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It is something of an irony that a man who worked so relentlessly for the preservation of the Society’s historical memory would end up being virtually forgotten by historians. That, at least, is what one could be led to think in the face of the relative scarcity of monographs on Juan Alfonso de Polanco, as García de Castro points out at the opening of this richly documented study. Not that Polanco’s importance was never properly acknowledged—it has been recognized by, among others, Dowling, Martini, Donnelly, Aldama, Ruiz Jurado, Coupeau, and O’Malley. However, and as García de Castro notes, such an acknowledgment has for the most part taken the form of passing remarks, made while discussing one of the three figures (Ignatius, Laínez, Borja) whom Polanco served as the head of the Society’s secretariat in Rome. García de Castro summarizes the consequences of this neglect quite eloquently: “Le debemos mucho y le conocemos desproporcionadamente poco” [We owe him much and know him disproportionately little] (26).

García de Castro’s formula serves not only as a description of the state of affairs surrounding the scholarship on Polanco, but also as a programmatic statement for his own book: if the latter seeks to fill a lacuna in our knowledge, it is because that is a way of paying the debt that Polanco is owed. One of the merits of García de Castro’s book, however, consists in specifying what this debt is. For while it is true that Polanco’s memory would end up being eclipsed by that of the seemingly more central protagonists of the epic of the Society’s foundation—echoing Astraín, García de Castro refers to him as one of the “silent heroes” or héroes callados of the Society’s early decades—it is equally true that his work (and hence the nature of the debt owed to him) has not been properly understood. It is in its efforts to understand this work that García de Castro’s book ends up being more than a biography. His study, as he puts it, is not only an ‘ejercicio de memoria’ [exercise in memory] but also an attempt to understand Polanco as the “arquitecto del carisma de la Compañía” [architect of the Society’s charism] (26).

As is the case with the formula with which García de Castro summarizes the state of the scholarship, this one, too, is worth considering carefully. It posits a tension that readers of this book will understand to have been fundamental to Polanco’s work: the tension between an evanescent spiritual grace that flows from God to humans and the fixity and permanence that characterize the structures that an “architect” is supposed to project. At stake here, to echo a basic
schema of sociological research, is nothing other than the fabled transition from a charismatic to a bureaucratic mode of organization. García de Castro depicts Polanco as someone who worked within the liminal zone that separates both, and his book makes a convincing case that what distinguishes this “architect” is the fact that he did not deaden the Society’s charism (a risk run by every effort to give enduring form to an exceptional grace) and that he instead “dynamized” it. In this depiction, García de Castro finds a way to dynamize Polanco’s own figure, liberating his memory from its imprisonment in the ultimately stereotypical role of the faithful secretary (29–40).

By his own admission, García de Castro follows a “classical” division. After an introduction that reviews the various treatments of Polanco’s figure, he proceeds to discuss Polanco’s life and work. Polanco’s native Burgos and family background are discussed in detail, as are his years in Paris and his arrival in Rome, where Polanco would quickly establish himself as a scriptor in the papal curia (43–108). A thorough selection of primary sources serves as the basis for García de Castro’s account of Polanco’s admission into the Society—of particular interest here is the testimony of his family’s fierce opposition to this path—and of his studies in Padua up until the year in which he was called back to Rome to assume control of the Society’s secretariat, an office that had been occupied on an ad hoc basis (109–16). We learn of Polanco’s organization of the archives, of his efforts to set up a system of communication for the entire Society, and of his role in the preparation of the Society’s Constitutions, and are then treated to a detailed account of his role in various critical junctures including the Portuguese crisis and, in the time following Ignatius’s death, the first three general congregations and the Colloquy of Poissy (147–83).

The discussion of Polanco’s work follows a threefold distinction between a juridical, a spiritual, and a historical oeuvre. It is in relation to the first group in particular—a set that includes not only the Industrias and the Constitutions but also various Instrucciones, the treatise De officio de secretario, and the vast number of letters which he wrote himself or ex commissione—that García de Castro refines his characterization of Polanco as the “architect of the Society’s charism.” In the book’s estimation, if Polanco is to be credited with having accomplished a successful transition into a bureaucratic mode of organization, it is largely due to his exceptional mobilization of the powers of the written word: under his command, writing became a means of continuously infusing new vitality into the special gift given at the origin of the Society (219–20). Polanco’s architectural task has, in García de Castro’s words, a “philological” basis—in the etymological sense of the term, where philology denotes a love of the word (23–24)—and its reach is nowhere more apparent, perhaps, than in the creation of what is arguably the most sophisticated “engine of communication” of its time. Polanco was a promoter, practitioner, and theoretician.