

Teresa's Life Story

CHAPTER I

The city of Ávila squats defiantly on a semiarid plateau in the old Spanish kingdom of Castile, as if unnaturally sprung from the earth, a boxy rectangular outcrop teeming with stone buildings and tiled rooftops, ringed by massive walls thirty-six feet high and nine feet thick. Eighty-eight curved towers extend outward from the crenellated ramparts at regular intervals, like mute giant sentries, making the whole city seem ever ready for a siege. Ávila's fortifications were built in the twelfth century, when war was constant and such bulwarks were needed, not just to keep enemies at bay but also to make them think one's city was an impregnable fortress, as invincible as its own arrogance.

Symmetrical Ávila mocks the landscape that surrounds it, so given to extremes of stifling heat and bitter cold, so implacably parched and vast and empty, so devoid of visible boundaries, so sorely bereft of the straight lines, obtuse angles, deltoid curves, and all the precise order that humans can impose on the world with the aid of Euclidian geometry.

On 28 March 1515, long after those battlements had last seen any action, and shortly before the start of the Protestant Reformation in faraway Saxony, Teresa de Ahumada y Cepeda was born in this utterly medieval city. She was the

fifth oldest of twelve children in her household. The two oldest ones in this brood were from her father's first marriage, a boy and a girl whose mother, Catalina del Peso, had died in 1507. The other children were eight boys and two girls from her father's second wife, Beatriz Dávila y Ahumada, who had married him when she was fifteen years old. Beatriz had given birth to Teresa when she was twenty, and would die at the age of thirty-three, shortly after the birth of Teresa's youngest sister. Nearly all of Teresa's nine brothers followed military careers and sought their fortunes far beyond Ávila's old walls, in the so-called New World that Christopher Columbus had stumbled upon in 1492, and that Spain claimed for itself.

Her father, Alonso Sánchez de Cepeda, was a hidalgo, a member of the lower nobility. Her mother, Beatriz, belonged to two of the leading families of the city. A well-disguised blemish lurked in the family tree, however: a secret so shameful and so potentially injurious—and so well hidden—that it would remain unknown for four more centuries, until the 1940s, when someone stumbled upon it accidentally, in an unlikely place. Tucked away in lawsuit records from Ciudad Real, two hundred kilometers south of Ávila, the secret had never surfaced in any official documents connected to Teresa herself, including those from her encounters with the Inquisition or those pertaining to her beatification and canonization inquests. Whether or not Teresa was in on the secret remains a matter of dispute, but many experts suspect that she was aware of it, indeed, and that this awareness shaped her life and her work.

This skeleton in the closet was as frightful as they came in sixteenth-century Spain, where one's social status

depended so much on lineage: Teresa had Jewish ancestors. Worse yet, her father's father had been punished by the Inquisition in 1485 for the sin of Judaizing, that is, for secretly observing Jewish rituals and customs. Authorities in church and state looked upon Judaizing as an amalgam of heresy, apostasy, and hypocritical deception, and as an especially heinous offense.¹

Teresa's grandfather Juan Sánchez de Toledo was the son of a Jewish convert to Catholicism who chose baptism for himself and his family in the mid-fifteenth century. Like many other such conversos, that is, Jewish converts and descendants of Jewish converts in Spain, Teresa's grandfather had either found it impossible to discard his ancestral religion completely or to convince his neighbors that he had indeed done so. Tens of thousands of Jews had been coerced into converting, especially after widespread massacres in 1391, and throughout the fifteenth century, thousands more converted in fear of popular violence and a rash of new laws that placed many segregationist restrictions on them. Preaching campaigns launched at Spain's remaining Jews only served to incite anti-Jewish sentiment and to produce waves of questionable conversions after 1391, creating a new social class with an ambivalent identity. Conversos were fully Christian, legally, and were not subjected to the same restrictions as Jews who refused baptism, but they and their progeny were tagged as "*new Christians*," to distinguish them from the "*old Christians*" who had no Jewish ancestry.

Questions hovered over all conversos, no matter how devoutly Catholic any of them might have been or might have seemed. Suspicions surrounding converso backsliding—or Judaizing—increased rather than decreased throughout the

fifteenth century, so much so that the monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella petitioned Rome in 1478 for the right to create and run an independent tribunal of their own in Spain that would identify and punish all Judaizers. Pope Sixtus IV granted this request, and so it came to be that Ferdinand and Isabella established the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition and that the hunt for Judaizers began in 1480.

When this relatively new Inquisition tribunal came to Toledo in 1485 to ferret out Judaizers, Teresa's converso grandfather Juan was a well-to-do cloth merchant who had successfully blended in with Toledan society by marrying a woman from a distinguished old Christian family. Fearing the wrath of the Inquisition, or sensing inevitable persecution regardless of innocence or guilt—or perhaps feeling remorse about secretly observing some Jewish traditions—Juan willingly confessed that he was a Judaizer. The fact that he had freely revealed his sin, expressed contrition, and begged for forgiveness earned him a full pardon and moderate punishment. But the price he had to pay for his offenses was steep.

Every Friday for seven weeks in a row, Juan, his children, and other *reconciliados* who had been forgiven had to walk from church to church through the streets of Toledo, garbed in a yellow penitential tunic known as a *sanbenito*. Undergoing this status-crushing shaming ritual was not the end of Juan's debasement, however, but only its starting point, for every penitent's yellow *sanbenito* would be hung permanently in his or her parish church, with the offender's name and sins clearly displayed for all to see.

In a culture that placed an extremely high value on honor and reputation, such as that of late medieval Spain, such humiliation could be devastating, not only to the penitent but

to all of his relatives, for generations to come. In essence, that *sanbenito* was an edict of permanent marginalization that sent a clear message as long as it hung in public, year after year: Juan Sánchez de Toledo and his kin were untrustworthy.

Juan responded to this situation by moving his family from Toledo to Ávila, where he had business contacts. In addition to transplanting his family, and to substituting his own surname and that of his children, Sánchez, with that of his old Christian wife, Cepeda, Juan was also clever enough to affirm his family's hidalgo status in a court of law in Ciudad Real, where he owned some property. Although his Jewish ancestry was mentioned in some of those court documents, that fact remained buried in those papers, far from Ávila.² What mattered most to Juan, and what allowed him to establish a new identity successfully, was obtaining the court document that affirmed his nobility, which allowed him and his progeny to pass themselves off as old Christians.

The basic assumption of his claim was simple enough: anyone who lives as a hidalgo and is recognized by his neighbors as a hidalgo must be a hidalgo, and, of course, also an old Christian. A witness from Ávila who testified in court on behalf of Juan had this to say about him and his family: "Those Toledans are considered hidalgos and also gentlemen and they mingle with the children of great hidalgos and with relatives of the leading gentlemen of Ávila . . . they have very fine horses and are very well attired, and are treated as top-notch people."³

Teresa's grandfather timed his move to Ávila most adroitly, for anti-Jewish and anti-converso sentiment continued to increase after his public shaming. In 1492 Ferdinand and Isabella responded to this crisis by issuing a harsh

ultimatum to Spain's Jews: convert or leave. Although tens of thousands of Jews fled from Spain in response, tens of thousands also chose to stay and convert. This sudden increase in the number of new Christians created by the 1492 Edict of Expulsion only served to worsen suspicions about insincere conversions among all conversos, and helped unleash a new wave of repressive and discriminatory measures against new Christians.

Eventually, by the time Teresa reached adulthood, the persecution of Judaizers by the Inquisition had begun to diminish, due largely to the fact that it ran out of new Christians to haul in, and turned its attention instead to all sorts of heretics and deviants. But discrimination against new Christians continued to increase. "Purity of blood" statutes that barred new Christians from holding government or church posts and from testifying in courts of law were enacted throughout Spain in the mid-sixteenth century. By the time of Teresa's death in 1582, discrimination had become the law of the land, and proving that one had *limpieza de sangre* or purity of blood had become a prerequisite for social advancement and membership in many religious orders. The ultimate irony of this turn of events is that according to the letter of these blood purity laws, Teresa would have been unable to join the Carmelite order, much less reform it, and—to top it off—she would also have been ineligible for canonization as a saint.

We know relatively little about Teresa's childhood, and the details we do have, mostly from her *Vida*, hide almost as much as they reveal. The *Vida* portrays her parents as very "virtuous and fearful of God," and credits them with instilling in her a reverence for things divine at an early age. "My father liked to

read good books,” she said, “and had some in Spanish so that his children could read them too. And my mother always took great care to make sure we said our prayers, and to instill in us devotion to Our Lady and to some saints.” Such efforts paid off, she claimed, for she “began to awaken” to piety “around the age of five or six” (1:1.34).

From the very first page of her *Vida*, Teresa dwells on the effect that books had on her, as well as on others, and this theme is carried through the entire narrative. In various ways, “the book of her life” (*el libro de su vida*) is a book about books and about how the right combination of reading and prayer, and the right kind of spiritual direction from the right kind of person, can lead one to God. This linkage of reading, praying, and following directions is essential in Teresa’s mind, for reading on one’s own without the other two components can lead one astray. Teresa stresses this point in the first few pages of her *Vida*, mostly through storytelling and carefully chosen examples from her childhood.

For instance, Teresa gives no details about her education but instead simply relates how she and one of her brothers took to reading the lives of the saints on their own, and how reading about martyrs inspired her and that brother to leave home in search of martyrdom. “We agreed to run away to the land of the Moors,” she says, “so that they might behead us there.” Although their parents stopped them before they could get very far, Teresa and her brother continued to be inspired by the lives of the saints in other ways. “When I saw that it was impossible to go anywhere where we’d be killed for God’s sake, we decided to become hermits, and we would build hermitages out of rocks, as best we could, in an orchard we had at home.” Similarly, Teresa says that when

she played with other girls, she loved “building convents and pretending to be nuns” (1:6.35).

Teresa also highlights the undesirable effects that the wrong kind of books had on her as a child. Much like the fictional character of Don Quixote (and also much like her flesh-and-blood contemporary Saint Ignatius Loyola), Teresa became addicted to reading chivalric romances, “so excessively,” she says, “that I could never be happy unless I had a new book.” These romances, as she later saw it, made her focus on frivolous, worldly things such as her clothes, hairbrushes, cosmetics and perfume, and harmful “childish” trifles rather than on things divine. They also inclined her to strike up a close friendship with some cousins, who were equally addicted to worldly frivolities, and with some other unnamed relative from whom she learned “all kinds of evil” (2:3.37). Teresa’s dalliance with bad books and bad company, which was compounded by the absence of good advice, led to a love of sin so profound that she “lost nearly all” of her soul’s “natural inclination to virtue.” Teresa provides no details about these sins of hers, or about her “depraved” behavior, but she does say that it was due to her “wickedness” that in 1531, at the age of fifteen, she was sent to live at the Augustinian Convent of Our Lady of Grace, where other girls of her social status—but “less depraved” than her—were educated (2:1–6.36–38).

Teresa’s confinement in a convent outside the walls of Ávila might have had less to do with her behavior, however, than with circumstances at home. Teresa’s mother had died three years earlier, in 1528, when Teresa was only thirteen years old, and the mother’s role had been assumed by Teresa’s older half sister María. When María married in 1531 and

moved to her husband's household in a nearby village, Teresa's widowed father faced a daunting challenge. Preserving a teenage daughter's honor was a high priority for any *hidalgo* father, but to do that properly his household needed an older female presence. As Teresa put it, "now that my sister had married, being alone in the house without a mother was not a good thing" (2:6,38).

Teresa had no burning desire to become a nun when she was sent to Our Lady of Grace, but she enjoyed her life at the convent, and it was there that she got her first taste of monastic life and began to develop the habit of praying regularly. After only a year and a half, unfortunately, as she was beginning to contemplate a life as a nun, illness suddenly forced her to return to her father's house. According to Teresa, the illness was "serious," and she recovered very slowly. Fevers and fainting spells plagued her, and she needed constant care. After some months with her father, she was sent to María's house, and it was on her way there, while she stopped for a brief stay with one of her father's brothers, a widower who liked to read devotional texts, that she was introduced to the genre of literature that would shape her personality most intensely.

Later on in life, as she was writing her *Vida*, she would look back on the few days she spent at her uncle Pedro's house as a significant turning point. It was there, while reading devotional texts to her uncle and discussing them with him that she "began to understand the truth . . . that all things are as nothing, and that the world is vanity and quickly passes away." Fearing that she would soon die from her illness and go directly to hell, and "inspired by servile fear more than by love," she decided to become a nun. It

seemed like a safe bet for her. Although life as a nun might be a lot like purgatory, she thought, spending a few years suffering an earthly purgation might give her the chance to gain eternal life in heaven (3:5–6.40).

When Teresa finally regained her health, in November 1535, at the age of twenty, she entered the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation in Ávila, against her father's wishes. This convent was a relatively lax monastic community, in which the rule of the Carmelite order was not strictly interpreted. All of its nuns hailed from the top tier of society, the same class as Teresa, and to enter the convent, every nun had to bring a dowry, just as if she were getting married. This was the way this convent and most others had been funded since medieval times, and exceptions to this requirement were very rare. Teresa's father did what was required, providing a generous yearly income from one of his properties and paying for all of his daughter's clothing and furnishings.

These privileged nuns at the Incarnation convent were not truly cloistered, that is, forced to remain behind the convent walls; nor were they required to cut off their connections to the outside world. Far from it: these nuns could come and go, with permission from their superiors, and they could also spend time visiting relatives and friends, or conversing with them at the convent, in the *locutorio*, a room set aside for such gatherings. Nuns like Teresa, who had the means to afford it, could live in a two-room suite, while others of lesser means had no more than a bed in a large common dormitory. Consequently, the nuns at the Incarnation had plenty of interaction with the world from which they were ostensibly fleeing, and the convent was a busy socially stratified space, always full of visitors. It was also common for some of the nuns to be sent

to live with patrons who requested the presence of a nun in their household during a time of grief, or for a nun to be given permission to take care of an ailing relative out in “the world.” Similarly, some nuns who had room to spare, like Teresa, could take in a boarder for a spell, when circumstances seemed to demand it. Teresa, for instance, took in a younger sister in 1543 after their father died.

All of this so-called laxity was relative in comparison to convents that observed strict enclosure—and Teresa would later decry her own lassitude—but, in fact, when all is said and done, Teresa’s convent was no haven for slackers. The daily routine for nuns at the Convent of the Incarnation was a tough grind, to say the least, and self-denial was expected of all of its nuns. Prayer times were strictly observed from the predawn hours to late into the night and consisted of eight daily prayer events that no one was supposed to skip: lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers, compline, and the night office, also known as vigils, during which the nuns would recite or sing set prayers in unison. In addition, from early autumn until Easter season in springtime the nuns ate meat only three times a week, and on the other four days of those six months of abstinence they would eat only one meal a day. Teresa and her sisters also kept strict fasts during the penitential seasons of Lent in late winter/early spring and Advent in December, a sum total of roughly seventy days of fasting per year. Constant introspection was required too, for every nun was supposed to confess her sins to a priest once a week.

In addition, Teresa and her sisters at the convent observed a rule of silence in their dining hall and in the common dormitories of the relatively less privileged nuns. This

means that no one spoke a word at mealtime, as one of their sisters read to them from some devotional text, and that after the relatively less privileged nuns had gone to bed in their dormitories, none of them could utter a word. Regardless of their family's rank or of the size of their dowry, every nun was also required to perform mundane tasks throughout the convent day after day, such as cooking or cleaning, hard work that was deemed undignified—or even downright dishonorable—for upper-class women such as Teresa and her fellow sisters. Needless to say, these menial tasks were lessons in humility for Teresa and others of her social class, as well as bitter pills to swallow.⁴

Teresa seems to have chosen a nun's life at the Convent of the Incarnation because she had friends there, especially one named Juana Suárez, who would become her constant companion for many years. At first, it was difficult for Teresa to come to terms with her choice. "Leaving my father's house hurt so much," she says in her *Vida*, "that I do not think that death will be any less painful. All my bones felt as if they were being wrenched asunder" (4:1.41).

Teresa adjusted to convent life quickly, however, and found great joy in her new life. She would have to serve one year as a postulant before being formally admitted to the Carmelite order and the Convent of the Incarnation, and then another year as a novice. Everything in her routine as a postulant—even sweeping the floor—made her very happy. A year after entering the convent, in November 1536, Teresa became a novice and donned the habit of the Carmelite order. As that year passed, Teresa continued to adjust to the rhythms and rigors of monastic life. In November 1537, before professing her final vows, she made a general confession, as required,

making an account to a priest of all the sins she had committed up to that point in her life. Shortly thereafter, at a solemn ceremony, Teresa left behind her status as a novice and became a full-fledged member of her monastic community.

All was not well, however. Once again, her health began to decline. Teresa provides few details about the frequent fainting fits, irregular heartbeats, and other ailments she began to endure, other than to say that she often lost consciousness and that all medical treatments failed to cure her. Years later, some of her fellow nuns would recall that she grew pale and thin during this time, and that she would weep often and suffer convulsions. By the autumn of 1538 her symptoms had worsened so much that her doctors gave up hope of finding a cure. Sheer desperation drove Teresa's father to remove her from the convent and to take her to a *curandera* (folk healer) who lived at some distance from Ávila. In Teresa's day and age, healers of this sort who relied on herbs and other natural remedies had not yet been stigmatized as witches, and it was not at all uncommon for elites as well as peasants to seek their help. The timing of her exit could not have been worse for Teresa, however, because the healer in question could not offer any treatments in the autumn and winter, when there were no fresh herbs to be found.

Unfortunately, Teresa's father did not realize this until Teresa was already on her way to the healer. This meant that Teresa would continue to deteriorate for several months outside of her convent, under her family's worried and helpless gaze, waiting for spring to arrive, or praying for a miraculous cure.

As had happened in 1533, during her previous illness, Teresa's father took her to María's house. On the way there,

as before, they stopped for a brief stay at Uncle Pedro's house, and that visit would have significant consequences for Teresa, even though she could not be aware of it at that time. Uncle Pedro, who had earlier introduced Teresa to devotional texts, now gave her a gift that would have an immense impact on her: a copy of *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*, a newly published book by the Franciscan friar Francisco de Osuna.⁵

Teresa began to read his book as soon as she reached her sister's house, and eventually—by her own admission—it would shape her spiritual life more intensely than any other text. Osuna's *Alphabet* was a distillation of late medieval mysticism, especially of the kind that flourished in Germany, the Netherlands, and England in the fourteenth century. Its basic premise is that God dwells at the core of every human being and that loving intimacy with the divine can be achieved in one's earthly life through a process of self-denial coupled with inner or silent prayer. An emphasis on silent prayer is essential to this tradition, as is the process of delving inwardly, to find the divine within the human and to rise above one's heart in perfect stillness. Osuna's book was one of several such texts circulating in Spain at that time. Spanish translations of various texts in this tradition had been commissioned in the early sixteenth century by the reforming cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, and these texts quickly found favor with many Spanish readers.⁶ Osuna's *Alphabet* was a how-to book, a primer for anyone who wanted to delve into this particular type of mysticism. The practice of silent prayer advocated by Osuna, and especially the "prayer of quiet," which would give rise to much controversy, involved reaching states of *recogimiento* (recollection, or

inner stillness) and *dejamiento* (self-abandonment), and, ultimately, states of ecstatic prayer and of union with the divine.⁷

Teresa spent the rest of that winter with María, languishing in the same sad state in which she had arrived, hovering too uncomfortably close to death but still able to read, pray, and achieve a fleeting foretaste of Osuna's prayer of quiet. Once spring arrived and she began to be treated by the healer, her condition worsened quickly. Teresa's *curandera*, who specialized in digestive disorders, gave her potent laxatives and emetics made from herbs and some ingredients straight out of the witches' brew in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, including frog's toes, snake excrement, and pulverized wings from flies. Contrary to her father's expectations, the cure proved worse than the disease, and after enduring three months of "the greatest tortures" at the hands of the folk healer, Teresa grew increasingly sicker. Constantly feverish, frighteningly weak, and wracked by "intolerable pain," she could no longer stand, sit up, or eat solid food. Disconsolate, her father had no choice but to take her home to Ávila in July 1539, and to await her death.

A few weeks later, on 15 August 1539, Teresa died. Or so it seemed.

Shortly after receiving the last rites due to the alarming speed of her decline, she suddenly lost consciousness and stopped breathing. No one could detect any sign of life, and when a mirror was pressed to her nostrils to determine whether or not she was still breathing, the absence of any moisture on the mirror made it seem clear that she was dead indeed. Preparations began for burial, and—as was customary—hot wax was poured over her eyes to seal them.

At the convent, the nuns prepared for her entombment. Teresa's grieving father could not reconcile himself to the circumstances and insisted, against custom, that her burial be delayed for a day or two. Family members kept vigil next to her corpse constantly, taking turns around the clock. Late on the third night of this vigil, shortly before she was about to be buried, her brother Alonso accidentally knocked over a candle, setting a curtain on fire. During the ensuing commotion, much to everyone's surprise and delight, Teresa gasped for air and sprang back to life. As the flames were extinguished, all rejoiced.

But this joy was muted. Teresa might have come back from the dead, but she was still in dreadful shape, totally paralyzed, seemingly incurable. Gradually, Teresa regained some strength and the ability to eat solids. In 1540, a few months after her close brush with death, Teresa asked to be moved back to the Convent of the Incarnation. Her recovery there was painfully slow but steady. Though she arrived as a bedridden paralytic who needed constant care, she gradually gained strength and climbed out of bed. At first she could only crawl on her hands and knees, but bit by wondrous bit, her health returned as mysteriously as she had lost it. Teresa would eventually recoup the ability to walk and to care for herself, but it was not until 1542—four years after she fell seriously ill and left the convent—that she was finally able to resume a normal schedule with all her fellow nuns. And even then, her recovery was incomplete. For the remainder of her life, bouts of paralysis in her left arm would be a recurring problem, compounded by many other ailments, such as migraine headaches, fevers, frequent colds, fatigue, and an odd assortment of pains in major organs of

her body, including her heart. By all external physical signs, it would seem that Teresa was doomed to live out the rest of her days at the Convent of the Incarnation as a cripple, perhaps even as a burden to her community. But Teresa would end up surprising everyone, including herself.

During her long illness, Teresa lost some of her spiritual fervor, and—in her own words—“began to indulge in one pastime after another, in one vanity after another.” Worse yet, her soul was “so led astray by all these vanities” that she became ashamed of “turning toward God and finding him in the intimate friendship of prayer” (7:1.52). Teresa joined her community every day and night during the scheduled times for vocal prayer, as she was required to do, but she abandoned mental (silent) prayer. The other nuns at her convent apparently saw nothing wrong in Teresa’s behavior, although she thought of herself as “wicked” and estranged from God. The problem—as Teresa saw it—was that as she gained more and more strength, she began to spend more of her time meeting with visitors. This behavior, which she viewed as a distraction that pulled her ever farther away from God, was not viewed negatively by the other sisters. Teresa confessed that she wanted nothing more than to be thought well of, or admired, and her constant conversations with those from the outside world were a perfect way of making herself seem more worthy of esteem, especially since many of the patrons of the convent came to visit the nuns for advice or for comfort in times of distress. Teresa’s convent was very keen on cultivating close relations with patrons, and would frequently send some of its nuns to live in their homes during times of need, especially when patrons or someone in their family fell ill or died. Teresa herself

would be sent on these errands of mercy a number of times, including one to her own father, who became gravely ill in 1543 and was attended by her. Alonso Cepeda would die at home that year, with Teresa by his side.

Teresa spent the next twelve years observing a perfunctory routine of vocal prayer at set times each day, weekly confession, menial duties, and the “pestilential pastime” of conversing with visitors. This “stormy sea”—those many “grievous” years of glum, passionless, humdrum existence during which she could “find no joy in God and no pleasure in the world” (8:2.60)—came to an abrupt end for Teresa in 1555, on a special feast day when a new image of Christ was brought into the convent for veneration. The figure in this image was the suffering Christ of the passion, wounded and bleeding, and seeing it affected her so much that she fell to the ground, and in a fit of weeping repented for having abandoned mental prayer for so many years, begging for Christ’s help, asking him to “strengthen her once and for all” so she could devote herself wholly to a life of prayer (9:1.63). Teresa considered this her “conversion,” for from that pivotal moment forward her life changed completely. Gone was the sickly, lukewarm nun who prayed and fulfilled her duties perfunctorily, frittering away too many hours with visitors, chatting about insignificant issues instead of praying or seeking intimacy with the divine. Teresa was a new woman. Now she would become an exceptional nun, bold and gifted and highly energetic, wholly engaged in silent prayer, a mystic who routinely crossed the boundaries established for religious women by society and the Catholic Church, as well as the dimensional boundaries between heaven and earth.

Teresa the avid reader would compare her conversion to that of the great saint Augustine (354–430), whose autobiographical *Confessions* she devoured and used as a model for her own *Vida*. The comparison is most apt and an acknowledgment of her indebtedness to Saint Augustine, for just before her conversion she had been given a newly published Spanish translation of the *Confessions* as a gift. The link between this gift and her conversion was clear to her: the fact that she had not asked for it or ever seen it meant that “the Lord had ordained it.” Teresa projected herself into the text, and Augustine’s description of his own tearful conversion, especially, made her weep and shook her soul out of its long, indolent slumber. Dissolving in a weeping fit at the feet of the wounded Christ’s image, just as Augustine had done under a fig tree, confirmed the mimetic dimension of this pivotal moment for Teresa. Once again, as she had done with her books of chivalry, Teresa sought to transform herself through imitation. Moreover, this was no self-transformation, as Teresa saw it. This was a divine irruption, an act of God. As God had transformed Augustine in his moment of repentance and tear-soaked self-abandonment (*dejamiento*), so would God transform Teresa in hers (9:7–9.65).

Filled with enthusiasm, the new Teresa returned to spiritual reading and mental prayer, and the *recogimiento* and *dejamiento* recommended in Osuna’s *Third Spiritual Alphabet*. Soon thereafter, Teresa began to experience “consolations” in return, that is, trances and visions, raptures, divine locutions, intense experiences of God’s presence, and supernatural physical phenomena such as levitations. These intimate encounters with the divine, which she would later

identify and classify as nine distinct states of prayer, became ever more frequent between 1555 and 1560.

Never trained in scholastic theology, and unfamiliar with all of its carefully drawn terminology and precise distinctions, Teresa would struggle to explain these ineffable experiences. Her *Vida* is in large measure an attempt to come to grips with these experiences and place them in some intelligible theological context.

One passage from the *Vida* that focuses on some of her experiences shortly after 1555 reveals the dexterity with which Teresa intertwined description and analysis in an effort to make sense of something that was beyond sensory experience or rational thought. “A feeling of the presence of God used to come over me, unexpectedly, which made it impossible to doubt that He was within me and I was wholly engulfed in Him. This was not like a vision: I believe it is called ‘mystical theology.’ The soul is then suspended as if it were completely outside itself” (10:1.66). In another sentence densely packed with terms drawn from devotional texts and monastic culture, Teresa would express befuddlement and, at the very same time, claim some expertise on the subject of her mystical encounters with the divine, saying, “I would like, with the help of God, to be able to describe the difference between union (*unión*) and rapture (*arrobamiento*), or elevation (*elevamiento*), or what they call flight of the spirit (*vuelo de espíritu*), or transport (*arreatamiento*)—which are all one. I say these are all different names for the same thing, which is also called ecstasy (*éxtasi*)” (20:1.108).

Teresa evolved into a mystic very quickly, in leaps rather than mere steps, so it did not take long for her to run into resistance from male confessors who disapproved of her

visions and raptures, interpreting them as delusions. One of her confessors, Father Gaspar Daza, a *letrado* (learned priest well versed in theology), scolded her, saying that no one with a life as imperfect as hers could receive divine favors of the sort she described. Much to Teresa's relief, she found a new confessor, Baltasar Álvarez, who validated her experiences. Álvarez was a priest from the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), a religious order with a strong tradition of recogimiento, and he would serve as her confessor from 1559 to 1564, as she began to emerge as a mystic and reformer. He assured Teresa that her encounters with the divine were indeed genuine, and also arranged for some well-respected religious figures to meet with Teresa and pass a very positive and affirming judgment on her experiences.

One of these luminaries brought in by Álvarez was none other than one of the most powerful men in Spain, Francis Borgia, former duke of Gandia and viceroy of Catalonia, who had given up his titles and his vast fortune to join the Society of Jesus. Francis Borgia would eventually become the third general of the Jesuit order, but when he met Teresa he was simply serving as the inspector of the new Jesuit school in Ávila. Teresa received approval and encouragement from Francis Borgia, who advised her not to resist her divine trances, visions, and ecstasies. "He consoled me greatly," Teresa would later say (24:3.132).

The other great figure Teresa met during this difficult time was Pedro de Alcántara, leader of a reform movement in the Franciscan order and author of a very influential devotional text, *Treatise on Prayer and Meditation*. A mystic well known for his ecstasies and levitations, Alcántara was revered as a living saint and had even been offered the post

of spiritual advisor to the king of Spain.⁸ A severe ascetic who fasted constantly and slept no more than two hours a day, Pedro was described by Teresa as “emaciated to such an extreme that he seemed to be made of nothing but tree roots.” The fact that this holy man was impressed by Teresa did much to enhance her own reputation in ecclesiastical circles. As far as Teresa was concerned, meeting this kindred spirit and earning his praise was a great gift from God. “He was very holy and also very amiable,” she said, adding, “he was a man of few words—except when answering questions—and his responses were exquisite because his mind was so sublime” (27:18.148).

Around this time, as she was receiving encouragement from Borgia and Alcántara, Teresa’s otherworldly experiences intensified. Visions of Christ became frequent, in which he revealed his full humanity and divinity simultaneously, dazzling and enrapturing Teresa. These visions had a profound effect on her. “A great love of God grew within and I did not know who had put it there, because it was very supernatural, and I had not sought it out. I found myself wanting to die from the desire to see God, and I knew no other way of seeking that other life except through death” (29:8.156).

It was also during this period that Teresa first experienced the transverberation—arguably the best known of all of her ecstasies—during which an angel pierced her heart with a flaming lance.⁹ Her own description of this ecstasy suggests that she did not see angels in corporeal form very often, but that the Lord sometimes (*algunas veces*) granted her “this vision” (*esta visión*) of an angel poised beside her, to her left, “in bodily form,” and that the angel she saw must have been one of the cherubim, because he was so handsome

(*hermoso*) and his face was so resplendent. Whether “this vision” (*esta visión*) refers to one specific experience or to a recurring experience is unclear, but tradition has interpreted the vision known as the transverberation as a singular event. According to Teresa, this ecstasy was a paradoxical wounding that caused her to experience ultimate bliss and ultimate pain simultaneously:

I saw in the angel’s hand a long dart of gold, and at the iron’s point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very inner depths; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all aflame with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it, and the soul could not be satisfied with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it. (29:13.158)

After 1558, due to her otherworldly raptures, Teresa the frail nun was transformed into a dynamic figure and a force to be reckoned with, assuming greater authority through three closely intertwined roles: that of a mystic, that of a writer, and that of a religious reformer. This new triple identity and the authority that came with it were not easily attained, but Teresa prevailed, overcoming many obstacles and sustaining a constant pace of feverish activity up until her death. Tracing the arc of her ascendancy to fame requires dealing not just with her dynamism, then, but also with the three closely intertwined roles that she played.

Of all her three roles, Teresa the writer is undoubtedly the best known. This aspect of her life and work provided

Teresa with a wide audience, not only during the early modern age but down to the present as well. Teresa's two other roles, those of mystic and reformer, were the subjects she wrote about. Writing about herself, her life of prayer, and her efforts to reform the Carmelite order gave Teresa the unique chance to shape and control her legacy to a considerable extent. Although hundreds of texts have been written *about* Teresa ever since her death, it is in the texts written *by* Teresa that subsequent generations have found—and continue to find—the key reference point for all narratives and analyses, and this is especially true of her *Vida*, for it is in that unique text that Teresa expresses her own understanding of her life and work.

When it comes to her two other roles, Teresa the mystic is perhaps better known nowadays than Teresa the reformer for one reason, above all: while her mysticism transcends its very Catholic essence and its historical setting by dealing with issues that are still of great concern beyond Catholic culture—such as the meaning and purpose of human existence and the nature of reality itself—her reforming work, which was limited to one order of cloistered nuns, does not easily transcend its very specific sixteenth-century monastic milieu. Moreover, for readers of the *Vida*, the Teresa they come in contact with is not the reformer but the mystic, for the narrative of that text is focused on her mysticism, not on her efforts to reform the Carmelite order, which actually began in earnest after she was done writing the *Vida*. Nonetheless, isolating the mystic from the reformer is not only impossible but wrong-headed, for contemplation and action were always linked for Teresa, and the fact that her reform of the Carmelite

order is directly related to some of her most dramatic mystical experiences—such as her vision of hell—is something Teresa makes very clear.

Teresa the Reformer

Displeased with the relative laxity with which the Carmelite rule was observed at the Convent of the Incarnation, and convinced that God had chosen her to return her order to its original strictness, Teresa formulated plans to establish a new Carmelite convent in Ávila. Her goal was to emulate the reform of the Franciscan order carried out by Pedro de Alcántara, the venerable mystic who had assured her in 1557 of the divine origin of her ecstasies and visions. This reform entailed a return to strict enclosure and to absolute poverty, and a commitment to silent prayer. The nuns were to be *descalzas* (discalced), that is, they were to wear sandals rather than shoes as a visible sign of their commitment to absolute poverty; and the new convent was to support itself by its own labors, such as sewing, and by securing alms from benefactors and patrons rather than by owning land and collecting rents, as was common for most monastic institutions. In addition, the reformed order would open its doors to any woman who proved herself spiritually and temperamentally worthy of joining, regardless of her class or status, or the ability to come up with a dowry, as was customary at most nunneries. Dowries—while welcome—were not to be required of anyone.¹⁰

Since Ávila already had five religious houses for women and six for men, opposition to the establishment of yet

another convent was intense, especially to one that would compete with the others for alms to ensure its survival, but Teresa prevailed. In August 1562 she established the Convent of Saint Joseph in Ávila, where she and three nuns from the Convent of the Incarnation began a reform of their Carmelite order. Teresa would spend the rest of her life crisscrossing Spain tirelessly, seeking patrons, establishing fourteen new Discalced Carmelite convents, and fomenting a parallel reform among the male Carmelites through John of the Cross, a younger mystic deeply influenced by her.

Since most of Teresa's work as a reformer took place after 1562, it is an aspect of her life that is explicitly excluded from her *Vida* and therefore also from our purview in this study, which focuses only on that text. Yet, that reforming work is invisibly woven into the fabric of the *Vida*, for Teresa deemed it an essential component of her conversion and of the increasingly intense spiritual life that flowed from it, described by her in chapters 32 to 36. That spiritual growth and all its intense transports and visions had a purpose beyond personal illumination, as she saw it, so writing the *Vida* was much more than an attempt to understand and explain the "favors" God showered on her. For Teresa, the project was also an attempt to discover the outcome of all those favors. It could be argued, in fact, that this link between action and contemplation is so significant to Teresa that the climax of the *Vida* is reached in those chapters that link her visions to the founding of the Convent of Saint Joseph and of the Discalced Carmelite reform.

Teresa the writer and reformer kept very busy after finishing the *Vida*. During the last two decades of her life,

between 1562 and 1582, Teresa penned three other major books: *The Interior Castle*, an intensely poetic yet analytical summary of her mystical experiences that relies heavily on metaphors; *The Way of Perfection*, a how-to guide for the nuns under her direction, which she called a “living book,” for achieving the ultimate goals of the Carmelite spiritual life; and *The Book of Foundations*, a history of her reforming efforts and of the establishment of the Discalced Carmelite order in Spain. A master at multitasking, Teresa also wrote poems, meditations, instructions, and more than five hundred letters during this stretch of time, while continuing to experience many of her transports, raptures, and ecstasies. And, as if all this were not enough, Teresa also traversed Castile and Andalusia ceaselessly, always uncomfortably, often in searing heat or freezing cold, in beggarly carts and carriages, establishing seventeen Discalced Carmelite convents hither and yon against constant local opposition, launching a similar enterprise among male Carmelites—against even stronger opposition—and handling the innumerable practical details and unpleasant disputes that were part and parcel of such activism.

Teresa died at the age of sixty-seven on 4 October 1582 at the Discalced Carmelite convent she had founded in Alba de Tormes at the estate of the duke of Alba. She arrived there exhausted, having just handled unpleasant business at her convents in Burgos, Palencia, and Valladolid. Her constant companion, Ana de San Bartolomé, would later say that she couldn’t look at Teresa during that trip without crying because Teresa’s face looked “half dead.” Ana would also say: “This final journey . . . was a prolonged martyrdom . . . It is only fair to report what I heard [from Teresa herself],

which given her great strength and courage, must have been most difficult for her to say: that in spite of all the many travails she had endured through her life, she had never been as distressed and afflicted as she was at that moment.”¹¹

Teresa died from a hemorrhage that began shortly after her arrival at Alba and lasted several days. Those who thronged around her deathbed, however, had a different interpretation. According to their eyewitness accounts, Teresa died in the midst of a mystical trance, and it was the intensity of that rapture, which wrenched her soul from her body too violently, that had caused the profuse bleeding. In other words, they believed that Teresa’s death was caused by the ultimate mystical ecstasy, and that her final moments were utterly blissful. One of her early biographers said:

She remained wholly absorbed in God, with the greatest serenity and stillness, totally enraptured with the novelty of what she was beginning to discover, rejoicing and enjoying her nearness to that which she had so keenly desired . . . Who would doubt that the King of Glory attended on her there, revealing a thousand new joyful things, and calling her to Himself with those sweet words: “Come, my beloved, my dove, hurry, my friend, for the winter of this life is now over, and the beautiful flowers of my eternity and my glory are starting to bloom.”¹²

In death, as in life, Teresa exerted a forceful presence. Suddenly, all of the objects that had come in contact with her body and the body itself acquired the wondrous qualities possessed by relics of the saints. In addition, many of those who were close to Teresa claimed she had visited them

from the afterlife. Her corpse became the greatest wonder of all, and the source of much contention.

Fearful that a relic as potentially wondrous as Teresa's corpse would be taken to Ávila, the nuns at Alba buried her quickly in their chapel and filled the grave with heavy stones to ensure she could not be easily dug up. Meanwhile, the nuns at Saint Joseph's convent in Ávila claimed legitimate ownership of the corpse and demanded it be turned over to them. As an unseemly dispute dragged on between the two convents, Teresa's corpse was exhumed and moved twice. In October 1585, Teresa's body was taken to Ávila. To console the nuns at Alba for this loss, her left arm was cut off and left there. Less than a year later, however, the duke of Alba—one of the most powerful men in Spain—obtained orders from Pope Sixtus V to have the corpse returned to Alba. So, once again, in August 1586, Teresa's remains were disinterred and returned to their original burial spot, despite howls of protest from Ávila. Appeals were made to Rome by the Ávila nuns, but to no avail. In 1589 Pope Sixtus V reaffirmed his decision that Alba should be Teresa's final resting place.

A miracle intensified all of this wrangling, for the exhumations had revealed that Teresa's corpse refused to decompose. This was not totally unexpected, for incorruptibility was a trait associated with saints' corpses, along with other miraculous phenomena, such as the so-called odor of sanctity, and the oozing of miraculous oil. But the fact that incorruptibility was not granted by God to every saint—even great ones—made Teresa's miracle all the more wondrous.

Teresa's corpse manifested all of these miraculous attributes, and others as well. The fragrance emitted by the

corpse was not only immensely pleasing but also capable of overwhelming anyone who came near it, and causing headaches. According to many who handled Teresa's remains, her flesh remained supple for decades, and capable of bleeding when cut. Miraculous oil also began to flow after some years, and the cures ascribed to this oil and to other bits and pieces of Teresa were more numerous than the bits and pieces themselves.

Why speak of bits and pieces? Because, paradoxically, the incorruptibility of Teresa's corpse ensured its disintegration. Gradually, as news of the marvel of her corpse spread, so did the desire to gain access to it, and the only way to fulfill that desire was to carve it up and disperse fragments of it, large and small. This process of *découpage millimétrique*, or of cutting up the relics of saints into minute fragments, was an old Christian tradition, based on the belief that the presence of the saints is manifested equally in every bit of their remains, no matter how small, and that this presence is a link between heaven and earth.

Teresa's corpse remained at Alba, where a proper shrine was eventually built for it, but by the 1590s it was already grossly mutilated. The heart had been removed and enshrined in a reliquary, and the arm that had been severed to placate the nuns at Alba when the corpse was moved to Ávila in 1585 was displayed in another reliquary. One hand ended up in Lisbon. One foot went to Rome, along with other fragments, including her lower jaw. One finger from the left hand was clipped by Jerónimo Gracián, a confessor deeply devoted to her, and he wore it around his neck for the remainder of his life. Other fingers ended up in various locations, and other relics—slivers of flesh, some teeth and

bones, and one eye—eventually made their way to other places in Europe, or overseas to far-off Mexico and the Philippines. Someone who saw the corpse at Alba in 1594 lamented that “there was a great deal of flesh missing from the back, and almost half the belly was gone.” And one of Teresa’s nieces was shocked to learn that “the body is all cut up and that they parcel out pieces of flesh to those who ask for them out of devotion.”¹³

While all of this carving was going on, Teresa quickly became an iconic representative of the Catholic Reformation. Since the Council of Trent had established new rules in 1563 for the beatification and canonization of saints, Teresa became one of the first to undergo this new process, which involved interviewing hundreds of people who had known her and examining her writings closely. The beatification inquest proceeded very smoothly, and Teresa was beatified in 1614 by Pope Pius V. Soon thereafter, a canonization inquest began, and a mere eight years later, in 1622, Teresa was officially declared a saint by Pope Gregory XV, along with Ignatius Loyola, Francis Xavier, and Philip Neri, great figures of the Catholic Reformation. Teresa’s canonization expanded the appeal and reach of her writings, which could ask for no grander seal of approval than to be declared the work of a saint.

In addition to becoming an authority on spiritual matters and an intercessor venerated throughout the Catholic world, Teresa also became an iconic national figure in Spain. The Spanish royal family had a role to play in this development, for King Philip II had greatly admired Saint Teresa and gathered her manuscripts at his library in the palace of the Escorial. One of the most avid relic collectors of his day,

Philip had brought more than seven thousand relics to that palace. He may not have acquired any of Teresa's corporeal relics, but he did manage to gather some of the most valuable contact relics of all: the books she had written with her own right hand. Philip guarded those manuscripts as closely as any of his other precious relics.

Devotion to Saint Teresa remained strong in the royal family after Philip II's death in 1598. In 1627, his grandson, King Philip IV, expressed his own devotion to Teresa by elevating her to the role of patroness of Spain, alongside the apostle Saint James, who had been the sole patron since the early Middle Ages. One of the sermons preached in Madrid during the celebration of Teresa's new role as patroness summed up the sentiments that informed the king's decree: "Everything about this saint is Spanish: her life, her death, her holiness, her religious order, her miracles, her teachings, and the fame she has earned throughout the world, all of these are Spanish."¹⁴ Although some Spaniards did not approve of making Saint James share his role with a woman, and eventually convinced Pope Urban VIII to proclaim Saint James the sole patron of Spain, very few of these naysayers dared to question Teresa's *españolidad* (Spanishness) or the reverence due to her.

All of her Spanishness did not hem in Teresa, however, or prevent her from becoming one of the best known and most universally revered saints in the Catholic world beyond Spain. Ultimately, much of what Catholics came to know about Teresa was derived from her *Vida*, a text that became inseparable from her role as an exemplary Catholic. Teresa the saint and Teresa the author of the *Vida* could not be unyoked. In the iconography that developed after her

elevation to sainthood, Teresa would often be depicted with a quill pen in her hand, or in the act of writing. In her own day and age, and for several generations, as Catholics and Protestants continually battled each other, Teresa came to represent some of the core beliefs about divine-human relations most beloved by Catholics and most loathed by Protestants. As one of her early biographers put it: Teresa was the antidote to Luther's poison.

This, too, was planned by God, that at almost the same time that the wicked Luther began to plot his lies and deceptions, and to concoct the poison with which he would later kill so many, He should be forming this sainted woman so she could serve as an antidote to his poison, so that whatever was withdrawn from God on one side by Luther should be gathered and collected on another side by her.¹⁵

One of these relics, her right hand, would play a very peculiar role in the history of Spain four centuries later. This was the hand with which Teresa did all of her writing, always very rapidly. We will return to this relic in chapter 6.