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John Donne in Meditation, Again

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Francesca Bugliani Knox, *The Eye of the Eagle: John Donne and the Legacy of Ignatius Loyola*, Religions and Discourse, Vol. 49, Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Wien: Peter Lang, 2011. xiv + 342 pp.

There is a great deal to recommend this book: its author is a serious scholar of substantial learning, who argues persuasively a thesis that is neither banal nor far-fetched. Her style, while hardly sparkling, is clear and workmanlike and blessedly free of the postmodern jargon that currently mars so much academic publication. Regrettably, these genuine virtues are often obscured by the author's tendency to pursue tangents of doubtful pertinence to the principal argument, including frequent overstatement of the case, displays of irrelevant erudition that sometimes border on pedantry, and an excess of pointless disputatiousness. The result is a book that is far longer than it need be, by perhaps as much as fifty percent.

Knox acknowledges that her book, like many others, began in a 2009 dissertation. I have no bias against dissertations turned into books (having done so myself many years ago), but the conversion ought to be complete. This volume, however, still looks and reads too much like a dissertation, and another year or two might have been profitably spent revising and, especially, compressing the argument. Nevertheless, *The Eye of the Eagle* provides a wealth of new insights on the relationship between Donne's poetry and religious prose and St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, and it is worth the time and patience of students of Donne and Renaissance devotional literature to glean the benefit. It is a tribute to

Knox's ingenuity and perseverance that she has produced such a valuable and original study on what may have seemed an exhausted topic.

It seems suitable to begin with my reservations about the book, which are almost all matters of the argument's presentation rather than its conceptual core. The first two chapters, especially the second and longer of the two, are a prime example of the marshalling of excessive amounts of material of marginal relevance to the argument. Indeed, had I not been reading the book for review, I may well have given up before getting through the first 65 pages, and that would have been a loss for me.

The first chapter, "John Donne Criticism and the Ignatian Legacy," is a rather predictable account of attention given by her scholarly predecessors to the influence of the founder of the Society of Jesus on Donne. It is accurate and useful up to a point, but might have been far more effective had Knox confined most of the routine documentation to the notes and concentrated on Helen Gardner and Louis Martz, who first established a critical link between the style and structure of Donne's poetry and St. Ignatius's methodical directions for personal prayer and meditation. The "Protestant poetics" challenge posed to their reading by Barbara Lewalski and her followers along with the coldly skeptical dismissal of any real religious significance to Donne's work suggested by John Carey and numerous new historicists sets up an intellectual drama of much greater interest than an indiscriminate listing of various approaches to Ignatian influences on Donne. By concentrating on the more important critical arguments about Donne's relation to continental Catholicism, Knox might have highlighted the importance of her own project.

Chapter two, "Discretion and Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* in Donne's Times," could have been largely eliminated with little loss to the argument. Knox's own words furnish a good sense of the general flavor of this chapter:

> Are there any historical or biographical reasons for thinking that Donne might have known and been influenced by the Catholic tradition of discretion and Ignation spirituality? This chapter suggests that there are. The first part explains how the idea and practice of discretion circulated among sixteenth-century Catholics and that facets of the Catholic tradition of discretion merged in Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*. The second outlines the fortune of Catholic adaptations of Ignatius'

> *Spiritual Exercises* and books inspired by Ignatian spirituality in Donne's England and explains why English Protestants used and adapted them. Finally, the chapter substantiates the claim that Donne knew Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* and books inspired by Ignatian spirituality and that he was familiar with the Catholic tradition of discretion.
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> (pp. 21–22)

Lumbering, repetitious passages like this—and there are many others—raise the question of whether there are any editors at work for Peter Lang. In addition to the verbosity and repetitiousness, there is also the problem that most of the books and authors discussed in the chapter are never mentioned again in the course of Knox's argument.

The four-page appendix (pp. 293–297) disputing a number of Anthony Raspa's editorial decisions and comments in his edition of Donne's *Essays in Divinity* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2001) seems at best fastidious: this effort to justify Knox's decision to quote Evelyn Simpson's 1952 edition instead (as if such a decision required a justification) merely reveals that the rejection of Raspa's version rests on disagreements over rather *recherché* matters with no discernible relevance to Knox's argument. In fact, all the appendices seem to be left-over dissertation material that might well have been omitted from the published book.

Knox frequently stresses the importance of Ignatius's influence of Donne to the extent that he is made to seem more faithful to the vision of the founder of the Society of Jesus than subsequent generations of Jesuits, who, it is intimated, have altered the order's charism in sinister ways that are never really spelled out. In the case of Robert Bellarmine, an inattentive reader may well forget that he was a Jesuit, because Knox does not mention it in stressing Donne's disagreements with Bellarmine, disagreements that might cast some doubt on her principal theme of Jesuit influence. What is more, she finds disagreements where none seem to exist. "Nowhere did [Donne] refer to the Church as *coetus*, the term preferred by Cardinal Bellmarine" (p. 228), Knox declares, and adds in a footnote that "Donne (*The Sermons*, vol. vii, 73) disagrees with Bellarmine's definition." But Donne mentions neither the Jesuit cardinal nor any definition of the Church in the cited passage. Similarly, footnote 88 cites three passages in the *Sermons* that seem, at best, tangentially

illustrative of the proposition, "The Spirit, in [Donne's] view, had a role in the reformation of the Church" (p. 237)—a view that hardly anyone will dispute.

There are two further particularly damaging lapses in the scholarship. First, in the seventh chapter, where Knox sets out to show that Donne's ecclesiology resembles that of Ignatius by being irenic in a way that anticipates contemporary ecumenism, she repeatedly cites twentieth-century Jesuits for confirmation where evidence from Ignatius himself or his contemporaries would seem to be required. Second, her discussion of the Holy Sonnets is marred by a failure to grasp the implications of the textual work of the *Variorum* editors. The assertion that "the order of the sixteen sonnets in the 1635 edition reflects the dynamics of the first week of the Exercises" (p. 80) is a non-starter, since the order in the 1635 edition is an incoherent farrago that obscures both the two sequences that Donne himself designed. For example, Knox rightly associates "What if this present" with Ignatian colloquy with the crucified Christ in the first week of the *Exercises* (¶ 53), but neglects the irony in Donne's treatment of the theme—perhaps because she is not seeing the sonnet in proper sequence.

Yet, despite these shortcomings, *The Eye of the Eagle* contributes to a deeper understanding of both particular features of Donne's poetry and devotional prose and also of his place in the religious life of his era. By reading the Holy Sonnets closely against the backdrop of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Knox shows that lines that have been taken as manifestations of Calvinism may with more plausibility be ascribed to the poet's familiarity with the counsels of St. Ignatius. For example, "As due by many titles" closes with a cry that has been taken by John Stachniewski, among others, as an indication of Calvinist despair:

> . . . . Oh, I shall soone despaire, when I shall see
> That lou'st Mankind well, yet wilt not chuse me,
> And Satan hates me, yet is loth to loose me.

Knox directs us to a paragraph in the *Exercises* where the devil is compared to a military chief who besieges a castle and surveys it all round, seeking its weak points in order to conquer and pillage it, and to another where the "enemy of our benefit and eternal salvation" invades the soul to "weaken or disturb or agitate it" (*Exercises* ¶327 and ¶333 [my

translation]; Knox, p. 78 and n. 16). The sonnet quoted may thus be seen as a dramatization of spiritual confusion rather than ultimate despair.

Chapters three and four of *The Eye of the Eagle* are replete with such detailed comparisons between passages in Donne's early religious poems and *Essays in Divinity* and St. Ignatius's methodical counsels and rules for rectifying the spiritual life. Readers of Martz and Gardner will find nothing surprising about this as regards the Holy Sonnets, although Knox provides a wealth of new parallels. Her treatment of *Essays in Divinity*, however, opens up new vistas and seems to me the highpoint of the book. As she points out at the beginning of the fourth chapter, "The *Spiritual Exercises* are just that, a guide to exercises that influence the exercitant experientially rather than literarily and it was in this way . . . that they influenced Donne decisively" (p. 111). Critics who have dismissed the influence of Ignatius on Donne on the grounds that the poet rarely quotes or paraphrases the saint, or imitates his meditative structure directly, are looking for the wrong kind of similarity. Neither the Holy Sonnets nor the *Essays* resemble the *Exercises* in the way that Donne's *Elegies*, for instance, resemble Ovid's *Amores*:

> Rather than teach a method, Donne's *Essays* give us the experiential process of discretion and meditation, rooted in humility and surrender. Similarities with the First Week of the *Spiritual Exercises* are traceable in both Donne's reference to, and exercise of, discretion and in the principles and dynamics of the meditative process.
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> (p. 116)

In other words, Donne's *Essays in Divinity* is not a book like the *Spiritual Exercises*, but rather an expression of Donne's experience of adapting Ignatian counsels to his own efforts at prayer and reflection.

Knox's stress on the influence of Ignatius's notion of discretion—most familiar to English readers in the phrase, "discernment of spirits"—is another important achievement of *The Eye of the Eagle*. While her discussion of the rôle of meditation in Donne's work constitutes a valuable addition to an already established notion, her treatment of discretion opens up an aspect of the poet's work that has been largely neglected. It is an especially valuable insight because it reminds us that Donne was more interested in the interior life than in doctrinal

controversy. There is, therefore, no reason for Knox's efforts to suggest that Donne and Ignatius were far closer in specific beliefs and in their understanding of the nature of the Church than seems at all plausible, since the argument is not really necessary to her principal thesis: that the shape of Donne's habits of prayer and meditation derive in large measure from the paradigm laid down in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Knox is quite effective, further, in showing that both Ignatius and Donne drew very deeply on the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, understanding *theology* as a way of grasping and ordering doctrine distinct from doctrine itself. She thus provides a way of seeing how Donne to some extent anticipated C. S. Lewis's concept of "Mere Christianity" and was thus able to serve the Church of England loyally while continuing to deploy the Thomistic theology and Ignatian spirituality that he learned as a boy.

In summation, *The Eye of the Eagle* is a book of impressive learning and shrewd insight that is marred by excessively lengthy digressions, a tendency to overstate the case, and an inclination toward disputations which are merely distracting rather than edifying. Although it calls for patience and occasionally for caution, it is a valuable addition to our knowledge of Donne and his relationship to continental Catholicism.

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