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Jesuit Polymath of Madrid: The Literary Enterprise of Juan Eusebio

Nieremberg (1595–1658). Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2015. Pp. x + 232. \$142.

For far too long, Juan Eusebio Nieremberg has been one of the most undeservedly obscure figures of the baroque age. Though he was not the same sort of Jesuit polymath as his contemporary Athanasius Kircher—currently the focus of much attention—Nieremberg was equally adroit at straddling different disciplines and equally intent on embodying and promoting Jesuit principles. Moreover, it could be argued that this prolific writer and best-selling author, who taught science to hundreds of students for many years at Madrid's Colegio Imperial, had a greater impact on a larger number of people than Kircher ever did.

Hendrickson's survey of Nieremberg's work is a very significant step forward in recognizing the value of this relatively obscure Jesuit. Thoroughly and carefully researched, elegantly written, and clearly organized, this study serves as an excellent introduction to Nieremberg and his age.

Given that Nieremberg has been largely ignored since the eighteenth century, this study is poised to become the gateway to further scholarship. There are few giants to tilt against, and even fewer paradigms to shift. In many ways, Hendrickson is working on a *tabula rasa*. This means, of course, that his study focuses squarely on Nieremberg's contributions rather than on challenging any scholarly *status quo* other than that of unjustified silence.

This feature of Hendrickson's study is its greatest strength. Unlike scholars who work in crowded fields, such as that of English Reformation history, Hendrickson is not distracted by entrenched theses or heated arguments. His sole focus is Nieremberg, and his intent is to place this Jesuit in context, especially in regard to the spirituality of his order and of his age. In sum, this study has no competition. Even better, it succeeds so well at introducing Nieremberg and placing him in context that it is likely to remain definitive for some time to come.

As the subtitle clearly indicates, this book focuses on the literary enterprise of Nieremberg. Its chief aim, then, is to analyze Nieremberg the writer in all his complexity, not just as an author, but as a Jesuit author of the baroque age. Linking Nieremberg's work to the spirit of the Jesuit order, and, more specifically, to the spirit of St. Ignatius and his *Spiritual Exercises*, Hendrickson provides a unifying vantage point for his analysis of a writer who crossed many boundaries. That unified vision is one of the chief virtues of this book, for Nieremberg could easily bewilder all who approach him for the first time.

In addition to very convincingly arguing that Nieremberg's broad reach had an essentially Jesuit sense of purpose, Hendrickson also situates Nieremberg squarely in a historical context. His Nieremberg has flesh and bones, so to speak, and is portrayed as a man of his age—somewhat overly ascetic—but still very much an exemplar of baroque Jesuit sensibilities.

Nieremberg's works span so many subjects that his books are scattered over five libraries at Yale University. Hendrickson approaches this complexity by dedicating separate chapters to Nieremberg's catechetical, scientific, devotional, and political texts. Given Nieremberg's prolixity, each of these chapters covers a variety of texts, and does so with an eye for the themes that unify them all.

One of these unifying themes is that of Nieremberg's asceticism, a subject that might surprise many readers. Hendrickson argues that the reintroduction of severe asceticism in the Jesuit order is central to the development of Nieremberg's thought and spirituality. This interpretation challenges the prevailing myth that would have one believe that the Jesuits were strictly "progressive" in a late twentieth-century sense. By bringing attention to Nieremberg's ascetic bent, this book not only corrects false assumptions, but also helps explain why it was that he slipped into obscurity in the eighteenth century and has remained hidden in the closet until now. It is when dealing with this somewhat uncomfortable subject that the contrast with Kircher, the worldly wunderkind, comes into high relief. For many in our day and age, Kircher represents forward-looking "postmodernism," while Nieremberg represents a "regressive" medieval mentality. The truth is, however, that Jesuits had various approaches to their spirituality, and that the ascetic Nieremberg and his popular devotional texts are proof of it.

Another unifying theme that might surprise some readers is that of Nieremberg's spiritual approach to nature, and to what we would call empirical science. Those accustomed to pitting science against religion will find much here that could give them a new point of view on the relation between theology, spirituality, and the birth of modern science.

Similarly, some readers might be surprised by Nieremberg's interest in social and political issues—an area of human experience often ignored by ascetics. Nieremberg's work as an *arbitrista*, or activist for social and political reform gets a lot of attention from Hendrickson. Not surprisingly, Nieremberg the ascetic Jesuit had much to say about the plagues, famines, wars, poverty, rebellions, inflationary spirals, bankruptcies, and political scandals that plagued Spain in its age of decline. And he also had much to say about the root causes of these calamities and about the need for moral transformations, much like the twenty-first century Jesuit Pope Francis.

This book is a landmark achievement. Although its tight focus on what is quintessentially Jesuit in Nieremberg's texts might not please all readers, it is certainly a praiseworthy approach, and one that gives this book the potential for elevating Nieremberg "the Jesuit polymath" to the place he deserves in history and in Spanish literature.

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