An Ignatian Approach to Reading the Spiritual Classics

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Since Pierre Hadot’s Philosophy as a Way of Life, published in English in 1995,1 there has been growing interest in the notion of the ‘spiritual exercise’ as a way to understand pre-modern philosophical texts. Hadot suggests that these texts should be read primarily as teaching not ‘dogma’ or ‘theses’ but ‘ways’ or ‘exercises’, by means of which the reader is transformed, ethically and spiritually.2 In his book, After Augustine: the Meditative Reader and the Text, Brian Stock traces this approach through Augustine and texts of the medieval period. He says, ‘it would be fair to say that Christian thinkers in late antiquity and the Middle Ages shared the search for wisdom with the ancients. They cultivated the interior life. They engaged in a variety of spiritual exercises that emphasized self-control and meditation.’3 Many of the texts that we call ‘spiritual classics’ today are in this category. Implicitly or explicitly, they contain a demand to engage actively in certain tasks for their appropriation, towards personal transformation. To think of these texts in terms of ‘spiritual exercises’ is a useful way to pinpoint this element of active engagement.

In this chapter, I would like to propose a way of approaching the reading of such texts using Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises as a model. By referring to these texts as ‘spiritual classics’ I am simply adopting the name that spiritually transformative texts from the past are commonly given today. I do not intend to discuss how to define a ‘classic’ text, though I am informed by David Tracy’s treatment.4 The question of precisely which texts should be included, and which excluded, I am also putting to one side. My focus is on how the notion of ‘spiritual exercises’ can guide the reading of these texts, and with what benefits. Ignatius

of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* provides a concrete starting point for understanding of the notion of the ‘spiritual exercise’. What would it mean to apply Ignatius’ approach to the reading of spiritual classic texts? This is not to deny that there are differences of teaching among the various spiritual classics: I am not seeking to impose an Ignatian model of spirituality on other texts. Rather, I am concerned with how readers appropriate these texts, in practical terms, and with a broader commonality of approach at this level. The test of the approach will be whether it can be shown to clarify and deepen the reading of spiritual classic texts, rather than distorting them.5

Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* is unusual, among the texts published as spiritual classics today, in spelling out what it means to read actively, putting personal appropriation at the centre. You cannot read the *Spiritual Exercises* without realising that what you do as a reader is vital to the interpretation. The text is addressed to spiritual directors, for use with individuals who wish to follow the exercises, in the context of a retreat. The exercitant’s role in appropriating and assimilating the material of the *Spiritual Exercises* is central. One could think of the analogy of a musical score. The only purpose of the score is for playing. The text is wholly directed towards performance. As a set of notes and directions on the page, it cannot be mistaken for the experience of playing and hearing the music which results. In contrast, in the case of most spiritual classics, the text is not just a ‘score’ in this way, but also offers examples of how the music is to be played and what it sounds like, by means of creative constructions of experience, in images, visions, autobiographical accounts, and so on. For instance, in Augustine’s *Confessions*, Augustine recounts the experience that he had at Ostia with his mother:

‘While we spoke of Wisdom . . . for one fleeting instant we reached out and touched it. Then, with a sigh, leaving our spiritual harvest bound to it, we returned to the sound of our speech.’6

Readers might imagine what it would be like to experience something similar for themselves, but no kind of action or self-appropriation is required, and a reader today would not assume

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5 I am not the first to ask this kind of question. David Lonsdale and Michael Paul Gallagher, for instance, have applied the notion of Ignatian discernment, in different ways, to the question of how to read texts, or in Gallagher’s case, cinema (David Lonsdale, “*TOLLE, LEGE*”: Reading and Discernment as a Source of Personal Transformation’, in *Sources of Transformation: Revitalising Christian Spirituality* (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 41-56; Michael Paul Gallagher, ‘Teologia, Arte, Discernimento e Cinema’, *La Civilità Cattolica* (1995) II, 391). Here, however, I am concerned not so much with Ignatian discernment as with the manner in which a reader engages in reading, regarding the role of personal appropriation in the process of interpretation.

that there was anything here to be practised, only a story about someone else to be understood. But what would happen if one approached the text more like Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*, as a text which requires active appropriation, for personal transformation? My suggestion is that Augustine and other spiritual classics can be fruitfully read in this way, and that the interpretation is improved by doing so.

The reason for seeking a reading in terms of spiritual exercises is not just to bring readers today closer to the attitude of the original readers, as suggested by Hadot and Stock. It is to deepen the theological understanding of these texts. To engage in this manner directly serves an understanding of the theology. For instance, a common spiritual movement in these texts is from an external type of imitation of Christ to one approximating more closely to the intimate personal sharing of the Father with the Son. Especially late medieval texts were concerned with this movement ‘into the Trinity’, to a personal union which puts the reader in the place of the Son in relation to the Father, to attain the goal of ‘union with God’. Then, in union with God, the individual is expected to self-implicate further, to the extent of feeling the intimacy of God’s immediate presence personally, and to pursue this movement out into the world, in virtuous action. Thus, the theology of participation is a practical one, involving the reader actively. If the text is read merely as an impersonal address, these movements cannot be adequately detected. Academic readers might object that, in universities, we are

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7 Ignatius’ *Exercises* is part of the development of a ‘manualist’ tradition in the late medieval period, where the tasks of the spiritual life were set out in the form of a manual, rather than in the more extended literary form found in earlier texts, for instance Augustine’s *Confessions* or Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. Ironically, this has the effect of separating the notion of spiritual ‘exercises’ from other notions of spirituality, putting a divide between theory and practice, which is precisely what Ignatius’ text seeks to avoid, and what Hadot’s adoption of the term is designed to redress.

8 This approach is supported by a number of studies emphasising the ‘performative’ character of these texts, e.g., to give only one example among many, on the mystical traditions: Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), esp. ‘Introduction’, pp 1-13.

9 In Western Christianity, this was a development of Augustine’s anthropological treatment of the Trinity in his *De Trinitate*, in which mystical writers, especially in the late medieval period, extended Augustine’s notion of the soul’s capacity to grow in awareness of the divine life within the Trinity, as a journey of deepening indwelling of the Trinity, in personal terms: for instance, in William of St. Thierry, and in visionary form in Beguine writers such as Hadewijch, and in Mechthild of Magdeburg, also in Meister Eckhart, Ruusbroec, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross.

not concerned with the reader’s spiritual growth and can only observe these spiritual movements indirectly. That is true, but it is possible to recognise that the tasks of interpretation are strongly affected by the call for personal appropriation, when this is understood as central to the text. Further, to engage with a text in personal terms is not to be regarded as contrary to critical interpretation. For these texts, being personally engaged helps to reveal structures of transformation that are invisible to a less involved reader, to which academic analysis and criticism can fruitfully be directed.

How did Ignatius understand the notion of the spiritual exercise? At the beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises*, he says that he includes all the activities of ‘examining one’s conscience, of meditating, contemplating, praying vocally or mentally’ that are aimed at ‘preparing and disposing one’s soul to rid herself of all disordered attachments, so that once rid of them one might seek and find the divine will in regard to the disposition of one’s life for the good of one’s soul’.\footnote{Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, in *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, ed. Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 1, p 283 (from here on abbreviated as ‘Exx.’).} Negatively, the goal of the exercises is to remove ‘disordered attachments’ which stand in the way of a correct perception of God’s will. Positively, they are to find ‘the divine will in regard to the disposition of one’s life’, which means the individual’s part in the divine will, which is also the path that is understood as for the greatest ‘good of one’s soul’. In terms of the content of the exercises, Ignatius shows a preference for imaginative contemplation. The individual is asked to contemplate scenes mostly from the gospels. Each exercise has a standard form, beginning with a short preparatory prayer and then what Ignatius calls the ‘composition’ of the scene or place in which the action in scripture takes place. This involves imagining not just the scene but one’s own response it. For instance, for the scene of the Nativity, Ignatius suggests the following: ‘making myself into a poor and unworthy little servant, I watch them [the figures in the scene], and contemplate them, and serve them in their needs as if I were present, with all possible submission and reverence; and afterwards I reflect within myself to derive some profit’.\footnote{Exx. 114, p 306.} The final phrase, ‘to reflect and derive profit’ is frequently repeated and entails seeking what Ignatius calls ‘not so much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but rather the intimate feeling and relishing of things’.\footnote{Exx. 2, p 283.} Not just discursive thought but an affective response should be made. At this point, Ignatius says that I should ‘ask for what I want’ in relation to God, that is, articulating...
this personal movement of desire as my own. This leads to the final stage of the contemplation, the colloquy, which is a direct conversation with Jesus (or his mother Mary, or God the Father, or all three in turn) where, as Ignatius says, one can speak ‘as one friend speaks with another, or a servant with a master, at times asking for some favour, at other times accusing oneself of something badly done, or telling the other about one’s concerns and asking for advice about them’. The high point of the contemplation, therefore, is a two-way, direct address between God and the soul, and the foregoing steps are set up deliberately with this goal in mind. The contemplation ends with a short prayer, usually the Our Father.

Joseph Veale points out that each individual exercise of imaginative contemplation is a microcosm of the dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises as a whole. In each exercise the narrative of scripture (or sometimes a narrative based on doctrine, such as the sending of the incarnation) is used to provoke the individual’s response. In the same way, the whole of the Exercises is divided into four weeks which follow the narrative of salvation history, from the sending of the incarnation to Jesus’ resurrection. Personal reflection on sin is the focus of Week 1, followed by Jesus’ ministry in Week 2, his passion and death in Week 3, and finally resurrection in Week 4. The process of individual contemplations is designed to enable the larger process of reading individual experience and circumstances into the narrative of God’s dealings with humanity, from incarnation to resurrection. On the one hand, the use of the imagination encourages a creative insertion of personal circumstances, putting the individual reader at the heart of the process; while on the other hand, the repeated reference to the divine narrative, greater than the individual, keeps the focus on the divine initiative, to which the individual responds. Two narratives are being brought together: an external narrative of God’s dealings with humanity, and an internal narrative of imaginative and affective response, designed to situate the individual at the heart of the process, for the sake of personal transformation.

Ignatius’ anthropology allows for a positive correlation between these two narratives: the divine initiative is capable of being identified with my own personal desire, provided careful

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14 Exx. 54, p 296.
15 Exx. 15.
17 Exx. 4.
18 Veale, p 18; Gilles Cusson, Biblical Theology and the Spiritual Exercises (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1988), p 42.
attention is given to the task of discernment. This means that theological meaning can be construed in terms of the task of personal appropriation: *how* I understand the divine narrative *is* the meaning of that narrative in my case. To make the story of scripture into my own story is not to manipulate it away from its ‘original meaning’, or to be seen as a step which is inferior to an impersonal investigation of the meaning, but is simply a deeper reading of the same meaning. The counterbalance to this positive assessment of human capacities and of the process of personal appropriation, which takes account of failure and sin, is to be found in Ignatius’ emphasis on the notion of spiritual poverty. Again, this is introduced within the exercises, in terms of personal appropriation. One attains spiritual poverty by desiring a state of ‘indifference’ or detachment in relation to the divine will, by focussing on Jesus’ poverty (in the contemplations) at key points in his life, such as in his nativity and supremely in the Passion, and by asking to share in his poverty as the means to serve him best. Spiritual poverty allows a correct discernment of the divine will, which avoids pride and deception. In typically late medieval terms, this poverty is also the fulcrum of the love of God, as a complete self-gift which is shared mutually between the individual and Christ, on the kenotic model. It is the culmination of the *Exercises*, called the ‘contemplation to attain love’. At this shared point of total self-gift, individual human freedom and divine freedom meet, united within a self that is shared with Christ.

From this brief outline of Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*, it is possible to extract some principles for interpretation which bring out the tasks required for personal appropriation. I have drawn five points from the *Exercises*, which aim both to be true to the dynamic of the *Exercises* and to be phrased in sufficiently general terms also to be applicable to non-Ignatian spiritual texts. An assessment of the value of these points for reading other spiritual classic texts will follow.

The first principle is to *locate the reader within the bounds of the text*, that is, to make clear that the task of interpretation will involve the reader actively, in a personal appropriation. Ignatius begins the *Exercises* with several annotations to this effect. He describes the central activity as one of conversation between the creature and the creator, with the individual

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19 Exx. 23.
20 Exx. 116.
22 Exx. 144, 157, 167.
exercises and the director only there to facilitate this engagement. The director’s role is to tailor the progress of contemplations according to the individual’s requirements, with this primary emphasis in mind. The weeks are to be taken one at time, saying nothing about what lies ahead, so that the individual’s ongoing personal appropriation remains in focus. In the imaginative contemplations, the emphasis, as we have seen, is on quickly reaching a moment where the elements of the text furnish a direct address between the reader and God. Ignatius asks the exercitant to address ‘my Lord’, ‘what I want’, ‘what I want to say’ to my Lord, and to enter into free conversation with God, as the means to progress. The reader cannot merely observe, but must at least imagine what would happen if one engaged actively in the way that Ignatius suggests.

Second, the aim of the reading is to join the reader’s personal narrative to the master narrative. The way that Ignatius’ text is set up continually works at the interplay between the two narratives, my personal narrative and the mission of Christ. The imaginative contemplations of scripture, the progress of the Exercises from incarnation to resurrection, and the additional help of the director, keep both elements in play. It is not the case that ‘spiritual exercises’ entail only what is on the side on the exercitant, for instance by providing devotional techniques. The task is a theological one, of bringing the divine narrative and the reader’s experience together. So the ‘theology of the Exercises’ is not something different from the practice of the exercises themselves: the exercises are theological. To understand the Exercises is to recognise not just what the practical tasks are that they ask the individual to do, but how these tasks work to join the reader to a larger theological process.

Third, the reading aims to develop a skill in the reader. In the case of the Exercises, the skill is of learning to see and act on an immediate knowledge of God’s presence, so that the resulting action is appropriately matched to both the circumstances and the individual’s talents. Two skills can be identified: first, among the various desires and thoughts that an individual commonly experiences, to sift those in keeping with God’s voice or presence reliably from those against; and second, to follow this movement into effective individual action, among a number of different possible actions. Ignatius builds this process towards

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24 Exx. 15.
25 Exx. 2, 6, 8-10, 17-19.
26 Exx. 11.
27 In many places throughout the text: see the directions for the various individual contemplations.
what is called the ‘Election’ in the middle of the *Exercises*, which is a major life choice such as a vocation or marriage.\(^{28}\) But he carefully resists any statement of preference for this or that outcome or decision: the burden is kept on the individual’s own process of discernment.\(^{29}\) This is where spiritual poverty is most applicable, because it opens the reader to a horizon beyond any one course of action, by remaining detached in relation to any particular outcome.\(^{30}\) The ‘discernment of spirits’, that is, discerning the will of God from that of opposing forces, is the main skill to be learned from the *Exercises*, and not just for the Election, but for all spiritual progress. In terms of the interpretation of the text, this means that the reader should not look primarily for a message or teaching of an impersonal kind, but for something more akin to a skill that can be learned, and for an understanding of how this skill is to be employed in the spiritual life and towards what personal goal.

Fourth, following from the first three points, the text is to be understood in terms of a ‘movement’ or ‘dynamic’, rather than in static terms.\(^{31}\) Readers generally try to understand theological texts in terms of their building blocks: the main concepts, the theory that lies behind the text, or the experience, perhaps in terms of the author’s biography, that it is trying to express. But here, the text demands to be understood in terms of how it moves the reader from a to b, and in how it sets up this *movement* and sustains it from beginning to end. That is to say, the text is about the reader’s transformation, to which other elements are secondary. Ignatius begins by asking the exercitant to find a place of liberty where their spiritual movements can be observed freely rather than while experiencing demands which push them in a certain direction.\(^{32}\) This is the prelude to seeking a divine movement that is otherwise invisible. Then, in relation to the imaginative contemplations, the exercitant examines where the various internal movements lead, while retaining an ongoing ‘indifference’ or poverty as to the outcome, as already mentioned. The process of discernment channels this progress, until one learns the skill of discerning and following the divine will reliably. Without a notion of the dynamics of the text and how the text works in terms of its ongoing process in relation to the reader, the central point is missed. However much one knows about Ignatius and his thought, the *Exercises* must be understood dynamically, as a process moving the

\(^{28}\) Exx. 169-189.  
\(^{29}\) Exx. 15.  
\(^{30}\) Exx. 149-157 (meditation on the three classes of persons).  
\(^{31}\) ‘There was a time when people spoke of the logic of the Exercises. . . . It is now more common to speak of their dynamic’ (Veale, p 3).  
\(^{32}\) Exx. 20-23.
exercitant through a certain pattern of personal growth, while other aspects of the text, such as the understanding of contemplation and the human person, are secondary to this.

Finally, the notion of the reader as ‘self’ is strongly implicated. Ignatius begins the Exercises with the reader’s desire. Desire for what? The self of the Exercises is one who, at root, desires ‘the end for which they [humans] are created’, which is ‘to praise, reverence and serve God Our Lord, and by doing so to save his or her soul’. The self is theologically relational, and in an active sense: it is orientated towards intimate relationship with and service of God as its deepest goal (however much this is hidden from view and obscured by sin). The movement of the text is from a self initially conceived of as autonomous and resistant to God, to one dependent on and open to the divine initiative, who has internalised this relationship to the extent of understanding it as the self, not as an adjunct. If the reader is central to the interpretation of the text, as is now clear, it follows that the reader of this text must at least be able to imagine a self that depends for its own being on another, in a way that renders it radically incomplete. The self of the Exercises is one that needs the text for its own understanding, because the self is discovering itself by means of the text’s dynamic. The text, then, becomes part of the self in this reading, as a means for articulating and understanding the self.

To what extent are these principles of interpretation of value in reading other spiritual classic texts? I shall assess their application by considering a single example, which is John of the Cross’ Ascent of Mount Carmel. Though it comes from a similar Catholic context and period of spiritual reform, I choose this text because it is very different from Ignatius’ Exercises. It is more like Augustine’s Confessions, in the respect that it can easily be read as a text about someone else’s experience, rather than in the manner of exercises for the reader’s transformation. Since the Ascent of Mount Carmel is based on John’s lyric poem ‘One dark night (En una noche oscura)’, and is written in the form of a commentary on the poem, there is no obvious guidance as to how the reader should appropriate it personally. Indeed, the experience of the ‘dark night of the soul’ is assumed by most readers to be a rarefied one, beyond their own experience, encountered only by advanced contemplatives. Alternatively, other readers are inclined to the opposite extreme of identifying their personal experience as a ‘dark night’ quite uncritically. In either case, the text is read as telling of a single type of

33 Exx. 23, p 289.
experience that the reader either does or does not have, rather than being concerned with personal appropriation.

To approach John of the Cross’ *Ascent of Mount Carmel* in the manner of Ignatian spiritual exercises produces a very different result. I am not suggesting that the text should be read as an Ignatian imaginative contemplation. That would be to read it against the grain, and John rules out imaginative contemplation as a method at key points. There is a long history of Ignatian-Carmelite exchanges and tensions to attest to the fact that, as spiritual teachings, the two texts do not say the same thing. But it is possible to look beyond these differences to the broader issue of how the reader is engaged and transformed by the text. To start with, instead of reading John’s lengthy descriptions of the dark nights as pointing to a single defining experience, the first Ignatian principle, of putting the reader at the heart of the interpretation, points to a different kind of engagement. The metaphors of the dark night can then be approached as means by which John attracts the reader’s attention to wider questions of spiritual growth. The dark night experience has a performative function, in relation to the reader, of pointing to the phenomenon, within any process of spiritual growth, of moments of disorientation and sense of loss. In the Prologue to the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John says that his interest is in how one should respond to this inner darkness: his purpose is therapeutic and for the reader’s benefit. He goes on to link the dark night experience to Jesus’ cry of dereliction from the cross, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me’: this, he says, was the point at which God brought about the union of the human race with himself. John reasons that our own experiences of inner darkness are capable of linking us to the divine.

34 John regards a disinclination to fix the imagination on particular objects and a resistance to the use of ‘discursive exercises’ as a vital point of transition in spiritual growth, indicating a move to a more immediate awareness of the presence of God (*Ascent* 2.13:4-6). Later, in union, John allows that one can have this immediate awareness without rejecting the use of the imagination. But to begin with, he sees an antagonism – which would rule out the use of Ignatian imaginative contemplation at this point of spiritual growth. In contrast, Ignatius recommends the use of imaginative contemplation throughout the spiritual journey, regarding the desire to stop as a temptation to be resisted (Exx. 12), though he thinks room should be given for different personal needs and speeds of progress, as already noted, and he sees the contemplations as becoming more simple as one progresses to later stages; he also values other ways of praying in addition (Exx. 238-260, on three ways of praying).


36 *Ascent*, Prologue, esp. 4-7.

37 *Ascent* 2.7:11.
movement from death to resurrection, through this moment of shared suffering. Darkness, in other words, has a rhetorical or didactic purpose, alerting readers to their own involvement with the Christ story. Beyond the experience itself, the aim is to open them to new possibilities for growth. In terms of the hermeneutic that I am suggesting here, the metaphor of darkness performs the second Ignatian principle, of joining the reader’s personal narrative to the master narrative of God’s journey from incarnation to resurrection. John’s narrative of dark nights first sets the reader in motion, by drawing attention to personal experiences of darkness on the spiritual journey, and then seeks to move the reader forward, by linking these experiences to participation in a greater journey of transformation on the pattern of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

In the Prologue to the Ascent, John says that he wants to reader to learn how to follow spiritual movements that originate from the spirit of perfection and how to avoid those from the spirit of imperfection.38 This points to the third Ignatian principle, of developing a skill in the reader, in this case the skill of recognising which spiritual movements lead to growth and which detract from it. After the initial identification of darkness with the reader’s experiences of loss and disorientation on the spiritual path, John gives darkness a more positive assessment. He suggests that it can foster detachment from attitudes of possessiveness in favour of a movement of self-gift in relation to God.39 Its role here is similar to Ignatius’ emphasis on spiritual poverty: to allow the divine movement to be followed without resistance from opposing forces within the self. Then, in the final stage of union, darkness is identified with an unfettered gift of oneself to God, now understood as being met by the complete self-gift to God in return, in spiritual marriage. At this point, darkness is paradoxically the same as light, as the ‘nothing’ of self-gift is met by the ‘all’ of the divine being, shared mutually and equally.40 Seeing the role of darkness in John’s text in this way, in terms of the development of a skill in the reader of discerning the divine presence, has other benefits in the interpretation. For instance, it explains why there is no single definition of the dark night in the text. John applies the metaphor of darkness to every stage of the spiritual journey, including not just purgation but illumination and union too.41

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38 Ascent Prologue, 7.
39 Ascent 1.13-14.
40 The state of union is not reached in the Ascent, but it is set out as the goal (2.5; 3.13:5) and described most fully in the Spiritual Canticle and the Living Flame of Love (e.g., Canticle 22). On the reciprocal nature of union, see esp. Flame 3.79.
41 Ascent 1.2.
Darkness, rather than being a single experience, is best understood as a marker by which readers can gauge their progress at successive stages of the journey. It is a transformative tool.  

Further, this approach is also consistent with the fourth and fifth Ignatian principles: darkness is a dynamic term for spurring growth, not a static concept with a single description; and in the end it is concerned with the reader’s transformation, moving the self to a point of mutuality in relation to God, in place of its initial isolation, giving it a transformed perspective on all things.  

The *Ascent of Mount Carmel* is not a manual like Ignatius’ *Exercises*, with clear directions for the reader as to how to engage the self by means of spiritual exercises. But if one reads it using the five principles that I have taken from Ignatius, the text not only makes good sense but otherwise obscure features become clear. The reading is deepened, providing a perspective around which the various elements of the text can be drawn together satisfactorily. In what sense is this an Ignatian reading? I have interpreted John of the Cross using principles from Ignatius’ *Exercises* which certainly affect the reading. But these principles only make explicit an understanding of the active role of the reader that is already implicit in John’s text. Far from distorting the meaning, the text is illuminated in a way that is consistent with its deepest currents. Ignatius’ *Exercises* serve to reveal assumptions that are already present, rather than importing Ignatian teachings.  

**Conclusion**

It might be objected that the Ignatian principles that I have outlined here are so general as to evacuate the term ‘Ignatian’. They could equally have been taken from Pierre Hadot, or from any recent hermeneutical theory that puts the reader in an active and central role.  

This would be true if I only wanted to draw attention to the existence of such practices of personal

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42 Further evidence of this reading of darkness as developing a skill of discernment in the reader is to be found in the various tests that John provides for readers to gauge where they are in the process (*Ascent* 2.13; repeated in another form in the *Dark Night*, at *Night* 1.9); and in observing how he develops other key metaphors, like darkness, as means of negotiating difficult points of transition. The metaphor of the ‘wound of love’, for instance, which John takes from the Song of Songs, enables the reader to manage feelings which are double-edged, on the one hand painful and constricting, like a real wound, while on the other hand opening to something greater, and to be identified with love, like the wounds of Christ (see the development of this image in the *Spiritual Canticle*, especially Stanzas 1-13).  

43 This high point of union is described, for instance, in *Flame* 4.  

44 An example in recent hermeneutical theory is Stanley Fish’s notion of ‘reader-response theory’ in relation to ‘interpretive communities’ (Stanley Fish, *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980)). David Tracy finds resonances in much recent hermeneutical theory, in relation to the kind of interpretation demanded by ‘classics’, notably in Gadamer and Ricoeur (Ibid.).
appropriation in the interpretation of spiritual classic texts. But beyond this, I have sought to show that these practices are to be found within the texts themselves. The texts contain the resources for their own interpretation. The difficulty is that they are hard to recognise and to understand, particularly for readers today, for whom the pre-modern methods of active personal appropriation are unfamiliar. I have used Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* because it makes these methods unusually clear, while also standing at the heart of a long tradition of spiritual texts that were understood to function in this way.\(^{45}\) Thus, an Ignatian approach serves to illuminate the practices and role of personal appropriation, and to find them within spiritual classic texts where they are otherwise easy to miss.

Are there limits to the application? This approach applies primarily to pre-modern texts. Hadot sees the rise of the universities in the thirteenth century as the beginning of a divide between philosophy as a ‘theoretical and abstract activity’ and its former role as a ‘way of life’, after which this way of writing and reading texts became progressively less common.\(^{46}\) Ignatius’ *Exercises* and John of the Cross’ writings came near the end of this tradition.\(^{47}\) But the texts that we call ‘spiritual classics’ today, including those written in modernity, seem to be exceptions to this rule: they continue to be read for personal transformation and for what they say about a way of life. There is an element of circularity here. We call them spiritual classics because they retain this pre-modern characteristic of inviting the reader’s participation in a way that is transformative.\(^{48}\) This means that the Ignatian principles that I have outlined are applicable beyond the pre-modern context and to a much wider group of writings – those that we call spiritual classics today.

\(^{45}\) Hadot suggests that Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* are an expression of a tradition of spiritual texts going back to the Greco-Roman period (Hadot, p 82), and Stock finds examples extending into the early modern period (Stock, p 114 and elsewhere).

\(^{46}\) Hadot, p 270.

\(^{47}\) See fn. 45.

\(^{48}\) This returns the discussion to Tracy’s understanding of the ‘classic’ on this point: Tracy regards this personally transformative engagement of the reader as central to the notion of the ‘classic’ (Tracy, p 114).