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The translation of Cecilia del Nacimiento’s prose and poetry into English is long overdue. Among Spanish mystics she is second only to the founders of the Discalced Carmelite order, Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross, in her mystical attainment and skill as a writer. Kevin Donnelly and Sandra Sider provide very fine translations of a wide selection of Cecilia’s poetry and prose and are to be commended for publishing this first edition of Cecilia’s works in English. Readers interested in the literary achievements of early modern women, convent literature of early modern Europe, the western mystical tradition, as well as those interested in personal accounts of spiritual experience will delight in the discovery of Cecilia del Nacimiento and wonder how it is that she has been in obscurity until now.

A Discalced Carmelite nun of the early seventeenth century (1570–1647) who spent most of her life in the Carmelite convent of Valladolid founded by Teresa, Cecilia wrote principally for her community and to fulfill the requests of her male superiors. Cecilia’s poetry and prose accounts detailing her own mystical experiences are a tribute to both Discalced Carmelite founders, whose teachings about the spiritual life flourished in the vibrant spiritual and intellectual convent culture of the second generation of Discalced Carmelite women. In spite of the obstacles to women’s attainment as writers and mystics in the Counter Reformation Spain of Cecilia’s day, her work outshines that of her male contemporaries. While clearly indebted to her order’s founders, her writings demonstrate extensive direct personal knowledge of the full range of spiritual experi-
ence. Although Teresa and John clearly inspired the bridal mysticism that informs her writing, her work is not derivative but evidences a thorough command of the details of the most advanced levels of contemplative experience, the direct, unmediated experience of God. Cecilia describes in great detail the spiritual path from its beginnings to its heights in full union with God.

This edition features several prose works that illustrate the range of Cecilia’s prose production. It features two long treatises that describe the evolution of the spiritual life from the very beginnings of contemplative experience to full union with God in spiritual marriage: “Treatise on the Transformation of the Soul in God” and “Treatise on the Union of the Soul in God.” The book also provides three shorter essays: “First Account of God’s Favors,” “Second Account of God’s Favors,” and “Glosses on the Song of Songs.” These accounts are more personal in tone in comparison to the formality of the treatises. In them she shares her own experiences, recalling specific visions, insights, and other spiritual phenomena. The edition also includes two theological essays, “Theological Exposition on the Immaculate Conception” and “Treatise on the Mysteries of Our Holy Faith.” These essays reveal Cecilia’s knowledge of the theological issues of her day. Also translated are several letters that she wrote to her sister, María de San Alberto, herself an accomplished poet and playwright, and to her brothers Antonio and Juan, which reflect her close ties to her siblings and their shared commitment to spiritual growth and devotion to God.

The treatise that comments on her “Songs of the Transformation of the Soul in God” is of particular importance. The poem is very reminiscent of John of the Cross’s “Noche oscura del alma” [Dark Night of the Soul]. The commentary demonstrates Cecilia’s mastery of the complete range of contemplative or mystical experience. She provides a systematic explication of the poem stanza-by-stanza and verse-by-verse, using John of the Cross’s expository method in his prose commentaries to his poems. Cecilia observes about the stanzas of her poem that “all these songs deal with the state of perfection and divine riches that can be enjoyed there” (55). The poem stresses the perpetual communication of God’s self in the soul’s center (55). She describes contemplative experience as one in which the soul “can receive in the core of its own substance communications that come
directly from God” (35). Initially these communications are perceived to be darkness because they are direct communications of God’s immensity and light that exceed the person’s capacity of perception. As direct infusions of the very substance of God, they are “above human intelligence and beyond anecdotal retelling” (36). As the person’s soul melts in the divine fire of God’s light, it experiences “the most powerful type of love” and beauty (37). The contemplative enjoys “delicious wisdom, delight, and glory” (49). The undisturbed solitude of contemplation is “true liberation” in God (54).

With time and continued contemplative experience, the human partner no longer perceives the divine lover as hidden in darkness but in full light. The human partner has so assimilated the qualities of the divine spouse that in their mystical union they are both divine (95). This Cecilia understands as coming from God’s willingness to lower Himself to the level of the human partner in order to lift up a mere creature “to make her what she is not” (103). The human partner, “stuck in the natural abilities of her nothingness,” “gives in completely to the greatness of her God” (104). Although in this sense, God conquers her, paradoxically, she has also conquered God (104).

This edition also presents a bilingual selection of Cecilia’s poetry. Among the eighty-seven poetic pieces are several sonnets addressed to the Divine Lover, poems dedicated to the Child Jesus, poems in honor of Teresa de Jesús, devotional poetry written for her community’s celebrations, pastoral verses, and an allegorical play on the occasion of a religious profession.

Cecilia’s poetry evinces an expert use of the baroque penchant for word play and the juxtaposition of opposites (conceptismo). This is apparent even in the opening line of “I Drink in a Sea of Thirst in which I am Drowning.” In the sonnet “You Are without Measure in your Measure” Cecilia underscores that nothing created can fill the void of the human heart, “your thirst will not be quenched by the salt sea of the blind world.” I favor another translation for the line “el centro tuyo busca en tí escondido.” Instead of translating it to say “your center searches in your hidden self,” I suggest, “Look for your center hidden within you” as it better comports with Cecilia’s understanding of mystical experience (267). In “Life that Kills, Death that Gives Life,” Cecilia conveys something of contemplative
experience with a series of oxymorons that transcends language and unites the human partner with God’s Being. It is “ice that burns, fire that freezes.” It is a “tortoise that flies,” “bitter health, sweet injury,” and a “proclaimer of peace that bears arms” (271).

Cecilia wrote several poems dedicated to Teresa of Ávila that played an important role in the campaign for her beatification and canonization. She praises Teresa’s virtues in “Poetry for our Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus,” calling her a princess, the spouse of Jesus, the prince (303). Other poems in Teresa’s honor are more daring. In “To Saint Teresa” Cecilia is clothed with Jesus, the Sun of Justice. Although the translation reads as though the reference to a patriarch connotes Christ, it is also possible to translate the poem to say that the patriarch is Teresa, who inspires others to become Carmelites, who in turn are new suns and new stars in the heavens. Teresa is not only clothed in the Sun of Justice, she is the moon, a symbol of the feminine (467). Teresa’s deification through her spiritual marriage to Jesus also suggests the equality of the genders in “Teresa is of Jesus.” Christ belongs to Teresa as much as she belongs to him: “For not only is she his, Jesus is more of Teresa.” Christ yearns for her just as she yearns for him: “he burns for her and she, longing, is devoted to him” (475–76).

In celebrating and justifying Teresa’s achievements, Cecilia not only challenged the limitations imposed on women by the church and the society of her day, she also defended the aspirations of her generation to write, to lead others and especially, to enjoy a spousal relationship with Christ. Cecilia pursued and attained all these goals. Of all Spanish mystics, she is second only to the greatest, Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross, her spiritual mentors. Thanks to the efforts of Kevin Donnelly and Sandra Sider, Cecilia will meet the wider audience she so deserves.

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