impurity and often blocked from entering certain religious institutions and from emigrating to Spain's colonies overseas. Given Spain's enormously diverse ethnic and religious make-up, falsifying bloodlines to prove one's worth was common. Ironically, Saint Teresa herself—the female patron saint of the Spanish nation—came from a *converso* family.

The Discalced Order's increased asceticism did not prevent it from fomenting a burgeoning tradition of female education that had begun in the decades before the tumultuous years of its foundation. By the time Saint Teresa established the new order in 1568, official church and state policies on female education had already begun a vast regime of curtailment. In response to the Protestant Reformation initiated by Martin Luther in 1517, as well as many other related heresies throughout Europe, the Roman Catholic Church imposed a series of measures agreed upon at the Council of Trent that sought to enforce orthodoxy in education and place all Christian subjects under strict surveillance. In addition, Spain's conquest of New World territories and interactions with the formerly unknown indigenous populations raised many new debates about human nature and education, most of which concluded that a heavy hand and strict limitation of autonomy was the only viable Christian option. This was particularly true in relation to those whom the church characterized as society's "weaker" individuals: women, the lower classes, and non-Europeans.<sup>9</sup> With the church's image recast as a conqueror on the offensive, faced with myriad enemies, a new cultural climate of fear, suspicion, and domination emerged, so that Cecilia and her sister Maria enjoyed much less intellectual freedom than their mother's generation.

Cecilia Morillas, the mother of Cecilia and María, serves as a perfect example of the increased educational possibilities offered to women of Spain's middle and upper classes in the early sixteenth century. A true "Renaissance woman," Cecilia Morillas spoke several languages, played numerous musical instruments and cultivated her talents in various forms of artistic expression. She was not unique among elite urban women of the time. By the late fifteenth century, there was an increase of prominent humanists in both church and state government, including the archbishop of Toledo and even Queen

9. Several recent works have done a great deal to show how debates surrounding Spain's imperial endeavors did much to reconfigure notions about women—the country's "interior Other." See Juliana Schiesari, "The Face of Domestication: Physiognomy, Gender Politics, and Humanism's Others," in *Women, "Race" and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London: Routledge, 1994), 55–70; and James D. Fernández, "The Bonds of Patrimony: Cervantes and the New World," *PMLA* 109:5 (October 1994): 969–81.

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Isabella herself. These leaders promoted modest yet progressive ideas regarding female education. By the 1550s, however, the shift in church politics led its leaders to the conclusion that the female spirit was too weak to resist the complicated temptations of the day. Thus, in a move that ostensibly sought to protect both Spain's integrity and women's souls, both church and state restricted women's access to education.

The socio-historic changes that took place during the mid-sixteenth century provoked a boom in literature and conduct manuals that contemplated and prescribed codes of behavior proper to virtuous women. In contrast to popular early sixteenth-century texts on education that demonstrate a modicum of education and autonomy as beneficial to a woman's development—in works such as Juan Luis Vives's *The Education of a Christian Woman* (1524) and Erasmus's *Exhortation to Diligent Study of Scripture* (1516) and *The Institution of Christian Marriage* (1526)—influential texts in the latter part of the sixteenth century stressed the need to keep women innocent and free from self-indulgence. Works such as Fray Luis de León's *The Perfect Wife* (1583) and Juan de Huarte's *Examination of Men's Wits* (1575) signaled a change in attitude toward women's education in Spain that did not begin to come widely into question again until the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

10. For the most recent English editions of these texts see Juan Luis Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, ed. and trans. Charles Fantazzi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Desiderius Erasmus, *William Roy, and Martin Luther, William Roy's An Exhortation to the Diligent Study of Scripture; and, An Exposition in to the Seventh Chaptre of the Pistle to the Corinthians*, ed. and trans. Douglas H. Parker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); selected writings of Erasmus in Desiderius Erasmus, *Erasmus on Women*, ed. Erika Rummel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Fray Luis de León, *A Bilingual Edition of Fray Luis de Leon's La perfecta casada*, ed. and trans. John A. Jones and Javier San Jose Lera (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999); Juan Huarte, *Examen de Ingenios. The Examination of Men's Wits*, ed. and trans. Camillo Camilli, Richard Carew, and Carmen Rogers (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1959). English-language scholarship on Vives, Erasmus, and de León is voluminous.

It is important to note that none of the titles mentioned here recommend complete autonomy or promote unfettered female agency when it comes to education. Vives's work, which defends a woman's right to increased education and contemplation of religious matters, can easily be criticized for being misogynistic and limited by readers today, though this interpretation holds Vives to impossible standards for his time. Fray Luis de León's work must be viewed more broadly as well. While *The Perfect Wife* undoubtedly configures

The greatest danger foreseen in women's education was its potential to destabilize the church's rigid male-dominated hierarchies and control of interpretive power. Many church leaders and intellectuals mobilized both religious and scientific knowledge to prove that women's constitutions were weaker than men's; and, therefore, more prone to error and deception. While biological and medical texts from the time point to such "facts" as female body temperature, body shape, and levels of hydration to prove that women were not meant to engage in intellectual pursuits, others, like Fray Luis de León, found inspiration in the famous opinion presented by Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35: "Women should be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church."<sup>11</sup> In *The Perfect Wife*, a best-selling marital guide published in five yearly editions throughout the 1580s, Fray Luis wrote:

Nature, indeed, as we have said already, and intend to say again, constituted women to stay in closely, and to be the guardians of their homes. So likewise has it laid upon them the obligation to keep their lips closed...."(155)<sup>12</sup>

The exclusively male church hierarchy in sixteenth-century Spain expected the same from its family's women. In order to be perfect "brides of Christ," nuns must remain in their cells and refrain from speaking or expressing themselves.

"Perfected" female behavior was not always a reality, however, especially during the decades following the Discalced Carmelite reforms. Though outwardly the Discalced sisters preached obedience

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women as possessions of their husbands who are better off without the "dangerous" influences of education, it must be remembered that Fray Luis did a great deal to promote female religious work during his time. Fray Luis de León was the editor of all of Saint Teresa of Ávila's important texts, as well as a literary role model for her and other women.

11. New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

12. Fray Luis de León, *The Perfect Wife*. Ed. and trans. Alice Hubbard (Denton, TX: The College Press, T.S.C.W., 1943), 70.

and subordination, one does not have to look further than Saint Teresa's own ambitious behavior in founding new convents and expanding the outreach of the order to realize that many sisters shaped their own destinies in ways that furthered the church's political agenda but also broadened women's role within it. Like Saint Teresa's, Cecilia del Nacimiento's life and writings serve as perfect examples of how subjective interpretation and expression were possible even while remaining compliant with dominant structures that sought to silence the female voice.

### *Biography: Early Life*

Cecilia del Nacimiento, the daughter of Cecilia Morillas and Antonio Sobrino, was born in 1570 in Valladolid, Spain. She died in the same city in 1646. Her upbringing, though hardly typical, is a testament to the rich cultural life afforded a newly emerging elite during Spain's early imperial expansion.

Cecilia's father, Antonio Sobrino, was from the northern Portuguese city of Braganza, and later moved to Spain to study law at the University of Salamanca. There he met his future wife, whose brother was also a law student. Shortly after their marriage, the couple moved to Valladolid, the historic capital city of Castile, where Cecilia's brother had professional connections. Antonio was soon appointed secretary of the University of Valladolid, a prestigious position, and he became known for his intelligence, honesty, and piety. In addition to his post at the university, Antonio was in charge of several commissions from the pope.

Cecilia's mother, Cecilia Morillas, was by far the most important influence on the education and spirituality of her children. Furthermore, she envisioned herself as the center of the household's functioning. Not only did she strive to set fine examples of competence and devotion among her nine children, but she also assisted her husband in his work for the university and papal Curia, the pontiff's governing body. Before her untimely death in 1581, Cecilia's children witnessed their mother working alongside her husband, discussing his negotiations for the university and the assignments that came from Rome.

Cecilia Morillas also passed on her considerable artistic talents to her children. These talents included illustrating manuscript documents and maps and overseeing the translation of important documents. She was so well known for her work that King Philip II commissioned manuscripts from her that are still housed in the museum of El Escorial, the royal residence of the Habsburg family founded during the sixteenth century. She had a special interest in geography and cosmography and was even known to have well-established cosmographers consult her on scientific matters. Her knowledge was practical as well as intellectual: in a gesture that demonstrates her lofty knowledge with her homespun ingenuity, Cecilia fashioned a globe of the world for her children by sewing together pieces of fabric and fastening them to a ball of cork. She balanced her children's lessons in the liberal arts with a profound spiritual training, such that when the children played games together, they often pretended to be nuns and monks. Later, during their years in the convent, Mother Cecilia and her sister María de San Alberto "would attempt the recreation of a woman-centered sense of family,"<sup>13</sup> like the one they had experienced as children.

Both Cecilia del Nacimiento<sup>14</sup> and her sister María de San Alberto learned the various "womanly" arts at home in addition to their general education. They were taught to paint and embroider, often creating their own designs, and they also learned to knit and crochet. The two sisters stitched together textiles as they would later "stitch" lines of poetry. Both were accomplished musicians, trained to play organ and clavichord. Unsurprisingly, musical cadences appear in their poems, and they often wrote works meant to be performed to music.

Cecilia's brothers were all devoted and dedicated members of the church. Sebastián, the youngest, declared his vows as a priest and studied at the prestigious university of Salamanca, though died at a young age; Tomás, like his sisters, became a "discalced" or reformed member of the Franciscans, as did Antonio, who after his death was nominated for beatification; Juan, the only sibling who was not an ordained member of the church clergy, nevertheless became a noted

13. Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters*, 169.

14. Cecilia's religious name, "Nacimiento," means "nativity" and was chosen when she became a nun to indicate her separation from the secular world.

theologian; José was chaplain and spiritual advisor to the royal family; Diego, the chronicler of the Sobrino family history, worked as an ordained priest in the service of a cardinal; and Francisco, the eldest, became bishop of Valladolid. The importance of this post should not be overlooked. At the time, Valladolid was the commercial capital of Castile, home to the region's wealthiest merchants and even the center of courtly life during several years of King Philip II's reign. Francisco was immensely popular with the city's citizens: in 1616 his appointment was celebrated for over a week, and after his death he was nominated for sainthood. Though he was old enough to be Cecilia's father, the two siblings maintained a close relationship, and Francisco's prominence came to Cecilia's aid when she found herself in conflict with her own superiors.

In the fragment that remains of her autobiography, Mother Cecilia describes her adolescence as a time when she demonstrated the usual vain tendencies of young women her age. She even goes so far as to say "my inclination to love myself was harmful to me."<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to judge whether this description is accurate, since the typical convention of the convent *Vida* is to cast the autobiographical subject as an abject sinner who later realizes her spiritual destiny in the convent. Yet, as she herself describes it, part of her frivolity was due to the fact that her siblings spoiled her after her mother's early death. By the age of sixteen, however, she made the decision to enter the Order of Discalced Carmelites with her sister. Though both Cecilia and María could have entered any convent of their choice because of their class and upbringing, they chose the more ascetic option of the Discalced Carmelites and displayed a fervent devotion to its founder, Teresa of Ávila. Both sisters found inspiration in Saint Teresa's dictates on poverty and penitence, and Cecilia was especially drawn to the Passion of Christ. She regularly relived Christ's crucifixion through images and spiritual practices.

Cecilia and María spent most of their lives in the Convent of the Conception of Our Lady of Carmel in Valladolid. This convent had a direct link to Saint Teresa of Ávila, as it was the fourth convent founded personally by her. It was founded in 1568 or 1569, with the permanent location settled in February 1569, the year before Cecilia

15. Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters*, 169.

was born, and Saint Teresa was known to visit the nuns there often. The Valladolid convent occupied a privileged place within the constellation of Discalced convents, partly because the nuns were known for their piety and devotion, and also because of Valladolid's prominent role in Spanish politics, commerce, and religion at that time. When Cecilia and María took the veil in 1588, Saint Teresa had been dead for only six years.

### *Life in the Convent*

As an outstanding example of extreme penitence, Mother Cecilia was made leader of her convent's novices soon after becoming a nun. She became known for her great devotion, occasionally performing her penitential acts throughout the night and foregoing sleep. Her superiors praised her yet warned her about excess, especially since she sometimes put her health at risk. Cecilia's extreme acts of penitence in the face of bodily damage reflect her strong will, which at times brought her trouble. In 1601 she was sent to Calahorra, in northeastern Spain, ostensibly to help organize a convent. This assignment, however, was most likely a sort of exile as Cecilia had refused to discontinue her communication with her confessor, Tomás de Jesús, after he had been censured by the church.

Prior to Mother Cecilia's arrival, the Calahorra convent had suffered from administrative conflicts since its foundation in 1598. Her tenure at the remote site attests to her leadership qualities. Shortly after her arrival, she was not only named mistress of novices,<sup>16</sup> but subsequently was elected prioress twice. While there, she proved to be a gifted teacher, and many of her students rose to prominent positions in the Order of Discalced Carmelites. Mother Cecilia had a reputation for forming close, personal bonds with her charges and specialized in guiding and convincing hesitant girls to take the veil.

During her ten years of service in Calahorra, Mother Cecilia managed to acquire a new site for the convent, in spite of conflict with the male property owner. Much like her role model Saint Teresa, Mother Cecilia's will was determined and steadfast. Eventually she

16. In a convent the mistress is in charge of a specific aspect of the community; the prioress is the superior next in charge to the abbess, who is in charge of the entire convent.

was granted a writ from the king to acquire the estate, defying the wealthy man's attempts to limit her influence in the area. Faced with the precarious budget typical of all Discalced convents, Mother Cecilia astutely managed the building project by raising funds and paying in installments.<sup>17</sup> The new convent was built on a beautiful, salubrious piece of property near the Molina River but above the flood plain.

According to both her own and her brother Diego's accounts, while in Calahorra, Mother Cecilia's industrious nature and abstemious habits served as a sublime example for the community. During times of penance, she subsisted on little more than eggs and often went without regular sleep. Occasionally she retreated to a local hermitage for more intense periods of prayer and meditation. It is little wonder that her example won the favor of locals and secured donations for the convent's future. After successfully ensuring the Calahorra convent's future during her ten years of service, Mother Cecilia returned to Valladolid in 1612 after spending a few months advising the sisters at a Carmelite convent in Palencia. For more than three decades to follow, she served her Valladolid convent in various capacities but was particularly gifted in the instruction and guidance of novices. She continued to set an example of extreme penitence and rigorous sacrifice, a living testament to all that could be achieved through volition and hard work.<sup>18</sup>

During the years when Cecilia and her sister María were together at Valladolid, María was probably the strongest earthly presence in her sister's life. Mother María was also a respected writer, and it is possible that the two sisters collaborated on works that have been attributed to them individually.<sup>19</sup> As sisters not much separated in age

17. One of the innovations introduced by the Discalced reforms was an almost complete reliance on donations. Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters*, 177–79, contains a translation of part of Cecilia's account of the founding of the convent.

18. As mentioned above, the descriptions of Mother Cecilia's life must be understood in relation to the conventions of religious autobiographical writing. While there is no reason to doubt her extreme piety or leadership capabilities, it must be remembered that the *Vida* tended to cast personal experiences in terms of absolute good and evil. Often past experiences are used to bolster an idealized spiritual journey to salvation. Difficult negotiations and nuanced accounts of struggles are often glossed over in this literary genre.

19. See Stacey Schlau and Electa Arenal, "Leyendo yo y escribiendo ella," *Journal of Hispanic Philology*, 13:3 (1989): 214–229. 32:1 (2006), 129–48.

in a house filled with brothers, they were close from the time they were children, with María most likely “mothering” Cecilia after the death of their mother. Writing about her sister, Cecilia notes her sister’s complete obedience to divine will, saying that the phrase she spoke most often was “May God’s will be done.”<sup>20</sup> Like Cecilia, María often made herself ill through penitential acts. She slept on the floor, for example, and left her window open during the winter. Such extreme behavior must have influenced Cecilia in her own mortification.

During the ten years that Mother Cecilia was in Calahorra, Mother María remained in Valladolid, writing letters to Cecilia about her desperation to purify her immortal soul. Returning to Valladolid, Cecilia found María looking ill, but filled with peace and serenity, like “an angel from heaven.”<sup>21</sup> Cecilia seemed somewhat in awe of her older sister, praising her talent in drawing and painting as much as her piety. In her biographical text concerning María, Cecilia seemed especially impressed with María’s ability to restore an oil painting of Christ’s face. She “repaired it so that it was perfect as it had been before, as though it had never been touched by human hands.”<sup>22</sup> Cecilia also admired her sister’s sewing skills, noting that when there was not sufficient material for the altar cloths she was creating, Mother María “arranged scraps and put together little patches, some as small as a fingernail.”<sup>23</sup>

More than once Mother María was elected prioress, the same office in which Cecilia served the convent in Calahorra. Mother María’s esteem in the community increased after she performed “miraculous healing.” It was thought that she even saved the life of the queen when the court was in residence at Valladolid. Such acclaim could only have enhanced Mother Cecilia’s pride in her sister, who died in 1640.

In 1636 Valladolid was devastated by a massive flood that inundated the Convent of Carmel. The nuns had to evacuate, but they returned as soon as the water receded. The buildings remained damp for a long time, and Mother Cecilia’s health deteriorated. Nevertheless, after Mother María’s death, Cecilia managed to complete the chronicle of their family begun by their brother Diego. By this time

20. Cortés, “Dos monjas vallisoletanas poetisas,” 35.

21. *Ibid.*, 38.

22. Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters*, 175.

23. *Ibid.*

she was rather elderly, according to seventeenth-century standards. Mother Cecilia del Nacimiento died in the spring of 1646, having devoted herself to the Discalced Carmelite life for nearly sixty years.

### *Cecilia del Nacimiento as Writer*

Through self-abnegation in her daily life, Cecilia experienced the mystical transports described in her writings. The exterior world faded away as her interior world became the true reality. Meditation on the Crucifixion was an important vehicle for this transformative experience. Her mystic inspiration impressed not only her fellow sisters in the convent; but also several local theologians.

Mother Cecilia produced an impressive body of writing over the course of her life. Her texts range from the mundane recording of hours, rituals, and other administrative details and correspondence to intimate recountings of mystical experiences and reflections on her inner spiritual life. Some of her texts gloss famous scripture passages, and in one daring treatise, she goes so far as to write a theological exegesis in support of the Virgin Mary's Immaculate Conception, an article of faith that was hotly debated in early seventeenth-century Spain, though not made Catholic dogma until 1854. This text is particularly bold as it engages in the discussion of church tenets, and women were explicitly forbidden from speaking out about such matters. In this instance, Mother Cecilia benefitted from the protection of her influential brothers.<sup>24</sup> In fact, in almost all of Mother Cecilia's most expressive texts, the name of a powerful male is invoked repeatedly in order to legitimate her own voice. Outside validation had become important, inasmuch as visions such as those she records were increasingly considered powerful and dangerous by post-Tridentine leaders and censors.

The bulk of Mother Cecilia's writing is best classified as a continuation of mystical literature, which experienced a boom in popu-

24. As mentioned above, all but one of Cecilia's seven brothers were also clergy members, and several of them were high-ranking, including her brother Francisco, bishop of Valladolid, the city of Cecilia's home convent. For more on Cecilia's exegesis, see *Obras completas de Cecilia del Nacimiento*, ed. Jose M. Díaz Cerón (Madrid: Editorial de la Espiritualidad, 1970), 379.

larity in Spain toward the end of the fifteenth century, reaching its height in the sixteenth-century works by Saint Teresa of Ávila, Saint John of the Cross, and Fray Luis of Granada, among many others. Yet Mother Cecilia's elaboration of this tradition was fraught with dangers. Mysticism's relation to Jewish Sufism and its focus on the individual's direct, unmediated experience with God aroused the anti-Jewish and anti-Protestant suspicions of church leaders. In fact, the Holy Office, the governmental unit commonly known as the Inquisition, targeted a number of key mystical texts in its first *Index*—the list of officially proscribed books—in 1551.<sup>25</sup> Recounting and describing mystical experiences became a complicated terrain to navigate. In order to remain above suspicion, Mother Cecilia had to be very careful about how she represented her interior life and visions.

Mysticism is generally understood to be a series of supernatural or secret experiences through which God elevates a specific individual above his or her own human limitations, bestowing knowledge that transcends the limits of this world. In the thirteenth century, asceticism in Spain became linked with mystical experiences, mostly because such raptures were associated with the Franciscan Order, which stressed simplicity and deprivation of bodily desires. Yet asceticism alone was never explicitly cited as the cause of mystic phenomena. Although ascetic practices may prepare a soul for receiving God, ultimately the mystical encounter is one that comes about through grace. Visions, raptures, and states of ecstasy are gifts from God bestowed only upon a select few. Mysticism's popularity during the sixteenth century induced many people in contemporary Spanish society to undergo raptures or see visions, yet church leaders ascribed most of these experiences to diabolical intervention.<sup>26</sup> Speaking out

25. The first *Index* included many books regarding mystical experiences that were first translated (where necessary) and published at the behest of Cardinal Ximénez de Cisneros, Queen Isabella's confessor. The list included writings by the Franciscan friar Francisco Osuna as well as other less orthodox works, including all texts associated with the *alumbrados*. For more, see Alastair Hamilton, *Heresy and Mysticism in Sixteenth-Century Spain: The Alumbrados* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 110–12.

26. Several socio-cultural factors help explain the rise of mystic experiences in Spain at this time. The resurgence of religious fervor along with the church's expanding mission prompted ecstatic manifestations across the general population and even in the least contemplative of orders. For more, see Milagros Ortega Costa, "Spanish Women in the Reformation," in

*Note on the Translation*

The translations contained in this volume are based on the original Spanish texts presented in the first collection of Cecilia del Nacimiento's complete works, compiled and edited by Jose M. Díaz Cerón in 1970. In presenting these works to a twenty-first-century English-speaking readership, we have necessarily had to make assumptions and interpretations about Cecilia's intentions based on what is known about her life and the sociocultural realities of Discalced Carmelite culture in early modern Spain. While several aspects of her writing may surprise readers, particularly the very sensual and at times semi-erotic nature of her mystical encounters, it must be remembered that Mother Cecilia wrote within a well-defined mystic tradition that is characterized by exuberance and fervor. At times, the language may seem overtly sexual to modern readers, and while it is not our belief that such a charge is necessarily absent from these expressions, Mother Cecilia's original readers would have been accustomed to seeing such intense language in relation to divine encounters. Thus, though we have struggled to maintain the "flavor" of the original writing and attempt to make the texts speak in their own words, a measured understanding of Saint Teresa's and Cecilia's metaphors and allusions must be kept in mind in order not to misconstrue their purposes.

In terms of the poetic verse, the goal of this translation was to facilitate an understanding of Cecilia's particular style and depth of emotion. Goethe believed that an interlinear translation has the best chance of achieving this goal, and the present translation was undertaken in this spirit. In only a few instances do the lines not match precisely, where the Spanish syntax would have been too awkward in English. Meter and rhyme have not been maintained because the focus is on the sense of the text. Dryden compared translating to a painting done from life, where the painter has no right to alter the basic features. In translating Mother Cecilia, we strove for transparency, with the English functioning as a clear lens through which her poetry might be understood. Walter Benjamin described this process as an "echo" of the original:

Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work of the alien one.<sup>38</sup>

As far as the prose pieces are concerned, the aim of this translation has been to convey Mother Cecilia's thoughts and experiences through a style that is intelligible and relatively idiomatic in modern American English. Though very long sentences with numerous subordinate clauses are typical of seventeenth-century Spanish, we have avoided reproducing extremely complicated grammatical structures since they tend to obscure meaning for modern readers not accustomed to such intricacies. Nevertheless, in order to maintain a sense of the original texts, wherever necessary the prose translations reflect the different works' original syntactic complexity and use of such rhetorical devices as hyperbaton—the deliberate subversion of conventional word or phrase order, and anacoluthon—grammatical asymmetry. Given Mother Cecilia's extensive education and her undoubted familiarity with increasingly elaborate baroque prosaic customs, it is our belief that her use of such devices was meant to present certain ideas in an artfully indirect manner.

In many of the prose pieces that deal with the interactions between Mother Cecilia's soul and God, we use the personal pronoun "she," rather than "it," when referring to the soul. The Spanish language lacks a neuter third-person pronoun, thus all persons and objects are referred to with a gendered pronoun that corresponds to the referent. Though the norm would be to translate the soul as "it," since in English the soul is considered a thing rather than a person, we have maintained Mother Cecilia's use of "she"—*ella* in Spanish—when describing the soul's journeys and spiritual encounters. There are several reasons for this somewhat unconventional rendering. The most compelling is that Cecilia herself takes advantage of the gender of the word

38. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Theories of Translation*, ed. Rainier Schulte and John Buguénet, trans. Harry Zohm (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 77.

*alma* to inscribe the relationship within the analogy of the bride and bridegroom, with “she” the soul marrying him, her God. Beyond this, the soul serves the purpose of both agent and vessel of God’s divine gifts, and based on what can be found in her texts, we believe that this is how Mother Cecilia considered herself. Thus, the use of “she” helps to reinforce the womanscript that lies within her spiritual narratives.<sup>39</sup> Though seventeenth-century Catholic dogma strictly maintained that the soul was gender neutral, we believe that Cecilia expands upon the word’s grammatically feminine designation to present the mystical experience as a gender balanced encounter.

Above all, the translations that follow attempt to make readable the vast array of emotions and experience that Cecilia records. Though it is impossible to produce the same range of understandings and effects that the works had for their readers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, we hope that the book clarifies certain themes and conveys an accurate sense of Mother Cecilia’s form of expression.

39. Here we use the word “womanscript” as Stephanie Merrim describes it in her work on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: “a secondary script that lies behind the mask of male writing conventions. The existence of this script is less “feminist” in its purpose than it is an indication of how the female writer simultaneously writes from inside and outside the male tradition to reinforce a sense of female experience. For more, see Stephanie Merrim, *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 101.