John Donne and Ignatian Spirituality

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1

In 1614, when the Jesuits at Louvain were busy with the founding of the college for the education of future priests that has become, as Heythrop College, part of London University, John Donne was preparing to take holy orders in the Church of England. He was in his early forties and had, as it happened, about seventeen years yet to live. A learned man, he trained himself for a vocation that he hadn’t chosen: it was virtually imposed on him by King James, who put Donne to work in the pulpit to serve both church and state. It took several years before he became the premier preacher in all of London.

John Donne’s relation to ‘Ignatian Spirituality’ is a heavily fraught subject, on which contradictory opinions have been registered. Given that we are here today to celebrate the four-hundredth anniversary of the Jesuits’ College, it is not our business to sort out the vexing contradictions in the often bristling prose in which Donne directed his powers of vituperation against the religious order that founded it. I mean to talk principally about two pieces of his writing, both edgy in their different ways, one a religious sonnet written in Petrarchan form, the other a
sermon preached before the court of Charles I. Both works prompt readers to imagine their present lives, as the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola also do, from the perspective of the hour of death. Such an exercise is not of course a uniquely Jesuit practice. It is, however, inflected in a distinctive manner in the *Exercises*, where St Ignatius has lodged it in relation to a meditation on two opposing standards by which a life may be lived; to another meditation on how to make a responsible choice of what place one will take up in the world; and to a contemplation on how love is attained. It will be helpful to think about the poem and the sermon against the background of our knowledge that Donne came from a family intimately familiar with Ignatian perspectives: his uncles, Ellis and Jasper Heywood, were both Jesuits and their sister, Donne’s mother, remained Catholic throughout her life and lived with her celebrated son in the Deanery of St Paul’s. The sad story of the arrest of Donne’s brother Henry for harboring a priest and of his imprisonment and death in Newgate prison, where the plague was raging, began to come to light only in 1874 in the Jesuit publication, *The Month*.\(^1\) In view of the fact that Henry’s older brother later became a representative of the established church, and recalling Coleridge’s observation that Donne was able to say better things for the papists than they could say for themselves,\(^2\) we can explore how, for all the polemics and satire that he directed against the Society of Jesus, John Donne sometimes made productive use of Ignatian perspectives. Long after he managed ‘to blot out’, as he explained in *Pseudo-Martyr*, ‘certaine impressions of the Romane religion’ that had been impressed upon him in his youth, other more lasting impressions that he had acquired from men of ‘learning
and of good life’ informed his mature devotional writing. Donne was unafraid to draw on what he had learned from such Jesuits, though he did so obliquely and discreetly.³

Our principal concern is one of the Holy Sonnets, the ninth poem in the Revised Sequence printed posthumously in the first edition of Donne’s Poems. It begins with a startling opening line: ‘What if this present were the world’s last night?’ Readers of the sonnet, sensing that any subsequent thirteen lines could hardly begin to exhaust the implications of this provocative question, generally read on to see where the poem will go next. In due course we will consider the results as part of a larger concern to explore what this poem may be thought to contribute to the Revised Sequence of twelve Holy Sonnets.

As for the sermon, a highly accomplished work worthy of more extensive scrutiny than there will be time for, it throws light on the dynamics of the Holy Sonnets. The way in which it directs attention to the last hour of a human life warrants comparison with exercises that feature prominently in Ignatian spirituality.⁴ Donne wrote the sermon out sometime after he preached it on the first Friday in Lent, 1627. The text on which he chose to speak is the concluding verse (7: 60) of the two chapters in the Acts of the Apostles that concern St Stephen, the first Deacon in the church and the first Christian martyr. St Luke depicts him speaking to a hostile auditory, attempting to persuade them that the crucified one belongs to a long line of rejected prophets. It turns out that Stephen’s speech is the antepenultimate act of his dying hour. What follows is his stoning by the crowd and his asking God that those who are throwing the stones
be forgiven. The lengthy speech is rife with materials that in other hands have been made to feed anti-Semitism. By Donne, those materials are utterly ignored. Offering a meditation on the importance of making the choice of a state in life, Donne observed that the ‘very name’ of ‘Deacon . . . signifies service’ and advised each of his hearers to ‘be something, profess something; and then . . . [to] do truly the duties of that profession; and lastly . . . [to] propose some good man, in that profession to follow’. The sermon culminates in a consideration of two radically different ways of experiencing the last hour of one’s life, one as seen in St Stephen, the other (without explicit mention of its most notorious contemporary representation) in Marlowe’s Dr Faustus, the role made famous by Edward Allyn, who became Donne’s son-in-law.

II

It will be helpful to prepare for a sustained look into the spirituality of Donne’s sonnet by adverting to the technique and lingering with the imagery of a more recent poem. Those who have encountered Elizabeth Bishop’s double sonnet ‘The Prodigal’ (see the Appendix) are unlikely to forget the overpowering stench with which its account of life in a pigsty starts out:

The brown enormous odor he lived by

Was too close, with its breathing and thick hair,
For him to judge. The floor was rotten; the sty

Was plastered halfway up with glass-smooth dung.\(^6\)

These details begin to define the abject condition of a modern equivalent of the central figure in the parable found in Luke's Gospel. The poem focuses not on the moment when a wayward son receives mercy from his loving father but on the process by which, as he comes to acknowledge that his physical surroundings are an index of his utter debasement, he resolves to do something.

Readers familiar with the history of reading Donne's Holy Sonnets will recognize that Bishop's poem was composed in the heyday of a literary revaluation of 'Jesuitism'. This was the disease that T. S. Eliot, in his Clark Lectures of 1926, had singled out as the ground on which the poet's imagination had disintegrated.\(^7\) By the time Bishop wrote her poem, Helen Gardner and Louis Martz had begun charting the relevance of Ignatian meditation to an understanding of Donne's poetry.\(^8\) Martz in particular called attention to the importance of the 'composition of place'. This meditative technique, widely disseminated through the *Spiritual Exercises*, asks readers of the Bible to abstract themselves from their present surroundings. It encourages them to use all the powers of their sensory imaginations to experience a given biblical scene as if they were actually present there. Martz saw this reading practice as having fostered a major strand in the writing of English verse, a meditative tradition that extended from Donne's time to the present. He knew full well that Donne had been in no position explicitly to credit the Jesuits. His own perspective was ecumenical,
however, and he promoted awareness of what Donne and George Herbert and other English poets held in common with continental devotional writers. Bishop, also living in a less religiously charged environment than Donne had, felt no inhibition about crediting a source of inspiration. Writing to Robert Lowell in November 1955, she located ‘The Prodigal’ within a living tradition when she confided that, in composing her poem, she had employed a meditative technique ‘like a spiritual exercise of the Jesuits where one thinks in great detail how the thing happened’. Six decades on, further fruits of this approach have been made available in *The Eye of the Eagle: John Donne and the Legacy of Ignatius Loyola* by Francesca Bugliani Knox.

What Dr Knox designates as a Jesuit legacy has, let us acknowledge, had its detractors. In the 1970s, a counter-movement of interpreting Donne’s religious poetry emerged in an attempt to extrapolate a distinctly ‘Protestant poetics’ in which English devotional poets of the seventeenth century were said to have avoided writing in any vein redolent of continental Catholicism. It is of interest that a seminal contribution to this project, when it accorded attention to the Holy Sonnets, singled out four poems, three of which have since been revealed to have been replacements for sonnets that Donne had previously written as part of an earlier sequence of twelve poems. In *Donne's Anniversaries and the Poetry of Praise* (1973), Barbara Lewalski presented, along with the famous ‘Death be not proud’, ‘Spit in my face, ye Jews’, ‘What if this present were the world’s last night’, and ‘Batter my heart, three-person’d God’ as signal instances of a meditative tradition in which ‘the senses were not stimulated to recreate and imagine biblical scenes in vivid detail’ (106). She cited these poems as illustrative of a typically Protestant procedure, because, instead of directing attention outward to
the subject, they locate the subject in the ‘self’ (103). This, Lewalski emphasized, ‘involved finding the whole of salvation history traced in one's own soul’ (104). She proposed that ‘What if this present’ in particular provides an edifying ‘earnest of [Christ's] mercy and pity’ on the Day of Judgment (106-07):

What if this present were the worlds last night?  
Mark in my hart Ô Soule where thou dost dwell  
The Picture of Christ crucified, and tell,  
Whether that countenance can thee affright.  
Teares in his eyes quench the amazeing light,  
Bloud fills his frownes which from his pierc’d head fell  
And can that tongue adiudge thee vnto hell  
Which prayed forgiuenes for his foes fierce spight?  
Noe, noe, but as in my Idolatrie  
I said to all my Prophane Mistresses,  
Beauty of pitty; foulness only is  
A signe of Rigor; soe I say to thee  
To wicked spiritts are horrid shapes assign’d,  
This beauteous forme assures a piteous minde.\(^{13}\)

Lewalski urged that this poem confirms her thesis because it ‘by-passes the expectations aroused by the opening line for a traditional meditation upon the terrors of the last day’ in order to ‘analyze . . . experience in the ‘heart’. Her larger claim was
that the introspective turn gave English Protestant poetry a ‘new depth and sophistication of psychological insight’ (106). She denied similar depths to Jesuit meditation. Its method, as Bishop noted, calls for directing one's attention outward, the more vividly to imagine what might be seen and heard—even smelled—in a biblical scene.

III

It is surprising how slow readers of the Holy Sonnets have been to explore the implications of what is now known about them from the early manuscripts. Since the publication of the relevant volume of the Variorum nearly a decade ago, many critics have continued to write about these poems in ways that that knowledge has discredited. The sixteen sonnets that appeared in printed editions beginning in 1635, the one encountered by most readers of Donne ever since, cannot be found in any manuscript and do not constitute a sequence. Their arrangement was fabricated by the editors of the second edition of Donne’s Poems, once they discovered four Holy Sonnets that hadn’t been printed in 1633. These sixteen poems offer no basis, and never have, for extrapolating a narrative about Donne’s spiritual journey, whatever that may have been. Unlike his Songs and Sonnets, which appear in the manuscripts sometimes singly, sometimes in groupings, the Holy Sonnets travelled in one or other group of twelve. No Holy Sonnet travelled by itself, nor
in any other configuration than the two sequences designated ‘Original’ and ‘Revised’. The table below indicates the contents of each sequence. Together the two columns list the sixteen poems by Donne printed in 1635 and in subsequent editions. The poems are untitled and listed here by standard one-word abbreviations after the letters ‘HS’. The columns make plain which poems [struck through] from the Original sequence of twelve were omitted in the Revision, which poems [bolded] replaced them, and how two of the eight poems that were retained were repositioned to conclude the sequence.

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<tr>
<th>ORIGINAL SEQUENCE</th>
<th>REVISED SEQUENCE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Divine Meditations</td>
<td>Holy Sonnets (1633 first edition)</td>
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<td>1. (HSMade)</td>
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<td>11. (HSDeath)</td>
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<td>12. (HSWilt)</td>
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When it comes to sonnet sequences of the early modern era, Donne’s Holy Sonnets are unusual, though not unique, in that in none of them does the speaker represent himself as the writer of the poem. When Donne sought to employ the eternizing conceit, whereby a poem is meant to preserve love or the beloved for eternity, he did so in a secular genre, employing religious language playfully, as in ‘The Canonization’ and ‘The Relique’. Moreover, among sequences, the number twelve is unusual. The sequences by Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, and other poets are much longer. The number twelve, like the number seven used by Donne in his La Corona sequence, likely rounds something out, as in the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve apostles, or the twelve positions on the face of a time-piece. The placement of any given poem within a sequence whose overall number remained stable through the process of revision is of interest; we can now interpret each individual sonnet knowing just where it was lodged in one of the sequences. Before attempting to exploit this opportunity with respect to ‘What if this present’, it is worth considering a feature of The Spiritual Exercises that helps to clarify something that is especially opportune.

In the instructions given at the outset to those who direct people making the Exercises, Ignatius stresses the great discretion that directors need to practice. One reason that the text is not given to exercitants themselves is that they are not to know what is to come but to concentrate on the work of each of the four weeks, one at a time. The director is to adapt the overall plan, given in the written Exercises only in outline, to the unique experience of each exercitant. How to apply a meditation is left to the one meditating. In particular, the director is to take care not to inquire into the particular sins that the exercitant reflects on having committed. In short, the Exercises provide a great deal of space for the
individual’s private thoughts, personal affections, and ways of speaking with God in colloquy.

Donne, by limiting his sequence to twelve poems, and without providing the stuff for a well-shaped narrative to be abstracted from them, offers in each sequence a spotty and suggestive record of exercises and experiences. These very limitations open space for private interpretation. The fact that the Revised Sequence retains twelve as a maximum number of poems discourages our thinking about the Holy Sonnets as transcripts of the poet’s own spiritual experiences; it frees us, moreover, from assuming that the poems are necessarily united by a single speaker, whose consciousness imposes coherence. Between one poem and the next there is open space, room for discreet inference about how one poem might be connected with what comes before and after it.

IV

One small feature in the history of printing ‘What if this present’ served for upwards of three centuries to inhibit what readers might notice about the poem and about its placement as the ninth sonnet in the Revised Sequence. In the first edition of Donne’s Poems, ‘What if this present’ contained a reading that, curiously, is not found in any surviving manuscript. Instead of giving the final line as ‘This beauteous forme assures a piteous minde,’ 1633 printed ‘This beauteous form assumes a pitious minde’ [italics added]. Possibly, the single letter ‘m’ was inadvertently substituted for the letter ‘r’. The word
'assumes' was in any event reproduced in nearly every printing until Grierson's edition of 1912. The omission of the word 'assures' made more obscure the connection of the poem with two contexts that have infrequently been brought together to bear on its interpretation: the convention in poems of persuasion whereby the poet seeks to win a woman's 'pity' and to obtain her 'grace' and the practice in popular double predestinarian piety of seeking 'assurance' that one belongs to the elect. The relation of Donne's sonnet to both these contexts and to the poems that follow it in the Revised Sequence is enriched, I want to suggest, by bringing to bear Ignatian spirituality as a third context. For the long-term goal of The Spiritual Exercises is summed up in the last of the four weeks in a Contemplation to Attain Love. The love in question is said, first, 'to show itself in deeds over and above words' and, second, to be 'mutual', involving 'sharing' and lively 'interchange between the two parties'. (Both these qualities add to the lovers' sense of what Donne in 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning' calls, apparently by his own coinage, 'interassurance'.) Meditating on 'the Picture of Christ crucified' is a preliminary exercise, figuring prominently in the first week, where its purpose is not to produce anxiety about the 'terrors of the last day' but to enhance appreciation of what God has done for sinful humanity. It is a prelude to asking oneself three questions: 'In the past, what response have I made to Christ? / How do I respond to Christ now?' / and 'What response should I make to Christ?' This rhythm in the Ignatian Exercises helps make sense of Donne's coming in the eleventh and twelfth Sonnets of the Revised Sequence first to what the speaker calls 'a wholesome meditation' in which he asks his soul 'Wilt thou loue God as hee [loves] thee?' and finally to an address to the Father in which the speaker prays that the ultimate divine law of Love prove to be mutually operative. Neither poem is quite yet the colloquy in which mutual affections are exchanged
between the parties. That poem was written by George Herbert, who made ‘Love’ the last poem in the central section of The Temple.

Returning then to the ninth poem in the Revised Sequence, we should note that exploring ‘What if this present’ in light of the Calvinist spirituality in which seeking assurance of one’s salvation has been long in coming. But in a recent essay Catherine Gimelli Martin proposed that Donne’s Holy Sonnets are best understood in direct relation to what historians of theology call ‘experimental predestinarianism’. By the late sixteenth century, ‘assurance’ was a technical term in this influential strand of Calvinist spirituality in England. As Martin has noticed, the word ‘assures’ calls up the imperative in the experimental predestinarian spirituality made popular above all through the works of William Perkins, whereby Christians were enjoined to make their calling and election ‘sure’. She observes, as others have, that for many persons who practiced Christianity in this framework ‘longings’ after assured grace ‘ended in depression bordering on despair’. She then goes on to present the Holy Sonnets as evidence of Donne’s own anxious ‘preparatory attempts to gain assurance and address fears of reprobation’ (357), asserting that he ‘repeatedly contemplates the terrors of hell and God’s swiftly approaching Judgment Day (the world’s “last night”) without knowing whether divine intervention will save him’ (363).

Reading the Holy Sonnets as spiritual autobiography is futile, however: poem by poem, Martin follows through the non-authorial sequence of sixteen sonnets concocted by the makers of the 1635 edition; and she attempts, as dozens of biographers and critics have attempted before her, to locate what they routinely call Donne’s ‘conversion’, a moment that, on the model of St Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus, Lewalski identifies as integral to ‘the Protestant paradigm of salvation’. According to Perkins and the preachers who
fostered thinking along these lines, it is incumbent on every individual believer to find a biblical passage, or ‘place’, so aptly tailored to one’s situation that it provides assurance that one has experienced the requisite conversion and is numbered among the elect. (Matthew 11:28, ‘Come unto me, all ye who labor, and I will give you rest’, was a favorite.) Being grounded in such a place was meant to ward off the possibility of slipping back into the state of reprobation.\(^2\)

The idea of perseverance among Calvinist predestinarians was notably different from the one operative in Jesuit spirituality. This is conspicuously attested in the differences between the Jesuit Robert Persons's *Book of the Christian Exercise* and Edmund Bunny's adaptation of it for English Protestants. Both books went through many editions and reprintings from their first appearance in the 1580s into the mid-seventeenth century. The book by Persons was early on subtitled to make it clear that the exercises that he advocated were, in the spirit of the first week of *The Spiritual Exercises*, meant to encourage amendment of one's life and to promote the reader's 'resolution' to take up a calling that would be of 'service' to others.\(^2\) Persons used the word 'resolution' to refer to the choice as a 'determination' and 'a fixed intention' (*OED*, 11). By contrast, 'Bunny's Resolution', as his book was widely known, directed readers to 'resolve' their assurance that they had been 'elected' by God, amendment being considered necessarily subsequent to justification. That is, Bunny reinterpreted 'election' to preserve a sense of passive righteousness and to rule out an exercise of 'free will'; and he reinflected 'resolution' to mean 'the removal of doubt in regard to a particular matter' (*OED*, 12a and 12 b). His aim was to help the elect read the Scriptures introspectively, in order to find there 'assuring' evidence of their having been personally saved by Jesus Christ.\(^2\) Persons's view, elaborated in subsequent editions as the
rivalry between the two writers became increasingly belligerent, was that an act of faith, being subjective, cannot produce a guarantee; security is something to be hoped for. Adverting to these thoroughgoing differences helps us to see that when Donne’s sonnet moves to its second line, ‘Mark in my heart, Ó Soul, where thou dost dwell’, the discourse turns inward. The ‘exercise’ then proceeds in ways geared to the removal of doubt. The speaker shows no concern to look outward to what the end of the world might mean for any other creature; nor does he countenance the possibility that, under the circumstances, one might seek to be of service to others.

V

Consideration of the interior drama acted out in ‘What if this present’ benefits as well from being understood in relation to Jesuit spiritual perspectives, as Dr Knox and R. V. Young have made clear. It is not sufficient to look to The Spiritual Exercises only for instructions that relate to the composition of place, the application of the senses, and the colloquy. The first two ‘annotations’ in the text of the Exercises, offering preliminary helps to one who will direct persons making them, clarify a difference between the sort of meditation in which thinking and reasoning play a large part and the sort of contemplation that consists more in making an affective response. En route to the climactic Contemplation to Attain Love, the Exercises offer a set of rules for making a good decision, proposing that, when deliberating on some significant choice to be made in life, one imagine oneself at the hour of death and, subsequently, present at the Final Judgment. The aim here is for the
exercitant to make a ‘resolution’, that is, to determine which of two or more alternatives will in retrospect prove to have been the preferable way to have lived.\textsuperscript{25} It is worth noting that this is just the sort of spiritual exercise that, in his sermon on St Stephen’s dying hour, Donne recommends, when he sketches ‘two pictures in little . . . of dying men’ and proposes that these pictures sum up the two possibilities for every human life: ‘he that dies in the Bath of a peaceable [conscience], & he that dies upon the wrack of a distracted conscience’.\textsuperscript{26} The record of interpreting ‘What if this present’ shows that its speaker, who attempts to persuade his soul that it will be counted among the elect, sits uncomfortably between these alternatives. A majority of those who have written about the poem, especially those who assume that it is the poet himself doing the speaking, have tried to help him firm up the conclusion that he draws. A significant minority read the final lines in ways that direct irony at an unwitting, incompetent John Donne identified with the speaker who trots out the hopelessly unconvincing seduction line. John Carey has memorably accused Donne of having produced here nothing but ‘piffle’.\textsuperscript{27}

‘What if this present’ bears a significant affinity to the eleventh poem in the Revised Sequence, ‘Wilt thou love God’, in that in both a speaker tries to persuade his own soul of something. It also bears an affinity to ‘O might those sighes and teares’ from the Original Sequence, another poem that makes reference to the speaker’s past ‘Idolatry’. These two features of ‘What if this present’—a fissure between body and soul and a reference to idolatry—seem to be related inasmuch as the speaker who splits his bodily voice and his heart off from his soul ultimately fails to distance himself from a habitual past practice that he re-enacts before our eyes. The climactic simile in the sestet, observed by Martz in the first edition of The Poetry of Meditation to be in bad taste, shows that Donne was parodying both
the experimental predestinarian agenda and the sort of Petrarchan poem in which a poet-speaker, for instance, the Astrophel of the opening sonnet in Sidney's sequence, seeks to attain love. Before the *Variorum* identified the two sequences, these features of the poem were already remarked by Young, in an essay demonstrating that those who read the Holy Sonnets in order to sort out the doctrine tend altogether to miss their wit and daring. Yet so routine has been the desire to produce a conventionally edifying narrative about Donne's 'path to salvation' that interpreters have rarely adverted to the signals of irony lodged in the impudent phrases 'my Idolatrie' and 'all my Prophane Mistresses'. Such readings allow virtually no scope to the possibility that this speaker, attempting to persuade his own soul, is engaging here in self-delusion—and much less that he recognizes as much. Nor do they envisage 'Wilt thou love God' as a revised version of this poem of persuasion, one in which the speaker, instead of producing a false assurance, initiates a meditation that gives way to contemplation of the benefits that derive from the Incarnation.

'What if this present' is more decisively Petrarchan than the other Holy Sonnets in that, while the speaker does not identify himself as a poet, the poem is conspicuously reminiscent of persuasions to profane love. It suggests, moreover, that while the speaker is attempting to turn back religious language to sacred subjects, in ways that would separate this sonnet from those of Sidney and of Shakespeare, he does not succeed in the endeavor. Young helpfully contrasts the Sidney-like slyness and duplicity in 'What if this present' with the guileless simplicity and spontaneous longing for the crucified Christ found in an anonymous Spanish sonnet of the same period. He points out that the repeated 'no' in the ninth line of Donne's poem is reminiscent of the sixty-third sonnet in *Astrophel and Stella*, where the poet cites the rules of grammar to construe Stella's doubled 'nay' as effecting a
reversal of her initial denial. To this, we might add that, in reading Donne’s poem aloud, the speaker’s first ‘Noe’ can be enunciated by the voice dropping down into what sounds like a conclusion, while the second ‘noe’, perhaps shouted out an octave higher, signals a moment of startled insight, as the speaker recognizes that the comparison he has been envisaging as a means for clinching his argument—and that he nonetheless goes on to articulate—amounts to a self-condemnation. As a parody of the quest for assurance of one’s being included among the elect, the poem exposes just what Persons isolated in his critique of Bunny: an interpretation of the bloody, tearful face of Christ as something ‘beauteous’ is contingent, not absolute; it requires a subjective response.

Looking squarely at lines 1-8, we can see that the octave attempts to carry out the agenda required in the experimental predestinarian tradition. It culminates the work of fostering assurance with a rhetorical question that expects the answer, ‘Noe’, Christ will not ‘adiudge thee unto hell’. The sestet begins as if to offer Bunny’s type of ‘resolution’, registering the answer in its first ‘Noe’—only to effect almost immediately, in the repeated but differently inflected ‘noe’, a dramatic turn.

The ‘but’ then launches a full-scale undoing. In the unfolding sestet, the part of a Petrarchan poem where readers typically expect a ‘resolution’ (OED, IV, sense 14) to some problem presented in the octave, the word ‘as’ introduces a parallel ostensibly meant to clinch the persuasion. Retrospectively, however, it marks that second ‘noe’ as already containing the speaker’s recognition that he is relying on the same self-serving strategy that he had long ago perfected whenever he attempted to persuade a woman to do his will. The confident announcement that pity has been obtained and grace is assured has been induced by
relying on a line of argument as specious as that of the seduction-line according to which ‘only ugly girls don’t do it, honey’.

Acknowledging that the voice sounds like that of someone well schooled in experimental predestinarian piety opens a window onto another irony in the sestet. The Calvinist preachers who insisted that a truly elect person find a biblical ‘place’ in which to root assurance of salvation frequently recommended employing II Timothy 3: 15 as its safeguard: ‘continue thou in the things which thou has learned and hast been assured of’. The speaker of ‘What if this present’, recurring to the habitual line that he says proved successful when he was trying to gain a woman’s pity, follows this advice all too well. In this way the poem shows that his introspection is ultimately self-regarding.

‘What if this present’ comes right after two poems that show how considerations typical of Jesuit meditation prepare us to recognize the dangers of self-delusion inherent in the turn inward to find assurance. In ‘Spit in my face’, the speaker’s attempt at the outset to place ‘the whole history of salvation’ in his ‘self’ gives way, in the sestet, to a productive meditation on Christ’s Incarnation and Passion. This is followed in ‘Why are wee by all Creatures waited on?’ by an exploration of a question explicitly raised during the first ‘week’ of The Spiritual Exercises, where one of the meditations calls for an acknowledgment of sinfulness. It is meant to induce wonder that ‘the heavens, sun, moon, stars, and elements, fruits, birds, fishes and animals’, that is, ‘all Creatures’, have helped to sustain one’s continuing life.31

When ‘What if this present’ follows, it exposes the dangers in the process of producing assurance of one’s salvation. It is best understood if we do not force its opening question into the forbidding context of terror dramatized in the great eleventh hour scene in
The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus, that is, if we deny it the tone of anxious, self-centered concern for one's own salvation heard as Faustus, in soliloquy, finds that he is unable and unwilling to accept that even a single drop of the crucified Christ’s blood will do him any good. This sonnet is more helpfully thought of in relation to the purposes of meditation envisaged in the Spiritual Exercises, acknowledging that if one knew that one's life, that all human lives, indeed that the whole world were about to end, one would spontaneously look outward and show care for others. In the tradition to which Donne's sermon on St Stephen is deeply indebted, the purpose of meditating on one's dying hour is to facilitate a responsible resolve to ‘be somebody’, ‘to do something’, to live a productive life of use to others, based on the inspiration that comes from imagining in detail the life of an exemplary person that one has personally chosen as a model.

Instead of someone veering away from the supposed ‘terrors’ of the last day, the speaker of ‘What if this present’ might finally be seen, as he delivers the last words of the poem, with a sort of smile on his face that befits his having discovered how bogus his attempt to persuade himself of his soul’s salvation has turned out to be; a wry and tolerant smile, that is, if in his relation with God, this amounts to assurance not of his belonging to the elect but of his continuing need to be delivered from habitual sin.

This proposal makes sense of the fact that the poem that follows, ‘Batter my heart’, takes up that very need, drawing now on the metaphor of a physically and emotionally abused woman ambivalently caught in a relationship from which she longs to be delivered. In one respect ‘Batter my heart’ occupies a place similar to that in which Bishop's ‘prodigal’, having nearly experienced reassurance and as a prelude to making a resolution, finally acknowledges that he has been mired. In another respect, however,
ultimately it is quite different. For if the words ‘in thrall’ and ‘ravish’, which may be thought to be available to the speaker through a sustained experience of degradation, are to be re-inflected to carry the much more positive senses for which she or he longs, something more than self-knowledge and personal responsibility and even a poet’s wit will be required. To read the poems in this way is to recognize that persons with spiritualities as different as Calvinist and Jesuit can share them. Even in his Holy Sonnets Donne drew upon different traditions, now critical of this aspect of one, now endorsing that aspect of another, and ultimately in an irenic spirit. This was a choice on his part. It defined the somebody that he chose to be. It gave a purpose to his speaking and his writing. It was what he claimed, in the sermon, to have learned from St Stephen, who had chosen Christ as his role model. And it is what redeems the effort of the speaker in ‘What if this present were the world’s last night?’, whose dramatic failure contributes richly to the larger workings of the sequence.

The hour is late and it is time to say a last word about the sermon. Near the outset of it, Donne promised that there were to be two parts. As he spoke, even the most enraptured hearer must have started to worry: assuming that our printed text is indicative of the pace, by the time that the preacher turned to the promised second part, his hour had nearly elapsed. And once he described the last hour of the person ‘who dies upon the wrack of a distracted conscience’—a person whose life, having been imprinted upon by the Devil, might be redeemed by a drop of Christ’s blood, or a tear from Christ’s eye, or a word from Christ’s mouth—when he came at last to paint a picture of the person whose death would be but a ‘sleep’, Donne called attention to the fact that there was but a minute’s sand left in the preacher’s hour-glass in which to do it. Perhaps he counted on
his hearers' indulgence and took two minutes to draw that picture. At all events, he must have proceeded calmly, confidently, in tones filled as much with anticipation as with hope. He relied upon his audience to do likewise, that is, to collaborate with him in calmly, confidently, experiencing the last moments of their mutual exercise, having recognized in him their Stephen, who had made himself somebody, and had so embraced his belated calling as to have done something with his life. His theme—be somebody, do something, choose a model to guide how you live—represented his adaptation of—shall we not say improvement on?—the Ignatian, 'What have you done for Christ? What are you doing now? And What will you do?' Having elaborated it through the long first part of the sermon, in accord with what he elsewhere said about a virtuous man's dying moment, that he passes away mildly, perhaps Donne modeled how to whisper to one's own soul to go: not raging against the dying of the light, but going gently into a good night's sleep as the first deacon, having performed his service, had.

Boston College
Appendix

The Prodigal

The brown enormous odor he lived by
was too close, with its breathing and thick hair,
for him to judge. The floor was rotten; the sty
was plastered halfway up with glass-smooth dung.
Light-lashed, self-righteous, above moving snouts,
the pigs’ eyes followed him, a cheerful stare—
even to the sow that always ate her young—
till, sickening, he leaned to scratch her head.
But sometimes mornings after drinking bouts
(he hid the pints behind a two-by-four),
the sunrise glazed the barnyard mud with red;
the burning puddles seemed to reassure.
And then he thought he almost might endure
his exile yet another year or more.

But evenings the first star came to warn.
The farmer whom he worked for came at dark
to shut the cows and horses in the barn
beneath their overhanging clouds of hay,
with pitchforks, faint forked lightnings, catching light,
safe and companionable as in the Ark.
The pigs stuck out their little feet and snored.
The lantern—like the sun, going away—
laid on the mud a pacing aureole.
Carrying a bucket along a slimy board,
he felt the bats’ uncertain staggering flight,
his shuddering insights, beyond his control,
touching him. But it took him a long time
finally to make up his mind to go home.

--ELIZABETH BISHOP

*The Complete Poems 1927-1979*


4 The sermon has been receiving more attention recently than at any other time in its history. It is newly available in a handsome and richly annotated volume (see the following note); and it has reached the ears of thousands of hearers through the many performances given it in churches and chapels by the general editor of the Oxford edition, Peter McCullough.


10 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011); see esp. chapter 1, ‘John Donne Criticism and the Ignatian Legacy’.


14 There is one exception. The unique Westmoreland manuscript contains nineteen sonnets: the twelve original ones, followed by the four replacements, and then three more which were never published until the manuscript was discovered at the end of the nineteenth century. See the General Textual Introduction in the Variorum, 7.1: LX-LXXIV; for the tabulation of the sonnets appearing in each sequence, see pp. LXI-LXII.

15 See the Textual Introduction to ‘What if this present’, Variorum, 7.1: 88-89.


17 Ignatius did not address a written version of the Exercises to exercitants themselves but to directors who were to lead them through the exercises on the basis of a highly adaptable living tradition. Most printed versions in various languages include commentary on the text. Fleming’s is a useful example. My references to the contents of The Spiritual Exercises are the result of having consulted several translations-cum-commentary of this sort.

18 See ‘assurance’, OED, 8b; cf. ‘assure’, 9a.

Lewalski cites Perkins in Donne's Anniversaries several times and still more frequently and extensively in Protestant Poetics, including in her chapter on Donne, which (like Martin's essay) proposes to trace the poet's spiritual path serially through the sixteen sonnets as they were first arranged in 1635 (see p. 265).


In our time translators generally prefer the word ‘election’ to ‘resolution’, employing the word in a radically different sense (see OED, sense 2) than it is commonly used in Calvinist discourse (see OED, 3).


Sermons Preached at the Court of Charles I, p. 102.


Young, ‘Donne’s Holy Sonnets and the Theology of Grace’, p. 31.
29 The best account of 'What is this present . . .' as a parody of love sonnets is by Anne Ferry, in her study of how a language of inwardness was developed in English principally in sonnets of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century; see *The 'Inward' Language: Sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 227-32.

30 Young, 'Donne's Holy Sonnets and the Theology of Grace', p. 35.

31 See the Second Exercise during the First Week, the Fifth Point for Meditation.