

## The Visions of Sor María de Agreda



The Visions  
of  
Sor María de Agreda



Writing Knowledge and Power

Clark Colahan

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# Contents

Acknowledgments vii

## I

Introduction 1

## 2

The Renaissance Cosmos and Its Secrets 17

Sixteenth-Century Geography

Cosmography

Date and Authenticity of *Face of the Earth*

The Converso Legacy

Manuscripts of *Face of the Earth*

## 3

Text of *Face of the Earth* and *Map of the Spheres* 47

4

Mystical Journey 93

Manuscripts of the Report to Father Manero

From Benavides' 1634 Report

Benavides to the Missionaries

Sor María's Letter to the Missionaries

Benavides' Letter on His Interview

with Sor María

Text of the Report to Father Manero

5

The Crucible of Trials 129

A Vision of Confrontation

The Agredan Style

Manuscripts of "The Crucible of Trials"

Text of "The Crucible of Trials"

6

The Empowered Spirit 147

Childhood Remembered

Luis de Granada and the Midrash

The Virgin as Role Model

The Virgin as the Holy City

Mystical Liberation?

Notes 167

Select Bibliography 183

Index 189

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# I

## Introduction

*Through the kindness of the generous and loving mercy of the Most High, the light of the Lord, coming out to meet me as I entered life through the door of rational thought, showed me the beauty and importance of truth so that I might love it and by that love be urged on to reach it.'*

**I**n the Hispanic world the fame of the Venerable Sor María de Agreda (1602–1665) is considerable and has been constructed on a three-part base: She is known, above all, as the author of *The Mystical City of God*, a voluminous biography of the Virgin Mary and detailed chronicle of her relationship with the human race, based on Sor María's revelations from the Virgin herself; second, she was the friend and advisor of Felipe IV, the king of Spain, with whom she exchanged hundreds of letters; and third, she was the miraculous missionary said to have carried out a "bilocation" to New Mexico and Texas during the Age of Discovery. Sor María was believed to have personally taken the gospel to the Indians without ever once leaving her hometown in the province of Soria by conventional means. In the American Southwest, Sor María's bilocation has been remembered ever since in the legend of the Lady in Blue.

Sor María still provokes surprise and polemic. Above all, it has been her great book that has brought her either respect bordering on adoration or smiles of amused disdain. Published some 250 times and translated into a dozen languages since its posthumous appearance in 1670, *The Mystical City of God* split Europe into Agredists and anti-Agredists.<sup>2</sup> Efforts toward Sor María's canonization continue today, and as recently as twenty years ago, the Spanish government actively supported such efforts. Rulers as diverse as the liberal Carlos III and the reactionary Francisco Franco took special interest in helping her cause at the Vatican. Yet in spite of this celebrity status, several of her signifi-

cant writings have never been published, nor is there a literary study of her work as a whole. Why?

An assembly convoked by the Sorbonne in 1696 foreshadowed *The Mystical City of God's* reception by the intellectual world. A minority of the scholars were not adverse to the fervent Marian devotion of the time and voted to accept the work as free of theological errors and probably the result of authentic supernatural inspiration. The majority, however, more oriented toward rationalism and the imminent Age of Enlightenment, rejected the work as patently deluded and possibly a somewhat fraudulent attempt by the Franciscan order in Spain to build a case for the much-debated theological hypothesis of the Immaculate Conception, which affirms that the Virgin Mary was born free of original sin. The indignant response of other universities, including many in Spain, was not long in coming.

Indeed, the book was part of such vehement controversy over the Immaculate Conception—into which Catholics at that time poured so much partisan energy—that in 1616 and 1622, two popes felt compelled to issue prohibitions of discussion of the subject.<sup>3</sup> In 1675, Ippolito Maracci, a Marian enthusiast who refused to obey the ban on preaching, was excommunicated. In France, oaths were taken to defend the Virgin's honor, and there was brawling in the streets on her account.<sup>4</sup>

At the root of the emotion were two issues, both related to the Reformation and the church's response to it: first, whether or not the Virgin is Christ's equal in glory and power, and second, whether traditions developed over the centuries within the church are as valid as the biblical record. As we shall see, *The Mystical City of God* portrays the Virgin as a full-fledged partner of her son, co-Redeemer of the World, knowing and doing the same things. Saint Jean Eudes, Sor María's exact contemporary, similarly raised the Virgin nearly to the Godhead in affirming that she "was an exact counterpart to Jesus: He [God] would give this Virgin Mother to us. And as the Son is the figure of his substance . . . and the perfect image of the Divinity . . . so also Mary should bear a perfect resemblance to him."<sup>5</sup> This identification can be understood in light of the fact that more and more throughout the Middle Ages, Mary had come to be thought of as the maternal, forgiving intercessor for sinners with God the Father, feared as a strict judge. In this role, she is the intermediary between God and individuals, just

as Jesus, in the New Testament, is the Lamb of God, the sacrifice that reconciles God and mankind.

In the movement toward self-direction that characterized the Renaissance and Reformation, the Virgin offered an acceptable avenue of personal access to the spiritual power at the heart of Christianity. Over the course of fifteen hundred years, the church had grown increasingly codified and institutionalized, insulating its members from the immediate, uplifting experience of divine revelation. While Protestants embraced a belief in divine guidance for individuals in their own readings of the Bible, Catholics found emotional sanctuary in both Mary and mysticism. Especially for Catholic women, living within a religion overwhelmingly dominated by men, what could have been more natural than turning for solace and inspiration not to a rigid institution ruled by severe padres, but instead to an inner world warmed by an understanding and all-powerful mother?

The especially vigorous defense in Spain of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is related also to that country's self-concept as the most stalwart defender of the Counter-Reformation. The Jesuits, whose order was founded in Spain in 1534, were guided by the finding of the Spanish-dominated Council of Trent that traditions of the faithful were to be held in equal honor with the biblical text. Reacting to the Protestant insistence on adhering to Scripture, and in particular to the pointed rejection of the doctrine due to its absence there, the Jesuits insistently defended the Immaculate Conception as one of those extratextual truths that the church had recovered through later reasoning and revelation. For this reason, its very absence from the Bible was a spur to its defense.<sup>6</sup>

Almost equally important, at least in Spain, was support for the belief by the Franciscans, within whose order the Immaculate Conception had been formulated in the thirteenth century. Marian devotion in general was part of the Franciscan emphasis on Christ's human nature. Stories of the holy family, often dramatized, figured importantly in their missionary programs, both to the southern part of the country, where there was a strong Muslim tradition, and to the New World. The province of Almería, in the mountainous outback of Granada, Islam's most persistent cultural enclave on the Spanish peninsula and the most stubborn enemy of Franco's campaign to impose orthodoxy

in the 1940s, still retains the Franciscan influence in place names such as San José and Pozo del Fraile, "The Friar's Well." In California, the eighteenth-century Franciscan missions had names like Purísima, "Immaculate," and Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles, "Our Lady Queen of Angels."

In England, the Age of the Reformation brought an emphatic end to this sort of adoration of the Virgin, a practice associated with allegiance to Rome instead of the new Church of England's independence and the Protestants' reliance on Scripture. A striking example is "England's Nazareth," a house built about 1130 to the dimensions of the holy family's house, said to have been revealed by the Virgin to a woman in Walsingham. For the remainder of the Middle Ages, it was a center of pilgrimage and, reputedly, continuing miracles. As a young man, Henry VIII supported England's Nazareth generously, but in 1538 he had the shrine dismantled and the miracle-working statue burned.<sup>7</sup> Devotion to the Virgin and the saints came to be thought of as part of the cluster of practices centered on externals—relics, pilgrimages, rituals—that replaced real inner spirituality with what until recently has been called "popery." On the other hand, the individual's right, or even duty, to rely on a personal interpretation of Scripture encouraged freedom of thought, creating an intellectual climate in which skepticism, the basis of modern science, took root early. This anti-mystical bias in connection with the cult of the Virgin can be seen clearly today in the Anglo-American *Catholic Encyclopedia*, whose article on "private revelation" makes a point of warning the reader to be wary of extravagant claims about the Virgin such as those made by Sor María de Agreda.

In nineteenth-century Spain, in contrast, *The Mystical City of God* remained a source of pride, even a point of honor, among conservatives, especially among those having Franciscan sympathies. The distinguished novelist and professor of comparative literature Emilia Pardo Bazán, although not a conservative in most matters, was an enthusiast and published a condensation of the book. She wrote: "[Sor María] deserves to be considered one of our classics on the basis of the purity, strength and elegance of her style; among our theologians on the basis of her abundance and depth of doctrine; among our philosophers on the basis of her rigorous logic and mental vigor. In her time learned

bishops and grave doctors felt confused and amazed, unable to make sense of the fact that an uneducated female, whose only schooling had been through meditation, could follow securely in the steps of Saint Thomas and Duns Scotus.”<sup>8</sup>

Liberals, on the other hand, who liked to identify their politics with the century's positivistic brand of science, were more careful. When Sor María cropped up in the context of their historical or literary research, they usually limited their analysis to remarking that her popular impact was, deservedly, in decline.<sup>9</sup> To these writers, it never would have occurred to bring out a first edition of new works by a writer with such a radically supernatural epistemology, especially in light of the strange experiences attributed to her, the very sort of superstitious extravagances against which the encyclopedist Father Feijoo had fought in the eighteenth century. Their intellectual adversaries (and that is the word to use in the context of the divided Spain that was bled by civil wars in the last century as well as the twentieth) were equally unlikely to dig around in Sor María's secondary works, though for entirely different reasons. Conservatives probably feared that a comparison of her other writings and the controversial biography, of which they were so proud but others so scornful, would point to human sources of inspiration and methods of composition. The Holy Scriptures themselves, as Christian traditionalists saw with alarm, were being subjected to the same kind of treatment by the new biblical scholarship.

This is the reason so much of the present bibliography on Sor María has been produced either by Franciscans with an unshakable pride in their extraordinary nun or by historians of a thoroughgoing skepticism, with many in both groups being non-Spaniards. In the United States, understandably, scholars have concentrated not on her writings but on her legend—its origin, historical references to tribes who retained the memory of having seen and heard her, and how much or how little truth there might be at its core. Prior to the 1960s, the nature of Sor María's mystical legend—which makes her personality and writings valuable for an understanding of the culture of the Hispanic Southwest and, in a broader context, Christianity's image of the maternal aspect of God—ran counter to the direction of progress. For many, it was only another of the quaint, romantic artifacts of the Spanish Southwest, emotional nonsense surviving in a generally scientific view of the

world. However, as the country's ideology has struggled toward pluralism, and the history of women, ethnic groups, and peripheral regions has gained recognition, Sor María's distinctive presence has attracted more attention.

Her importance for women's studies is clear. Sor María's spiritual and imaginative life, the resonances it has called forth perennially from her readers, and their place within comparative literature and religion are complemented by her historical life. Like that of her model, Teresa de Avila, Sor María provides an extraordinary example of a woman overcoming restrictions. Although she never left the town where she was born and never lived anywhere except her parents' house or the convent her mother founded, still she became a famous missionary to the American Southwest—became that in her mind and the minds of her king, church, companions, and the very Indians she had so wished to help. Though Sor María was unable to go to court to counsel the king, he went to her, and then for years he sought her advice in active correspondence. Though limited by her gender in opportunities for formal study, Sor María wrote not only influential letters, memoirs, and collections of prayers, but even a little geography and cosmology before undertaking her monumental biography of the Virgin. In all of this, she has much to offer as an exemplar of a woman successfully working for recognition within a narrowly prescribed social role and its accompanying discourse while ultimately managing to subvert them.

The subversion culminated in Sor María's life of the Virgin, who over the centuries has been one of the most revered women in the history of European civilization. The biography, while a creation of the imagination, has offered thousands and thousands of readers a role model who is not passive, but active, powerful, even all-knowing, and who was of fundamental importance in the history of the church and mankind in general. The traditional paternalistic view of the Virgin, in keeping with the little space she receives in the biblical account of the life of her son, urged women to keep quiet and to think of themselves primarily as self-sacrificing mothers, enclosed within their own long-suffering hearts, pierced swordlike by the Virgin's seven traditional sorrows taken from the Gospels. In fact, statues of Mary with real swords piercing her chest in a cluster over the heart are still frequently found in Hispanic Catholic churches.



This justification for denying women leadership roles was made use of explicitly, to cite one example, by a churchman working to diminish the influence of María de Santo Domingo, a reforming nun of the early sixteenth century.<sup>10</sup> But after the publication of *The Mystical City of God*, the Spanish church, especially the Franciscans, looked to the book's energetic image of the Virgin on more than one occasion as a positive example to be followed, even by men, in areas of active endeavor, as her influence on Fray Junípero Serra and the missionaries to California clearly shows.

One would think, then, that a person seeking a deeper understanding of Sor María's legend and of what her life and work have to say in more than theological terms could turn to Spain, where her perennially and internationally read literature would have been studied and the reasons for its hold on so many people's imagination articulated. But no, Spanish critics have shown no interest, but rather an apparent unwillingness to taint themselves with a work popular with the wrong sort of readers. Of the nation's internationally recognized writers of the last two centuries, only the feminist Pardo Bazán has argued for Sor María's inclusion in the canon of Spanish literature.<sup>11</sup>

Famous novelists in the liberal camp, Benito Pérez Galdós, for example, repeatedly have ridiculed the stories surrounding her. Juan Valera—urbane, ironical, and critical of the impact of the mystical tradition on Spanish life—in *Pepita Jiménez* described the false priestly vocation of the male protagonist as a wish to be another Sor María de Agreda. In his 1977 novel, *Fragments of Apocalypse*, Torrente Ballester, who edited Sor María's correspondence with Felipe IV, sounds a distorted echo of her reports to the king about the afterlife of his dead wife and son when Ballester's modern protagonist makes weekend trips to hell to bring back politically useful information.<sup>12</sup> The scoffers have apparently carried the day in Spain; in a 1989 conference celebrating the five-hundredth anniversary of Sor María's own Conceptionist order, nuns from the León convent, not far from Agreda, told me *The Mystical City of God*, once intensively studied in the order, was a book they had not read and about which they had been warned to be alert for errors in case they should.

This sort of disdain has meant that the artistic and psychological elements that have kept Sor María's epic in publication for centuries

still remain unexamined. One would like to point out diplomatically to Spanish scholars that *Paradise Lost* has suffered less from this kind of ideological prejudice, allowing the English-speaking world to recognize the important human value of its own seventeenth-century epic set in a grandiose religious frame.

Given that since 1975 the “two Spains” have made an effort to listen to each other in the political forum, the moment may be right for a fresh, open-minded look into such highly charged corners in the history of the national spirit. Moreover, the growing acceptance of women’s studies means that the importance for Spain of an intuitive, visionary woman can now be more easily recognized. And finally, Sor María’s case is of interest because she reflects Renaissance Spain’s view of the expanding geographical world, a view that was part of the impulse leading to Spanish exploration and colonization.

Two important books on Sor María in the last twenty-five years already have taken steps toward a less polarized, more conciliatory approach to the long-stewing “caso Agreda.” The first was the excellent biography by the English historian Sir Thomas Kendrick, which combines the advantages of good archival documentation with careful methodology and his perspective as a neutral but expert foreigner. Shortly after his book was published, there appeared in Spain the so-called critical edition of *The Mystical City of God*, based on Sor María’s autograph manuscript and offering a comprehensive introduction. It was competently carried out by a team of Franciscan scholars headed by Father Celestino Solaguren, whose introduction shows a clear will to bring Agredan studies into the second half of the twentieth century. Reflecting his intellectual honesty, as well as a belief in the goodwill and openness of his readers, Solaguren gets into thorny but basic issues that here, too, will be considered. Given the unmistakable strength of Sor María’s personality, to what extent is her portrait of the Virgin modeled on herself? To what in her life should be attributed her strong sense of God’s immense power and the marvel of his infinitely varied creation? And if, contrary to Franciscan tradition, we are not dealing with the autobiography of the Virgin Mary as told to Sor María de Agreda, what is the literary genre of the work, and what are its sources? I have sought to point the way toward an appreciation of Sor María’s writings *a lo humano*, looking at her personality and what it

created as neither untouchable icon nor the bizarre outcome of an environment overfull of religious pressures. As Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlauf have pointed out, the fundamental value of such nuns' writings is that "these texts contain almost the only record we have of the consciousness of early modern women in Hispanic lands."<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, readers familiar with the panoramic, pioneering studies of Hispanic convent literature by Arenal, which have recently opened up forgotten vistas of a women's literature that a male intellectual tradition had belittled and ridiculed nearly into oblivion, will find in Sor María's writings and life many familiar themes. The cloister, for all its enclosure and the presence of authoritarian confessors, did offer the support of a community of women and a measure of solitude and independence.<sup>14</sup> While Sor María did not become a nun through her own initiative—the decision being her mother's—still, it was the conditions of her life in the convent that gave scope to her administrative talents, stimulated her visions and lent them authority, and called for their recording on paper. An expert seamstress like the Virgin in *The Mystical City of God*, Sor María's position as a gifted nun, like that of her famous Mexican counterpart Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, gave her the "right to wield not only the needle but the pen."<sup>15</sup> And in their writing, both Sor María and Sor Juana display the curious mixture of exaggerated self-effacement and self-importance that reflects the contradictory demands of patriarchal paranoia and the feminine need to survive with self-esteem.<sup>16</sup>

Close parallels will come to light with the theological feminism of Sor Juana that Arenal has pointed to, notably the Mexican nun's placement of the Virgin "sometimes above, sometimes next to God. . . . Thus she revised patriarchal concepts."<sup>17</sup> Both Sor María and Sor Juana turned to the Virgin as the "Queen of Wisdom," in the Mexican's phrase, Sor María portraying her as a celestial queen as omniscient as her divine spouse and father, and both affirm their worth by establishing comparisons between themselves and heroic figures out of biblical narrative.<sup>18</sup>

The present study publishes for the first time two more Agredan writings and explores their connections to Sor María's presence in the Southwest and to *The Mystical City of God*, both in terms of the ideas themselves and of their place in the trajectory of her writings. They

are, first, *Face of the Earth and Map of the Spheres*, a Renaissance cosmographic treatise presented as a mystical trip around the world and up into the heavens, but with emphasis on the New World, and second, the first half of her report to Father Manero, a long letter to the minister general of the Franciscan order in Spain with Sor María's later reflections on the bilocation.

Chapters 2 and 3 seek to identify the historic and social forces behind Sor María's early venture into science, asking to what extent her drive to know is explained by the Renaissance and by her Jewish ancestry. Chapter 4 tells of the beginning of her spiritual presence in the New World, as it was explained not only by the Franciscans, but by Sor María herself in a quite conventional, rationalistic mode of discourse. The bilocation serves as a bridge to her more fully imaginative writings, since while the origin of this incident would appear to be in the realm of the fantastic, I have considered both the biographical and social factors responsible for it as well as its place in the development of Sor María's imagination. Chapters 5 and 6 offer an analysis of her imaginative and mystical literary writings, including *The Mystical City of God*, using the findings of comparative religion in an effort to clarify not only the reasons for Sor María's literary success, but also the nature of her symbolic images.

Recent biographies of Sor María in English are no longer in short supply. Kendrick's is the standard scholarly work, while James Carrico has a briefer one with a strong Franciscan, hagiographic flavor. Sor María's legend appears with some prominence in histories of colonial New Mexico. John Kessell's historical essay on the bilocation is the most recent, balanced, and thorough look at the circumstances surrounding the origin of Sor María's impact on the Southwest. This study, which is not intended as another biography, goes into her life only when it sheds light on her writings. Just a handful of facts are needed here to suggest the challenging conditions under which Sor María made a satisfying life for herself and a lasting contribution to the self-image of women in Hispanic society. In the discussions of the biographical contexts of the writing of each of her works, there is a closer focus on the texture of her day-to-day living.

Sor María was born into the world of Cervantes, Calderón de la

Barca, Ignacio de Loyola, the Spanish missionary effort to the Americas, San Juan de la Cruz, and, above all, the soon-to-be-canonized Teresa de Avila. Before becoming a nun, her name was María Coronel y Arana, and her parents were exceptionally devout and regularly practiced demanding spiritual, ascetic exercises with the discipline of athletes. As the result of a dream vision experienced the same night by Sor María's mother and her confessor, the family house was converted into a Franciscan convent for women, and the entire family—father, mother, sons, and daughters—joined the order. Although from the time she was a young girl Sor María had been attracted strongly to life as a nun, she suffered intensely, both emotionally and from bad health, during the first three years after taking the vows at seventeen. It is during this period, and perhaps for some years more, that she made repeated mystical journeys to New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas while undergoing trances in Agreda. Although she wanted to keep these events private, her mother, the other nuns in the convent, and her confessor enthusiastically spread the news, and after some years the astonishing story reached the New World, where, according to an official Franciscan report, the Indians themselves confirmed it. She was interviewed on the subject by a Franciscan superior—the same one, in fact, who had first broached the matter with the Indians in New Mexico and then written a celebrated report to the king—and she became quite famous.

While still young, so young as to require a papal dispensation, Sor María was appointed abbess, a post she held for the rest of her life. Energetic in practical as well as religious matters, she was a good fund-raiser and a regular correspondent with influential people in both ecclesiastic and lay circles. Uncompromising in denying the body to enrich the life of the spirit, she slept little and wrote much. But in recording her inner life, Sor María was always under the direction of confessors, one of whom, opposed on principle to women being writers, appears to have been the reason she burned *The Mystical City of God*. (After he died, another commanded her to write it all again.) In 1643, near the midpoint of Sor María's life, Felipe IV, knowing of her through the fame of the Southwestern bilocation, turned aside from his route to the front in the war with France to visit her. A deep and last-

ing friendship was formed, sustained through frequent letters for thirty years. Following her death and the publication five years later of *The Mystical City*, the church bestowed on her the title of "venerable."

In English history, there is no woman mystic with a comparable political profile, but if we go back some 250 years prior to Sor María's life, well before the English Reformation, we do find parallels in religious life. The most celebrated are Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. Kempe, in particular, had much in common with the Counter-Reformation nun. She composed and dictated a book of her own, which though generally considered the first autobiography written in English includes the content of frequent visions. Sor María's life of the Virgin, full of conversations with the protagonist as well as connections to her own life, falls within the same genre of biography fused with introspection. Reminiscent of *The Mystical City of God*, Christ and the Virgin engage Kempe in intimate conversation and instruct her in holy mysteries. And like Sor María's mother, Kempe, believing she was following celestial guidance, convinced her husband, with whom she had lived and raised their children for many years, to abjure forever his marital relations with her. Indeed, both were exceedingly concerned about their sexual purity, and in Kempe's case and that of Sor María and her mother, it is clear that their worry originated both in ecclesiastical teachings about abstinence as a woman's highest form of virtue and in a desire for independence from male control in daily life. Both Kempe and Sor María saw groups of angels attending on them continuously to provide emotional support.

Sue Ellen Holbrook has described Kempe's visions as "mystical, radical, physical and public," which is also an appropriate characterization of Sor María's life of the imagination.<sup>19</sup> It was precisely the radically physical and public nature of the bilocation to North America, as perceived by both enthusiastic Franciscan missionaries and the Inquisitors who investigated the sensational claims made on her behalf, that gained for her at an early age both fame and the king's friendship. And just as Sor María spoke as the voice of conscience in her letters to the king, so, too, Kempe interviewed bishops and spoke with a critical candor that only her manifest aura of saintliness made permissible.

Both Kempe and Sor María practiced severe ascetic exercises and had

a keen interest in world travel, the former making pilgrimages that included the Holy Land, while the latter traveled imaginatively.<sup>20</sup> The long trips made by the Virgin in *The Mystical City* similarly seem to reflect a keen desire to be outward bound, leaving the restrictions of a woman's daily round to undertake important missions. Kempe describes other aspects of her spiritual life that also find an echo in the idealized life of the Virgin presented by Sor María: Both are the brides of God at elaborate weddings, both act as God's mother as well as wife, and both participate with extraordinary vicarious intensity in Christ's sufferings on the cross. These similarities between the two women and their visions of the Virgin will be touched on in more detail as the evolution of Sor María's writings is traced.

But if Kempe's book shows that Sor María lived within a cultural tradition not as foreign to the English worldview as most of us had thought, we must return to Spain, and specifically to Teresa de Avila, to see how much the Spanish nun was shaped by and how well she expressed the circumstances of women living within Counter-Reformation Catholicism. The parallels between the two are certainly no coincidence. One reason is that the famous saint from central Spain, the country's co-patroness in Heaven along with Saint James the Greater, not only was revered immensely but was widely read and consciously imitated by Hispanic nuns. As Arenal and Schlauf have demonstrated, "Saint Teresa of Avila's impact on the lives and writing of Hispanic nuns can scarcely be overestimated."<sup>21</sup> There were, indeed, many Teresas in the years following her canonization, women who found inspiration in her example to take seriously their visions and their voices. Her positive effects as a role model would be in themselves sufficient demonstration of the importance of the feminist revision of the canon now in progress.

It was repeated often in Agreda that Teresa de Avila had prophesied that the town would produce a most fragrant flower for the garden of the Lord, in effect calling for a future woman to follow in her way. Another, much less well known reason for their parallel casts of mind and resultant actions is that Teresa de Avila and Sor María came from similar families and, therefore, social and religious places in a Spanish society whose heterogeneity was greater than Spaniards have been willing to admit until recently. This factor is explored in chapter 2 in

relation to the piece of writing most connected to Sor María's childhood, her *Face of the Earth*.

For an initial illustration of the ties between the two women, we can turn to a kind of writing Sor María did over much of her life, the one part of her work that has been analyzed several times by academic writers: her extensive correspondence with the king. It also shows her abilities in the world of politics and how she related to those in power. Similarly, Teresa de Avila's skills as a letter writer, her strategies for appealing effectively to her readers, have been explicated recently in Alison Weber's study, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*. As a militant reformer within the Discalced Carmelite order, Teresa de Avila was obliged to find ways of persuasion effective with both her followers and the men above her in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Out of necessity from her position as a woman seeking to exercise power over her own life, and the lives of those in sympathy with her reforms, she developed what Weber has called "the pragmatics of writing as a woman in Counter-Reformation Spain."<sup>22</sup> The guiding principle of that pragmatism was to write what she insisted on saying, but in a style unlike the masculine discourse associated with social power, to write as women were thought to write and so avoid rivalry. Her use of "such 'feminine' features as diminutives, self-depreciation, and self-irony . . . might be better understood as covert strategies of empowerment."<sup>23</sup>

When Felipe IV went out of his way to meet Sor María, she was already forty and an important woman, as Joaquín Pérez Villanueva stresses in his close analysis of their correspondence. The balance of dominance and deference that becomes apparent in their long exchange of thoughts and feelings is not what one might expect, and shows that they both considered her his moral superior and his intellectual equal, although she was also his close friend, with whom he shared his anxieties and joys on a week-to-week basis.

Felipe IV also shared with her and took seriously her ideas on the most challenging parts of his kingly role: politics, war, and finances. For this reason, she has been called, with some exaggeration, the brains of his administration, although it must be pointed out that the unfavorable judgment of history on his effectiveness as a ruler makes the compliment less impressive. Still, she had his confidence and was an undeniable force in his thinking and decision making.



No sycophant, Sor María spoke out sharply against the corruption that was undermining the Spanish court in the twilight of the Spanish Hapsburgs: "Everyone deceives the king. Lord, this monarchy is coming to an end and everyone who does not try to set this right will burn in hell."<sup>24</sup> She was a forthright proponent of peace over war and opposed policies that would further oppress the poor: "For the sake of peace, to lose is to win. . . . Your Majesty should command your advisors to take pity on the helpless poor and your hardpressed vassals, not laying any new burdens on them or wringing blood and sweat from their brows by depriving them of life's necessities."<sup>25</sup>

In religious matters, Sor María acted not only as confessor, to whom the king lamented his seemingly uncontrollable marital infidelities, but also as the voice that exhorted and encouraged him to mend his ways. In another long exchange of letters with the courtier Don Fernando de Borja and his son Francisco, she described herself as the doctor and Felipe as the patient.<sup>26</sup> At her urging, Felipe IV used his royal power to have the Spanish representative to the Vatican argue for acceptance of the belief in the Immaculate Conception as official doctrine. In return, Sor María used her own, visionary power to bring him words of consolation from beyond the grave, from the mouth of his dead son Baltasar Carlos.

In short, the self-deprecating persona often used by Teresa de Avila was not always as necessary for Sor María. A comparison of Teresa de Avila's self-portrait in *The Dwellings*, whose self-affirmation has been described by Weber as disguised and intentionally obfuscated, to that which Sor María projected onto the Virgin Mary in *The Mystical City of God* shows that Sor María, living half a century later, could speak with greater freedom about feminine equality. True, the self-affirmation was not openly her own and was given to a unique, deified woman, but Sor María's writings draw enough parallels between her celestial model and herself to make it clear that her far-from-passive Virgin was a paradigm the author felt to be anything but inimitable.



## 2

### The Renaissance Cosmos and Its Secrets

To understand Sor María's childhood or, more specifically, how her direction as a writer took shape, we might first turn to an account she wrote of her earliest years. Possibly inspired by Teresa de Avila's or other nuns' accounts of their lives, Sor María began an autobiography near the end of her own life, although she died before she was able to describe events later than early childhood. But as Rosa Rossi insists in her biography of Teresa de Avila, one must take such writings not as a reliable source of data but as the expression of a persona created, usually with unconscious inaccuracy, as an essentially fictional character within the narrative.

That caveat may apply to Sor María's case, so I shall put aside for the present the examination of Sor María's late account of how she felt about herself when very young. However, we now have what is, to our knowledge, the earliest work she wrote, *Face of the Earth and Map of the Spheres*. With that, and with information that historians and Hispanists have put together about Sor María's life and society, we can form a better picture than before of how her personality and writing were shaped.

At first glance, it seems contradictory that the mystical Sor María de Agreda should be the author of *Face of the Earth*, a treatise whose subject matter is thoroughly scientific—geography, meteorology, and astronomy. The position of nuns within Renaissance Spanish science was summarized succinctly in 1979 by the leading Spanish historian of the field, José María López Piñero: "Women in religious orders . . . did

not participate in scientific activity."<sup>1</sup> However, since López Piñero's emphatic statement, research in women's studies, now vigorously present in Spain, has found evidence of more intellectual activity in Hispanic convents than was previously recognized (although it is true that Juana Inés de la Cruz's and like-minded nuns' literary brilliance remains in the foreground).

Arenal and Schlau, for instance, have studied the works of two sisters who became nuns, María de San Alberto and Cecilia del Nacimiento, and they conclude that "the lives and writings of these two sisters exemplify humanistic culture as it was transplanted to the monasteries of seventeenth-century Spain and its colonies."<sup>2</sup> The sisters' mother was an intellectual and artist whose abilities were recognized even by Felipe II, and their home often received well-educated visitors, including the king's cosmographer and mathematician.

As mentioned earlier, such learned women were more common among the aristocracy at the height of the Spanish Renaissance, in the early years of the sixteenth century, than before or after. As the Counter-Reformation became entrenched, however, the church's institutional agenda was to discourage, or often forbid, women from writing anything that might be construed as authoritative truth, although as Teresa de Avila's canonization shows, there was sometimes tolerance and even popular veneration for women's views in matters of spirituality and mysticism.<sup>3</sup>

It is possibly out of this reluctance to allow women to address "academic" questions as well as from a recognition of how few nuns were in a position to study scientific questions in a modern way that during the eighteenth-century investigation carried out to determine whether Sor María should be canonized, it was officially decided that the work was not authentically hers. That she did in fact write it, as Kendrick has shown and the present chapter makes even clearer, has much to do with the nature of her response to an intellectual and social milieu with which few people today are familiar.

### Sixteenth-Century Geography

To understand and dispel surprise at Sor María's Renaissance piece on the natural world, it is helpful to trace the changing attitudes in Spain

about science. The idea most commonly expressed in our own century—as current Spanish historians of science document convincingly but lament impatiently—combines two conflicting ideological positions that are at the heart of the so-called “polemic of Spanish science.”<sup>4</sup> Numerous treatments in literature (Galdós’ novel *Doña Perfecta* being one of the best known) have stressed the gap separating the two Spains in matters of science: for example, the gap between Galdós’ benevolent, progressive engineer, Pepe Rey, and the sinister and reactionary clergyman, Don Inocencio, whose thorough classical education serves no good purpose. Curiously, the demands of the debate have led those most apprehensive of technological and social changes to stress how well things have gone in the past, while those who call for change have projected into the past an intellectual poverty that they condemn in the present.

Until recently, an ironic situation existed in which thinkers bent on social change and concerned about science (precisely the people best able to study its historic role) have accepted and made use of a general ignorance of the scientific excellence in Spain during the Renaissance to strengthen their accusation of backwardness against the society of their own time. In the mind of the distinguished twentieth-century philosopher Ortega y Gasset, as in the minds of the forward-looking and scientifically oriented *renovadores* of the two preceding centuries, there was an urgent need to bring from abroad as much as possible of Europe’s depository of advanced knowledge. Spain, which was seen as radically different and disconnected, was portrayed as lacking that tradition.

This point of view is well known, as is its partial justification in the undeniable isolation of seventeenth-century Spain from the intellectual revolution transforming the rest of the continent. But as a general rule, the fact that the sixteenth century had been different was conveniently overlooked, and at times even the most obvious was denied: the existence of the Renaissance in Spain and, above all, its scientific dimension. The factors responsible for the country later falling behind were tacitly supposed to have taken hold before the rise of modern science: the rigidity of the Counter-Reformation that combined the fears of an endangered church with the disillusionment and stagnation of a governing class that gradually failed to impose or retain its own

way of life in other nations; a profound economic collapse; the policy of attempting to exclude those of Jewish or Moorish descent (*conversos* and *moriscos*) from a productive social role; and the minimal growth of the middle class.

Contrary, then, to what a well-educated group of Spaniards thought for a long time without looking at the facts, Spain enjoyed flourishing scientific activity during at least the first century following its unification under Fernando and Isabel. In the Middle Ages, the mixing of the Arabic and Jewish cultures, which transmitted and developed much of classical learning, did give the country a different inheritance—a source of progress, naturally—while in the sixteenth century under Charles V, the international contacts and prestige generated by the empire favored the growth of humanism. Geography and cosmography were practiced and developed above all because of their application to navigation, the exploration of the New World, and astrology, and there were many professionals in both disciplines. These are the two fields within Spanish Renaissance science that have been most studied in this century, work facilitated by the relatively large number of books originally published in these disciplines. So many were published, in fact, that the reader who is nonplused by the apparent idiosyncracies of *Face of the Earth* will be doubly surprised on visiting the National Library in Madrid to encounter a varied and extensive collection of sixteenth-century texts all similar in many ways to Sor María's.

Although the identification of all the geographers and cosmographers—classical, medieval, and Renaissance—who directly or indirectly influenced Sor María would have to be done by a specialist, the tradition to which the work belongs had settled and consolidated with time, and the book's basic conformity to that tradition can be sketched with assurance. As in other branches of knowledge, it was Aristotle who created a model that later would be imitated tirelessly, both in the Arabic world that inherited the school at Alexandria and in medieval and Renaissance Europe. His four books *Of the Heavens*, combined with four others entitled *Meteors*, present the concepts of Greek science of his time regarding cosmography, celestial mechanics, and meteorology, and his writings were available in multiple editions, translations, and commentaries all over Europe in the sixteenth century.

A Spanish scholar who was influenced by Aristotle was Isidoro de Sevilla, who wrote *The Etymologies* and *On the Nature of Things* at the end of the Visigothic period. The encyclopedic *Etymologies*, one of the best-known books of the Spanish Middle Ages, includes geographic information that was used for many world maps, and its anecdotal style recalls the narrative style of Sor María's *Face of the Earth*. In astronomy, Isidoro de Sevilla played a considerable role<sup>5</sup> in the establishment of what, until Copernicus, would become the normative celestial model, and the one Sor María reproduced: ten transparent spheres or "heavens" located concentrically enveloping the earth, one or two of the upper ones "aqueous" (separated from the sea during creation as described in Genesis), and above them all the empyrean, the dwelling of God, angels, and the souls of the blessed. As specific textual parallels confirm, the *Etymologies* was one of the works with which Sor María certainly must have been familiar.

The geography of the era, faithfully following that of classical antiquity, was changing less in response to the discoveries in America than one might imagine.<sup>6</sup> Discoveries simply were integrated into the Ptolemaic world, which was divided into four parts and considered inhabited not only by Europeans, Africans, and Asians, but also by three other human groups, mentioned by Sor María: the Antipodes, the Antoecians, and the Perioecians. Some of the works, aiming at maximum scientific rigor, also calculated the latitude and longitude of all the places mentioned.

Sor María's list of each continent's countries, rivers, and cities in *Face of the Earth* was not the first of its kind. She took the descriptions word for word, sometimes abridging, sometimes adding, from the Castilian translation of a cosmographic text widely used in sixteenth-century European universities: *The Book of Cosmography, which Presents the Description of the World and Its Parts, Illustrated with Clear and Attractive Art Work, Supplemented by the Highly Learned Gemma Frisio*. The German author Peter Bienewitz (known in Latin as Apianus) enjoyed extraordinary prestige, and numerous editions and translations of his work contributed to the continuing acceptance of Ptolemaic perspectives.<sup>7</sup> In 1541, Carlos V made him a Knight of the Empire, accompanying the honor with a lavish gift.

Sor María's *Face of the Earth*, in spite of its reproduction of the geographic data in Apianus, is distinguished by its literary nature and the presence of the author as narrator and participant. Isidoro's anecdotes take on more life as Sor María amplifies them and turns them into actions witnessed and commented on by the traveler herself. Where Apianus merely states the existence of Asiatic cannibals, Sor María details a savage custom in which a moaning boy is roasted by his own people, and she vividly expresses her horror. The episode grows out of the common European belief of the time regarding the lamentable state of human life on other continents, and it recalls, for example, the Barbarous Isle of the first section of Cervantes' *The Trials of Persiles and Sigismunda*. On this isle, a false religion demands the bloody sacrifice of foreigners, whose hearts are ripped from their chests. While probably based on accounts of the Aztecs, Cervantes' image is used, as in Sor María's treatise, to build the religious symbolism of the narrative.

Similarly, the strange and even monstrous human races described in classical Greek histories assume new characteristics and take on a richer life and history, reflecting Sor María's concerns and interests. The question of which peoples in fact existed—and to what extent they differed anatomically and morally from the European human norm—fascinated and disturbed her. In this she was typical of the Age of Discovery, but she also touched on a universal interest and literary theme, as mythology and science fiction make clear.

Catholic tradition recorded the opinion of Saint Augustine, who seems to have felt a little perplexed about the issue: "As a consequence, it shouldn't seem absurd to us that within the human race there should be certain monstrous peoples, for this is the same as the cases in which monstrous individuals exist within a people. Therefore, to conclude this question carefully and with circumspection, I shall say that the things written about some peoples are pure fiction, or that, if they are a reality, they are not human beings, or that, if they are human beings, they descend from Adam."<sup>8</sup> Isidoro, on the other hand, was fully convinced: "Therefore, looking at the human race as a whole, there also exist some peoples which are monstrous beings, such as the giants, cynocephalians, cyclopes and more."<sup>9</sup>

In his extensively annotated translation to Pliny's *Natural History*,



Francisco Hernández, protophysician and historian for Felipe II, reveals an enthusiasm for these marvels very much in the style of the chroniclers of the first century of American exploration. His enthusiasm doubtless was linked to the taste for all things extraordinary, which is obvious in the chivalric romances of the era and even in the sensational side of Spanish mysticism. But Hernández, bearer of nascent modern science and akin to one side of Sor María's personality, seeks more rational explanations. In this they both reflect the Counter-Reformation zeal to bridle the cognitive and imaginative expansion of the Renaissance. The same standards led Tasso to invent the concept of the "legitimate marvelous," a basic Cervantine literary device.<sup>10</sup> Sor María, although doubtful about a reference to people with no heads, clearly enjoyed these imagined races with astonishment and delicious horror. On comparing her descriptions with the simpler ones found in Apianus, Isidoro, and Pliny, one can see her visual imagination and storytelling ability, although both are less developed than in the later *Mystical City of God*. Her power to convey in words the world of the imagination moves with the same impulse and direction as other accounts of trips to extravagant locations, including *The Divine Comedy*.

The character that Sor María gives to the exceptional beings of *Face of the Earth* differs little from the intellectual and moral pattern she projected onto indigenous Americans. She did not invent that pattern either; its constituent ideas were already in the writings of contemporary historians of the Indies. The 1575 Castilian translation of Apianus, for example, contains an appendix on America drawn from Francisco López de Gómara's work. Moreover, that summary seems to explain the presence in *Face of the Earth* of a long and otherwise hard-to-explain section about an island supposedly closed to Spanish exploration, "that they call Arctic and Antarctic." Sor María says that it was not Christianized by the apostles because its original inhabitants, perverse creatures, did not migrate there until the year 700, a detail that would support Kendrick's assertion that Sor María drew on the medieval concept of Iceland.

Nevertheless, the names and placement in America are better explained by a passage from Apianus: "I want to say, too, that there are many other islands and lands on the face of the earth, in addition to

those we have named. One of which is the land of the Strait of Magellan, which turns toward the East, and judging by what has been seen of it, it is extremely large and set very close to the Antarctic pole. They think that one part of it goes toward the Cape of Good Hope and the other toward the Moluccas. So the great size of the earth is not yet fully known."<sup>11</sup> Even the characteristics Sor María attributes to the inhabitants are similar to the 1575 description, although with a conflation of tribes and an additional dose of classical geography.

Sor María's detailed description reveals her enthusiasm as she imagined a people that brings together all that is most bizarre, bestial, and needing to be civilized. They go around naked, and their appearance is hard to distinguish from that of animals. They walk on four feet, which are like those of a bird. Instead of speaking, they only grunt, and the devil must tempt them by means of gestures. Having no houses, they live in burrows. Among them are animals of unknown name—by every indication American buffalo—and Sor María expresses sadness that the people scarcely know how to tell the difference between their essential human condition and that of the beasts. Conscious in her own life of God's immense power and the importance of the small, weak human creature obeying and propitiating him, Sor María is filled with grief and compassion.

Sixteenth-century Spain went through a soul-searching polemic about the treatment of the conquered Indians, and it had been insisted that they were human beings with souls and rights in spite of their living conditions, often thought similar to those of animals. Catholic Spain's duty was not fundamentally to change those conditions; more important was to allow the native Americans to become aware of their souls and how their savagery offended God. The Franciscans, although clearly motivated by humanitarian concerns as well, were the branch of the church entrusted with this basic mission, and its farthest, most glorious frontier during Sor María's childhood was the Kingdom of New Mexico. It therefore became for her, in the context of her own life, the setting where her devotion or, perhaps, her imagination began the story, one very much hers, of the bilocation. Her urge to know the geography of the whole, freshly discovered globe was a step toward the fulfillment of other desires: to leave home, to take action, and to cross the sea on a heroic personal mission.

### Cosmography

Copernicus's astronomical thought, published in the middle of the sixteenth century and not condemned by the Inquisition at Rome until 1616, did have a limited acceptance in Spain at the end of the century. Nevertheless, as in the rest of Europe, the traditional medieval system remained dominant. One of the works that most spread its influence was the *Sphera* by John Holywood, an English astronomer of the thirteenth century, known in Latin as Sacrobosco, and several translations were done in Spain.<sup>12</sup> Later humanist professors introduced popularized manuals unburdened by complex mathematics for readers lacking a strong background in science. Among the clergy, as López Piñero points out, "it was usual while young to study subjects belonging to the division of arts—mathematics, cosmography, natural philosophy—in preparation for mature years dedicated to theology."<sup>13</sup>

Even a random glance at such texts quickly confirms their ties to Sor María's cosmography. The celebrated professor Alejo Vanegas (or Venegas), for example, published several editions of his *Statement of the Differences among the Books Existing in the Universe*, in which the first part is devoted to the natural sciences. It shows the ubiquitous division of the text into the four continents and then the four elements, each of the latter occupying its own niche in the world, the same organization found in Sor María's treatise. Vanegas explains the same phenomena of the natural world as Sor María does: why, for instance, the sea is salty but springs sweet.<sup>14</sup> He makes use of the same terminology for the "elemental and celestial" regions, as does Bartholomé Belentín de la Hera y del Varra in his *Repertory of the Specific World of the Spheres of the Heavens and the Elemental Orbs*, and Pedro de Medina in his *Cosmographical Summa*. Like Medina, Sor María extends to the celestial bodies the application of the principle of the four qualities (moist, dry, hot, cold) derived from the four elements. A good example of these parallels in content and even in tone is Medina's enthusiastic description of the empyrean in his *Book of the Truth*:

First you should consider the dwelling of the blessed, which is the empyrean heaven, so called for its great light and splendor. This heaven is so large and spacious that measuring its immensity is beyond all numbers and proportions. It is so big that, even though there were in it as many

blessed souls as there are drops of water in the sea, and grains of sand on the earth and leaves of trees and blades of grass in all the world, for all there would be more than ample living room. This heaven, as I have said, is very bright, very resplendent, very luminous and beautiful, and very excellent in so many ways that no understanding is sufficient to imagine it, or any human tongue to explain it.<sup>15</sup>

Because of cosmography's kinship to theology at the time, so apparent in *The Divine Comedy*, it was studied frequently by church scholars. An important Franciscan tradition within the field has even been identified running through Roger Bacon, William of Marseille, Saint Buenaventura, and Duns Scotus (whose ideas on the Immaculate Conception are basic to *The Mystical City of God*).<sup>16</sup> In harmony with Saint Francis's own feelings, several learned friars stressed man's amazement in the face of the beauty and immensity of the Creation. Juan de Toledo, for example, bishop of León in 1672 when he published his voluminous *Cursos Theologicos*, wrote a cosmographical treatise very Agredan in its subjects and style. On the first page are praises of the Lord taken from the Book of Psalms. In a similar if more Aristotelian manner, Vanegas featured the phrase, "the creatures proclaim the first cause, which is God."<sup>17</sup> The importance among Spanish Franciscans of the idea of the world as a book proclaiming the greatness of God was studied by Laura Calvert: "In the early sixteenth century, the Franciscan known as Francisco de Osuna echoed the phrase, giving the 'book of the creatures' an importance almost equal to that of the Bible as a revelation of the Divine. His creatures are not limited to those in Biblical passages. They may come from the sciences—the negative after-image of sight or the principal of the pump; the arts of ironworking or music—and plants and animals of the world."<sup>18</sup>

This Franciscan perspective, from as early as the work of William of Marseille, had drawn upon the system of Ahmed Mohamed Ibn Kathair al-Fergani, an Arabic cosmographer of the ninth and tenth centuries known in Europe as Alphraganus.<sup>19</sup> Taking the Greek astronomers' texts as his starting point, he arrived at figures not only for the diameters of the sun, the moon, the five planets, and the six magnitudes of stars, but also the "exact" distance to the celestial spheres, a feat of ingenuity and creative geometry that earned him the title of "The Calculator." He stressed the smallness of the earth, suspended motionless like

a grain of sand in the center of the immense, rapidly rotating heavens, and to each of the heavens he ascribed a considerable thickness, a distance large enough to allow the planet to move in an epicycle between its apogee and its perigee (i.e., its farthest and closest positions in relation to the earth). There existed, therefore, one distance to the lower or "concave surface," and another, substantially greater, to the upper or "convex surface."

The numbers generated by such calculations, however, varied wildly from astronomer to astronomer when others sought in vain to perfect Alfraganus' methodology over the succeeding centuries. Even the diameter of the earth was not universally agreed upon. The Jesuit father known by the Latin name Clavius, who directed the Gregorian revision of the calendar, includes in his commentary on Sacrobosco a table comparing the calculations of Aristotle, Hiparcus, Erathosthenes, Ptolemy, Alfraganus, Fernellius, and "more recent astronomical experts."<sup>20</sup> He himself opined that Alfraganus was the closest to the truth.

To get an idea of the variety of results obtained, and the extent to which these terrestrial-planetary, medieval-Renaissance dimensions were bandied about in the scientific world, it is instructive to make some comparisons among cosmographers. The following table lists the distances to the spheres of Mercury and of Saturn as calculated by Alfraganus, Clavius (who takes them from Francisco Maurolico), Vanegas (who says he takes them from Alfraganus, although that's not clear to me, and who also mentions a method by Gemma Frisius), Juan de Toledo (who does seem to be based on Alfraganus), and Sor María de Agreda.

	SPHERE OF MERCURY	SPHERE OF SATURN
Alfraganus <sup>21</sup>	208,545 miles	46,816,250 miles
Clavius <sup>22</sup>	1,443,750 miles	323,512,500 miles
Vanegas <sup>23</sup>	334,209 miles	18,541,250 miles
Juan de Toledo <sup>24</sup>	75,369 leagues	17,154,631 leagues
S. María de Agreda	7,901,917 leagues	8,505,119,514 leagues

It is not at all obvious on which of many contradictory authorities Sor María might have based her calculations. The *vice-postulador*

entrusted with the current efforts for her canonization, Father Ruipérez, has suggested that she might have multiplied some preexisting figures by a mystically ascertained constant. What is certain is her unflinching consciousness of the greatness of God and his Creation—here expressed in millions of leagues.

### Date and Authenticity of *Face of the Earth*

In spite of so many points of contact with this venerable cosmographic tradition, the question of what Sor María read is not simple. She herself sought to dismiss consideration of sources in evaluations of her work, insisting that her knowledge was the fruit of heavenly inspiration, “infused science,” or “infused knowing,” and that so much information in an uneducated woman could only be explained in this way. Certain facts, however, suggest that her attitude was in large part a conventional one imposed by her social circumstances as a woman. Aside from the quotations and sources in *Face of the Earth*, Sor María states in her report to Father Manero that she can read Latin and distinguish between good and bad translations from that language. In *The Mystical City of God*, she shores up the authenticity of events with footnotes referring to passages in history books. And one of her confessors, Fray Andrés de Fuenmayor, affirmed that Sor María could talk about geography and cosmography as though she had studied them in school.<sup>25</sup>

Father Solaguren and his collaborators in the recent “critical” edition of *The Mystical City of God*, willing to accept the possibility of human as well as divine sources of inspiration, attempted to trace details of the Virgin’s life as told by Sor María by searching in the apocryphal gospels and popular traditions. One of the editors said they could not find details similar to those in Sor María’s narrative expansions of the biblical story, although my own inference runs counter to that conclusion. In any case, their position, as illustrated by the encyclopedic nature of *The Mystical City of God*, is not unreasonable: Sor María apparently had an exceptional memory and capacity for synthesis. From the time she was a little girl, friars from the men’s convent at Agreda had visited the house, and later she heard their sermons and confessorial advice while living out her life in the women’s convent. Although the friars certainly would have lent her books, and the convent has

a collection that dates from the earliest years, one may suppose that much of the vast theological and biblical information in her masterpiece was acquired by listening. Still, *Face of the Earth* shows that this oral communication was complemented by reading.

At what point in her life Sor María wrote her cosmographical treatise, a circumstance clearly related to her access to books, is also uncertain. Kendrick (who echoes the positivistic nineteenth-century scholars' view that the little book is just an accumulation of errors and absurdities) considers it a childhood work, written before taking orders, and motivated by a wish to display recently acquired knowledge to impress her two younger brothers. To support this hypothesis, he gives capital importance to Sor María's statement in the prologue that she was writing to inspire love of the Creator in "her brothers." It must be noted, however, that in a prologue written later, Sor María uses the same expression clearly meaning all people, her brothers and sisters in Christ. It was a common expression in the period, especially in Franciscan writings, and one could argue that she used it to achieve the sound of masculine discourse and to gain the societal approval that went with it.

On beginning to write her autobiography at the end of her life, apparently having just reread *Face of the Earth*, Sor María felt again the desire that her work might inspire devotion in everyone, but now the language is more inclusive: "I confess to Heaven and to Earth that, as I look at these events with greater understanding and enlightenment than when I received them, and reflecting on what the Most High has deigned to do, my heart dissolves in loving tenderness, and how I wish that my chest would burst with a voice heard from east to west and from north to south, calling out to all the children of Adam, inviting and begging them to employ all their energies in knowing and serving such a Lord. . . ." <sup>26</sup>

There are, however, other reasons for believing she must have written the book in her youth, in the years just before the bilocation, and that is how her close friend Samaniego, her Franciscan superior and first biographer, presents it. The enthusiasm in *Face of the Earth* for the beauty and variety of Creation, the sensation of flying around the world carried by angels; the desire to help convert the New Mexican Indians—everything points toward Sor María's adolescence and the

first, trying years of life in the convent when she felt she was carried across the sea. In her autobiography, Sor María says that twice God had shown her all things created:

The first time was when I first became capable of rational thought; the second, when through infused knowing I was prepared to write the life of the Queen of Heaven, Most Holy Mary. On the occasion I am describing, I saw things but took in their beauty on the surface, yet still perceiving the Creator in them; I was moved to love and serve Him, and became aware that their being, arrangement, and ordered functioning depended on divine wisdom and power. Great was this kind gift and benefit, second only to knowing God, and with it I suddenly went from ignorance of all things to wisdom about them.<sup>27</sup>

A few paragraphs earlier, Sor María says that after her first contact with supernaturally imparted knowledge of the world, she entered a period of ordinary human perception and learning:

Since I received the teaching and discipline of divine knowing when as ignorant as I have said, and suddenly so many mysteries were shown to me, giving me the capacity to know and penetrate them, as has been described, when that passive teaching ceased, I came down to the five senses and made good use of them. I was astonished at both what I had learned and at what I was now seeing with my own eyes and outside my own head; and like one who unexpectedly discovers new and precious things and is left amazed, so it happened to me.<sup>28</sup>

Even as a purely human observer of the world as a child, Sor María says she was intellectually precocious because “the understanding with which I knew all that is created was more advanced than my age, for the Most High enlarged my mind’s capacity.”<sup>29</sup> She underlines the different nature, relative to ordinary learning and to her first mystical experience, of the second supernatural revelation, experienced when she was fully mature: “Greater beyond compare was the second time, because the right hand of the All Powerful infused into my mind knowledge of the universe more abundantly than the first. I came to know the being of all things, their qualities and properties, with great penetration and perception of distinctions, as I shall say at the appropriate moment.”<sup>30</sup>

It can be supposed then, without contradicting her own memories,



that during her childhood, Sor María probably acquired her cosmographical knowledge through reading and put it down on paper in a first version of *Face of the Earth*. Years later she might easily have modified, amplified, and polished that juvenile draft, perhaps in the enthusiasm of writing *The Mystical City of God*, or even remembering in old age the second cosmographic revelations of her mature years, when she was writing her great narrative. Other circumstances, found in connection with the prologues for the treatise written at the end of her life, suggest this last possibility.

Until a century after Sor María's death, no one suggested that *Face of the Earth* might not be authentic. Several compilations of her writings during those years include it as hers without comment or question, and I had the opportunity to look through the three copies preserved in the collection of Sor María's works at the convent in Agreda. Sor María herself, in the prologue to her autobiography, includes it in the list of her works.<sup>31</sup> Both Father Samaniego and Father Salizanes, who knew her and her handwriting well, were sure of it. Fray Antonio de Jesús, director of the campaign for Sor María's canonization in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, carried out the project of locating and legally certifying valid copies of her writings immediately after her death, and among them is *Face of the Earth*. On more than one manuscript he wrote to the effect that Father Salizanes had the original in Cordoba and had not allowed Samaniego to have more than one copy made.<sup>32</sup> In fact, the convent's archives preserve a letter from Samaniego, dated October 14, 1665, promising to return all the original autograph manuscripts to the nuns. These two friars, superiors and friends of Sor María, accompanied her at the time of her death and two days later locked away all her writings in a "chest with three locks," the inventory of which includes the "books . . . of the perfections of the heavens and the earth."<sup>33</sup> This fact, though not conclusive, weakens Kendrick's hypothesis that one of Sor María's two younger brothers had the original and later handed it over to Salizanes.

In addition to this physical evidence, the ideas and personal traits linking *Face of the Earth* to Sor María's accepted works carry the greatest weight. Aside from the testimony that it offers for her interest in science, the text is creative and of interest primarily as literature. The difficulties with her figures, pointed out by the anonymous au-

thor of an arithmetic study appended to the 1724 manuscript under the title “Adjustment and Liquidation of the Heights, Diameters, Semi-diameters of the Terrestrial Globe and the Ten Heavens,” remind us that even in its time the work was not considered rigorously scientific. That circumstance, along with the proscriptive and descriptive objections to the combination of nuns and science—not to mention the borrowings from Apianus—must have influenced the theologians of the Congregation of Rites, who in a year as scientifically “enlightened” as 1762, discarded *Face of the Earth* as not authentically by Sor María.<sup>34</sup>

To educated readers, the treatise always has seemed neither fish nor fowl, neither mysticism nor science. Although at first glance *Face of the Earth* seems a natural candidate for mathematical tables of the sort that abound in authors like Father Clavius (an authority cited in the “Adjustment”), the circumferences have been calculated very badly from the diameters, using the number 3 instead of pi. The author of the appendix expresses his bewilderment and can only reassure himself regarding this anomaly by reflecting that Sor María had personally seen and touched the spheres; however, that obviously is not the verifiable type of experiment now considered the hallmark of trustworthy knowledge.

What, then, does this expression of a strong impulse toward Renaissance science have to do with Sor María’s more literary, mystical works like *The Mystical City of God* and with the visions that gave rise to the legendary bilocation? In a word: knowledge. From that early moment in her life when in a vision God showed her the whole world, until the mature years when she wrote in *The Mystical City of God* that the same experience was granted to the Virgin, Sor María de Agreda was motivated by an unmistakable desire to participate in the Creator’s knowledge.

What is typical of the Renaissance here is, first, Sor María’s urge toward encyclopedic knowledge. Witness the survey of all that can be known in a later work that nonetheless still breathes the spirit of the Spanish Renaissance, the *First Dream* by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (who included Sor María among the learned women from whom she had drawn inspiration).<sup>35</sup> Second is the typical organization of information in a logical order, clarifying the relations among the many headings and subdivisions. *Face of the Earth* is structured this way, and

even more so is *The Mystical City of God*, which recounts the history of the universe from the Creation to the Final Judgment—exactly the recipe that readers of Renaissance literature may recognize; Lope de Vega recommends it in his *New Art of Making Plays* as an effective technique to hold the attention of a Spanish audience. But *The Mystical City* does so with a clearly structured outline, including divisions into books, chapters, and numbered paragraphs. Unlike Teresa de Avila, Sor María did not make strategical use of the stereotypically disordered, illogical “prattle” that Counter-Reformation Spain attributed to women.<sup>36</sup> Just as she dared to converse on equal footing with her good friend the king, so too she dared to express her undeniably self-asserting ideas in the approved style of masculine discourse.

The final chapter, on *The Mystical City of God*, traces the importance in Sor María’s work, from her earliest years as we know them in the autobiography, of the connection between acquiring knowledge and access to some measure of power—between, in broader terms, knowing and emotional security. The evolution of Western ideas reminds us that the Renaissance stressed the same connection, and that the roots of modern science are in alchemy and magic. As the legend of Doctor Faustus dramatizes, the scientific quest flows from an urge to enlarge the possibilities at the command of the individual, who seeks to enhance her own potential by uncovering powerful knowledge unknown to others.

This drive is certainly tied to the other Renaissance phenomenon represented by Sor María: Spanish mysticism. I would be quick to add, however, that it developed without an option for an openly rebellious personal ambition like that expressed in pronounced literary form by writers such as Marlowe and Goethe. Among Spanish mystics, the enforced traditions of Christian humility and monastic obedience almost always controlled Luciferic pride, and the Inquisition took care to extirpate the more rebellious of the charismatic *alumbrados*. Nonetheless, Teresa de Avila and, to a considerable extent, Sor María were convinced that they were specially called to change the world, and they energetically tried to do so through both their writing and political activities in spite of the Inquisition’s paternal frown.

In principle, then, there is nothing inexplicable in Sor María’s thirst for knowledge, combining book knowledge (which in the Renaissance

had come to include personal observations and experiments as supplementing the authority of writers hallowed by the centuries) with an “infused science” based on personal experiences flowing from the highest authorities in the Christian tradition—voices from Heaven and the Creator himself. Francisco Márquez Villanueva has argued that sixteenth-century Spain offered an alternative approach to the Modern Age, one that did not oblige it to break with the medieval theocentric world view.<sup>37</sup> He points to this same mixture of science and mysticism, a dual mode of knowing, in several figures from the period. For example, Juan de Avila was a contemplative and also an avid experimenter, notably with hydraulic systems.<sup>38</sup> Luis de León took inspiration from the beauty of the perfect regularity of the stars’ movement across the sky, and Vanegas juxtaposed books based on human reason with those written through divine revelation. Sor María, for her part, took a standard college text as the point of departure and supplemented it with the description of a mystical “flight” that could supply new “data” not found in her traditional, bookish source. As Catherine Swietlicki has pointed out, Jewish mysticism was appropriated eagerly by many Renaissance scholars drawn to alchemy and magic. Cabala’s promise to grant access to God’s secret powers appealed to “humanism’s fascination with the esoteric.”<sup>39</sup>

But Vanegas, Juan de Avila, and Luis de León did not mix cosmographical geography and arithmetic with data intuitively received from Heaven. And as we have seen, women in religious orders—for whom research was not thought appropriate—rarely participated in science. What, then, explains Sor María’s mystically scientific writing? Part of the answer may lie in Sor María’s, and Teresa de Avila’s, Jewish descent.

### The Converso Legacy

Various explanations have been offered for the remarkable flowering of charismatic spirituality in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain. In reviewing the sources of *iluminismo*, Mary Giles has pointed out parallels in several religious traditions—Islam, German mysticism, Judaism, Erasmianism, Lutheranism, Anabaptism, and medieval Christian heresies—though at its root there was, she concludes, a “desire to

nurture an inner life of prayer that, for the most part, was an integral part of Catholic practice.”<sup>40</sup>

In tracing the ecclesiastical currents that led to the later prominence of Teresa de Avila, Weber focused on the first half of the sixteenth century in Spain as a period in harmony with, although it arose independently from, the spirit of the Protestant Reformation.<sup>41</sup> Before the misogynistic Counter-Reformation moved to discredit a growing importance for women’s spiritual gifts within the church, Cardinal Ximénez Cisneros encouraged the inner life of prayer, gave women a larger role to play in administering convents, and defended women visionaries. Thus Teresa de Avila encountered changing and mixed cultural attitudes, with much gained in society at large but then discouraged by the church hierarchy during the second half of her life. Sor María’s life and writings confirm the idea that in the broadest historical context, both the Renaissance and the religious upheaval of the Reformation were about individuals taking knowledge, power, and inner peace into their own hands. Even Kempe in the late Middle Ages received a similar vision: Christ, while not speaking ill of church ceremonies, made her understand that they could not provide as much intimacy between him and the soul as was to be desired.<sup>42</sup>

Religious enthusiasm, as seen in the mystical nature of Saint Francis’s belief in union with God through an intensely emotional experience related to human love, certainly was transmitted to Spain as a part of orthodoxy through mystics like Catherine of Siena. Less clear are the circumstances within Renaissance Spain that led to the exceptional development and widespread acceptance of that tradition as a desirable way of life. One explanation has been developed by literary critics like Swietlicki, who have argued for the decisive influence of Jewish and Muslim culture during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

In this context, the special intensity of mysticism in sixteenth-century Spain is best understood in relation to the high percentage of conversos who, whether or not they took religious orders in a faith not of their ancestors, became either *alumbrados*, rejected by the church, or orthodox mystics. During the Middle Ages, two sharply contrasting tendencies coexisted within the Spanish Jewish population. One was philosophical and rational, harboring a substantial element of skepticism and a view of God that T. A. Perry has called

medieval Jewish existentialism.<sup>43</sup> The other tendency, in which God, his power, and purposes were more accessible, was emotional and mystic. Both views were cultivated through an active writing of books as different as those of the cabala and those in the tradition of the rational philosopher-physician Maimonides. The role of Spanish Jews as translators and transmitters of Greek-Arabic science and philosophy for a Latin-reading Europe reinforced Jewish preeminence in the learned professions and gave extra vigor to a Jewish way of life based on books.

Even after and notwithstanding the forced baptisms of the fifteenth century, conversos continued to be influential both intellectually and socially although they were resented for it, as suggested by the creation of discriminatory "clean blood" statutes by competing groups. According to López Piñero, "Jewish conversos were the most important demographic base for scientific activity," even though some "developed their scientific activity while straddling exile and Spanish society. . . . Luis Núñez Coronel, also from Segovia, accomplished a notable contribution to physics from his chair at the College de Montaigu in nominalist Paris without for that reason disconnecting himself from Castile."<sup>44</sup>

Those who subscribed to the rationalist and skeptical current within Hispano-Jewish thought reacted to the loss of social rights with desperation, bitterness, and irony, creating works like Fernando de Rojas' *Celestina* and contributing heavily to the whole genre of the picaresque. The mystic tendency, in marked contrast, led to a fervent embrace of Catholicism, producing inquisitors and members of religious orders who did everything possible to show the purity of their faith, if not that of their blood, through heroic devotion and extraordinary zeal. They also passed on their mystical inheritance, a circumstance that not coincidentally allowed a converso writer like Teresa de Avila to appeal her grievances and sorrows directly to the bar of divine justice. That legacy naturally influenced the nature of mystical life. Writing about Luis de León in 1988, Joseph Silverman commented that his "'mysticism' derives from a mixture of poetry and philosophy, reminiscent of the Cabalistic poetic tradition, and founded on a passionately intellectual curiosity about the origins of life and an unswerving contemplative devotion to God and His creations."<sup>45</sup>

Doubters have argued about how many generations of “new Christians” would keep alive their parents’ worldview, but social discrimination throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, combined with the Jewish culture’s usual resolute persistence in the face of adversity, seems to make the four or five generations of the sixteenth century not an improbably long time. Swietlicki, like Stephen Gilman a generation earlier, has shown the degree to which Jewish culture was alive and integrated into Spanish life in Sor María’s lifetime: “Cabala was an integral part of the popular culture and folk customs to which [Santa Teresa] was heir, as a descendant of conversos and as a member of Spanish society.”<sup>46</sup>

Evidence of Sor María’s Jewish descent is her father’s family name of Coronel, a prominent name that invariably went back to Fernando and Isabel’s chief tax collector, who converted in 1492. Because an important character in Quevedo’s picaresque novel *El buscón* is named Diego Coronel, the name has been researched thoroughly. Luis F. Peñalosa and Carroll B. Johnson have shown with abundant sources that the several branches of the Coronels, all derived from a common source, were characterized by scholars and politicians.<sup>47</sup> Although important throughout Castile, the Coronels were centered in Segovia, where in the sixteenth century one neighborhood bore their name. That neighborhood’s location in the Jewish quarter was the circumstance that first alerted modern researchers to the name’s origin.<sup>48</sup>

Pérez Villanueva has brought together similar facts about the conversos and, specifically, about Sor María’s family name of Coronel:

Caro Baroja . . . supplies information about the Coronels being conversos. Abraham Senior, of Segovia, converts and takes the name of Fernán Pérez Coronel. A. Domínguez Ortiz . . . studied this figure, who was the head of the converso lineage of the Coronels. The granddaughter of Senior was María Coronel, wife of the participant in the Comunero revolt Juan Bravo. . . . Sometimes—according to Caro—conversos would take old lineages that had almost disappeared. . . . Juan of Vallejo, in his famous Memorial . . . refers to a professor Coronel who took part in the editing of the Polyglot Bible and was a “townsman from Alcalá, a Catholic Christian, a convert from Judaism and very learned in the Hebrew and Chaldean languages.”<sup>49</sup>

Sor María's parents were extraordinarily devout, engaged in bodily exercises of self-mortification and, moreover, seeing supernatural interventions in their lives. Such manifestations of religious fervor often grew from the social circumstances that so strongly bounded the lives of conversos, for they lent a highly visible intensity (and guarantee for society) to the sincerity of the new faith. The custom would have started two or three generations before Sor María's parents, when a desire to wash out what some considered the fresh stain of Judaism would have called religious fervor into existence. But the way of life would have been passed down to children and grandchildren even when its origins might have been hidden successfully and even forgotten. What is more, there is specific evidence that the Jewish mystical tradition reached Sor María de Agreda, as it had reached Teresa de Avila, in the form of Christian cabala. Sor María's treatise on the six angels who attended to her mixes a surprising amount of cabalistic imagery and concepts with Christian angelology.<sup>50</sup>

The parallels between Sor María's and Teresa de Avila's family situations are revealing. Both grew up in small towns in Old Castile with populations of about 100, in large stone houses that still can be visited today, houses that testify to an above-average social position.<sup>51</sup> However, both fathers struggled, like many *hidalgos* at the time, against a declining level of income, and though married to women from old Christian families, both were four or five generations removed from wealthy Jewish ancestors who had converted to Christianity. In Teresa de Avila's case, it had been her great-grandfather, whose son had moved to Avila from Toledo after being publicly punished for lapsing into Judaism. Rossi argues that Teresa de Avila must have known about the carefully guarded secret of her Jewish descent, though she left no reference to it. It is harder to know about Sor María. The cabalistic content of her *Six Angels* suggests that she did know of her Jewish ancestry, but Swietlicki has pointed out that cabalistic ideas were adopted by many Christian writers in the Renaissance, and Spanish society had incorporated many Jewish traditions into what was thought of as purely Christian.

Teresa de Avila's father's social strategy for coping with his Jewish ancestry was, in Rossi's words, "to appear to others as an hidalgo even though he knew he was not one."<sup>52</sup> A lavish lifestyle, which he could



not afford, and the creation of disastrous debts were the result. Sor María's father, who was given to exaggerated displays of painful, penitential piety, might well be viewed as following a parallel pattern in the sphere of religion. Whether his generation of the family knew of their ancestry or whether he simply inherited a way of life, the loss of his house and lands for a convent represents a similar economic denouement to the same story of radical insecurity. This pattern also includes the fact that Sor María's and Teresa de Avila's childhoods came to an end as they became nuns under pressure from their families, who required the girls to acquiesce to meet the families' needs. Writing about Teresa de Avila's converso family background in connection with becoming a nun, Arenal and Schlauf observe that "for her, as for other women whose Christianity was in doubt, the cloister afforded better protection from accusations than did the secular world."<sup>53</sup> And while Kempe was not of Jewish descent, Susan Dickman has pointed out that whatever its inward function, her frequent, seemingly uncontrollable sobbing in public when she was moved by compassion for Christ's suffering was useful as a demonstration of her piety, a piety that her life in the world instead of the cloister seemed to call into question.<sup>54</sup>

This is not to say there were no other reasons for women to enter convents. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is a famous example of someone who chose to enter a convent in the interest of pursuing the life of the mind. Another powerful consideration was freedom from masculine control over one's body, whether from domestic violence, or the dangers of repeated pregnancy and childbirth, or the lack of opportunity to live the church's ideal of holy celibacy. Still, Teresa de Avila's and Sor María's full and joyful acceptance of the decision to enter a life thought of as apart from the world appears to have come sometime later. Similarly, the young Kempe longed to be favorably noticed and turned to an intensely spiritual life only after failing in the milling and brewery businesses, which she entered in an effort to earn money for fine clothes.

Little is known about Sor María's education, although *Face of the Earth* shows that she read textbooks, even incorporating one into a fantasy of leaving home and being taken around the world. Since, in Spain, traditional Jewish respect for books fused with the Renaissance

quest for knowledge, a studious girl might well have been a *conversa*, but not necessarily. In the early sixteenth century, before the rejection of Erasmian reform calling for education of women, wealthy Spanish families often provided their daughters with tutors and home study, sometimes advanced. A century before Sor María's childhood, Isabel la Católica hired Italian humanists to teach her two daughters, one of whom, Catalina, the first wife of Henry VIII of England, was considered amazingly learned by Erasmus and Sir Thomas More.<sup>55</sup>

Teresa de Avila, though not learned, avidly read saints' lives and chivalric romances and tried to live the heroics they describe, including an unsuccessful attempt to run away from home with her brother so they might reach pagan lands and be beheaded for the faith. They also wrote a romance of love and adventure, which probably provided the same sort of emotional outlet represented by Sor María's writing of her horror and compassion as angels showed her the strange customs of peoples around the world.

In sum, both Sor María and Teresa de Avila, with a focus on books typical of *conversos*, nurtured ideas of their place in the world through them. Also, both families had a history of turning to religion for social authentication. In light of growing knowledge about the circumstances of *conversos* in seventeenth-century Spain, and the Jewish origins of the Coronel family, one can conclude that the combination of science and mysticism in Sor María's work did not arise only from the influence of the Spanish Renaissance. It also arose from the fusing of two ways of life, one broadly scientific and the other mystical; both were traditional in the influential *converso* sector of Spanish society but already for more than a century adapted and reshaped in a continuing attempt at cultural and personal survival. In Sor María's writings, one can see a parallel to the response of Spanish intellectuals of Jewish descent to their adverse fortunes in the period, similar to her own search for happiness under very restricted circumstances as a woman who never left Agreda.

From the perspective of sociological interpretation, then, the historical and family factors in the human formula behind the success of Sor María's famous book would be the mind as power in human relations, clarity and organization of information, and intense emotional

commitment to uncovering, through either experimental or mystical “knowing,” the secrets permitting salvation of difficult lives, salvaging happiness in both the inner and social worlds.

### Manuscripts of *Face of the Earth*

The location of Sor María’s autograph manuscript is unknown; there has been no trace of it since Salizanes had it at the Cathedral of Córdoba. Aside from the three copies at the convent in Agreda (with no indication of their connection to the original), there are ten in the National Library, identified by Serrano y Sanz.<sup>56</sup> Conversations with archivists familiar with Spanish Franciscan writings confirm my impression that *Face of the Earth* was widely known and copied in manuscript form; its mystical theme and the protracted Vatican investigation of *The Mystical City of God* would explain why it was never printed in spite of a substantial demand by readers. Brief published descriptions of copies of *Face of the Earth* include one from the Public Library of Toledo.<sup>57</sup> Agueda Jiménez has been kind enough to give me a photocopy of one preserved at the Public Library of Guadalajara, Mexico. The large number and uneven quality of the manuscript copies of all of Sor María’s works is explained well by Angel Uribe:

The fame of her writings flies from mouth to mouth and her admirers felt a common desire to obtain copies and refresh their spirit with reading them. To satisfy this urge numerous copies hurriedly made were distributed, and these were not always of reliable accuracy, either because the scribes were inadequately trained, or because on occasion surreptitious copies were made under time pressures that limited comparison with the original, or because the copies taken as the model were deficient, or because, as a way to extricate themselves from other difficulties, some copyists attributed to the mystic writer and placed under the mantle of her protective authority texts fathered by someone else. For all these reasons it is no surprise today to find in both official and convent libraries in any corner of Spain manuscript copies of works by the Venerable Mother.<sup>58</sup>

The present edition is based on a manuscript preserved in the Royal Library of El Escorial and described in the catalogue written by Julián

Zarco Cuevas.<sup>59</sup> Evidence for its early date include the handwriting (from the middle of the seventeenth century according to Zarco Cuevas) and a colloquial and spontaneous style that contrasts sharply with the eighteenth-century versions, which are more polished and stylistically corrected. It is also one of the copies legalized by Antonio de Jesús. Moreover, on the first three folios of the volume that contains it, there appears the following note, evidently added later by a friar resident in El Escorial, on the origins and authenticity of the writings found therein:

This volume, along with two others of the same size though somewhat thicker, have for more than eighty years been passed together from hand to hand among the friars of this monastery, it being a tradition among them that they belonged to the distinguished Señor Don fray Antonio Agustín, illustrious son of our monastery of Santa Engracia and former bishop of Alvarracín from the year 1665 to that of 1670, in which he died.

This tradition is based on the word of the first person who brought them into the house, who was Father fray Joseph del Valle, known also as the Benedictine father, and who assisted His Excellence throughout the latter's entire episcopate and later lived here highly regarded until the year 1692. On his death they were given to Father fray Juan de Aguirre, a great servant of God, who died on August 3, 1727; from him they went to another friar who is still alive and who after a few years handed them over to Father fray Antonio de San Joseph, the senior librarian, so that the latter, if he thought fit, might place them in the library among the manuscripts. But since the said Father fray Antonio died on March 24, 1732, without having done so—nor does the reason for that happen to be known—they were returned to the possession of the friar who had given them to him, and he decided, lest they be misplaced or lost, to return them to the library in case they might be useful in the future.

The first volume, which is all works by the Venerable Mother Superior de Jesús de Agreda, contains four treatises. The first is the laws that the Lord intimated and made known to his wife so that she might be perfect. The second, the discipline of divine knowing. The third, part of *The Mystical City of God* that this venerable mother superior wrote, and it goes through the end of chapter fifteen, which is halfway through the infancy of Our Lady in the temple. But it is somewhat different from the one that is circulating in print, so it may be part of what the said venerable

mother superior originally wrote in the year 1637. And the fourth is a daily exercise to spend the day well, and it fills half or more of the volume.

The second volume, which is likewise by the same venerable mother superior under the same title of *Laws for the Wife*, contains at the beginning the two first treatises of the first volume with very slight differences, but then adding different doctrines and other things that Our Lady taught her. And after this, as a separate work, a treatise on the infused knowledge that her soul received about the face of the earth, its inhabitants, etc., and about the elements and the heavenly region.

Now since someone might possibly doubt that these writings are by the said mother superior—in the first place because it is true that in the year 1645 she burned all her works at the instructions of one of her confessors, second because none of them has to date appeared in print among the others of hers that are in circulation, and finally because in these writings one finds some imperfections unbecoming a distinguished person like Señor Don fray Agustín, all of which would seem to dissuade one from believing that his excellence had them—but I feel that although these facts that have been brought forward are true, still it is also true that the venerable mother superior wrote all the treatises contained in the said two books, as is stated by the Most Reverend Father fray Joseph Ximénez Samaniego in several places in the biography that he wrote and which is published in the first volume of *The Mystical City of God* (especially in paragraphs 12, 21, 22, and 25), and also that a very respectable member of his order who had a special devotion for the venerable mother superior made a copy for himself, although with the flaws to be expected when done surreptitiously, of many of her early works and kept them until his death (these are the very words of the said most reverend father in paragraph 22<sup>60</sup> and in the “Defense and Prologue,” paragraph 12); and above all since it is certainly true that His Excellence, before becoming bishop, was in very close communication with the venerable woman, as is demonstrated by eighteen letters of hers that are found in this library of San Lorenzo (which doubtless were also brought here along with the books by the same friar), so that it seems to me not only not unlikely, but on the contrary very probable, that either through his own initiative or as a gift someone might have wanted to give him that these books came into his possession, and that having naturally formed a high opinion of the venerable mother superior’s virtues and holiness through the correspondence just mentioned he would have highly valued

them and kept them until his death. Finally, we say just what we know and we offer what we are able, without trying to pressure anyone to change his views or to lend more authority to the manuscripts than they deserve. But it seems to us they are not contemptible simply because they are naive.

The third volume contains various accounts of some extraordinary events and other things related to a servant of God called Isabel Trilles, known also as Isabel de Jesús María, who seems to have flowered in Valencia as a lay person at the same time as María de Agreda, especially from the year of 1661 to that of 1666, and these things were written down as they were happening by her confessor, Father Ginés Berenguer of the Company of Jesus, as is recorded and can be seen several places in the same volume, which is very naive and not even written in the best form, as anyone will be able to observe. For this reason and in order to learn what authority and truth could be attributed to this piece, not having been able to find anything on the subject in our library, a letter was sent to Madrid to Don Joseph Tormo, a Valencian and Doctor of Theology, who replied that according to what he had heard and gathered from others from that region, the Venerable Trilles flowered in Valencia as a lay person highly reputed for her virtues, a reputation she kept through the end of her life, and whose good qualities were preached about; in Valencia, Father Ginés Berenguer, her confessor, has her life written down, and in the biography he has said wonderful things about her lofty holiness. These are the very words from the letter of the said doctor, and they agree very well with what is stated in the said treatise. And so I feel that in spite of the substantial defects that are obvious in it, one may with good conscience keep it for whatever value it may have in the future.

I have designated this manuscript "A," for Fray Antonio Agustín. Unfortunately, it lacks the prologue, and the map itself is incomplete, going only as far as the section on the first heaven. Curiously, the same is true for the legalized copy preserved in the National Library, and I have been obliged to make use of another seventeenth-century copy, one apparently reliable but lacking any data about its filiation. I refer to it as "K," from its old call number (KK, papeles curiosos, 15). It must be asked whether the treatise is hers only up to the point where, in some manuscripts, it breaks off unfinished. This is certainly a logical possibility and one strengthened by the diminishing of her personal voice and the predominance of pure numbers after that point. Never-

theless, the preambles to the work and the title itself of *Map of the Spheres*, in the plural, weaken the argument, for it is clear Sor María planned to write about all the heavens, not just one.

Another possibility is that Sor María originally left the piece unfinished, not completing it until a later time in her life, probably when she wrote the two prologues and polished the entire treatise. In fact, the 1724 manuscript meticulously prepared for Don Juan Isidro Yáñez Faxardo shows not only grammatical corrections and improvements that might be from the hand of a copy editor, but the recasting of whole paragraphs and even the introduction of new themes, both sorts of changes with an authentically Agredan flavor. This latter manuscript (designated "F") also offers the advantage of preserving intact phrases that in the seventeenth-century copies have been truncated, thereby weakening the sense and syntax of the sentence. For these reasons, then, although the text offered is from A, and completed from K, at times I have substituted or complemented with a reading from F. Although this version of *Face of the Earth*, drawn from more than one manuscript, offers the best readability in English of what Sor María probably wrote, it is not intended as a substitute for a critical edition in Spanish (which I hope to publish soon) with a systematic comparison of variant phrases. However, I have indicated in the notes almost all of the differences among the manuscripts.





# 3

## Text of *Face of the Earth and Map of the Spheres*

**B**ook of Mother María de Jesús, religious sister and late abbess of the Conceptionist convent of the town of Agreda, dealing with the face of the world, the elements and a little about the heavens. This book was found in Madrid, the original belonging to Father Salizanes, bishop of Córdoba, from whom Señor Samaniego, bishop of Plasencia, was able to have made just one copy, which reads as follows.

### Chapter 5

*About the first degree of illumination, and the knowledge of the face of the whole earth and its inhabitants that my soul received through mystical knowing, along with some hidden secrets of the earth.*

**W**onderful is the Lord as seen in the face of the earth, in having created it and in the providence with which He cares for it, and in its orderly arrangement. What a good dish to set before this magnificent King and Lord! And what grand and delicious fare for the palate of the guest, who is mankind wandering here below, if only we would let ourselves enjoy it! And what a good reason to praise the Creator of such a structure, the giver of life to the universe! The shame is that all mortal creatures might well

keep the image of the earth in mind but do not do so for two insurmountable reasons, and so we do not repay such a great kindness.

The first reason is its immense size, its length, and breadth. Since we, as creatures, are limited, we cannot understand it, not knowing it beyond a certain part, familiar only with the space within which we live and move. Secondly, since one cannot comprehend or grasp this wonder, texts are not prepared, the subject is not presented to the mind, nor is information supplied in such a way as to move one's will to love the Lord, through whom and from whom we receive this beneficial kindness.

I feel the Lord has given me light to know the truth of this so that by knowing I might leave behind my ignorance and, having been well schooled by experience, find it does me good, like a medicine to make not only me better but my brothers and sisters, too, for I would like them to share what I have learned and experienced.<sup>1</sup> Now one cannot deny the many marvels I have received from the generous hand of the Most High, and that is a compelling reason to recognize Him as the Creator of all He has shown me and so to serve Him, for He is a marvelous and magnificent God, and to praise Him for all that He does on behalf of such a poor, lowly creature.

The first wonder His Highness showed me—among the countless number I know myself unable to describe—was the earth. And everything the Lord showed me was done just as I shall explain, and to make it all clearer, I shall follow the order of events as the Lord brought them about. I found myself in contemplation after having received the most holy sacrament and given thanks, when there appeared a holy angel, exceedingly beautiful and delightful. He said to me, “May the Lord be your eternal well-being and give life to your spirit, my dear. His Highness wants you to entrust yourself to Him. He keeps his promises faithfully; his word is less likely to fail you than the heavens and the earth. His Majesty wishes to keep his promise to give you mystical knowledge of all things. He will reveal great mysteries to you and commands for that purpose that you come into his presence, that is, standing above all things created and in the presence of God alone.” And although we always are there, still this was by means of a vision from the Lord perceived by my intellect, accompanied by specific experiences.

As soon as I said, "The will of His Highness be done,"<sup>2</sup> He said to me, "My wife and turtledove, I created the heavens and the earth and the elements and the sea. I want you to know the purpose for which all that has being was created and of my watchful providence that protects mankind, and that I have provided for it many kindnesses and a diversity of created things. Pay attention and look." I looked carefully. I did as the Most High commanded, and I saw what is impossible for me to explain, something of which my mind had known nothing. My understanding was through the illumination of revelation, without which, by natural means, it could not have come about. So that I might see and know and understand, the Lord endowed me with a special ability (and that in itself was another of his great marvels), in order that I might know all the face of the earth, the sea, some of the big rivers, the animals, the inhabitants, the cities and kingdoms, and the diversity of creatures—all these things—and still its being so big was not an obstacle. And while there is no denying its size—even though by natural means one cannot see a quarter of a league ahead—still I was able to know and form an opinion of the smallest things, for my sight extended many, many leagues distant, as far away as the earth stretches. I saw the diverse creatures there are within it, along with other aspects of it, as though all these things were no farther from me than a crossbow shot; and I will tell now just how distinctly I perceived it all.

I saw the earth and its immensity, which I found truly astonishing, though no more than all I perceived within it. I could see, then, that the earth is divided into four parts, and beneath each of the meridians that separate it in this way there is a dwelling,<sup>3</sup> the relationship among the four of them being somewhat symmetrical.

The first of these four parts is the one in which we live, though any one may be considered the first of the four dwellings I am now describing. It does not matter which one you start counting with; it comes out the same. The second dwelling is of the people called or known as the Perioeci, which means they live in that other section or region of the earth. The third dwelling is of the people known as the Antoeci, which are, and whose name means, those who live opposite us. The fourth dwelling is of the people who are known and called the Antipodes. Their dwelling is contrary to where we are, so

situated that their feet are directly opposite to ours; our nadir is their zenith, and our zenith is their nadir. And if we think and say that they are upside down, they can say the same about us.

But the truth of the matter is, and this I have seen and recognized, is that we are all right side up; we should not judge on the basis of our own situation who is right side up, but in relation to the center of the earth and the world. Everyone's feet point down toward the center, which is their foundation, while their heads go up toward the sky, and so both they and we are straight up, just the way God wants and commands it to be, each group living where its lot fell to it. Divine providence arranged for mankind to have our heads up to the sky and our feet on the earth so that we should know and be aware that we were born from the earth and formed from it, though our final home will not be on the earth. On pleasures and vanities we must step, denying them all and not giving ourselves over to them for our delight; that is why our feet were placed on it. Instead we should long for our country, which is Heaven, and meditate on it day and night and look toward it; that is the reason they put our heads toward that heavenly Jerusalem for which we were created. That is why our feet go down to the earth and our heads up to the sky.

The Antipodes and we do not share the same seasons, for when they have summer, we have winter, and when we have day, they night; and when we have the longest day of the year, they have the longest night and the shortest day. And this is true, for I saw it was so. And it is a great wonder of the Most High to see the night in one part of the world and the day in another, in some parts the sun and in others the moon, the moon and the shadow caused by the absence of the sun, for the world is like a ball. Seen all together, it offered a beautiful diversity and revealed its Author to be a great and magnificent King.

To give a clearer idea of how the world was shown to me, let me say it was by reproducing images of it for me, so that I might see it in God. I saw it so clearly that it all seemed to spring from God. In His Highness I perceived all the images. I cannot be sure of the exact way in which I saw them. But the world is divided into four parts; to make myself clear I will describe them in order, and they are Europe, Asia, Africa, and America.

The structure and body of the earth is so large that its circumference alone is 9,280 leagues, as I perceived.<sup>4</sup> The part already discovered is 8,480 leagues.<sup>5</sup> The 800 remaining are an island near the two poles called Arctic and Antarctic. At the time of the apostles it was uninhabited, empty of every sort of people, and so the Gospel has not been preached there.

Closer to our own time on this island, in the year of the Lord 700, a people migrated toward this part of the world, a people so vicious that no one could tolerate them, and they settled on this island. They multiplied, acting like animals as they reproduced. About their customs I will speak later, in the part about America.<sup>6</sup>

The earth's diameter is 2,502 leagues, and in half of that, which is to the middle where hell is, there are 1,251 leagues of depth. At this center and heart of the earth are hell, purgatory, and limbo, hell in the middle, purgatory to one side, and limbo to the other.

Hell holds many caverns and stone mansions. It is all one infernal cavern with a mouth, and it is certain fact that there is a flat stone bigger than the mouth of hell, with a thickness of half a league, with which the mouth of hell will be covered, and on the last day the damned will be left entombed and sealed within, never to come out through all eternity.

Purgatory has a sort of licking flames, a fire from God's power that afflicts the bodiless souls, though the fire has body and substance. In limbo are visible the footprints where Christ placed his feet when He went to free the souls of the holy fathers whom He took with him. In limbo are the children who die unbaptized, whose existence is pure mystical meditation given by God, and there are some who died quite old without ever having offended God.

This land is inhabited by various sorts of people, and the Most High cares for them all at the same time, giving them life and its spark, without which they are unable to do the least of their deeds and actions. In God they move, in His Highness they live, in His Majesty they are both refreshed and vexed. He sees to them all, the righteous and the sinners. How astonishing is the diversity of these creatures, in both their actions and their inclinations as well as their outer appearance. Some are drawn to God, heeding and loving Him, some to his creatures, others to their appetites, which they pursue. Some are more

perfect, others less. Some are friends of the Most High, some of the devil. Some are pleasing to God for their grace, others abominable for their sin.

By the diversity of their outer appearance one cannot know their inner qualities, for there are some who are courteous, having good inclinations, being clean and beautiful, but still ignorant; others who are not as good looking are intelligent and wise. The Spanish are of a goodly appearance, the French, English, and Germans better, just as energetic but less educated. In Europe there are a variety of elegant if curious ways of dressing, many pleasing manners, and the peoples are handsomely formed, although some by diseases have become misshapen. Africans, Asians, and Americans are short of stature and almost hairy. What they wear are skins, cut and painted in bizarre ways. While some are misshapen, others are deformed by being so tall, even as much as three yards—some more than four or six and the absolute tallest eight<sup>7</sup>—and some are very brutish. There are also dwarves about half a yard high,<sup>8</sup> such being the extreme diversity of creatures and such the greatness of the Most High.

Very different sorts of people live in the other parts of the world. In the vicinity of the Indies, they wear a sort of earrings from their noses, lips, and chins, made of stones, though not as well crafted and set in jewelry as in Spain. On other islands there are people with ears so long they reach the ground.<sup>9</sup> There is such a number of creatures that to our mind they seem uncountable. And one should notice carefully that while there are so many, still none are alike, not in their natures, their faces, their bodies, or their inclinations, or in their social organizations and governments, for each kingdom is different.

It is also very worth noticing the hierarchy they have, some standing above others, such as the kings above the grandees, the grandees above the lords, the more distinguished knights from the lesser ones. Some are big, others small: lords, husbandmen, slaves. All of this is much to the glory of their Creator, as is the diversity of the various lesser occupations in which each one is engaged. The rich are terribly ambitious, and that is a poison that neither rich nor poor escape. And more so in our own time, when there is no truth or faithfulness or concern for fairness. All is madness, vanity of vanities, and hollow words, especially those who blindly worship false gods.

David was right in saying that all people lie. Mankind's life on earth is a struggle and like the morning dew that soon is gone, like the flower of the field that quickly withers. We mortals are so blind that out of such a multitude of people only a small portion know the true God, primarily in this part of the world, Europe, the Spaniards being the most faithful. Among those raised in the church, few confess the faith and many of them are in sin, so nineteen out of twenty parts of mankind live in darkness and blindness.

Idolatry had its origin<sup>10</sup> at the time of Abraham. What led to it was that the son of a very rich man, whom he loved most tenderly, died very young; to console himself the man had a statue made in his image and commanded his servants to worship and offer it sacrifices belonging rightly and properly only to God. This went on and the vice was made a law. Later Nin,<sup>11</sup> a descendent of Cain (Noah's bad son), king of Babylon and the founder of Ninevah (that Genesis calls Assur), made a statue of his father Belo, placed it in a temple he had built in Babylon, and commanded that he be worshiped like a God. From this comes the fact that some idols are called gods, being given names such as Bel, Baal, Balin, Belphegor.<sup>12</sup> In some provinces, statues were raised to kings by subjects of theirs who felt they governed well.

For this reason or other causes they find compelling, some peoples worship the sun and the moon. The Memphians worship the ox; the Mendesians worship the goat; the Scythians and the Lamians the bee; the Quipolitans the wolf; the Zinopolitans the dog; the Traodens mice.<sup>13</sup> Europe, which is the best of the four parts of the world, is the most fortunate, the one God has blessed.

The second part is called Africa, the third Asia, the fourth America, and I will go into each of these four in all the detail with which they were revealed to me. And so I might better understand what the world is, it was shown to me either in images or seeing it in God. I saw it so clearly that everything seems to spring from God. In His Highness I perceived all the images, but I cannot be sure in what way I could see it.

It is something wonderful and a source of great amazement to see the immensity of this world so full of mountains and plains and valleys and bad lands; other parts are very pleasant, offering many sorts of flowers, plant, and fruits for an ungrateful mankind. There are

some inhabitable parts of the world, others that are not. Some parts of this structure are densely populated by diverse and different sorts of people—some Christians, others that are not and do not know God, fleeing from the light and the truth; and in other parts they love and value the Lord. And there is a diverse and uneven variety of people, some living in great solitude. In some parts there are very Catholic people who confess the faith; in other parts they dismiss it, while in others they do not know it. There are so many differences and kinds of people it is impossible to state them all.

Oh, most high, immortal King, uncreated and sole creator of all that has being! May your immense majesty be praised, my Lord and my King, for your marvelous providence in creating this structure and wonder that is the world with such a multitude of adornments and diversity of plants, flowers, fruits, animals, and birds that in it are sustained by the waters; and such a variety of fish; so many herbs with healing power in them for mankind. And if our ignorance were not so great and our knowledge so limited, what marvelous secrets of nature that now Your Highness has hidden would you show us and we would learn.

Oh, boundless wisdom! I do not know whether to be more astonished at the diversity of plants and animals and other things or at the fact that each of them You sustain, fill with life and being according to its own needs and purposes. I do not know whether to be more amazed at the meticulous care, protection, purposefulness, and love with which You provide them to mankind, or at the fact that Your Highness will tolerate our ungratefulness, the bad repayment we make, and the thoughtlessness we show about so many and such generous kindnesses. And how big they are, my Most High Lord, the earth and all the many animals sustained on it and hidden in its huts and caves! So many birds fly through the air, so many fish are contained and nourished within its watery lodges, and all for the delight of an ungrateful mankind!

How I wish I could make the proper payment and offer the praises due so many mercies and favors! I offer them up for us travelers here below and beg the blessed in Heaven to do the same, for we mortals have such sluggish hearts, are creatures made and shaped from the slime of the earth. Let the angels, seraphim, and the blessed always



praise you and say, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of the heavenly hosts, worthy of praise and reverence and a new song."

Saints, you who already enjoy seeing the face of the Most High and are in Heaven, for you see Him in the fullness of knowing and so are able to judge truly the worth of the kindnesses we travelers below receive yet through our ignorance and indolence do not recognize—praise the Lord, bless Him, and as you offer up those praises remember the kindnesses given to his slave and servant, María. Offer up payment on behalf of this poor, lowly creature for the countless benefits I receive through no merit of my own. May He be eternally praised. Amen.

## Chapter 6

*About the first of the four parts of the world, called Europe, and about some of its kingdoms and provinces and certain other mysteries that divine providence has accomplished, revealing itself more in this part of the world than in the other three, for here the holy faith is confessed in Spain.*

Europe's western boundary is the great sea, which is called the Atlantic Ocean; on the north it is bounded by the English and German Sea; to the south it is closed in by the Mediterranean Sea; on the east is the Tanais River,<sup>14</sup> which the Scythians<sup>15</sup> call Silim, and Lake Maeotis,<sup>16</sup> which the same people call Themerida, meaning almost "the sea's mother." It is more illustrious than Asia or Africa or America; but it is not as broad. Nowhere is it 222 German miles wide, except toward the north and south where it spreads itself out as though it had dragon wings, and its greatest width is in those wings. Its length extends from the Tanais River to the Strait of Gibraltar, almost 750 German miles.

The westernmost region of Europe is Spain, which contains three provinces:<sup>17</sup> Betica, which is called Andalucia, within which is the kingdom of Granada; Lusitania, that now is called the kingdom of Portugal; Tarraconensis, which is divided into many kingdoms—Galicia, Navarre, and Castile, in which are included Leon and Ara-

gon, and it is thought of as taking in Valencia and Catalunya. The closest place to Spain is France, the two kingdoms being separated by the Pyrenees.

That explains that on the west France is separated from Spain by mountains. On the east the Rhine River separates it from Germany. As for the other sides, on the north the boundary is the Ocean Sea,<sup>18</sup> while on the south the Mediterranean Sea. It is divided into four parts, which are Aquitania, Lugdunum, Belgium, and Narbo,<sup>19</sup> the latter separated from the rest of France by the Cevennes and Jura mountains and extending all the way to the sea. Those who inhabit the region of the Rhine are the peoples of Upper and Lower Germany, and from them over to the Sarmatians,<sup>20</sup> it is all called Germany. On the north it is bordered by the Ocean Sea along a nearly straight coast, except near Dania,<sup>21</sup> which sometimes is called Dacia. There an arm of land sticks out into the sea called the Chersonese.<sup>22</sup> On the south it ends at the Alps. It is a fertile land, and in this part very populous and abundant. In it there are mighty rivers, such as the Rhine, the Neckar, the Elbe, and the Danube, which empties into the sea through seven mouths. This is a most beautiful river, and of all others, this one filled me with wonder at its great size. There are many other rivers.

Germany is divided into Swabia, Franconia, Thuringia, Vogtland, and Vindelicia,<sup>23</sup> which is part of Bavaria. Toward the south is Moravia,<sup>24</sup> which is connected to Upper Pannonia,<sup>25</sup> which in turn is called the Archduchy of Austria. Then comes lower Pannonia, which today is called Hungary. Then comes Moesia,<sup>26</sup> over to the sea from the Danube. In between is Bohemia,<sup>27</sup> and next to it the Hercinian Forest.<sup>28</sup> To the north is Misna,<sup>29</sup> Saxony, and after those toward the Rhine are Westphalia, Hessa, Hartz, Friesland,<sup>30</sup> Holland. On the other side of Saxony are Holstein, Silesia,<sup>31</sup> the Mark,<sup>32</sup> Mecklenburg, Pomerania,<sup>33</sup> which reaches all the way to Sarmatia. The peoples of Sarmatia are Lithuanians, Poles, Wallachians,<sup>34</sup> Transylvanians.<sup>35</sup> Then come Dacia,<sup>36</sup> followed by Thrace, which is now called Greece and divided into the following regions: Epirus, Achaia, Macedonia, and Morea. The Dalmatians<sup>37</sup> and Illyrians<sup>38</sup> that today are called Slavonia<sup>39</sup> surround the Adriatic Sea. Farther on is Italy with its prov-

inces: Campania, Calabria, Puglia, Tuscany, Umbria, Gallia Togata,<sup>40</sup> Lombardy, Venice, and the province of Ancona.

After seeing this part of the world, the angel said the following words: "Look carefully, soul, at all these provinces, places, and kingdoms, for the Lord is to be marveled at for the diversity and quantity of peoples. Look and observe, my dear, that Europe is the smallest of the four parts of the world, but in it the marvels and special protection of the Most High shine the brightest. In this part, which is Europe, live the Christians, the Catholic faith is confessed, the uncreated God is worshiped and revered, and its inhabitants, though they often offend Him, are Christians, at least most of them. But the church militant is based in this part of the world, and for that reason it is and always has been fortunate. And among the Catholics who form the heart of the church militant—I mean those who live in this part of the world—the Lord has many holy friends of his, in whom can be seen the Most High's very generous gifts of the spirit.

"When His Majesty created the world and gave it his blessing, He paid special attention to Europe and particularly to Spain. His Highness gave it the best climate and made it a pleasant land suitable for human habitation. It is rich in all things that support mankind but are lacking in the rest of the world, for Our Lord gave it his blessing and looked kindly on it. It is a greater and truer gift than the one Isaac gave to Jacob, for Isaac was fooled when he touched Jacob's hairy hands and thought they were Esau's. But this true Father was not deceived, for He cannot be, yet although deceit is not in fact practiced on Him, still out of compassion He allows Himself to seem to be deceived. So although He knew that the Christians who live in this part of the world would not be faithful children and did not deserve a blessing, for they would commit many offenses against His Highness, still so that He might give them his blessing, He covered their bad deeds with the skin of his faithful son Jesus Christ, and weighing in his mind who He was, what He would suffer and that He was to put on human nature, He was won over and gave his generous blessing.

"The part of the sky and the planets that give light to Europe are very well tempered, for which reason the people are intelligent, courageous, and vigorous. They are more civilized than anywhere else in

the world. Their stature and appearance are the best, their monarchies better administered, their rulers more respected. And although it is true that all of Europe is like that, still Spain is even more fortunate; its king should be the most grateful, for he has received the most. When it comes to all different kinds of people, Europe is very different from Asia, Africa, and America. When one knows just how true that is, the differences can be seen to be like those separating Heaven from earth, men from angels, and animals from men; it is a strange and astonishing subject, as I shall explain later.

“In the regions of Europe that border on the other three parts of the world there are, through the contact with those parts, very bestial and bizarre people. The most fortunate place of all, where there is the least mixture of heresy, is Spain, which was the land blessed by the God of Zion who created the heavens and the earth. To it we can apply the words of the prophet Samuel: ‘You will go up to the mountain of God where there is a band of Philistines, and at the entrance to the city, a company of prophets coming down from on high will come out to meet you. They will carry musical instruments: psaltery, tambourine, flute, and zither. They will be prophesying, and then the spirit of the Lord will come upon you, and you will prophesy with them and become another man.’<sup>41</sup>

“This happened to the Catholics of the holy church. They went to the mountain of God, in the sense of being born into the church, where the holy faith is confessed. While growing to become children of the church, they encountered a squadron of Philistines, who are the devils, always alert, and the unbelievers who in their wrath attack the ship of the church. But God is so compassionate that at the entrance to the city, that is, as soon as we accept the faith, He offers us a company of prophets, who are the saints and their descendants. Although founded and formed on earth, it comes from on high, for every gift and present has its origin there, and its members were able to do all things in the Lord who comforts them, for whoever confesses the faith is armed with this shield. So they come down, descending like the spirit from above. They bring musical instruments that are their prophecies and the mild law of the Most High, instruments leading us to follow their example.

“No one can imagine, unless she has experienced it, what joy and

harmony it brings the heart to hear the prophecies of the saints and to put them in practice. Those who do not confess this faith live in darkness and bitterness. Those who do confess it walk in the light because they follow the Lord and take pleasure in his mild law and the musical instruments played by the saints.”

Oh, my most high Lord! How can I, an unworthy, lowly creature, repay the kindness Your Highness has done me by showing me these mysteries? And how can I satisfy the desire to love You that I feel when I think about something so great? While still in the flesh of this mortal life, how can my will withstand the spurs of my understanding when I understand such immense ideas, or of my memory when I remember them? It would have been better for my life to have ended so that my repayment might be that offered by a blessed soul in Heaven and not what can be given by a poor soul burdened with suffering. Let them praise You, Most High, all the blessed who delight in seeing your face, and would that I were free of the chains and shackles of mortal existence, at which my spirit so sorely chafes.

My Lord, break these chains or close my eyes to these many wonders You show me. I recognize, my King, that You have done me a wonderful favor by placing me within the company of the Catholic faith and the church militant. What language, my love, might there be to express all the wonder of these tender mercies I receive from Your Highness? May You be eternally praised by all your creatures. Amen.

[Chapter 7]<sup>42</sup>

*Second part of the world, called Africa, and what the Most High showed me about it.*

**A**frica took its name from a descendent of Abraham and his wife, Cetura<sup>43</sup>; he came to Libya, which is what the Greeks call Africa, and he came with an army. After defeating his enemies, he established himself, making his home there. Africa begins at the Strait of Gibraltar and ends at the Egyptian Sea, to the north bounded by the Mediterranean Sea and to the south by

the Ethiopian Sea.<sup>44</sup> It has many provinces: first the Mauritanias,<sup>45</sup> Tangerine,<sup>46</sup> and Caesarean,<sup>47</sup> plus Numidia.<sup>48</sup> These three together are now called Barbary. It has, too, Libya, which includes Carthage, Byzacene, and Cyrene,<sup>49</sup> the latter known also as Pentapolis.<sup>50</sup> It has, too, Egypt and Ethiopia.

Tangerine Mauritania has the Mallow River<sup>51</sup> on its eastern border, to the north the Spanish Sea and the strait, to the west the Atlantic Sea. In this province there is a mountain called Abila,<sup>52</sup> one of the two Columns of Hercules. There are other mountains, called the Seven Sisters. Caesarean Mauritania is situated between Tangerine Mauritanea, to its west, Numidia to its east, and the Mediterranean Sea to its north. Farther on, in the Carthaginian region, beginning with the Ampsaga River,<sup>53</sup> is Numidia. The inhabitants of this province carry their houses in carts, just as they do in the German province of Misnia to make it easy to graze their cattle in more favorable and fertile places.

Then there is another province called Africa proper, making use of the same name given to the whole region; it contains the following cities: Zeusis, Carthage, Maxula, and Utica, where Cato died.<sup>54</sup> Then comes Byzacene. Nearby is a city called Hadrumetum,<sup>55</sup> and another called Leptis,<sup>56</sup> and the Cynips River,<sup>57</sup> and a region called Tripolitana,<sup>58</sup> having three cities, and among them is Leptis or Naples (not the one in the European region). Near here is Syrtis Major.<sup>59</sup> At the place farthest from the coast, there are some boundaries or limits called the Arae Philaenorum.<sup>60</sup> Next comes the province of Cyrene. To its south are the Garamantes<sup>61</sup> and the Ethiopians, to the north the Libyan Sea and a place called the town of Catabathmos.<sup>62</sup> From there to the north is Marmarica,<sup>63</sup> known also as Libya Mareotis. It borders on Egypt, the province near the Nile River. On the east are grouped Judea, Arabia Petrea,<sup>64</sup> and the Red Sea, or Arabian Gulf, while to the north is the Egyptian Sea and to the south the Ethiopian Sea. In this region, the holy angels told me, it does not rain; but in the dog days of high summer the River Nile overflows, leaving the land fertile. So it is through God's great providence that it does not rain; he commands the river to overflow for the good of these provinces.

The best-known cities are Alexandria, head of all Egypt, and Cairo, or Babylon. With these two goes Memphis. Below Egypt is Ethiopia.

In the east is the region of the Troglodytes.<sup>65</sup> In this region the inhabitants are more animals than people. Here live the Aegipanes<sup>66</sup> and the Blemyes,<sup>67</sup> headless people, though they really are not but have it stuck in their chests between high shoulders. The appearance of these people is bizarre, with their eyes in their chests. I learned that some Spaniards have thought these people to be headless, but they are not, but simply have it the way I have said. They are very bright people, though lacking education, for that is something they make little use of. If they did, they would be quick learners and good at it. They are short and stocky; what they look like is tree stumps.

Here the Satyrs<sup>68</sup> live without houses or anything else civilized, just like beasts in the field; they are bad looking. And some of the inhabitants of this land have something like bumps or horns—I do not know what to call them—that make them repulsive. They grow out of their foreheads and go back to a time when some of their ancestors were abused on their foreheads because they were not Christians, but they did not suffer it for God but simply in obedience to their cruel law, which required a perverse ceremony in which they were struck a certain number of times. That is how they came to have this bulge or big callous.<sup>69</sup> This senseless torture still goes on.

There are others they call Cynocephalians,<sup>70</sup> whose faces are like dogs because their snouts stick out so much. Their faces are very narrow, with sunken cheeks, and their bodies badly shaped. Most of them walk on four feet and lie down on the ground like animals. There are others who have only one eye<sup>71</sup> where the two normally come together, and pug noses.<sup>72</sup> The face is grotesquely wide, and all of them have bodies unpleasant to look at because they are so ugly. The shame of it is that they are God's creatures like us, but whether with one eye or two, they will not enter into the kingdom of Heaven (should we wish to take the gospel literally)<sup>73</sup> but with just one into hell, for they neither love nor know their Creator and Lord. These are foul-smelling and impure creatures. Their gaze is always fixed, looking foolishly toward the heavens; they look at that wonder, but they will never be able to enjoy it. They are called Monoculars.<sup>74</sup> They are blind and stupid, unable to talk.<sup>75</sup>

There is a sort of a plague on this region, which is the presence of many dragons, rhinoceri, tigers, basilisks, and a wide variety of other

sorts of animals and snakes. In this region there are lots of other poisonous vermin. Likewise in Africa, though on the side opposite from the one I have just described, there live many elephants, unicorns, and other animals that, even though they are not human, are more pleasant to see than some of the people from these provinces.

Oh, how great are the deeds of the Most High, my King. I am left stuttering and unable to pronounce any word at all when my heart reflects on how many thanks and praises it owes to Your Highness for having created me as I am, my King, when there are so many barbarians and benighted peoples. They have souls like mine and five senses. The infinite price in your most holy<sup>76</sup> blood that I cost, they cost, too, and are worth the same. In your image and likeness You created them, my King, as You did the other creatures.

Who, most high and uncreated God, asked You more for me than for them? Before You created us, who obliged you, my Lord, to make me one of the called and one of those who confess the holy faith, when there are so many who, if they should have been so lucky, would have served You better than I, valuing and reverencing better the holy mysteries of the gospel law and showing more gratitude? Was it perhaps because You did not know, Lord and magnificent King, the bad return that I would make You, my bad and disordered life? No, indeed, because from *ab initio* Your Majesty knows who all the travelers through this world will be. And as I would turn out to be the most wretched and ungrateful of them all, you would have seen through me all the better.

Oh, infinite God! May Your Majesty be eternally praised for such great and unspeakable favors, as are confessing the faith and your holy law, so gentle and mild, just and holy, pure and clean, pleasant and wise. It is not subject to errors or not knowing. It is true and strong, bitter for transgressors, sweet and smooth for those who confess it, bitter and hard to bear for those who scorn it. All good is bound up within it, it has no evil at all.

You are, my Lord, its author, and so it is the law of the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, whose head is Christ, its treasure<sup>77</sup> and ransom his most holy blood. May You be eternally blessed, my Lord, for this law that You have given to your servants. Powerful, holy, and



strong, a knife against heretics, destroyer of idols, shadow that terrifies hell, refreshment and relief to those who live beneath its protection and aid, unfailing in rewarding, consoling, and giving life to its chosen ones, standing above all law without stain or spot or wrinkle, for it cannot be blemished or contain any lie.

## Chapter 8

*About the third part of the world, which is called Asia, and what I saw regarding it in the light given me through his kindness by the Most High Lord.*

The ocean touches Asia on three sides: on the south it is the Indian Sea, on the north the Scythian Sea,<sup>78</sup> and on the east the Eastern Sea. On the west, Asia is next to Africa and Europe, and the Mediterranean Sea, which is between the other two. In this part of the world there is a great diversity in human appearance and a variety of social customs. Some people wear sashes or stoles, which are kinds of garments, for basically they go naked and use them only for decoration. There are others who have long ears. There are many who are extremely white and so come to be covered with something like a red down formed by freckles; they are so completely enveloped in it that they look like leather-skinned animals. There are others who are tall, skinny giants, ugly and stretched out of all proportion. Farther on there are some dwarves who look like they have been cooked up out of the earth, no more than half a yard high. They are very cute because the Most High shaped their bodies with the normal proportions. They look like funny little toys, and to think that one Lord created them all is more than enough reason to be amazed and recognize his power. There are others that have no legs, just big arms and small bodies and big heads. They walk with their arms and bodies, looking like tree stumps and three-footed animals, for their arms seem like two feet and their bodies a third. But that is not what they are, but rational beings. This is a fertile and abundant land. There are many peoples, but what astonishes me about it is the diversity of the people.

The places in Asia and this part of the world are like this. The first province next to that of Asia proper<sup>79</sup> is Pontus and Bythinia. Then the provinces of Cappadocia, Lycia, Caria, Pamphylia, Mysia,<sup>80</sup> and Armenia, where the Tigris and Euphrates run toward the south. Then come the Cappadocians (who are called the Pontics) and the Amazons,<sup>81</sup> (who are long-breasted and throw them over their shoulders), the Sarmatians along the Tanais River, and the Scythians last of all. Surrounding the Caspian Sea are the Caspians, the Medes,<sup>82</sup> and the Hyrcanians.<sup>83</sup> The Parthians,<sup>84</sup> Carmanians,<sup>85</sup> and Persians are on the Persian Gulf. The Babylonians, Mesopotamians, and Syrians to the south. The Arabs are on the Arabian Gulf. After Turkey is Aria,<sup>86</sup> Paropamisus,<sup>87</sup> Drangiana,<sup>88</sup> Gedrosia.<sup>89</sup> After that is India, with the Ganges River between its two halves.

In the south of this part of the world, there is a great diversity of peoples, all of them different, so much that their diversity is a reason to praise the Most High. They show little mercy to each other, harming each other terribly and waging wars continuously. I perceived that a terrible demon, a schemer, has his headquarters there. This is the demon who has provoked conflict in the world and is now present where the biggest ones rage. They eat human flesh,<sup>90</sup> and to roast it, I saw with my own eyes that they impaled a live boy on a stick, and there were many of them there, and when he moaned, they jumped and grunted so as not to hear him. But the worst of it is that this was not done out of compassion, but is a ceremony they have to celebrate the meal. As I was asking myself who or whose that boy might be to let that happen to him, I understood that it is a law and custom of theirs to give up one out of five children.

I also understood that it had been an order of the Most High for me to see the world at this time. They fight with some heavy iron clubs. No group of people is worse, in my opinion, than this one, for I intensely hate the absence of peace and brotherly love. They dispute with the griffins<sup>91</sup> for the metal gold, struggling to obtain it.

In this land in the region of Mount Imaus,<sup>92</sup> there are savages deformed by having their feet reversed. They run a lot. There are others with faces like dogs, and instead of speaking, they growl or bark. Others have only one leg and with the foot, which is big and round, they

protect themselves from the weather by lifting it up high. They lie on the ground and are called Sciapodes.<sup>93</sup>

In this part there are creatures that some people here have thought to be without mouths or eyes,<sup>94</sup> but that is not right, for they do have them. The fact is that close to the eyelashes or eyelids there are some little curtains given them by nature. When they need to do something, they raise them, and when not, they are able to see with the light that comes through them, more than enough for walking. Their mouths have the upper lip<sup>95</sup> so long that it goes down to the chin. These are ridiculous creatures. Next to the River Ganges is where they are, and then the pygmies, and countless other kinds of people.

Oh, deepest wisdom and divine painter! Who is not amazed and inspired to see the variety of creatures You created, the inclinations Your Highness gave them, how You look and call to them all, my God, whenever they are willing to turn their eyes to You? How astonishing Your Majesty's goodness, for even when they do not heed You, still You bear it, not annihilating them but sustaining and giving them life? Eternal blessings on You for giving me the law of love and commanding that we love each other like ourselves, keeping some from becoming the food of others. My dear and my Lord, even if your law did not give a reason and a justification for our loving our neighbors as ourselves, in itself that precept gives reason enough to know and value your law as holy and pure and its Author as the Lord and uncreated God, Creator of all things. Only Your Highness is God of gods and Lord of lords, for the others are only wooden and metal gods who speak words of eternal death, deceitful and leading to the deepest darkness. But You, Lord, are the true light and eternal brightness.

No less am I amazed, my King, at the power of your word and the obedience of the holy angels, your ministers and my lords. You ordered that every creature should have a watchful guardian angel, and although it might well be burdensome to accompany such beastly and horrible people, still Your Highness ordered your angels to protect their paths and highways, and those princes obey and do so; I do not know what may move them except obedience, and that is what they replied when I asked them about it. But still they are not denied see-

ing your face and that must make them happy. Great is your goodness and compassion. May You be forever praised for such goodness and magnificence. Amen.

## Chapter 9

*About the fourth part of the world, which is called America, and what I understood about it and the diversity of creatures there are on this island.*

America is almost entirely an island, for the sea surrounds it on most sides. It is a land very rich in gold and precious stones. It lacks many metals that we have here in abundance, such as iron and copper, to such a degree that their weapons are made of animal teeth and jawbones. It contains many provinces, and here I will mention the principal ones, which are the Island of Paria,<sup>96</sup> Isabella,<sup>97</sup> Santa Marta,<sup>98</sup> Cartagena, all the way to the end, which is called God's Cape and where one finds the River Platte and Peru. The most remote provinces are Yucatán and Honduras, with New Spain,<sup>99</sup> which is what it is called there. It is much larger than what we call Spain here; there is no comparison. To the south one comes to Guatemala, and Nicaragua, to the west of which is found the province of New Galicia. To the northeast is Florida, which is large, and the land of codfish,<sup>100</sup> together with the very extensive province of Labrador, and many others that are invincible.<sup>101</sup>

In this part of the world, near the Arctic and Antarctic poles, there is a big piece of land the Spanish have not visited. This is the land I said I would talk about when I got to it. The island covers eight hundred leagues, and there are indescribable and incredible things in it. What the angels made clear to me is that on the island I am speaking of they do not know the true God but greatly offend Him by their evil inclinations. I already said in chapter 5 that this island was populated after the law of grace, since it was in the year 700, and the first settlers were a vicious people; then the devil deceived them and they stayed on the island, over which they have spread, and no Spaniards have come to this part of the world. That is what they told me, nor is it possible at this time.

It is densely populated, though I do not know whether I should say by humans or animals; they seem more beasts than people and rational beings, though I can state that they are because while I was marveling that they could be, an angel said to me, "Yes, they are, and they have a soul like yours." Their appearance is like that of four-footed animals, since they use their hands that way. They have long ears. They do not speak to each other, but rather grunt, communicating like that. Their hands have three fingers, like birds' feet, but they are larger. They are yellow and have a scab . . . <sup>102</sup> like animals, and feet. Their heads are low and round, with a small body, with long feet and arms. There is no sign of buildings or houses where they might take refuge against the weather, though they have some holes or caves in the earth they have dug, just as any other animal might do to make a place to live.

With these people there were some animals like bulls and lions, although they are not; they do not even have names, because the people have not given them any. They must have one to God, for He knows everything; I did not learn it. These animals can scarcely be told from the people, although it seemed the latter showed more respect and reverence for God. As they all looked the same, I asked the angels who accompanied me whether those brutish people realized their superiority over those animals, whether they recognized it, and whether they really were.

Those princes, the ones who always cleared up my doubts, answered me. "You will notice, dear soul, that this group of people is so brutish that they do not realize that they are superior to these animals and think they are all the same. Their being different in appearance<sup>103</sup> they attribute to better or worse stature or looks, something they recognize in a confused sort of way. This ignorance is not something they all suffer from, though most do, but those who understand somewhat better do not know enough to inform and teach the others. There are some who know that they are superior to the animals, but that knowledge comes to them through natural human superiority or understanding." This seems yet another marvel, for their ignorance and blindness could not be greater than to fail to know whether irrational animals are beasts and whether they themselves are the same thing.

One of the holy angels told me they feed on something that grows out of the earth due to the moistness of some rivers and the sea that is next to the island. I do not know what to compare this food to except mold or the mushrooms we have here, although there is some difference between them. They are eaten with some plants that are raised in that land, plants more bitter than the wormwood we have here. It is all miserable stuff.

They do not make things with their hands, nor do they have a kingdom or any lord or houses or anything else civilized. There is a large number of them, both big and little, and they cover themselves in various ways, according to nature's gifts, for they wear no other finery or clothing than their own body hair. Some have it one way and others another, but they all look like bears.

I perceived something remarkable, that the devil does not tempt them in words but by stirring up their passions, particularly those of anger and wrath, which in them are cruel and uncontrolled, also tempting them often to be lustful and impure. And they are known to deal with the devil, for he appears to them in different shapes that please and delight them, through the charms of outer appearance making them commit a thousand moral blunders, though they do not recognize him or have words for all this. They do have some measure of malice and evil the devil himself has taught them using signs and visions and adapting their way of speaking to his purposes. They have not been fortunate enough to learn of the divine light, for the reason already mentioned that this island was not inhabited at the time of the apostles, and though they still have not received the light of the gospel, it is impossible now, too. Regarding these peoples, I think one can use that maxim God has in his church about not throwing pearls before swine.

Oh, my God and Lord, how much I wish I could describe everything that is—and I could if I were not prevented by the subject being so large—so that such a God might be known! But it is not possible for me. This story of the world has also been shortened because telling all is not necessary. Still, on the other hand, it has not seemed proper to me to leave out the most remarkable things I observed, for they are a reason to praise the Lord. Oh, immense and uncreated God! Oh, un-

changing greatness! How incomprehensible and unfathomable are your judgments, my Lord! You are the same one who created the Spanish and these people. We are all souls in your image and likeness, and it is astonishing that there should be such differences.

Oh, immortal and immense God! How I wish I could, even at the cost of my life blood, spread the holy gospel law from west to east and from north to south! Oh! How I wish I could set right and show the light to everyone who is without it so they might know the Father of all light, and so, too, that those who already have it might appreciate their good fortune and realize that by so doing they walk in light and not in darkness. Moreover, so that those who do not have it might realize they walk blindly, that they will die forever. How fortunate those whose good luck led them to know You and walk in the light, enjoying such a true, clean, and pure law. Oh, my Lord! Is there any pain to equal that I feel knowing that not all mortals recognize You as their author, and that for that reason many fail to love and reverence Your Majesty?

My Lord and my beloved, if Jeremiah dwells so much on the fact that Your Highness was not recognized by your people and that they crucified You and in place of fruit bore thorns, so, too, should it be lamented and said that there is no pain to equal what one suffers on knowing of these peoples who do not recognize You and so offend your truth, crucifying You a second and many more times.

Lord God of Israel, although I am dust and ashes and no good at all, here am I, willing to die a thousand deaths for this cause, or many more if Your Highness would only grant me them to offer up as a pleasing and faithful sacrifice. But even should it be too insignificant to be of any benefit to the travelers here below in their exile, still it would calm my burning desire, for like a wounded deer I long to go to the waters of tribulations. Though these be many, they will not slake my thirst and desire, which spring from charity and love. They can never be satisfied, for I love You, my God, and want to suffer much more than I can in fact suffer or even describe. If You do not believe me, my God, put me to the test, and I will make a full reality of these my partial desires. But should I not deserve it, may my desire kill me and I be a martyr for it and for the defense of the faith that I so value

and love beyond all saying, for it is the gate to well-being and the hidden treasure beneath the truth and the unchanging good that gives and promises and contains within it eternal happiness.

Treatise on the Description of the Heavenly and  
Elemental Spheres from the Empyrean Heaven  
to the Center of the Earth<sup>104</sup>

*Preamble*

To better understand the following, one must keep in mind that everything was created by the Lord and that only His Majesty is uncreated. When we accept this truth, we will necessarily not find where the Lord was or where He had his home and dwelling, for before He created everything visible, there was nothing with any substance, not the empyrean heaven, nor the lower ones, nor the earth, nor the fields, nor any other created thing. Nor did the Most High have any need of it for Himself, for his divinity is unembodied, not taking up or occupying any space, for since it has no body, it needs neither seat nor throne, not even a Heaven to put it in. It follows that we will be obliged to believe and unavoidably recognize that Heaven and earth and all things contained in them—except only that which is God—were created by Him. He created it all; for mankind traveling here below, the earth and all the other elements, animals, and plants, while for the blessed, those who have passed through the earthly death<sup>105</sup> to reach eternal life, Heaven and its glory.

All of this do we creatures owe to this eternal and magnificent King. And His Majesty needed nothing for Himself, for He is without beginning or end. For countless eternities He was as glorious in his being as He is today, and yet He had no house, home, or residence, and as soon as He decided upon the creation as a measure to communicate and reveal Himself, He created a place to live for the Creator who is uncreated and has no beginning. His beginning needed no one; He is *ab eterno*. His residence is within Himself and his own being without taking up place, space, Heaven, or earth, nor did He need heavenly glory, which is something similar to the effect of his cause.



Nor did He need the saints to be blessed and glorified as He is today. Just as holy, just as strong, just as wise, just as infinite was He before creating all things as He is after having created them, for within Himself He contains all things. He is infinite in his attributes, for they exist in his infinite medium, and all these perfections did He have in the past, does have in the present, and shall have in the future, incapable of existing for any instant or any length of time whatsoever without being holy, eternal, powerful, and blessed.

All three persons of the Holy Trinity are most holy and eternal, having no beginning or end. They love each other with an everlasting, mutual love, knowing and understanding each other fully, clearly, and truly. These three persons are one true God. They were in communion among Themselves, and although alone, They suffered no solitude. Though They had no material thing, nothing was lacking for Them because in comparison to their presence, everything created seems as though it were not. And whatever exists today, if the Lord did not sustain it, would cease to be. Within Himself, He encloses such greatness and magnitude that compared to God, all things created are like a drop of water thrown into the sea; the all cannot need the nothing, the Creator the creature, the higher the lower.

The Creator that only through his free will gave being to the worm that is mankind, why did He need us, for even had He not created us, would not He still have been glorious? For in and of Himself He has the principal cause of glory, for with the sight of Him, the blessed have and will have it through all eternity. With this beatific vision, they have all their rest, satiety, comfort, pleasure, happiness, and satisfaction. For if the sight of God gives this delightful happiness to all who are in his presence, and it is sufficient through worlds without end to remove suffering from a suffering mankind, to make glorious and give satiety and satisfaction to those who suffer want and decay, then true it is that God needed nothing.

The three divine persons resolved to do (to use terms we can understand) that which They had already known and decided *ab initio* (being infinite understanding), which was to make and create angels and men in their image and likeness so that the attributes of the Most High could be communicated, especially his compassion, which is what will shine the most on the last day. These and other good things

are what we creatures cannot comprehend: God created mankind while His Majesty already existed in the fullness of his infinite being.

The three divine persons resolved and conferred among Themselves about these actions, to use terms we can understand, for it goes without saying that They did not need to discuss or reach an agreement to know anything, for what the Father knows *ab initio*, the son and the Holy Spirit know, too. And all three persons understand and communicate among Themselves without there being even the possibility of anything hidden, not in words as people do, but simply by looking and understanding with the generative power of the mind, and in all three persons there is only one understanding.

They resolved to create all things. Once it is known and agreed that God in the fullness of his being and in his divine mind decided to create all things, it should be observed—since God was uncreated and within Himself—that He gave being and existence to nothing visible except following the order and manner Moses describes in the Genesis chapter. And so it may move people to praise their Creator, I here summarize the elemental and heavenly spheres, taking the information from the first part of the world, something about which I have written in greater detail and at greater length, but to make this subject handier and more useful for our understanding and fragile memory the following is sufficient.

## Chapter 10

*About the mystical light the Most High gave me to perceive the elemental and heavenly regions and the natures of the four elements and heavenly bodies.*

The elemental region is understood to include everything contained from the sphere of the moon to the center of the earth, and is called elemental because it is entirely composed of the four elements or simple substances, which are fire, air, water, and earth. As the universal starting points and instruments that form all the mixed and compound ones, God's majesty gave them those four primary qualities so different among themselves—heat,

cold, dryness, and moistness—to carry out the generation and decay of all elemental things. For this reason, we creatures are subject to these elements and diverse qualities and suffer so much through their effects.

The holy angels told me that the elements are instruments in the hand of the Most High to test and then crown the righteous, to punish the reprobates, and finally to be the scourge and just punishment for the sin of our original parents. Among the things that turned against mankind when we sinned were these elements, or to put it better, through sin we deserved and prepared ourselves for human decay, which is brought about through the four elements.

It should be observed that these four have such diverse properties that each element has two of its own, an active one with which it acts and another passive one, with which it is acted upon. Air is strong and acts on moisture, while it is acted upon by heat; the coolness of water is the property that acts, while moisture is the one that is acted upon; earth acts upon dryness and is acted upon by coolness. Regarding this diversity, I perceived and they explained to me that since they are such different properties, the result is a constant fight and struggle among the four elements striving naturally to preserve their own natures and retain the essential being God gave them, while at the same time not failing in the slightest to participate in the mixtures and combinations that naturally occur among them. And out of all these different and contrary natures, there comes a perfect harmony that with a surprising and astonishing balance configures the elemental sphere and region in its due and definite proportions.

An element is a simple substance, pure and not mixed with any other substance. This is so much so that its parts have no diversity at all, nor are they made from any others. Moreover, there is a difference between the elementary substances and the elements, for the elementary substances are composed of many things, while each element is a simple substance. Now some people have thought that the elements are dispersed into particles and so present in the mixtures and compounds, but that is not correct,<sup>106</sup> for the elements are not actually in the mixtures and compounds but only present through the effect of their properties. The natural and proper place and situation of the elements is for them to be on top of and surrounding each

other, for the reason that all have an intrinsic tendency to move directly to their own places. In the following chapters I will explain more fully what is each element's place.

One cannot fail to recognize, my Creator and Lord, who is the Author of such marvels and that his power is infinite. Eternal God, let all the creatures praise You, for You formed them, You sustain them and take away their lives in a natural way by means of these elements, for they control and sustain, preserve and consume us. You are amazing in all things, not the least of which are these elements, and your greatness and what You bring about in them is no less to be marveled at. As their Creator and Author, You should be blessed, for with just these words, "Let the dry land stand in the midst of the waters and the waters beneath the firmament be separated from the waters over the firmament," with these so efficacious words, my God, all of the elements were created in accordance with your will and word, then formed into compounds and placed in their proper places, where they are quick to obey their Maker. They are astonishingly integrated, and such are the wonderful forces that sustain this perfect world that serves an ungrateful mankind. Most ungrateful are we, indeed, for we do not make the payment that these benefits deserve. I offer it up to You, my Lord, for all the human race, and I invite all the angelic beings (for they know what mankind does not) to offer up that praise and glory my heart longs to give and that which my so stammering tongue neither dares nor knows how to utter.

## Chapter 11

*About the first element, which is earth, and what the Lord has shown me and where it is.*

**E**arth is naturally cold and dry. It is dense and very heavy, for which reason its natural place is in the middle of the universe, in all directions the most distant place from Heaven. With his providence, God sustains it, and contrary to what some false prophets have said, it is not sustained by any other force, for that is

something no one can give except the true God and Lord, Creator of the universe.

The earth together with its waters makes a round, spherical body, and although on the earth there are highs and lows, mountains and valleys, they do not really affect the earth's roundness, for compared with the whole they are smaller than grains of sand. I saw the proof that this is true one morning when the sun was rising, for as it rose, it shone first on the eastern peoples<sup>107</sup> and then little by little began to show itself to those in the west. What one concludes is that the earth and water form a round body, for if it were otherwise, the instant the sun came up it would be seen by half the world, assuming the latter to be flat, and every shadow imitates the shape of the object that produces it. From this, one infers that the earth has a circular shape.

It has a circumference of 9,280 leagues,<sup>108</sup> while the diameter, as has been said, is 2,502 leagues. To the place where hell, purgatory, and limbo are, the distance is 1,251 leagues, and that location, as well as the holy places where the Lord shed his blood, are in the middle of the earth. Purgatory is beneath Mount Calvary, with hell on one side and limbo on the other, as will be explained when it is time. The thickness of the earth from Mount Calvary to purgatory is 1,251 leagues.

This body and element, the earth, is, as I have said, the first, since it is the heaviest. It contains three regions: in the first grow fruit, trees, and plants that nourish the animals, while in turn the animals and plants nourish mankind. In this region, fountains gush out, rivers run, mountains rise up, and volcanoes erupt. This zone does not extend below the surface more than seven times the height of a person.

In the second region are generated the earth's vapors and warm breaths through the energy and power of the sun's rays, as transmitted through its influence and that of the planets. Here all the metals are formed: gold, silver, copper, iron, bronze, tin, lead, mercury, and the minerals that can be ground, such as sulphur, alum, copperas, and vitriol.

In the third region of the earth, nothing is produced because it is true that the energy that generates and creates all things does not reach so deep. And so in this last region the earth is purer and simpler. Its quakes and tremors, when they occur, are generated within

the second zone and result from the many breaths produced in its deepest cavities, breaths that contain in concentrated form the energy of rays from the sun, stars, and planets, for since these are not free there to rise through the air, they shake the earth, causing many quakes in those places where they occur.

On the earth live a large number of animals that it supports. I will remark here on the most remarkable ones I observed. Out of all the countless parts of creation I saw, they seemed to surpass the others in their beauty and their secrets of nature. Among the animals I saw a marvel of a bird,<sup>109</sup> delightful to look at. This bird lives around the Mediterranean Sea in the third part of the world—Asia, in its western part. It was shown to me so I might praise its Creator. What most impressed me was its beauty and large size, which exceed that of a peacock. It has a long neck, while its head is decorated with feathers of varied and most beautiful colors; the wings are similar to the feathers in the headdress, and when the sun shines on it, its many hues shine like enamel over gold and silver. I saw it at a time when it was caring for two of its little children. And nature has given it so much maternal love that with wings outstretched, she stood around them, making a wall to defend them from the waves of the sea; since it is so close by, she raises them with much anxiety, the faithful mother locked in combat with the very waves.

That is a wonderful thing, just as it was wonderful for me to see one after another in a short space of time so many different varieties of animals, some on land, others on the water, and some in the air. Those that the earth sustains and shelters in its lodges are many; the Most High effortlessly providing them with nourishment, and with no need for anyone to care for them, giving them their natural instinct to protect themselves from their enemies. And some of them care so much about others that they take responsibility for their well-being, as does the unicorn,<sup>110</sup> which places its horn in the water to act as an antidote to the venom that poisonous insects secrete in it. And God gave them such true instincts that before drinking, the other animals wait for this medicine given by the unicorn, about which they all know.

The lions revealed their strength, and just as much do tigers, bears, ounces, wild boars, and rhinoceri. Others are not as fierce: elephants,

deer, camels, each province and place having different sorts of animals. I shall finish this list of them with one that is most remarkable and so particularly caught my attention. It is much bigger than a large ox, brown, with a large head, and has a pouch on its chest that nature gives it to use when its young are born, carrying them there and using it as a luxurious litter. Its love is so great that it carries them with it until they are out of danger and can take care of themselves. As soon as they are born, it cleans and licks them and has them get into this pouch, where it feeds them, its milk not going dry until it is time to take them out; it keeps growing with the young so as not to squeeze them. Blessed be the providence and the wonders of the Most High.

There is another very big animal called a crocodile. It lives near the Nile River and feeds itself by tearing apart and eating animals. Its upper teeth are very sharp and the lower ones widely separated, and the two sets fit into each other. When it eats, the food gets in between its teeth, causing a lot of pain and suffering. When it finds itself in this distress, it opens its mouth wide to the air. And the Most High created a little bird called a *matroquillo*<sup>111</sup> that removes what is between the crocodile's teeth, living on just that. When the teeth are clean, the crocodile shakes its head to scare it away. I will not write more on the subject to keep it from becoming tiresome.

Oh, astonishing God and Lord and magnificent King! I do not know if I am more astonished that Your Highness created the *matroquillo* to clean the crocodile's teeth, or at the providence this shows, or that this cruel animal that lives on others should be so grateful as not only not to kill it, but also to signal its goodwill by letting it know it should leave.

Oh, uncreated God! How astonishing is your name as revealed by the wide world and the animals that live on its face, and how worthy You are, Lord, to be praised. What should cause mankind shame is that an animal appreciates the kindness done him by another, but people do not, my God, for the countless favors they receive from your generous hand. And who can count all that she receives? Impossible, for You created such diverse animals, each with its own purpose and reason, and Your Highness can do nothing in vain.

My Lord, looking into your divine mind and providence, what

grand design (supposing that Your Highness were obliged to formulate plans), what beneficent will, compels your magnificence to accomplish so many actions, to create so many animals and plants and grasses and lodges on the earth where all may take shelter and none lack for a place to retire in repose? May You be eternally blessed, uncreated Lord, for your countless wonders and acts of love.

## Chapter 12

*About the second element, water: its place and other properties and aspects of its nature.*

**W**ater is naturally cold and moist, heavier than air but not as heavy as earth, so for this reason its place is on and spreading over the surface of the globe. All the earth was covered with water, and it was necessary for the Most High to command that it withdraw to one part and place so that the earth might emerge and appear and become fruitful, providing a place for the grass, trees, and plants that sustain both mankind and the flying and earthbound animals.

The original body of water split into two when the Lord said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters; let the water under the firmament be separated from the water over the firmament." With these words God divided the waters into two parts. One rose up so high it went beyond the firmament, even above the sun, there freezing and becoming crystalline. I shall explain more about this water or heaven when it is time to talk about the heavenly spheres.

The other part of the water is at the lowest level, which is the surface of the earth. This is the place and location of the water that makes up the sea; the water from all the rivers and fountains, being so slippery, insistently runs to the sea, its natural place and the lowest point; for just as the earth is naturally round, so is water, finding no rest or repose until it reaches its home. And it was necessary for the Maker Himself to place limits on the waters. With his word and powerful arm, He commanded them not to rise above the line that marks



their boundaries, for His Highness has set the point beyond which they should not go.

And what His Immense Majesty commanded was important, for since of its own nature water is so flexible, without difficulty moving and taking itself from one place to another, it could easily (and painfully for us mortals) once again cover the earth and embrace it all, as it did when it was first created, and then we would suffer the flood many more times, the waters covering the earth all the way up to the highest and most lofty mountains, as happened when Noah took refuge with all his family in the ark. On that occasion, the water rose fifteen (and I am not sure it was not more) cubits higher than the highest mountain. This danger might well threaten us were we not free of it by the command and providence of the Highest, the magnificent Lord, for even the most violent elements obey Him as their Creator, and none offer Him resistance, except for a cruel and ungrateful mankind, for we are the ones who receive the benefits derived from the obedience of the elements and God's command over them.

Water is highly instrumental and more powerful than the other elements. It embraces the earth, taking possession of it, rising by the sun's energy into the high and lofty air, there causing rain, dew, snow, hail, and fog. Finally, its natural power mitigates and even neutralizes that of fire, overcoming it in spite of that being such a strong and all-consuming element.

Water is very important, the main resource necessary for our natural life. It all goes to the sea, into which run all the rivers and fountains, though they later spring forth again, spreading their waters over the earth to be of help to the needy in all that they lack. Through this wonderful arrangement and providence, God directs the various rivers, distributing them without any effort on the part of mankind.

The sea is an astonishing creature, and no less so the multitude and variety of fish it contains. The reason seawater is salty I perceived and understood to be that the energy of the sun's rays raises the finest particles of water and leaves behind the heavier and most earthbound ones. And although this might by natural means be part of the reason why the water is salty, the fact is that the Most High, making use of this natural cause, adds a lot of his own providence and plan. In the first place, His Highness created those salty and bitter waters because

they were more suited to and effective for preserving such an infinity of fish as live in them, for seawater prevents their spoiling or rotting. And in addition to being healthy for fish, they are better for ships since they are denser.

The sea is called the beginning and end of the waters, for they all (as has been said) are born from and return to it. And although it is true that many thousands of rivers and fountains flow into it, that does not cause it to grow. The reason is that the sea, while it is the repository of all the waters, also has many vents through which it gives off as much water as it receives.

Rivers are produced and caused by a flowing together of many fountains, and when they rise, so too the rivers they feed. Fountains are caused by the water that runs through the veins of the earth and its hollows, sometimes finding their way blocked and being unable to turn back due to the pressure of the colliding waters, likewise unable to move to the side or down due to the density and thickness of the rock, and so necessarily rising, thereby producing springs.

But one can also observe a wonder of the Most High in the fact that although the rivers and fountains are caused by the sea, for in it they have their beginning and origin, still they are not salty as it is. I noticed this contradiction but was shown that it happens naturally, something the Maker of all things makes use of and directs according to the purposes of his most high<sup>112</sup> providence, which is that the waters should become sweet for the natural well-being of mankind. If this magnificent King did not so direct through his providence, the salt water would be extremely harmful. The natural cause and means that His Highness takes for such an important thing is this: just as living creatures take on the properties of the region through which they are passing, losing those they had at the beginning and acquiring other very different ones—as we see in the example given by summer, when it is hot and the air becomes hot, too, while cold in the winter—just so the waters of the rivers and fountains, going through different and diverse lands, slowly lose that bitter acidity they bring from the sea, taking on instead a smooth sweetness. This is the providence of the Most High; it is good for all, as it is a great good for the sea that its waters are salty. When I saw this creature, I truly perceived its Creator within it.

The sea is bigger than the land. The beauty it shows is great. And I thought to myself, if the water all went away or it were possible for it to dry up, what a big empty space would be left! God left that there for the water, making it to its measure in the beginning when He created the heavens and the earth. This big hole now filled by the sea is wonderful to see, with all the hollows where the fish are. There are craggy rocks and as the result of shipwrecks, the sea holds accumulated treasures.

The extent and circumference of this creature is something to see; to the unaided eye it appears to have no end, such is its breadth. There is a large quantity of fish for the delight and use of mankind: whales, for example, which are as big as large rooms, and all the parts of their bodies can be put to excellent use. So many salmon, bass, lobsters, tuna, and many other large and small fish, and all of them know to move through the sea, picking out their own lodges and places to live. Then there are the ways and means they use to flee and protect themselves from each other, although sometimes it does not save them for the small become the food of the big ones, some the graves of others. Yet this does not happen without being the providence of the Most High, for it is his will to permit and command that of the many small fish, some more than others should fall victims to these trials and death. And even among those that fall into the hands of fishermen, the Lord picks out some more than others according to his will.

Oh, astonishing and magnificent King, how your power shines resplendent in this marvelous element of water! My Lord and husband, with your remarkable providence You made this creature so pure, its bright and clear body. And not only did Your Highness, my King, create it but also ordered and took action so that it be salty, as was needful, and the rivers, by your providence, sweet. Oh, Author and Lord of the universe! With the strength of your arm You ordained not only that this element be enclosed within the sea but also, so that it might not cost mankind so dear to look for water to meet our needs, You sent a stream to every province and corner of the earth so that all might satisfy their thirst and enjoy fully such a beautiful creature. Oh, how great and powerful You are, my God, and especially for holding back the wild waves of the sea stirred up when the weather changes!

If Your Highness did not do so, the world would drown—that happening to us not only from the extreme turbulence of the terrible winds and storms that often happen at sea but also from the very high bulges and swellings in it often caused by the moon. For if at the time of the flood all the tall and lofty peaks were covered and the water rose much higher than they, how would we avoid drowning now if your providence did not come to our aid?

Blessed be such a Lord, so well obeyed by his creatures. In this your Majesty shows Himself to be the true God. I ask the pagans whether by any chance the gods of metal and wood they worship would be powerful enough to do this wonder. Would the water obey them? Would they create the smallest fish or sustain it? No, indeed. My Lord, Your Highness alone is the Creator of the heavens and the earth and the elements, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and it is You who sustains and gives life to them all. May You be eternally blessed and recognized as a magnificent and generous Lord worthy of honor and glory. Amen.

### Chapter 13

*About the third element, air, and its particular properties and place.*

**I**t is unquestionably true that the element air exists, for we experience it with our sense of touch even if we do not with that of sight. It is divided into three regions—high, low, and middle—all different in their properties.

The highest is hot and dry through the circumstance of being next to the element fire. I encountered it when I was flying through the air on my way to learning about the kind deeds the Most High did for me. In this high region, comets are generated. The second one, situated between the other two, is very cold because it does not participate in the fire above it or receive, at least as much as the first does, the reflection of the sun's rays from below. The third and lowest region has those properties naturally associated with air, although it takes them on according to the circumstances; it is hot when the sun

shines upon it, moist from the proximity of water, and cold when the weather is. In this region, the third, are generated fog, dew, and frost.

There are many sorts of winds that are not really air but are produced by the breathing out of the earth; they have various properties and effects, though it does not seem appropriate to explain them here. The element air, though, is very important and instrumental in producing some things and sustaining others.

In all things is the Lord marvelous, nor did He create idly or by chance but with great wisdom. There are many birds that soar through the air, parting it with their flight, a reason for the Most High to be praised. In one of the properties of eagles,<sup>113</sup> there is a strong reason for such praise (just as it gave me a very big one to recognize the magnificence of this King), and it is that when they want to take their little ones out to fly and so have them begin to take care of themselves, they take them up to the loftiest part of their flight. Then, in order to test them—and this is something I observed—they place them looking directly into the sun's rays, and if they are stunned and cannot bear it, they deny that they are their children and drop them. This mystery of nature strikes me as a very appropriate parable for parents, for God gave them children to bring up with the care they should have, educating them and not allowing any love of flesh and blood to lead them to fail to admonish and punish their children when in their actions they do not look to God eternal who sustains them, even though this may mean the parents, in their desire that their children serve the Most High, seem to deny the love they naturally have for them; they should be parents who want eternal life for them, not the life that perishes.

Cranes also have a remarkable property<sup>114</sup> showing great concern for each other, for while some sleep, others are sentries standing guard. To do this better, they have a stone held in their hand or claw; it helps them stay awake because they awaken if it falls, and so they can warn the others of dangers that may threaten them from other animals. What a warning this is for churchmen, into whose care God entrusted souls! Notice that they should all be awake even though their flock sleeps. And they should not feel this is a burden, for all of

us, even though we have no one except ourselves to answer for, need to keep watch and be vigilant against the enemies who constantly hem us in. And how much more those who have so many to answer for! Remember that it is wrong for a guard of Israel to sleep or doze. The Israel of the Most High God and Lord is the soul, and it is guarded by prelates, who are the watchmen over their flocks. The stone they should have in their hands following the example of the crane is Christ Our Lord, who is a model to awaken them when they see the vigilance of that careful shepherd, though it may also represent an absence of comforts and luxuries, a measure that will keep churchmen from sleep and lead them to feel concern for the needs of their flocks.

There are many beautiful birds. The heron is exceptionally so, as are parrots, hawks, goshawks, and countless more, for some delight us with their songs, others please by their appearance, letting us see the variety of colors beautifying the feathers in which their Creator dressed them. It is something pleasing to contemplate. In fact, all the birds are, and give cause to praise their Lord. I will not list them because it would be tiresome to do so, including their properties and habits, though all that is for mankind's delight.

Oh, Author of all things created, Lord God of Israel, how wonderful You are in your works! Wonderful for having given us travelers here below the element air, so pretty and having such a tenuous body that it does not keep us from seeing the structure and grandeur of the heavens, for in seeing them we may remember the great King and his court, and the happy reward of enjoying You in the heavenly Jerusalem. Then we, poor pilgrims beholding our homeland, take heart and find new energy to do all those things of which we are capable through He who comforts us. May You be blessed, my Lord, for You created such a diversity of beautiful birds so that we human creatures might imitate them and correct our negligence in something so important as is serving your Majesty; You created birds for the support, delight, pleasure, and luxury of mankind, so that with their harmonious music rolling out of their beaks as though from harps, they might entertain and delight the ears of all creatures and lead us to praise their Maker and Creator. And true it is, my Lord, that they compel us to do so.

Even though I am dust and ashes, I do and shall offer that praise forever, as long as my life may last; should I not, let it come to an end. Should I not love and praise You, that would be not life, but death. May it please Your Highness that I die to all things imperfect and live to all things good, and God in me, for He is the life in which I live and for which I die.

## Chapter 12<sup>115</sup>

*About the fourth element, fire; in which its existence is proved, something I myself saw, and where it is.*

Elemental fire has its own natural home above the third region of the air, for it is more rarefied and diffuse than the other elements and rises above them; although invisible, it is there, for at the time I was experiencing this mystical knowledge of all things in the way I have said—an angel staying in my place while I went to see these marvels—with that opportunity I touched the region of fire with my hands. I say with my hands because I could feel how it was. And although it is true that by its nature elemental fire is all-consuming and scorching, there is no substance in its sphere to feed it, nor can there be, nor is it necessary, for an element (when it is in its own natural home) has no need of any other substance to preserve it, and although we do not see it, still it exists. The reason we do not is that it is not visible the way something material is. It cannot burst into flame or burn, being so pure, simple, and rarefied, and, indeed, it is all that.

Water is ten times more diffuse than earth, air ten times more than water, fire ten times more than air. Fire is naturally hot and dry, its heat greater than that of air and its dryness that of earth. This element warms but does not burn, as I experienced. I mean it does not consume things. Its way of heating is through a big slow heat like that given by the sun in the east. It is a pretty element, and the Lord exalted his work.

May You be praised, Lord, for these many marvels, for having cre-

ated such a pretty creature and sustaining it naturally without the need for any other substance, and without its ever being used up. This creature pleases me by its activity, and would that all creatures had the same, especially we rational ones, so that we might serve and love Your Highness for these magnificent things, for your high wisdom hates the lukewarm, and they provoke in You a strong dislike.

Give me, my King, even though I might not deserve it nor be qualified for it, the light and fire of the Holy Spirit to love and serve You. And should all that I have on my conscience be an obstacle, You have the power to grant me the right inclination, the spiritual quality and light for perfect love, and the fire and fruition of the High Spirit so that they may purify my soul, just as physical fire did Isaiah's. So be it. Amen.

## Chapter 15

*About the heavenly region and some mysteries regarding it that were shown to me, and about the first heaven and its planet, the moon.*

**T**hrough his kindness and compassion, the Lord showed me the heavenly region the same way He did the other things and said to me, "My wife and turtledove, pay attention to all this and offer the praises owed me by my human creatures, for they have forgotten the kind favors I did for their benefit, and give me the payment that from ingratitude the other mortals do not." No sooner had He said this to me than my holy guardian angels carried me away, my principal guardian angel staying in my place, while the other five who care for me accompanied and moved with me in the same manner by which I went to see the other things that I came to know in these assumptions, which by the grace of the Most High I was able to experience. I went up into the heavens and personally witnessed and clearly saw all that follows.

There are ten heavens that are in continual movement, eleven in all. The last and highest is the empyrean heaven, which is subject to no motion, being the place of quiet and repose where lives the great



and magnificent King as well as the blessed chosen by His Highness. This is the celestial Jerusalem, the heavenly home. I shall talk about it at the end.

[*First Heaven*]<sup>116</sup>

The first heaven, the one closest to us, is the sphere we see as very beautiful and pleasant to look at. It is separated from the earth, on its concave surface, by 6,247 leagues. In this sphere is located the moon, whose body has a circumference of 1,663 leagues; if the moon were in the eighth heaven instead of the first, we would not be able to see it since it is smaller than the stars. Its sphere or heaven contains 756,758 leagues, and the thickness of the crystal is 118,878 leagues. The moon moves from east to west at 31,532 leagues per hour. The body of the moon appeared to me with a resplendent brightness, like something white and dense, cold and damp, though it is hot to some degree by virtue of the warmth it receives from the sun.

The sphere's body is also glassy, white but tending toward a diaphanous light blue. As I penetrated, it felt like a beautiful cloud; the touch on the skin was soft, gentle, and pleasant. It is extremely beautiful, especially when seen so close. In going through it at high speed, I covered a certain time and distance, though I did not go so fast that I failed to see and learn about this heavenly body. Its grace and beauty were remarkable.

Oh, wonderful and magnificent God! Who is not amazed to see your providence in the fact that this heaven remains always in view as a pretty sight for us travelers here below and that You are so prodigal in your generosity, my Most High Lord, that the moon is visible to the world at night both to us and in other parts of the globe, and it lights up the night for the Perioeciens, the Antioeciens, the Antipodes, and all the others? And Your Highness directed the moon to travel a set distance from east to west in an hour, and that amount was so precisely and correctly set when Your Majesty created the body of the moon that it has never had to speed up nor failed to move, while mankind, created to love You, does not. What is to be seen here, my King, except your word and command? How faithful is your watchful

care and how well, Most High Lord, this creature obeys You. By all your creatures may You be praised, Lord of all the universe. Amen.

### *Second Heaven*

The second heaven, on its concave surface, is separated from the face of the earth by 7,901,917 leagues. Its circumference is 521,159,700 leagues.

The body of this second heaven is more beautiful than the first, for the closer they approach the empyrean, the more they reflect the spirit in brightness and beauty. In this heaven, there is a star or planet called Mercury. Its circumference is a hundred paces. This star travels from east to west in an hour the distance of 801,620 leagues. The properties of this star are mixed, hot, cold, and moist.

### *Third Heaven*

The third heaven, on its concave surface, is separated from the earth by 86,858,699 leagues. Its thickness is 235,678,750 leagues. Its circumference is 1,935,232,200 leagues.

This third heaven is larger than the first two because it encloses them, and the closer they come to the last ones, the bigger, more beautiful, and brighter they become. In this heaven, there is a star or planet called Venus. It is the morning star. Its breadth is 175 leagues.

### *Fourth Heaven*

The fourth heaven, on its concave surface, is separated from the earth by 322,037,449 leagues. Its thickness is 657,985,670 leagues. Its circumference is 5,883,146,220 leagues.

In this fourth heaven, there is just one planet, the sun. It is in the middle position among the planets as king and lord over them, giving its light and brilliance to the heavens, stars, and all the earth. The sun's breadth is 5950 leagues. This beautiful planet is hot and dry in moderation, and this is the reason all the earth's plants and fruits grow and ripen.

*Fifth Heaven*

The fifth heaven, on its concave surface, is separated from the earth by 980,593,119 leagues. Its thickness and depth is 985,678,787 leagues. Its circumference is 11,797,218,942 leagues.

In this heaven is the planet Mars. It is extremely beautiful and brilliant due to the light it receives from the sun. Its circumference is 240 leagues.

*Sixth Heaven*

The sixth heaven is extremely beautiful and delightful by virtue of all it receives from the sun and the empyrean heaven. On its concave surface, it is separated from the earth by 1,966,201,906 leagues. Its thickness is 6,578,917,718 leagues. Its circumference is 51,270,724,590 leagues.

In this heaven is the planet Jupiter, whose body is ninety-four times bigger than the earth. This planet is naturally hot and moist and favorable to the earth.

*Seventh Heaven*

The seventh heaven is pretty, bright, and beautiful. On its concave surface, it is separated from the earth by 8,505,119,514 leagues. Its depth and thickness is 7,650,976,500 leagues. Its circumference is 97,176,583,590 leagues.

In this seventh heaven is Saturn, whose body is one hundred times larger than the whole earth. This star is naturally cold and dry.

*Eighth Heaven*

The eighth heaven is exceedingly beautiful and adorned with such a multitude of stars that it exceeds all the others in brightness, being next to the empyrean; moreover, it has the luminosity of the stars and the light it receives from the sun. On its concave surface, it is separated from the earth by 16,196,960,014 leagues. Its depth and thickness is 89,765,890,060 leagues. Its circumference is 635,721,318,190 leagues.

In this eighth heaven are set the stars as we see them from here

below; they are all there except the seven planets already mentioned. The whole heaven revolves very rapidly from east to west as the others do. Of all the stars that fill this heaven, there are twenty-two that are the biggest and best known. Fifteen are of first magnitude. Each of these fifteen is a hundred times larger than the earth. Forty-five are of second magnitude, smaller than the first fifteen, but eighty-nine times larger than the earth. There are 208 third-magnitude stars, smaller than the ones described so far, but each one seventy times larger than the earth. There are 474 of fourth magnitude and size; they are smaller than the ones described so far, but each one is fifty-three times larger than the earth. There are 217 fifth-magnitude stars, but each one is thirty-five times larger than the earth. There are sixty-three smaller than any mentioned yet, but each one is seventeen times larger than the earth. And finally, all the stars, no matter how small, are larger than the earth. Only God is able to count them. The body of these stars is like polished silver, only transparently clear.

#### *Ninth Heaven*

The ninth heaven is exceedingly beautiful, but in it there are no stars or planets. Its beauty is greater than that of the purest crystal. This and the following heaven are called aqueous. God created them from the waters that he commanded to rise above the firmament; he purified and made them beautiful, then froze them. These two heavens were created by God as protection from the radiance of the empyrean heaven that beats upon them. How beautiful!

On its concave surface, it is separated from the earth by 105,961,885,074 leagues. Its thickness is 299,824,574,900 leagues. Its circumference is 2,434,012,731,350 leagues.

#### *Tenth Heaven*

The tenth heaven, like the preceding one, is called aqueous. It is the prime mover because with its movement it pulls along with it all the lower spheres. It is larger than all the others because it embraces and surrounds them. On its concave surface, it is separated from the earth by 405,785,453,974 leagues. Its thickness and depth is

9,872,387,657,802 leagues. Its circumference is 61,669,308,678,162 leagues.

The circumference on the concave surface of all the ten heavens has been stated. Likewise what it is on the upper surface, for as the highest level borders only on infinite space, all the dimensions can be calculated from what has been stated. And since the tenth heaven touches the empyrean, I will say how far it is from the earth so that the number of leagues may be known from the sphere and face of the earth up to the empyrean heaven, which is next to the tenth heaven. To figure that out, I have added in the air up to the first heaven and the thicknesses of the ten heavens. Adding it all up, the result is 10,278,173,111,766 leagues. That is the distance that separates us on the surface of the earth from the sphere of the brightly shining empyrean heaven. May the Lord give us his grace that we not be unworthy to go there. Amen.



## 4

### Mystical Journey

For Sor María, the first three years of life in the convent were terribly trying.<sup>1</sup> She suffered physically from almost constant illnesses, and spiritually from an inner life full of what she considered diabolical temptations, including some very persistent sexual ones, and an exaggerated idea of her own sinfulness. This scrupulosity, which her autobiography indicates is a continuation of her negative self-image as a child, caused her to impose painful and inappropriate forms of penitence on herself. These acts of penitence were followed by comforting “*exterioridades*”—trances, visions, and even levitations—either a gift from Heaven, as Sor María believed, or the product of psychological and physiological tensions she felt from her supposed sins and her efforts to purge them. When the *exterioridades* took place, the young nun, kneeling and absorbed in prayer, lost consciousness, swayed from side to side, and grew deadly pale, seeming to those present to lose contact with the ground.

In this state, it was not hard to take the step from the deeply rooted and intimate concerns expressed in *Face of the Earth* to the experience of bilocation. As Sor María described the experience, God already had shown her all of the universe, but now He was giving her more specific and detailed information about the lands to the north of Mexico. She was convinced that on hundreds of occasions she was carried there through the air and felt the drastic changes in temperature and saw from above the terrestrial globe divided into day and night. She al-

ways preached to the Indians, and more than once in pagan lands she won the crown of martyrdom for which she, like Teresa de Avila and Kempe, longed.

Much later in her life, Sor María wrote that at the end of the three years, after having with all her heart begged God to stop sending these favors, the trances ceased. In spite of that statement, the period of time involved, three years or several more, is not entirely clear. But however long the bilocations lasted, she naturally had told her confessor about them. He was an older priest who shared with the nuns in Sor María's convent a keen enthusiasm for extravagantly marvelous cases in religious life, phenomena not at all uncommon among Spanish mystics of the time. "Not a cautious man," as Sor María would describe him years later, he spread the good news within the order, generating an interest that eventually resulted in a letter to Alonso de Benavides, director of the Franciscan missions in New Mexico, requesting him to investigate whether or not the Indians knew anything about the nun.

What happened as a consequence of that request was narrated by Benavides in two reports, one to the king in 1630, and an expanded version in 1634 to the Pope. The impact of these reports, which were widely read at court, translated into several languages, and responsible for Felipe IV meeting Sor María, was reinforced by a letter the director sent to the missionaries in New Mexico after he returned to Spain. That letter summarized—very much from his own point of view, as we shall see—a long official interview that he conducted with Sor María in Agreda. Thus Benavides' accounts, more than Sor María's, are the direct sources of the legend that, thanks to Franciscan teaching, has survived in New Mexico and Texas.

Sor María's own interpretation of her experiences was very different. The Inquisition, set in motion on her case in 1635 and again in 1649 by the nun's supposed participation in a political plot tied to her friendship with the king,<sup>2</sup> examined her about the bilocation. She first gave oral testimony to the inquisitors who interrogated her, and then sent a written account to Pedro Manero, minister general of the order in Spain.

From any perspective, it is a fascinating story, so I will let Benavides and Sor María tell it in their own words. Just a few observations may set the stage in greater detail. Although Benavides had chosen to wear



the habit of a friar minor, he had not given up an energetic and enterprising character. The Spanish crown was covering the costs of Franciscan missionary work, and the 1630 report stressed the benefits, both practical and otherworldly, of the order's presence on the northern border of New Spain. On returning to Spain to argue for the missionary cause with the greater insistence made possible by being at court, Benavides had as an only partially hidden agenda, aside from a budgetary increase, the goal of creating a new diocese of New Mexico and being appointed its first bishop. The diocese did not fall to his lot, but Benavides did manage to become a bishop, though in the other Indies, in Asia, and he apparently died on the journey there.<sup>3</sup>

In detailing his achievements administering the spiritual life of New Mexico, Benavides would not have objected to a miracle such as Sor María's bilocation that showed heavenly satisfaction and even active cooperation in taking the Gospel to the region. What is more, a miracle that included teaching the basics of the catechism to the natives prior to the arrival of the missionaries would have helped the order defend itself from criticism, which in fact it was subjected to, that it was baptizing en masse without having communicated the essential concepts of the new faith.<sup>4</sup> Kendrick, who along with Pérez Villanueva and Kessell has advocated a rationalistic yet serious historiographical approach to the bilocation, suggests that when Benavides received the initial letter of inquiry about Sor María, he saw his opportunity and knew how to make the most of it, asking informants in the Jumano tribe leading questions that encouraged them to give the answers he wanted.

There are perfectly plausible reasons why the Indians might have known how to give Benavides the desired answers—and why they would have wanted to do so. In their annual trip to the region recently settled by the Spanish, the Jumanos would have learned something of Catholicism and seen images of the Virgin Mary dressed in blue, a starting point for their statement that the same color was worn by the lady who urged them to invite the Franciscans to their lands in West Texas so they might be baptized. In fact, for several years, they had been asking that missionaries be sent to them. Kendrick argues they probably had other motives for saying what Benavides wanted to hear—trade, protection, and curiosity, for example—a circumstance that

would address the disconcerting detail that never before had they mentioned the lady in blue who repeatedly came down from the sky. Kendrick proposes a parallel with the case of the Indian called El Turco, who led the Coronado expedition from New Mexico to Kansas with stories, described by the English historian as "lies," about a people whose features were much more grandly mythological than those found among the Wichita Indians at the end of the journey.

There is no conclusive proof for this interpretation of the bilocation, just as there is none on the other side of the question. All we have is what Benavides wrote, what the Southwest Indians told explorers, and Sor María's own account of her experience and the interview. Still, if one does not automatically reject the possibility of a bilocation, the detour around the extant documents seems much smaller. What we can add today, twenty years after Kendrick's study, is a growing recognition by scholars studying Spain's first exploration of America that frequently the participants, Europeans as much as the indigenous peoples, let themselves be caught up in and guided by a fusion of practical material interests and archetypal elements of myth—taken from one culture but adapted to the other to meet the needs of the circumstances. If we were to apply that approach to the bilocation, we would talk not about lies but about the powerful role of the imagination in both Benavides' and the Jumanos' reaction to the news of what the nun had told her confessor, and in Sor María, too, for she participated vicariously but effectively in the exploration of the Southwest.<sup>5</sup>

The report to Manero reveals another, almost anti-mystical side of Sor María. She has matured, unquestionably, but one cannot ignore that she was writing immediately upon emerging from the shadow of the Inquisition. She needed to refute Benavides' letter, and she knew how to distance herself from practically all of his sensational assertions. It does not seem overbold to suppose, in spite of what she told her superiors years later, that in the famous interview she let herself be swayed a little by the insistent New Mexican director, and that the neutral truth of how she understood the bilocation lay between two more personal truths: what she felt in the excited enthusiasm of 1631, and the cooler moment of circumspect reflection under the threat of the Inquisition.

What is beyond any doubt is Sor María's skill as a literary self-defender. Not wasting a scrap of the advantage of having the last word against her dead opponent, Sor María convinces us, as she convinced Manero, that she is sincere when she affirms she had always distrusted the authenticity of this famed mystical experience. She proposes a more sensible interpretation that looks for acceptable explanations. Then, with impeccable logic, she proposes the probable origin of what we come to believe were surely just foolish misunderstandings and exaggerations based on rumor. She convincingly identifies mitigating circumstances: her nervousness as a young woman in the authority-laden, threatening presence of several "graves padres" of her order, the involuntary nature of her experience, the intense suffering that accompanied it, and her heroic but failed efforts to prevent others from generating painful publicity.

At both the beginning and the end of the letter, Sor María wields the checkmate argument, picked up in the manuscript and stressed by Kendrick: she asserts her "trips" lasted only until 1623, while Benavides and the Indians maintained (as she herself did in a letter she wrote and gave to Benavides to send to the missionaries) that they were still going on in 1631. Her protestations notwithstanding, there is no statement by Sor María contradicting Benavides, nor any other document dating from 1623 to 1650, that supports her later declarations that the bilocations ended earlier and that Benavides wrote and placed in her hands her much-reprinted letter of 1631 to the missionaries in New Mexico.<sup>6</sup> Kessell's 1992 study inclines toward accepting Sor María's later disavowal but leaves the question open. Readers will now be able to compare for themselves the tone and style of her two letters on the subject.

In Teresa de Avila's somewhat similar descriptions of amazing favors from God, she was forced into self-contradictions that reveal more about a nun's powerless situation with ecclesiastical fathers than what she truly meant or thought. In Weber's view, an adroit use of "concessions and qualifications" helped save her from condemnation by the Inquisition in her tightrope walk between orthodoxy and heresy.<sup>7</sup> Equally important may be the fact that the dominated party in a hierarchical confrontation often finds it necessary to acquiesce in word and—to make the surrender easier—at a certain level of thought revis-