



FETTERING IGNATIUS TO VERSE: DONNE'S RECKONING WITH THE  
*SPIRITUAL EXERCISES* THROUGH HIS *HOLY SONNETS*

By

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## Dedication

To Heather: For your unwavering support of me, your unfailing confidence in me, and your love of me through everything. Words fail me when I think of you.

## Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to Jerry Passannante for his support and dedication to this project. He agreed to direct my work without knowing me or my abilities and literally willed me to complete this. I am forever grateful. My thanks also go to Jane Donawerth who pushed me to see my flaws and helped me to achieve a much more coherent project. Finally, Ralph Bauer, my first and last Professor at Maryland, thank you for everything, especially for taking time out of your sabbatical to work with me on this.

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Fettering Ignatius to Verse:  
Donne's Reckoning with the *Spiritual Exercises* through his *Holy Sonnets*

In "The Triple Fool" John Donne portrays a speaker who sees the role of poetry as therapeutic, granting it the ability to "allay" or disarm the power of certain intense emotions, certain nagging thoughts:

Then as th'earths inward narrow crooked lanes  
Do purge sea waters fretfull salt away,  
I thought that if I could draw my paines,  
Through Rimes vexation, I should them allay,  
Griefe brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,  
For, he tames it, that fetters it in verse. (ll. 6-11)<sup>1</sup>

By placing "paines" within a poetic form, Donne suggests that he can remove their immediacy and dilute their intensity. The poet is able to distance himself from the reality of his emotions by imprisoning them in verse. At the same time this speaker comes to understand that once put into verse, these feelings are available to the world, and "by delighting many, frees again / Griefe, which verse did restraine" (ll. 15-16). For the poet virtually addicted to paradox, poetry is both a blessing and a curse, something that alleviates pain but also enshrines it for others to use, abuse, and enjoy. Accordingly, it is

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<sup>1</sup> John Donne, *The Complete Poetry & Selected Prose of John Donne*, Charles M. Coffin, ed., 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., (New York: Modern Library, 1994), 14. All quotations of Donne's work will be from this edition unless otherwise noted and will be cited in the footnotes by section, page, and line.

not surprising that Donne limited the circulation of his poetry or declined to become a fool in print – at least during his lifetime.<sup>2</sup>

This idea of poetry's function as a therapeutic device for the self raises an important question for the rest of Donne's poetic work, and in particular, for his devotional verse. Namely, in what ways could expressing meditations through poetry serve the therapeutic needs of the poet? What emotional attachments could he be trying to "allay?" This project will examine Donne's devotional aesthetic through his use and abuse of modes of Jesuit spirituality. As I will argue, Donne's speakers in the *Holy Sonnets* struggle with meditation in the form of poetry, subjecting the steps of Ignatius and his followers to the trials and experience of language – that is, the experience of ambiguity, irony, and self-expression. In this way, as in "The Triple Fool," we see Donne staging his pain and exposing it to the paradox of poetry. By engaging the *Exercises*, Donne both seeks relief and expresses frustration; he bears witness to his heritage and also struggles to erase it. The poetry of the *Holy Sonnets* provides an outlet for the poet's negative reactions toward meditations that were influential in his early life, allowing him to control them by containing them in language. In the process, Donne creates a poetic which attempts the reshaping and even the forgetting of the Jesuits' role in his biography.

This study reopens a critical debate about the influence of the *Spiritual Exercises* on Donne's poetry which some consider to be closed. In his seminal study, *The Poetry of Meditation*, Louis Martz asserts that the *Holy Sonnets* "are, in the most specific sense of

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur Marotti in *John Donne, Coterie Poet*, (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1986) notes: "[Donne's] verse was not composed for a wide literary audience but rather for coterie readers – for his friends, acquaintances, patrons, patronesses, and the woman he married" (x).

the term, meditations, Ignatian meditations.”<sup>3</sup> This statement has in some way informed the scholarly discourse over this poetry for the last fifty years. Recently, however, critics have challenged this Jesuit connection, exploring other possible influences on Donne’s religious verse. As we shall see, many of John Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* commence by engaging methods of meditation prescribed in the *Spiritual Exercises*. However, no single sonnet concludes with the speaker having achieved the goal of these meditative experiences, which Ignatius defines as a sense of generosity and humility in the face of a union with divine love. Instead, the speakers seem to revolt against the movement of the exercise in order to assert their poetic voice, resulting in expressions of emptiness, despair, and betrayal. Critics have struggled with the source of this ambivalence and have debated whether it is fair to claim that these poems result from Donne’s encounter with the *Spiritual Exercises*. Some critics, Lewalski, Archer, and Strachniewski among them, claim that this despair provides evidence for a Calvinist poetic developing in England at the time.<sup>4</sup> Others have linked this meditative tradition to Augustine.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the Ignatian context has lost its critical currency.

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<sup>3</sup> Louis Martz was the first critic to examine extensively the implications of reading Donne’s poetry in light of Jesuit meditation. He sees this process of meditation as “a fundamental organizing principle, deep within the poetry.” Martz’s study traces the many forms of meditative prayer that flowed into England during the mid-sixteenth century. In particular, he focuses on Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*, and adapted forms of the work, as central to the meditative aesthetics attempted by John Donne. For Martz, the *Exercises* provide a tradition through which to understand the structure, content and the organizing meditative principles that shape Donne’s “divine poetry.” Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation*, (New Haven, Yale U.P., 1954), 53.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara K. Lewalski in *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979) proposes to situate Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* firmly within a Protestant poetic because of the use of “very familiar biblical metaphors of life as pilgrimage and as athletic race.” For Lewalski, the Ignatian model does not differ from that of Calvinist divines at the time. She roots her studies in the knowledge that John Calvin’s theology informed much of mainstream Anglicanism at the turn of the seventeenth century, when Donne would have composed his *Holy Sonnets*.

John Strachniewski, in “John Donne: The Despair of the ‘Holy Sonnets’”, *ELH*, Vol. 48, No. 4. (Winter, 1981), staunchly challenges the assumption that the *Holy Sonnets* fit the structure of the *Exercises*, and he proposes to “establish a strong Calvinist influence on Donne’s ‘Holy Sonnets’ and their related expression of a dominant mood of despair” (677).



By removing Donne's *Holy Sonnets* from the Ignatian context, we close a door on understanding the ambivalent response of the speakers. If Donne had wanted "so thoroughly to cast off the *Jesuits*," we have perhaps helped him too much in that regard.<sup>6</sup> My purpose is to reassert the Ignatian influence on the *Holy Sonnets*, showing in detail the complex and various ways Donne incorporated the practices of St. Ignatius in order to contend imaginatively with the Jesuit influence on his life. T.S. Eliot wrote regarding Donne's use of Jesuit materials in his prose, "one can hardly fight anyone for very long without employing his weapons and using his methods. Conflict is contact."<sup>7</sup> In a similar way, the *Holy Sonnets* place Donne's speakers in contact with the spirituality of St. Ignatius as a way for Donne to combat the Jesuits. Thus, in the *Holy Sonnets* Donne acknowledges his Jesuit heritage but also rejects it through the complexity of his verse. In the course of resurrecting an older strain of criticism, my readings will not emphasize the structure of the *Exercises* as the fundamental organizing principle for the *Holy*

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And Stanley Archer questions Martz's and Gardner's contention that the structure of these poems is any different than that of the *Songs and Sonnets*. He further questions claims that Donne would have had some experience of the *Spiritual Exercises* as a youth in "Meditation and The Structure of Donne's 'Holy Sonnets,'" *ELH*, Vol. 28, No. 2. (Jun., 1961), 138-147.

<sup>5</sup> See Patrick Grant, "Augustinian Spirituality and the *Holy Sonnets* of John Donne," *ELH*, 38, No. 4 (Dec., 1971): 542-561 where he insists that "the sonnets belong firmly within a definable and distinctly medieval Augustinian tradition" (561). However, Anthony Raspa offers evidence that Donne's poetry, as rooted in the Ignatian *Exercises*, was the product of a new, post-medieval world-view. See Anthony Raspa, *The Emotive Image: Jesuit Poetics in the English Renaissance*, (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1983). T.S. Eliot also challenges those who categorize Donne's writing as medieval. He says that Donne was "wholly a man of his own time." See *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, Ronald Schuchard, ed., (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 89.

<sup>6</sup> Donne, *Ignatius his Conclave*, Timothy Healy, SJ., ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 5

<sup>7</sup> Eliot, 89. Eliot was also one of the first to notice the way Jesuit influence shaped Donne's *Holy Sonnets* in "Thinking in Verse" where he notes "[n]ow if you read and study the *Spiritual Exercises*, you will find a stock of images which reminds you, and by no mere coincidence, of Donne ... St. Ignatius works on the imagination, to make us realize the Passion as he realized it ... And we shall find the visual imagery of St. Ignatius in Donne, whose childhood was passed under Jesuit influence." Quoted in *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, n29, p 292. T.S. Eliot, "Thinking in Verse: A Survey of Early-Seventeenth-century Poetry," *The Listener*, III (12 March, 1930, pp 441-3), 443.

*Sonnets* as Martz's and Gardner's have.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, I am less concerned with theological or doctrinal tensions than with what we might call the speakers' interaction with the *Exercises*.<sup>9</sup> I see the ambivalent response of the speakers as resulting from the meditative requirements specific to the individual *Spiritual Exercises* with which Donne's speakers refuse to engage fully. Through Donne's "fettering" of these meditations to verse, he explores a tension between self-expressive poetry and self-abandoning meditation. While the *Spiritual Exercises* have the objective of movement toward resolution, Donne's lyrical voice often avoids such a narrative process. Whereas Martz and Gardner find progress toward an attainable goal, I note the stagnancy in the speakers. As I will show, it is as difficult to read a progression of meditation into these texts as it is to read a maturation process towards selfless love in the *Songs and Sonnets*. This stagnancy and lack of progression result from Donne's conscious attempts to allay the effects of the *Spiritual Exercises* as he struggles and often fails to achieve resolution with his past. It is important to reexamine the Ignatian influence on these sonnets so that we might understand them not as the product of a pious meditative experience, but as the work of a

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<sup>8</sup> Helen Gardner recognized a pattern in the twelve sonnets published in 1633. She claims that they form a "coherent set of poems, and are by no means 'separate ejaculations.'" She then separates the poems into six meditations on the "Last Things" and six meditations focusing on "two aspects of a single theme, love." In viewing the poems in this manner, it is easy to see a progression that would imitate the movement of the *Spiritual Exercises* from reflections on one's sin to an understanding of divine love. However, textual scholarship over the last twenty-five years has served to discredit this theory. In fact, I see the resistance of progression as central to these poems.

See John Donne, *The Divine Poems*, Edited with Introduction and Commentary by Helen Gardner, (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1952), xl-xli.

<sup>9</sup> Scott Pilarz, SJ, in his study of Robert Southwell's poetry, notes the "sea-change in the historiography of [the late sixteenth century], which complicates previous understandings of denominational affiliations during Elizabeth's reign. Religious identity in Southwell's England was more fluid than once imagined." Because of this, he believes that "Lewalski's argument with Martz needs reevaluation...it may be fruitless to worry over which religious tradition had the greatest influence" (xxviii). As a result of this reevaluation of literary influences, which has begun to color most contemporary criticism, I am not interested in whether or not these are unequivocally Ignatian meditations, what I hope to examine is, insofar as Donne's speaker's engage language and methods derived from the *Exercises*, what does that do for Donne, the self-conscious poet? *Robert Southwell, and the Mission of Literature, 1561-1595: Writing Reconciliation* (Ashgate: Burlington, VT: 2004).

conscious poet who was aware of and concerned about the reception of his texts, and with the shaping of his biography. To illustrate this difference further, I will show how the speakers' derailment of the *Spiritual Exercises* is particular to Donne by comparing his works to those of Robert Southwell, SJ. Donne was formed by the cultural milieu in which he wrote, and also understood the way in which readers would interpret his writing as reflective of himself.<sup>10</sup> As a result, I view the *Holy Sonnets* as part of Donne's efforts and failures to fashion his own biography, shaping it so that it might serve his imaginative need to create a self free of the Jesuit heritage that formed him.

John Donne's association with the Jesuits has been documented in numerous biographical accounts, as well as critical analyses of his *Holy Sonnets* and other writings. His early biography provides some intriguing evidence of early Jesuit influence during Donne's formative years. Donne's uncle, Jasper Heywood, SJ, headed the Jesuit mission in England and may have been intimately involved in Donne's upbringing. Dennis Flynn argues persuasively that when Donne was twelve years old, Heywood engineered his nephew's exile to the continent as a way to avoid Protestant persecution of Catholics. Flynn also examines Donne's Latin epigrams as evidence of Jasper Heywood's schooling of him as a youth.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the probability that the young Donne once attended a

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<sup>10</sup> In following this New Historicist approach, I will refer to all of Donne's speakers in the masculine. I understand that the poetic speaker is available to both genders in terms of reader response, but for the purpose of discussing what these poems do for Donne, I will remain consistent in how I address the speaker.

<sup>11</sup> Dennis Flynn, *Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), See 134-46 for discussion of Donne's experience in France and Belgium. And see the Appendix 183-185 for Flynn's compelling argument on the correlation between Donne's Latin epigrams and Jesuit educational practices in the early-modern period.

Jesuit meeting with his mother in The Tower of London has received not unwarranted speculation.<sup>12</sup>

There can be little question that Donne recognized the power that the Order held over him and his family. Joseph Kruppa, in his dissertation *John Donne and the Jesuits*, comments that “much of Donne’s thought is the product of some form of interaction with the Jesuits.”<sup>13</sup> Donne admits this explicitly in his treatise *Pseudo-Martyr*, where he rationalizes English Catholics’ ability to take the Oath of Allegiance while remaining true to Rome:

I had a longer worke to doe than many other men; for I was  
first to blot out, certaine impressions of the Romane  
religion, and to wrestle both against the examples and  
against the reasons, by which some hold was taken; and  
some anticipations early layde upon my conscience, both  
by Persons who by nature had a power and superiority over  
my will, and others who by their learning and good life,  
seem’d to me justly to claime an interest for the guiding,  
and rectifying of mine understanding in these matters.<sup>14</sup>

Considering that his text challenges the Jesuits and their perceived obsession with martyrdom in the face of the Oath, many consider the reference to “others” to be Donne

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<sup>12</sup> Donne notes in *Pseudo-Martyr* that he attended a “Consultation of Jesuites in the Tower, in the late Queenes’ time.” Many critics speculate that this refers to the time when Donne’s mother visited her brother Jasper Heywood, SJ in the Tower and helped Fr. William Weston to gain access to the leader of the English Province at the time. Carey notes: “Eventually, Weston took the immense risk of going into the Tower with [Donne’s mother] on one of her visits, so that he could consult with [Jasper Heywood]. Donne, though only twelve, was selected to play a part in this escapade, and taken along too.” John Carey, *John Donne: Life Mind and Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph E Kruppa, *John Donne and the Jesuits: A dissertation*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1964), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Donne, *Pseudo Martyr*, 313.

acknowledging the grip the Jesuits held upon his psyche and systems of belief. Moreover, as he declares publicly the renunciation of his old faith, in what he calls the “declaration of my self,” he justifies his action by testifying that he came to this decision by “the ordinary meanes, which is frequent praier, and equall and *indifferent* affections.”<sup>15</sup> These are precisely the directions, and nearly the same wording, that Ignatius puts forth for making a choice in one’s way of life: a person must “find [him/her]self indifferent, without any inordinate propensity.”<sup>16</sup> In using terminology specific to the meditations on election, Donne acknowledges openly in publication his understanding of the *Spiritual Exercises*, and may be admitting his use of them. John Klause sees this as Donne’s settling accounts with the Jesuits after rejecting them: “Donne wanted the ghost [of Ignatius] and anyone else who required an accounting of him, to know that he had complied with their rules.”<sup>17</sup> I believe this is precisely the action Donne is taking in many of the *Holy Sonnets*; he engages the exercises as part of his process of rejecting Jesuit influence upon him.

Later, in *Ignatius his Conclave*, the prefatory note, ostensibly from “The Printer to the Reader,” states specifically Donne’s trouble in ridding himself of all things Jesuit: “[t]his Booke must teach what humane infirmity is, and how hard a matter it is for a man much conversant in the bookes and Acts of *Jesuites*, so thoroughly to cast off the *Jesuits*,

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<sup>15</sup> Donne, *Pseudo Martyr*, 314. John Klause notes that “ordinary’ here means, not ‘common’ or ‘usual,’ but ‘ordinate,’ ‘appropriate to achieving an end.’” See, “Hope’s Gambit: The Jesuitical, Protestant, Skeptical Origins of Donne’s Heroic Ideal,” *Studies in Philology*, (1994 Spring; 91 (2), 191. Emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> St. Ignatius Loyola, *A Literal Translation and A Contemporary Reading of The Spiritual Exercises*, Eldar Mullan, SJ., trans., David L. Fleming, SJ, ed., (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 140. Hereafter cited as *Exercises*. In the Latin translation of Ignatius’ manuscript, which is most likely how Donne would have encountered the text, this point on election reads “et simul invenire me indifferentem, sine affectione ulla inordinata.” St. Ignatius Loyola, *Exercitia Spiritualia, cum versione litterali*, trans John Roothaan, SJ (Vatican City: Thesaurus Spiritualis Societatis Jesu, 1948).

<sup>17</sup> Klause, 191.

as that he contract nothing of their naturall drosses, which are *Petulancy, and Lightnesse*.”<sup>18</sup> This emphasizes the extreme influence the Jesuits had on Donne’s development, and as in his mention of his work to “blot out” Catholicism from his life, the assertion that he has thoroughly “cast off the Jesuits” rings hollow.<sup>19</sup> John Donne was a member of a proud Catholic family who were intimately involved with the Jesuit mission in England. While from a postmodern perspective we might be able separate this history from Donne’s writing, Dan Flynn warns us against such methods, noting that:

The problem of Donne’s lineage for Donne studies is to appreciate the fact that, as a member of a group directly afflicted by enormous and penetrating social developments, Donne wrote out of an experience that his contemporaries *could* not ignore, that therefore never ceased to dominate *his* outlook, and that may appear as an element in anything he wrote.<sup>20</sup>

Flynn’s description of Donne’s upbringing as “dominat[ing] his outlook” illuminates the primary issue at play in the *Holy Sonnets*. Donne expresses an attempt to take control in verse of a force that pervades his past and shapes his present. In working to transform his conflicted Jesuit inheritance, he admits its power over him.

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<sup>18</sup> Donne, *Ignatius his Conclave*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> The scope of this study is not broad enough to examine all the ways in which the Jesuit’s informed Donne’s writing. However, the Order or its members are mentioned specifically in Satires IV and V, “The Will,” “Elegie XI, The Bracelet,” *Pseudo-Martyr*, *Biathanatos*, *Ignatius his Conclave* and many letters and sermons. Likewise, the *Exercises* have been cited as influencing his *Holy Sonnets*, *The Anniversaries*, and some of the *Songs and Sonnets*. Donald Ramsay Roberts in “The Death Wish of John Donne” notes that Donne’s “antipathy to the Jesuits...can be seen everywhere throughout his works.” PMLA, Vol. 62, No. 4. (Dec., 1947), 974.

<sup>20</sup> Dennis Flynn, “A Biographical Prolusion to Study of Donne’s Religious Imagination,” *Donne’s Religious Imagination*, edited by Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway AR: UCA Press, 1995), 34. Emphasis Flynn’s.

The Jesuits were not simply a phenomenon that might have influenced Donne due to his familial ties. Their political theories posed a serious threat to the stability of the monarchy, and their spirituality spread pervasively through the British Isles in a large-scale attempt to provide recusant Catholics with modes of prayer and spiritual sustenance.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Anthony Raspa assigns Jesuit spirituality a significant role in the development of a new form of poetics during this time. He recognizes a shift during the mid-sixteenth century in the way poets interacted with the external world. This represented a philosophical move away from seeing the “memory as pictorial” to “memory as sensation,” which Raspa defines as “baroque” imagery.<sup>22</sup> He believes this emergent baroque world-view developed out of Counter-Reformation attempts to reorganize recently fractured understandings of humanity’s relationship to the world. Raspa claims that this new baroque cosmology recognized that “man was always conscious of a meaningful universe and that he was bound to recognize its significance.”<sup>23</sup> Following from this, the baroque human required new methods of understanding that were not linked to a scholastic hierarchical view. According to Raspa, because of Jesuit emphasis on interiority, the *Spiritual Exercises* provided an outlet for such poetic meditation, and their popularity spread through England during the latter half of the sixteenth century. Ignatius “had effectively remade the world into an unassailable shape in the inner-self for all...according to God’s traditionally held original plan to keep

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<sup>21</sup> Louis Martz cites A.C. Southern’s *Elizabethan Recusant Prose, 1559-1582* to show “in elaborate detail how Catholic books in English were printed at Antwerp, Louvain, Rouen, Paris, Douay, Rheims – or in some cases secret presses in England itself – and were distributed among the English people by missionary priests and regular agents.” See Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation*, (New Haven, Yale U.P., 1954), 6. Furthermore, Raspa, notes that “Ignatian aesthetics in England assumed disproportionate dimensions because the Church of Rome, its English hierarchy now swept away, survived principally in the hands of the Jesuit mission priests” (3).

<sup>22</sup> Raspa, 77

<sup>23</sup> Raspa, 13.

the material world at man's rational disposal."<sup>24</sup> This new world-view, as dramatized in the *Spiritual Exercises*, shaped the Jesuit meditative poetic that spread throughout England at the turn of the seventeenth century. So great was the Society of Jesus' influence on Donne's England that T.S. Eliot remarked in his "Clark Lectures" at Trinity College that:

Jesuitism is one of the most significant phenomena of Donne's time. In Jesuitism the centre of philosophical interest is deflected from what it was for the Middle Ages, and this marks an important alteration of human attitudes. Throughout his life [Donne] was in contact with Jesuitism; directly in his early family life, later by his studies, and not least by his battle with Jesuits...The air which Donne breathed was infused with Jesuitism.<sup>25</sup>

Eliot recognized that the Jesuit influence on Donne was so pervasive that, like the air, it permeated his works and at times could be barely discernible. As a result, Donne's poetic enterprise in the *Holy Sonnets* of reshaping his past plays out in both obvious and at times veiled ways. The speakers in the *Holy Sonnets* engage, confront, and reject the requirements of the *Spiritual Exercises*, dramatizing Donne's desire, struggle, and failure to eliminate part of his inherited identity.

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Donne composed the majority of the *Holy Sonnets* between 1609-1610, a period marked by sickness, thwarted ambition, and seclusion from court society. As Donne

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<sup>24</sup> Raspa, 66.

<sup>25</sup> Eliot, 89.



places the speakers in conversation with methods for meditation expounded in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, he dramatizes the self's contention with a heritage that was "impressed," and "layde upon" it.<sup>26</sup> In doing so, Donne's speakers recognize and remember the requirements of the *Exercises* in an effort to reject and forget them. The *Spiritual Exercises* were first published in 1548 with the expressed purpose of "preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all disordered tendencies, and after [the soul] is rid, to seek and find the Divine Will as to the management of one's life for the salvation of the soul."<sup>27</sup> During each exercise, the participant proceeds through a rigorous method of: "one preparatory prayer and two preludes, three chief points and one colloquy."<sup>28</sup> This process engages all faculties of the soul: memory, intellect, and will. The "colloquy" in particular represents the goal of a given meditation. It is a humble prayer addressing God and requesting grace after self-examination.<sup>29</sup> In performing these exercises, the participant proceeds through four weeks of intense meditations in the hope of achieving an understanding of Divine love.

Ignatius emphasized the total subjugation of the self as essential to achieving an understanding of Divine will. This notion of self-abnegation is central to the *Spiritual Exercises*, which developed out of Loyola's conversion experience.<sup>30</sup> The *Spiritual*

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<sup>26</sup> Donne, *Pseudo Martyr*, 313

<sup>27</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 48.

<sup>29</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 54.

<sup>30</sup> Ignatius Loyola is a figure whose life in many ways mirrors Donne's and whose youth provides significant areas of ambiguity. Ignatius, a one time member of Basque aristocracy, experienced a conversion while recovering from battle wounds received while fighting for Spain against France. He was a man of worldly ambitions similar to Donne's who pursued courtly life and was subject to extreme vanity. In his introduction to *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, George E. Ganss, SJ recounts that while Ignatius convalesced, he meditated upon the *Life of Christ* by the Carthusian monk Ludolph of Saxony and *Flos sanctorum*, a Spanish version of the short lives of the saints, *Legenda aurea*, written by the Dominican Jacobus de Voragine. During this recovery period he felt compelled to leave behind his courtier exploits to pursue a life dedicated to the imitation of Christ and the Saints.

*Exercises* begin with a concise statement of purpose: “to conquer oneself and regulate one’s life without determining oneself through any tendency that is disordered.”<sup>31</sup> The goal is to reach a level of spiritual freedom that will allow one to be guided entirely by the Spirit so that no worldly desires can alter one’s choice. Loyola pushes this abandonment to the will of God to extremes, saying that “on our part, we want not health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, long rather than short life, and so in all the rest; desiring and choosing only what is most conducive for us to the end for which we are created [,the service of God].”<sup>32</sup> The requirements of the exercises call for a subjugation of the self and a disinterested approach to choice that forsakes all worldly desires for the service of God.

The heart of the Ignatian experience and the goal of the four-week retreat is this abandonment of self in the “Contemplation to Attain Love.” This contemplation asks the exercitant to reflect with gratitude upon all the gifts bestowed by God and then to offer in prayer:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my  
intellect, and all my will – all that I have or possess. Thou  
gavest it to me: to Thee Lord, I return it! All is thine;  
dispose of it according to all thy will. Give me thy love  
and grace, for this is enough for me.<sup>33</sup>

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This conversion period culminated in his mystical experiences while at Manresa (1522-23) during which time he abandoned his worldly sword to take up the mantle of Christ at the monastery on Montserrat. George E. Ganss, SJ, “Introduction.” *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*. By St. Ignatius Loyola. Ed. and Trans. by George E. Ganss, SJ. (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), 13.

<sup>31</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 26.

<sup>33</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 176.

Donne's speakers never achieve this sense of abandonment to a loving God. Instead, many of the poems end in despair and fear that give no certain reassurance that the speaker is saved. However, in choosing an Ignatian meditation as a way to engage his speaker, Donne dramatizes the challenge such meditations pose for a soul in search of salvation.

Ultimately, the test of the *Spiritual Exercises* centers on their dialectical approach to persuasion. In *Self Consuming Artifacts*, Stanley Fish notes that this type of persuasion, "disappoints present expectations and even challenges them, and thus induces dissatisfaction with the mind's state of knowledge."<sup>34</sup> In asking the exercitant to offer his freedom and the three faculties of his soul in gratitude to God, the *Exercises* achieve dialectic persuasion by spoiling the reader's expectations. Having employed the memory, intellect, and will throughout the retreat as a way to become closer to God, the retreatant is now asked to abandon these faculties. This leaves the exercitant "wholly dependent on the one genuinely effecting force in the universe."<sup>35</sup> In this way, the *Spiritual Exercises* expect the participant to offer themselves entirely to the meditation, abandoning their sense of control and uniting their will to that of God. The indignant responses proffered by Donne's speakers reveal the fear of abandoning the self to the meditation which requires a loss of individuation. The speakers desperately cling to those faculties of reason and understanding that allow them to relate to the world, causing the meditation to break down and shift away from a focus on the divine.<sup>36</sup> Thus as Paul

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<sup>34</sup> Stanley Fish, *Self Consuming Artifacts*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 19.

<sup>35</sup> Fish, 38.

<sup>36</sup> Strier in "Radical Donne: 'Satire III'" recognizes Donne's aversion to "foolishly humble and obedient souls who 'in the sea are lost.'" He continues saying that for Donne "Loss of individuation seems to be the ultimate terror – giving up one's will." (311). "Radical Donne: 'Satire III.'" *ELH*, Vol. 60, No. 2. (Summer, 1993), pp. 283-322.

Oliver claims, these poems reveal “a poetic personality that impinges so strongly on the poems that their religious basis is left looking very much like a platform for self-promotion.”<sup>37</sup> As Donne places his speakers in contact with these *Exercises* they refuse to forego the self completely. Even when they attempt to do so, we find them almost shouting back at God that their reason forbids it. By simultaneously engaging and rejecting the *Exercises*, Donne’s speakers “wrestle” with the effects the Jesuit tradition and create a poetic form of forgetting through which Donne portrays the struggle to “blot out” one’s past.<sup>38</sup>

Many scholars agree with Martz’s contention that the presence of “grand passionate openings [in] the *Holy Sonnets*” represents the clearest connection between Donne’s poetry and the Ignatian model.<sup>39</sup> In Jesuit spirituality and poetry, the “composition of place” requires engagement with all the senses of the imagination to place oneself within the scene to be contemplated. During this part of the meditation, which comprises the “first prelude,” the exercitant must “see with the eyes of imagination the corporeal place where the thing [he/she] wishes to contemplate is found.”<sup>40</sup> Martz sees this meditative practice as the source for the opening of many of Donne’s *Holy*

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<sup>37</sup> Paul Oliver, *Donne’s Religious Writing: A Discourse of Feigned Devotion*, (New York: Longman, 1997), 136.

<sup>38</sup> Donne, *Pseudo Martyr*, 313.

<sup>39</sup> Martz, 31. It is important to note that Martz recognized that the Ignatian influence had to be reviewed by examining individual poems and that while some poems engage the *Exercises* through a composition of place, they do not follow the exercise in its entirety. He explains this by noting that the typical exercise was “long – an hour or more in duration – and its deliberate, predominantly intellectual method would not, for most of its course, provide material for poetry” (46). Martz saw the majority of the *Holy Sonnets* as reflecting only portions of any given exercise. Strachniewski and Archer both thought that this argument amounted to intellectual hedging. See Strachniewski, 678 and Archer, 137-8. The argument between these scholars illuminates the ambivalent response of Donne’s speakers to these meditations. For the purposes of my study, the movement away from any given exercise is not the result of time constraints when expressing a meditative experience, but of the speaker’s attempts to challenge and derail the meditative process.

<sup>40</sup> Martz, 27.

*Sonnets*: “such practices of ‘composition’ or ‘proposing’ lie behind the vividly dramatized, firmly established, graphically imaged openings that are characteristic of [Donne].”<sup>41</sup> However, the purpose of this type of meditation for Jesuit poetics is to “create distance between the poet and the world,” in other words, to produce artificially, within the speaker’s poetic interiority, a space for meditation.<sup>42</sup> In doing so, meditative poets had to be vigilant to “avoid superfluous properties such as a too great personal concern with the self.”<sup>43</sup> The tension between self-negation and assertion plays a significant role in the process of writing devotional poetry. In the *Holy Sonnets*, Donne fails to negotiate this tension when treating the “composition of place.” As the poet initiates these meditations, he also inaugurates a poetic self, which challenges these self negating aspects of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Donne begins many sonnets with scenes specifically prescribed by the *Spiritual Exercises*, such as the end of time, one’s own death, and moments from the life of Christ: “As due by many titles I resign,” “Oh my blacke Soule!,” “This is my playes last scene,” “At the round earths imagin’d corners,” “Spit in my face you Jewes,” “What if this present were the worlds last night?” and “Why are we by all creatures waited on.” Although these sonnets commence by placing the speaker within a moment to be examined and understood, Donne’s speakers often find themselves unable to fully separate from the created world. Thus, the meditation is derailed before it even begins because the speakers fail to apply their full sensual memory to the scene.

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<sup>41</sup> Martz, 31.

<sup>42</sup> Raspa, 94.

<sup>43</sup> Raspa, 96.

Aside from “Spit in my face you Jewes,” where the speaker asks to share in the suffering of Christ, as he entreats “Buffet, and scoffe, scourge, and crucifie mee,”<sup>44</sup> Donne’s speakers do not engage in any concerted efforts to concentrate on a particular scene. In fact, they barely attend to the meditation before asserting their rationality. Take for example, “This is my plays last scene,” where the speaker contemplates the moment of his demise. While this meditation on death is a fitting topic for reflection in the *Spiritual Exercises*, the speaker shows few attempts to empty himself into the scene. Indeed, instead of attempting to see the scene, the poetic voice takes an active role in its creation:

This is my plays last scene, here heavens appoint  
My pilgrimages last mile; and my race  
Idly, yet quickly runne, hath this last pace,  
My spans last inch, my minutes latest point<sup>45</sup>

While the “heavens appoint” the “last mile,” the speaker appears reluctant to engage the meditation and needs to force his powers of concentration upon the moment. But there is no sense that he is fully engaged in a reflection on the scene. The speaker attempts different descriptions of the event, but none of them prove sufficient. Moreover, by creating a melodramatic effect through the repetition of “last,” the speaker reveals resignation at the thought of approaching death. Finally, instead of creating distance from the world in order to concentrate upon the scene, this speaker seems to be clinging to the world by imagining successively smaller measurements for his lifespan. Far from creating a sense of pious self-reflection, the speaker expresses dramatic surprise at being

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<sup>44</sup> Donne, *Holy Sonnets*, 251, l. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Donne, *Holy Sonnets*, 249, ll. 1-4.

suddenly faced with death. Most important, the speaker's focus remains less upon the scene and more upon himself because of the repetition of "my." This lack of attention to the reflection and subsequent self-assertion is typical of Donne's "compositions of place" throughout the *Holy Sonnets*. By opening this sonnet with such an ego-centric reflection, the speaker sets the tone for the rest of the poem, which concludes with an overly theatrical line reminiscent of an actor exiting the stage at the end of a scene: "For thus I leave the world, the flesh, the devil" (l. 14). Just as we saw in the opening quatrain, the speaker has taken control of his death and exits the world on his own terms. This sonnet reveals the speaker's self-assertion from beginning to end.

This lack of attention to the meditative scene by Donne's speakers is revealed further through a comparison to Robert Southwell's composition of place in the "The Nativitie of Christe":

O dyinge soules! behould your living spring!

O dazeled eyes! behould your sunne of grace!

Dull eares, attend what word this Word doth bringe!

Upp, heavy hartes, with joye your joy embrace!<sup>46</sup>

Southwell's composition of place exposes two areas where Donne's speakers fail. First, as Raspa notes, the feelings aroused by such meditations are "universal, absolute, and fixed in nature."<sup>47</sup> Southwell engages with the Nativity scene by recalling the feelings and emotions that are part of salvation history and are accessible to all. The speaker calls up these emotions for the reader and the poet, but the poetic voice is difficult to locate. Second, the composition of place is meant to prepare the meditator to activate the

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<sup>46</sup> Robert Southwell, SJ, *The Complete Poems of Robert Southwell*, Edited by Rev. Alexander B. Grosart, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970), 128.

<sup>47</sup> Raspa, 44.

understanding in order to comprehend divine will. Whereas Southwell's speaker proceeds through each sense in a concentrated reflection on the scene, Donne's speakers often offer a dramatic flourish and then move immediately into self-assertion. As we shall see, this poetic control over a *Spiritual Exercise* represents the primary weapon Donne employs in his *Holy Sonnets* in his speakers' attacks the Jesuit method. The interplay between Donne's poetic self and the Ignatian meditative model dramatizes the struggle for a spiritual selfhood free of a constraining religious heritage.

Even after proceeding through a composition of place, the speakers in the *Holy Sonnets* tend to seize control over the movement of the *Spiritual Exercises* with which they engage, never fully inhabiting the self-negating aspects of the meditations. Nor do they express true humility and gratitude, the fruits of the *Exercises*. While the speakers do employ Ignatian methods, they often shift into self-assertion, revealing an aversion to being controlled by such rigorous meditations. The poems allow Donne to take control over a method of prayer that once controlled him. Ironically, in rejecting this method of meditation, the speakers remain spiritually stagnant. Donne's struggle to eliminate his association with the Jesuits exposes the poetic self to the pain of isolation in verse; by working to forget, the speakers remember.

Donne's *Holy Sonnet* "As due by many titles I resigne" uses a reflection that explicitly places his poetic self in tension with the central tenet of the *Spiritual Exercises*, the "Principle and Foundation," which states: "[humanity] is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord and by this means save [their] soul."<sup>48</sup> This statement shapes the exercitant's approach to every meditation in the retreat. Donne's speaker engages the

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<sup>48</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 26.



meditation with a similar reflection, expressing the speaker's understanding that service of God is everyone's *raison d'être*:

As due by many titles I resigne  
My selfe to thee, O God, first I was made  
By thee, and for thee<sup>49</sup>

The speaker begins with subjection of the self prior to noting both from whence he came and for what purpose. However, as the speaker engages with this meditative form, he simultaneously rejects it through his language. The word "resigne" connotes an unwilling submission, stressing the speaker's understanding and assertion of whose "selfe" is being turned over.<sup>50</sup> Although Donne's speaker acknowledges the sense of Ignatian humility required of the exercise, he does not fully accept it or communicate it through the verse. The speaker addresses the meditation but Donne's poetic crafting of the sonnet creates a tension between the rigor of the meditation and the poetic self's indignant declarations of self worth.

Proceeding from this, the speaker notes that he has strayed from the original purpose of being made for God and acknowledges his sinfulness. By describing himself as, "decay'd" and having "betray'd himself" (ll. 3, 7) Donne's speaker implicitly addresses the second exercise of the "First Week" which calls the retreatant to "see all

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<sup>49</sup> Donne, *Holy Sonnets*, 247, ll. 1-3.

<sup>50</sup>The word "resigne" in particular emphasizes Donne's command over the meditation through language. In early modern usage, resign most often implied the surrender or relinquishing of "something pertaining to one or in one's possession or charge." However, resign could also mean "to yield up (oneself, etc.) with confidence to another for care or guidance." The speaker's language displays Donne's conflicted approach toward this meditative model.

"resign, v.<sup>1</sup>" *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 10 Apr. 2008

<[http://dictionary.oed.com.proxyum.researchport.umd.edu/cgi/entry/50204007?query\\_type=word&queryword=resign&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10&sort\\_type=alpha&result\\_place=2&search\\_id=4NuC-NV51UI-13491&hilit=50204007](http://dictionary.oed.com.proxyum.researchport.umd.edu/cgi/entry/50204007?query_type=word&queryword=resign&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=2&search_id=4NuC-NV51UI-13491&hilit=50204007)>.

my bodily corruption and foulness.”<sup>51</sup> But this is as far as the speaker will go, avoiding the Ignatian retreatant’s humble reflection in gratitude that the earth “has not opened to swallow me up, creating new hells for me to suffer in ...forever.”<sup>52</sup> The speaker does not proceed in the direction that Ignatius stresses in the “First Week” of his retreat.<sup>53</sup> On the contrary, while exercising the intellect or understanding during the second part of the sonnet, the speaker indignantly portrays himself as equal to God and deserving of his love:

I am thy sonne, made with thy self to shine,  
Thy servant, whose paines thou hast still repaid,  
Thy sheepe, thine Image and, till I betray’d  
My self, a temple of thy Spirit divine;

By engaging the exercise in this way, Donne weakens its effectiveness as a meditation. The structure of the poem reflects the speaker’s struggle between relinquishing everything to God and asserting a poetic voice in the meditation. The focus of the octave is outward, directed toward God as the words “thee,” “thy,” and “thine” appear ten times. Just as a servant to the master, the speaker acknowledges God’s due and attempts to defer to that power. However, the second quatrain shifts away from deference toward God; the speaker verges on blasphemy by asserting his position as God’s “sonne made with thy selfe to shine” (l. 5). Thus, after composing an Ignatian meditation, the speaker shifts to sinful expressions of hubris.

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<sup>51</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 50.

<sup>52</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 52.

<sup>53</sup> The First Week of the *Exercises* serves as an examination of conscience as the retreatant prays to understand his/her sinfulness and its effect upon his/her relationships. The goal of many of these exercises is to “beg for a great and intense sorrow and tears for my sins” (50). As we shall see, Donne’s poetic language allows his speakers to evade full admission of guilt and sin.

The tension between language and meaning continues in the second quatrain, which appears deferential and humble through noticing the speaker's role in damaging his relationship with God. However, the *a-b-b-a* rhyme sequence produces a very different effect. The middle two lines, because of the rhyme sequence as well as the anaphora which begins each line, form a cohesive unit. Moreover, the enjambment (between ll.7-8) creates a tension regarding who is responsible for the betraying here. By disrupting the series with the clause, "till I betrayed myself," the phrase "a temple of thy Spirit divine" can be read as an appositive modifying "myself" as opposed to the third part of a series (in l.7). This reading allows "till I betrayed" to stand alone. Donne often employed ellipsis by compressing words or thoughts in order to fit the prosody of his poems.<sup>54</sup> This obscure poetic structure makes it very possible to read the above line as saying "till I was betrayed," which begs the question, by whom? This interpretation is persuasive when one compares the parallel of this line in the first quatrain, "[b]y thee, and for thee, and when I was decay'd" (l. 3). On the other hand, the punctuation of the enjambed line militates for a reading that shows the speaker's recognition of his self-betrayal, that is "till I betrayed My self." Ironically, the speaker still sees the betrayal in self centered terms as he betrays *himself* not God. The ambiguous prosodic movements support both readings, portraying Donne's conscious efforts to both engage and reject the *Spiritual Exercises*, struggling with a past that informed his youth and constrains him still.

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<sup>54</sup> For studies in Donne's prosodic methods, see Arnold Stein's works, "Donne's Obscurity and the Elizabethan Tradition," *ELH*, Vol. 13, No. 2. (Jun., 1946) pp. 98-118. and "Donne's Prosody," *PMLA*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Jun., 1944), pp. 373-397. In "Donne's Obscurity," Stein notes the many instances where a verb may be left out of one of Donne's lines to be supplied by the reader. Also see Michael F. Moloney who focuses specifically on ellipsis as "one of the most important elements in Donne's prosody" (233) in "Donne's Metrical Practice," *PMLA*, Col. 65, No. 2. (Mar., 1950), pp 232-239.

The speaker's self-asserting defiance becomes more evident when examining the Petrarchan structure of the sonnet. In the flow of this sonnet, "My Self, a temple of thy Spirit divine" serves as a transition between the octave and sestet, bringing the octave to rest on a line emphasizing the speaker's overconfident sense of self (l. 8). Thus, a rebellious statement of self-worth sits at the heart of this poem, emphasizing the speaker's shift away from a reflection on humility. This acclamation colors our reading of the octave and underscores the indignant pleading that we shall see in the closing lines.

Finally, as the speaker moves into what represents the Ignatian colloquy, he abandons all notions of self-abnegation and incredulously challenges God:

Why doth the devil then usurpe on mee?  
Why doth he steale, nay ravish that's thy right?  
Except thou rise and for thine owne worke fight,  
Oh I shall soone despaire, when I doe see  
That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt'not chuse me,  
And Satan hates mee, yet is loth to lose mee<sup>55</sup>

The speaker questions God's commitment to him and ends the sonnet in a state of isolation and despair. Martz argues that this fits an Ignatian colloquy in that it has similarities to the Ignatian meditations of Fr. Luis de la Puente, SJ.<sup>56</sup> In recognizing this connection, Martz provides us with a venue for understanding the tension inherent

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<sup>55</sup> *Holy Sonnets*, 247, ll. 6-14.

<sup>56</sup> See Martz, 48. where he notes the similarity between the conclusion of this sonnet and Fray Puente's directions for colloquy. In these instructions he calls the retreatant to recognize that "we have disordered passions, strong enemies, and that without [God] we are able to do nothing. That we are his Creatures made according to his owne Image, and Likeness, and that for this cause the devil persecuteth us to destroye us, and that therefore it appertayneth to him to protect us." (l, 4-5). Donne's speaker, however, does not seem to have the same confidence that God will rise up to defend him.

between Donne's speaker and the meditative requirements of the *Exercises*. The approach Donne's speaker takes with God reveals that this poem does not simply reflect the simultaneous act of meditating and writing poetry. Although the speaker implores God to deliver him using an Ignatian colloquy that reflects the structure of the *Exercises*, there is an underlying cynicism in the language of his supplication to God.<sup>57</sup> The content of the speaker's exclamation to God hardly matches Ignatius' instructions for how to make a colloquy: "the colloquy is made, properly speaking, as one friend speaks to another, or as a servant to his master; now asking some grace, now blaming oneself for some misdeed, now communicating one's affairs, and asking advice in them."<sup>58</sup> On the contrary, this speaker's abortive colloquy challenges God, showing no sense of humility, and certainly not "blaming oneself." Instead, he rather hopelessly berates God and demands answers. Strier notes that the subjection to God at the beginning of the sonnet, results not in "a prayer for unmerited mercy" but the speaker "produces something like a threat."<sup>59</sup> The speaker, instead of seeing God as merciful for not having abandoned him, imagines God as unfair for having forsaken that which was once a "temple of [His] Spirit divine." What began as an Ignatian meditation is usurped by the hypercritical poetic voice that asserts the speaker's reasoning and creates ambiguous uncertainty. This speaker refuses abandonment to the exercise and thus it leaves him unsatisfied and resigned to a situation where Satan seems more interested than God does in obtaining his soul. Donne regulates and constricts the process of the exercise, consciously filtering it through paradoxical and ambiguous poetic language, allowing the speaker both to engage and reject the meditation. This poetic process wrests control from a meditation that

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<sup>57</sup> For a discussion of how this fits the Ignatian colloquy see Martz, 27.

<sup>58</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 48.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Strier, "Awry and Squint," 370.

presumes to guide exercitants through a rigid progression. Consequently, the speaker registers spiritual stagnancy, further separating Donne from a meditative act. Perhaps for Donne, “fettering” Ignatian meditation to poetry represents a form of self-betrayal as the poetic self revolts against the poet’s formative heritage. As a result, the speaker simultaneously asserts himself and expresses feelings of betrayal and isolation.

This process of contacting and abusing Ignatian meditations is typical of Donne’s speakers throughout the *Holy Sonnets*. In “Oh my blacke Soule,” the speaker imaginatively addresses his soul when faced with the prospect of imminent death and judgment. In an attempt to emphasize the immediacy of the experience and to force the reflection into the speaker’s consciousness, he exclaims, “O my blacke Soule, *now* thou art summoned.”<sup>60</sup> Proceeding from this, the speaker describes the soul’s fear when presented with this reflection:

like a thiefe, which till deaths doome be read,  
Wisheth himself delivered from prison;  
But damn’d and hal’d to execution,  
Wisheth that still he might be imprisoned.<sup>61</sup>

The speaker expresses little trust in the redemptive mercy of God as he contemplates his soul’s desire to abort death in order to avoid facing its Creator. However, this meditative trope is composed in a similar manner to that which Ignatius recommends for the First Exercise of the “First Week,” where he encourages the exercitant to “see with the sight of imagination and consider that [your] soul is imprisoned in this corruptible body.”<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, Ignatius suggests that retreatants specifically imagine themselves as “going to

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<sup>60</sup> Donne, *Holy Sonnets*, 248, l. 1. emphasis mine.

<sup>61</sup> Donne, *Holy Sonnets*, 248, ll. 5-8.

<sup>62</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 42.

appear bound as in chains before the supreme eternal Judge; taking for an example how prisoners in chains and already deserving death appear before their temporal judge.”<sup>63</sup> These exercises engender feelings of humility, guilt, and remorse leading participants to conclude their prayer with a reflection upon God’s mercy in order to propose amendment for the future. However, these limiting and constraining expectations of the *Exercises* challenge Donne’s poetic persona. Instead of fully engaging in the process of the meditation, Donne’s speaker draws on his own baffling logic as he seeks self-reassurance. Far from being able to relinquish his ego, the speaker rather rationalizes a way toward salvation:

Oh make thy selfe with holy mourning blacke,  
And red with blushing, as thou art with sinne;  
Or wash thee in Christs blood, which hath this might  
That being red, it dyes red soules to white (ll. 11-14).<sup>64</sup>

Unlike in the prescribed method, the speaker does not simply reflect upon the state of his soul and then pray for the strength to reform as required by the Ignatian colloquy. Rather he attempts to give the soul directions for achieving redemption. Donne’s speakers consistently rebel against the Ignatian paradigm and rely on themselves to sort out their own salvation. In this instance, the speaker imagines his soul playing a central role in its own redemption. He directs his soul to make itself black and red so that Christ’s red

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<sup>63</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 64.

<sup>64</sup> Helen Brooks rightly recognizes that Donne’s speakers’ participation in these *Exercises* without a director to guide them results in their inability to prevent their own psyche from usurping the *Exercises*. Helen Brooks, “When I Would Not I Change in Vowes, and In Devotione’: Donne’s ‘Vexations’ and the Ignatian Meditative Model,” *John Donne Journal: Studies in the Age of Donne*, Vol. 19 (2000), 128-9. Often the speakers’ language in the *Holy Sonnets* resembles that of a retreat director. Thus the speaker directs himself resulting in a tension of motives, which leads to a rejection of the meditative process, producing despair. Moreover, Donne as poet could be seen as serving as a given speaker’s director, steering him off course.

blood might wash it clean. The speaker's logic is paradoxical and reveals a lack of sincerity as the soul must first present itself: "red with blushing." By imploring his soul to portray itself as sinful, the speaker reveals doubts about his sinfulness. This becomes even more plausible when one considers the possible word play of the phrase "as thou art with sinne." The speaker could be both affirming that his soul is with sin, or praying that it make itself appear "as [if] thou art with sinne." The sonnet provides a prime example of Donne's manipulating the *Exercises* as it seems like an elaborate plan to fool God in order to gain a back door entrance to salvation. The speaker continues by entreating his soul to wash itself with Christ's red blood, so that it might be changed from red to white. The paradoxical nature of this logic reveals Donne's speaker over-employing his intellect to try to understand a matter of faith. As Strier notes, Donne's ambiguous understanding of the potency of Christ's blood reflects "the model of a homeopathic alchemical cure."<sup>65</sup> The speaker hopes to manipulate his soul and imagines being saved through a magical transformation. The imaginative voice folds back upon its own logic, illustrating the speaker's inability to progress past these meditations on sinfulness. Finally, the section which represents the colloquy is directed to the soul, never engaging God. This self-negating meditation results in a self-aggrandizing sonnet where the speaker can control the method of his own salvation. The poetic voice ensnares itself in its own language and the complex prosodic movements constrict the forward momentum. Through the

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<sup>65</sup> Strier, "Awry and Squint", 371. For a study of Paracelsian homeopathy see Walter Pagel, *Paracelsus: An Introduction to Philosophical Medicine in the Era of the Renaissance* (Basel, 1958), pp 141-48 and Allen G. Debus, *The English Paracelsians* (London, 1965), pp 32-35. In this new medical philosophy, Paracelsus believed that "likes" cured "likes" which contrasted with Galenists who believed in the negative manipulation of the four humors. Thus for the speaker, something red washes red things white, purifying the soul. Ironically, just as Donne uses Jesuit spirituality in the *Holy Sonnets* but then condemns Ignatius to hell in *Ignatius his Conclave*, he uses Paracelsian imagery here and then portrays Paracelsus as one of Ignatius' rival innovators for hell's throne. Perhaps Donne attacked other controversial figures by using their methods as well.



paradoxical language in this sonnet, Donne critiques the process of the Ignatian meditation which attempts to lead the exercitant to an achievable goal. By portraying a speaker that orchestrates his soul's salvation, Donne derails the rigorous process of meditation and denies its potency over him.

### *Southwell's Meditation on Death*

If Donne struggled so with Ignatian meditation, can we conclude that Jesuit spirituality itself is in tension with poetic creativity? Raspa and Martz offer extensive studies on the many early-modern poets who implemented the *Spiritual Exercises* through verse. However, a brief examination of one of Robert Southwell's poems exposes Donne's particularly personal conflict with the *Exercises* in his *Holy Sonnets*. The way in which Donne's speakers take over what would typically be a humble prayer to God in the colloquies becomes clearer by comparing Donne's meditations on death to Southwell's "Upon the Image of Death." Whereas Donne's poetic voice in the face of imminent death avoids humble supplication, Southwell's speaker moves through the Ignatian model producing a profoundly different effect.

Southwell composed the following poem during his imprisonment prior to his execution. The speaker moves through a "composition of place" that vividly describes the figure of death before him:

I often looke upon a face  
Most ugly, grisly, bare, and thinee;  
I often view the hollow place,  
Where eyes and nose, had sometimes bin:

I see the bones acrossed that lie,  
Yet little think that I must die.<sup>66</sup> (ll. 7-12)

This “composition of place” continues for four stanzas as the speaker imaginatively reinforces his impending death by reflecting on different materials within his cell. However, the speaker does not seem to recognize that death is fast approaching, as each stanza ends with a variation of “I have little minde that I must die” (ll. 6, 12, 18, 24). Instead of abruptly abandoning the composition of place as Donne’s speakers often do, Southwell reinforces the scene until he achieves the appropriate level of humility. The speaker continues the composition of place until he accepts the reality of his death admitting, “No, no, I know that I must die” (l. 35). The length and detail of this composition of place reinforces the speaker’s attention to the meditation.

In picturing death before him, Southwell’s speaker attempts to stir up the emotions that will lead to self-analysis in the later stanzas. This meditation upon death focuses the speaker on recognizing his own sinfulness and unwillingness or inability to alter his life through the refrain ending each stanza “[a]nd yet my life amend not I,” (ll. 30, 36, 42). Throughout this section of the poem, Southwell’s speaker addresses his sinfulness and repeatedly challenges himself to repent his transgressions. The final stanza offers a colloquy which follows Ignatius’ instruction of “proposing amendment, with His grace, for the future.”<sup>67</sup> In this stanza, unlike in Donne’s “Oh my Blacke Soule,” the speaker recognizes his lack of control and offers supplication to God:

If none can ‘scape Death’s dreadfull dart,  
If rich and poore his becke obey;

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<sup>66</sup> Southwell, 155.

<sup>67</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 52.

If strong, if wise, if all do smart,  
Then I to 'scape shall have no way.  
Oh! grant me grace, O God! that I  
My life may mend, sith I must die. (ll. 49-54)

Southwell's speaker moves through the three faculties of the soul and ends with a prayer similar to colloquies in the *Spiritual Exercises*. By meditating upon death, the speaker moves through self-analysis to a humble realization of the necessity of reconciling oneself to God. The speaker does not express self-promotion in "Upon the Face of Death"; rather, the poem and the Ignatian exercise on which it is based, represent a process of self-negation. No doubt, this poem lacks the witty, intellectual quality of Donne's verse and it does not express the emotional angst of Donne's speakers, but it reveals that Jesuit spirituality could be effectively expressed in poetry.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, by comparing this poem to the way in which Donne's speakers address the *Exercises*, we can see that placing these meditations in verse does something very specific for Donne's imaginative needs. Whereas Southwell's speaker uses the form of the *Exercises* to express a movement toward abandonment of the self, Donne's speaker engages the *Exercises* in order to assert the self's power over them and to reject the rigid progression of the meditative form.

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<sup>68</sup> Employing the *Spiritual Exercises* as a meditative form in poetry was not limited to England during the early-modern period. For a compelling study of Antonio Mira de Amescua's employment of the *Spiritual Exercises* in his poetry see Jorge E. Taracido, "Mira de Amescua: The Meditative Poem and the Ignatian Tradition," *Hispania*, Vol. 81, No. 1, (Mar., 1998), pp. 50-59. Taracido notes that "Mira employs the Ignatian meditative process to provide a structured dramatic expression to *his personal* religious encounter, which is central to this poem." (p. 50). Emphasis added.

*Imitating Christ on the Cross: "Spit in my face you Jewes"*

Another aspect of the *Spiritual Exercises* that Donne examines and manipulates in his *Holy Sonnets* is the call to imitation. The idea of imitation poses an inherent challenge when attempting self-assertion in the face of one's heritage and traditions. Donne explores this relationship between reproduction and self-expression through the speaker in "Spit in my face you Jewes." The imitation of Christ is a central component for understanding humility and for engendering feelings of generosity in the Ignatian meditative model.<sup>69</sup> While engaging this meditation, Donne's speaker struggles and fails to avoid self-promotion, revealing the challenge to the ego presented by such meditations. Ultimately, Donne partakes in an "imitation of meditation" as he processes the Ignatian model through his poetics. The speaker's impersonation of Christ's crucifixion allows Donne to question and defy the constricting aspects of salvation history that confront his sense of self. Moreover, he exposes the tension between reliance on one's past and establishing one's independence free of inherited traditions.

In "Spit in my face you Jewes" the speaker's desire to take Christ's place reveals a self-centered and over-dramatized quality which conflicts with the purpose of the meditation. Donne, as his own theology developed, warned his congregation against such meditations, "for it is not always good to go too far."<sup>70</sup> His own experience taught him that such imitation was too daunting and damaging to one's ego. Moreover, the imitation we find in this sonnet leads the speaker towards dangerous hubris. The speaker

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<sup>69</sup> Imitation was an invaluable tool for Ignatius and he recommends three aids for choosing a life of following the will of God: reading books of "*The Imitation of Christ*, the Gospels, and lives of saints." Ignatius, *Exercises*, 88.

<sup>70</sup> John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, edited by George R. Potter and Evelyn Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953-62) iv, 329.

vividly composes the scene, but his purpose for assuming Christ's place on the cross is unclear:

Spit in my face you Jewes, and pierce my side,  
Buffet, and scoffe, scourge, and crucifie mee,  
For I have sinn'd and sinn'd, and onley hee,  
Who could do no iniquitie, hath dyed: (ll. 3-4).

At first it appears that the speaker hopes to share in the humiliating experience as a way to better understand the divine mystery of salvation. For Carey, this reflection reveals Donne's feelings of "unfitness" in the face of a God he betrayed through his apostasy. Thus, the speaker's commands in the opening quatrain serve as an attempt to shake Donne from spiritual paralysis akin to "Batter my Heart"<sup>71</sup>: "[i]t is envy of the crucified Jesus, rather than pity for him, that thrills in [the speaker's] cry."<sup>72</sup> However, this envy results from feelings of indignation and hubris as the speaker demands to participate in his own salvation. Ironically, these exhortations are fruitless and insincere as he begs to be humiliated yet recognizes that by his "death can not be satisfied / [his] sinnes" (ll. 5-6). The speaker does not express a true intention of experiencing these pains and acknowledges that his death would serve little purpose. As a result, the exclamations at the beginning of the sonnet amount to little more than blustering. However, the speaker does express a personal reaction to his realization that his death would be worthless. Instead of piteous envy, the speaker reflects feelings of indignity that his death would be insufficient. These expressions of indignity reveal a bold shift away from the purpose of the meditation.

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<sup>71</sup> The speaker in "Batter my Heart" enjoins God to "o'erthrow mee, and bend / Your force, to breake, blowe, burn, and make me new." Donne, *Holy Sonnets*, 252, ll. 3-4.

<sup>72</sup> Both quotations from Carey, 48.

This movement reveals the speaker's unwillingness to enter fully the contemplation on the Passion. In the Ignatian retreat, exercitants vividly contemplate the Passion during the "Third Week." David Fleming, SJ, in his contemporary translation of the *Exercises*, explains the level of attention required for the contemplation on the Passion:

It goes beyond picturing the scene or reading the account into words. I try to listen to the way words are spoken; I attempt to see the expression on the face; I am present with as heightened an awareness as I can muster, so that I enter as fully as possible into the mystery I am contemplating.<sup>73</sup>

Although it would seem that Donne's speaker in "Spit in my face you Jewes" enters the contemplation as "fully as possible" by asking to receive the wounds of Christ, in doing so, he shifts the emphasis away from the suffering of Christ, stealing the meditative stage so to speak. The Ignatian exercitant is to be moved with pity over the intense suffering of Jesus, not to ask to take the place of Christ. Moreover, "[b]ut by my death can not be satisfied / My sinnes" (ll. 5-6) implies that the speaker entertained the salvific quality of his death as a possibility at the start of the sonnet. Instead of recognizing the gratuity of Christ's death for humanity, the speaker hopes that he might be able to save himself through a similar act.

As the sonnet progresses, the speaker expresses further assertions of pride and arrogance. Although the speaker reverts back to "First Week" reflections on sinfulness, he does so by placing his sins in competition with those of others. The speaker notes:

My sinnes, which passe the Jewes impiety:

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<sup>73</sup> Fleming, SJ, 149.

They kill'd once an inglorious man, but I

Crucifie him daily, being now glorified (ll. 6-8).

Donne's speaker claims that he cannot perform a self-saving act by imitating Christ's suffering because of the gravity of his own sins. However, this is not simply a humble assertion of the speaker's culpability. The speaker declares that his sins are worse than those of the crucifiers of Christ. This hyperbolic statement could be read by his coterie with a sense of witty bragging, not pious humility. In addition, the syntax of these lines creates ambiguity regarding the referent of glorified. Is the speaker or the risen Christ glorified? If it is the speaker, then this conflicts with the expressed view of his sinful state. This ambiguity portrays a struggle between self-assertion and negation when partaking in an imitation of Christ. As the poem continues, the speaker's self-promotion keeps him from humbly attending the meditation. The colloquy that ends this sonnet reveals resignation in reflecting upon the mystery of the Passion. The sestet moves from the speaker's assertion about his sinfulness to a half-hearted shift back to Jesus: "Oh let mee then, his strange love still admire: / Kings pardon, but he bore our punishment" (ll. 9-10). It seems that Donne's speaker would prefer to save himself through gloriously acting out the crucifixion. Since this is not possible, the speaker resignedly moves back to Christ, but not without a parting shot. The speaker's arrogant wit cannot help but reflect that God's love is so strange that, whereas Kings simply pardon the condemned, Christ bore the punishment. On the one hand this reflection shows a true sense of understanding the mystery of the passion. However, on the other hand, the speaker here could be noting that this method of salvation defies logic and could have been avoided by an all-powerful God.

In imitating Christ, the speaker cannot avoid self-promotion and fails to achieve the humility required of the *Spiritual Exercise*. Marotti treats this poem as a prime example of how “Donne’s fascination with the experiencing self produces a form of that self-conscious poetic performing in which he habitually engaged before his coterie.”<sup>74</sup> The poetic self in performance exemplifies the tension between the *Spiritual Exercises* and Donne’s poetry. By exposing Ignatius’ rigorous meditative process to the flexibility of language Donne creates a tension between self-abnegating meditations and self-performative poetry. Whereas in the course of Ignatius’ meditations the exercitant creates an internal stage through which God guides the process, in Donne’s poetic his speaker impersonates God, at times stealing the show. In doing so, Donne explores the tension between imitation and self expression, between contemplation and action. The speaker’s unclear response toward the exercise, as expressed by the performance anxiety toward fully partaking in the suffering of Christ, reveals an internal struggle between a demanding spiritual tradition and a burgeoning sense of an autonomous selfhood.

*Donne’s Doomsday Sonnets: Rejecting Meditations on Election*

Perhaps the best examples in the *Holy Sonnets* of how Donne’s speakers actively combat and invert the methods of the *Exercises* come in his two sonnets that focus upon the apocalypse: “At the round earths imagin’d corners” and “What if this present were the world’s last night?” Eschatological meditations are typical of the “Second Week” of the *Spiritual Exercises*. For Ignatius, meditations on the apocalypse were intended to aid in the process of election when faced with a major life decision. The exercitant is to:

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<sup>74</sup> Marotti, 257.



[consider] how I shall find myself on the day of judgment,  
to think how I would then want to have deliberated about  
the present matter, and to take now the rule which I would  
then wish to have kept, in order that I may then find myself  
in entire pleasure and joy.<sup>75</sup>

By meditating upon the end of time, exercitants can remove all external and worldly influences that might alter their choice. In doing so, one may be assured of a sound election.<sup>76</sup> For Ignatius the choice is clear: one can choose to follow the “Standard of the Temporal King” or that of “The Spiritual King.”<sup>77</sup> However, choosing the King of Heaven is daunting as one must be prepared to “imitate [Christ] in bearing all injuries and all abuse and all poverty of spirit, and actual poverty, too, if [his] most holy majesty wants to choose and receive me to such life and state.”<sup>78</sup> One must be ready and willing to bear any suffering at the beckon of the Spiritual King. This requires ultimate humility and repudiation of worldly desires. Moreover, these meditations are focused upon determining vocation, understanding God’s calling for you in life. This produces a primary tension in these sonnets for Donne’s speaker as he struggles between movement and stasis. In both sonnets, Donne’s speakers avoid the purpose of meditating upon the end of time and thus depict the challenge of choosing between God and the world.

In “At the round earths imagin’d corners,” the speaker quite vividly employs the eyes of imagination when he perceives the “numberlesse infinities of soules” returning to

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<sup>75</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 144.

<sup>76</sup> Marotti emphasizes that Donne in his *Holy Sonnets* “allowed his current secular concerns with ambition and preferment to intrude upon –or rather be translated into the language of – his sacred verse” (251). This interplay between sacred humility and worldly ambition plays a part in Donne’s speaker’s inability to progress through Ignatian meditations on election.

<sup>77</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 110, “Meditation on the Two Standards.

<sup>78</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 86.

their bodies as described in the book of Revelation.<sup>79</sup> The speaker catalogues all of the souls, both living and dead, that will return at the moment of the rapture. Moreover, the speaker achieves that distance from time and the world which is required in an Ignatian Exercise, as he sees “all whom the flood did, and the fire shall overthrow” (l. 5). While engaging the meditative form, the speaker has constructed a space where he is beyond time, seeing the dead from both past and present. The structure of the sonnet once again provides the framework for Donne’s speaker to build up the meditation only to recoil back from it and avoid the possible fruits of the exercise. As the speaker moves through the catalogue of souls, the tension mounts throughout the octave:

At the round earths imagin’d corners, blow  
Your trumpets, Angells, and arise arise  
From death, you numberlesse infinities,  
Of soules, and to your scattered bodies goe,  
All whom the flood did, and the fire shall overthrow,  
All whom warre, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,  
Despaire, law, chance, hath slaine, and you whose eyes,  
Shall behold God, and never tast deaths woe.<sup>80</sup>

By encountering this meditation in verse, Donne creates a poetic inertia which propels the sonnet forward through the octave. The anaphora of “[a]ll whom,” along with the series of deaths, increases the tempo of the poem and creates the feeling that the speaker will soon be overwhelmed by the “numberlesse infinities of soules.” As the tension mounts, it

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<sup>79</sup> The book of Revelation describes the apocalypse that will come after the breaking of the “seven seals.” When the seventh seal is broken the speaker in Revelation states “I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth...now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets made ready to blow them...” NRSV Rev. 7:1, 8:6

<sup>80</sup> Donne, *Holy Sonnets*, 249, ll. 1-8.

seems as though the speaker might reach that level of abandonment to the experience that the exercise requires.<sup>81</sup> However, just at the crescendo of the meditative moment, the speaker unexpectedly retreats, banishing the vision from the sestet. The speaker shifts from the rising action and forces his voice into the sonnet, pulling the reins on a meditation that possessed its own forward momentum. Once again, the speaker refuses to relinquish full control and must assert his reason. The sestet begins, “[b]ut let them sleepe, Lord, and mee mourne a space.” This shift reveals that Donne’s speaker remains incapable of achieving the purpose of the Ignatian reflection, which is supposed to lead the participant to “entire pleasure and joy.”<sup>82</sup> The speaker pushes the vision from his imagination and returns the souls to their eternal sleep. In the midst of a meditation meant to aid in decision making, the speaker stalls. Ending the octave with the word “space” emphasizes the speaker’s abrupt recoiling from a meditation on a grand cosmic scale, reducing it to a personal internalized conversation. Donne’s speaker clearly is unprepared for the apocalypse.<sup>83</sup> This lack of preparedness leads to dolorous expressions as he reflects on the futility of praying for Grace at the end of time.

Of course, we should have expected this stagnancy from the start. By commanding the angels to “blow [their] trumpets” (ll.1-2), the speaker begins by usurping the role of God in initiating the apocalypse. Donne’s use of strong imperative verbs like “blow” (l. 1), “arise, arise,” (l. 2), and “goe” (l. 4), reveals a speaker of

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<sup>81</sup> G. Richmond Bridge also notes “not only an accelerated, vigorous pace in the initial lines but a rising, ascending movement” which works up to a “crescendo.” (16). “Trumpet Vibrations: Theological Reflections on Donne’s Doomsday Sonnet,” *Early Modern Literary Studies*, Special Issue 7 (May, 2001): 12. 1-43.

<sup>82</sup> Ignatius, 144.

<sup>83</sup> For Bridge, insofar as this is an Ignatian meditation focused upon making an “election of a state or a way of life”(Ignatius 132), “the relationship of Donne’s vocational crisis to this Doomsday sonnet takes on new significance”, 33. Bridge recognizes the autobiographical quality of this sonnet and the way in which the speaker struggles with and rejects an Ignatian meditation.

commanding power. Frederick Ruf offers a compelling description of Donne's speakers in the *Holy Sonnets*, revealing the tension between self-negation and assertion found in this sonnet: "The self fills nearly the entire stage ... which makes his notorious self-absorption not so surprising."<sup>84</sup> As the speaker performs the role of God he challenges the Ignatian model, criticizing it for leading to hubris and rejecting its ability to guide him toward resolution.

Receding in mournful resignation, he reflects back upon his own sinfulness, expressing an aversion to the controlling progression of the meditation. Yet even this reflection, which seems to be separated from the self-aggrandizing vision of the apocalypse, betrays a hint of arrogance and cynicism. The speaker reveals a level of self-effacing guilt when asserting:

For, if above all these, my sinnes abound

'Tis late to aske abundance of thy grace, (ll. 10-11)

However, it is not entirely clear that he believes fully that his sins actually outweigh those of all the dead. First, the conditional, "if" betrays a sense of doubt in the speaker. Perhaps, he feels, his sins do not abound above the rest of humankind, and thus, Judgment Day will not be too late to pray for grace. But at the same time, Donne expresses a note of boastfulness at the possibility that his sins do in fact outweigh all humanity's. There is a sense of competition in his sinfulness that only makes sense if we consider his coterie readership. We saw this same sense of pomposity in "Spit in my face, you Jewes."

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<sup>84</sup> Frederick J. Ruf, "Lyric Autobiography: John Donne's "Holy Sonnets," *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 86, No. 3, (Jul., 1993), 305.

The sonnet concludes in the form of an Ignatian colloquy, where the speaker asks God for the grace to learn “here on this lowly ground...how to repent.” However, this prayer also lacks conviction and displays a certain resignation to his fate. The speaker somewhat dejectedly recognizes that learning to atone for his sins here on earth is

...as good

As if thou 'hadst seal'd my pardon, with thy blood (ll. 13-14).

The speaker asks to learn how to repent, a Catholic theological tenet, but seems unconvinced that it will be effective. Moreover, far from achieving any sense of spiritual consolation, Donne's speaker concludes doubting that Christ's death necessarily saved him.<sup>85</sup> The interjection of the speaker's voice into the poem, which breaks up the meditative “composition of place,” reveals the speaker's refusal to allow the meditation to guide the poem. The poetic voice disrupts the movement of the exercise, leaving the speaker without spiritual sustenance. Moreover, election remains distant from the speaker's psyche, as he reverts back to focusing upon his sinfulness. The speaker abandons the goal of the exercise, remaining spiritually stagnant. This encounter with election exemplifies the vicious cycle of making a major life-decision, something with which Donne was all too familiar.<sup>86</sup> The speaker avoids choice out of fear of the repercussions; yet in not choosing, he remains isolated and full of doubt.

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<sup>85</sup> Oliver argues cogently that this sonnet represents Donne's speaker trying out different forms of redemption. He believes the speaker hopes that repenting will work as well as the Calvinist theory of limited atonement. Since the speaker doubts that Christ's death redeemed him, he hopes that repentance will be just as efficacious. (Oliver, 130). This argument furthers my contention that Donne's speakers are entertaining and discarding Donne's Ignatian heritage.

<sup>86</sup> The implications of Donne's choices and his inability to act have been documented in his letters. While contemplating what appeared to be his imminent death in a letter to Goodyer, Donne notes, “I would fain do something; but that I cannot tell what, is no wonder. For *to chuse, is to do*: but to be no part of any body, is to be nothing.” Donne desires to choose but fears the consequences of choice. Perhaps this has some bearing on his rejection of meditations on election. Edmund Gosse, *The Life and Letters of John Donne*, Vol 1. 1899, 191. Emphasis added. Likewise, a letter from Tobie

Just as the previous sonnet reveals the speaker's voice disrupting the flow of the *Spiritual Exercise*, in "What if this present were the world's last night?," Donne's speaker even more profoundly derails the meditation's goal of evaluating a "good and sound election." Although, as Raspa notes, the first line achieves the meditative purpose of "distancing" oneself from the world, the profane imagery later employed in the poem reveals that the speaker remains very connected to the material world.<sup>87</sup> In avoiding the purpose of a meditation on the apocalypse, the speaker shifts abruptly back to a first week meditation on sin. This poem exemplifies Donne's method of placing his speakers in contact with the *Exercises* that he hopes to combat and control. He aborts the proper process prescribed by St. Ignatius and makes his own imaginative leaps. In taking these poetic liberties, Donne serves the role of retreat director, moving his speaker off course. Similar to the circular logic we saw in "Oh my blacke Soule," this backward looking trajectory in the sonnet illustrates how Donne's speakers seem frozen within the first week of the *Exercises* and the requisite contemplations on sin and the self's unworthiness.<sup>88</sup> The Ignatian meditation he reverts to is that of Christ on the cross. In

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Matthew attests to Donne's stasis and at times frustrating inaction: "Your friends are sorry, that you make your self so great a stranger; but, you best know your own occasions. Howbeit if you have any designe towards the Court, it were good you did prevent the losse of any more time. For, Experience and Reason are at odds in this, that the places of Attendance, such as may deserve you, grow dailie dearer, and so are like to do." *A Collection of Letters Made by Sir Tobie Matthew, Knt.* (London: Henry Herringman, 1660), p 288. As quoted by Dennis Flynn, "Donne's Politics, 'Desperate Ambition,' and Meeting Paolo Sarpi in Venice," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 99 Iss. 3, (Jul. 2000), 339. The speaker in this sonnet mimics a similar aversion to act when confronted with a meditation designed to aid one's choice.

<sup>87</sup> Raspa, 91.

<sup>88</sup> Brooks notes that the spiritual stagnancy experienced by Donne's meditative personae results from "the inherent ambivalence in the Ignatian *Exercises* itself about the role of the Church – versus individual agency – in the attainment of higher levels of spirituality. She sees this tension as the ultimate reason for Donne's speakers' "pronounced inability to move beyond the preoccupations of the First Week" (127). This makes sense if we approach these texts as devotional poetry, however, I believe that Donne expresses the challenge of the Jesuit war on ego for a strong poetic self. Perhaps the most daunting characteristic of the "The Second Week" is the reflection upon the three degrees of humility. This is the final meditation prior to the rules for a "good and sound election." According to

this meditation as well, the speaker veers from the exercise's purpose. As the participant pictures Christ before him in all his agony, willingly choosing to die for his creation, the hope is that the exercitant's spirit will be stirred into a greater sense of generosity. As the meditation turns inward, the exercitant is to examine "what I have done for Christ, what I am doing for Christ, what I ought to do for Christ."<sup>89</sup> This is hardly the response that we get from Donne's speaker. Instead of introspectively imagining how he might be called to greater generosity, he "concerns himself with what the suffering Christ is in a position to do for him."<sup>90</sup> The speaker tries to reassure himself that Christ could not:

... adjudge [him] unto hell,

Which pray'd forgiveness for his foes fierce spight?<sup>91</sup>

In an attempt at self-soothing, the speaker tries to convince himself that Christ must treat him mercifully. Again, Donne's speaker avoids full devotion to the experience and the meditation moves away from its intended purposes.<sup>92</sup> The poem then proceeds into a grand rationalization recalling the speaker's youthful dalliances. Donne's speaker uses profane logic to ascertain whether this vision of Christ crucified is a sign of salvation or

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Ignatius, the third degree of humility is the most perfect and requires that one: "[w]ant and choose poverty with Christ's poor rather than riches, opprobrium with Christ replete with it rather than honors; and to desire to be rated as worthless and a fool for Christ, who first was held as such, rather than wise or prudent in this world." To achieve this level of humility, all one's desires for self-promotion, worldly advancement, or human accolades must be eliminated and replaced by a true desire to be completely forsaken by the world. In doing so, the exercitant reaches a level of freedom of choice unimpeded by base desires. An inability to remove these worldly temptations impedes spiritual progress and often results in despair. This describes precisely the stagnancy we find in Donne's speakers as they engage meditations on election but cannot eliminate worldly ambition.

Ignatius, *Exercises*, 130.

<sup>89</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 48.

<sup>90</sup> Oliver, 114.

<sup>91</sup> *Holy Sonnets*, 252, line 8.

<sup>92</sup> Diana Treviño Benet reinforces the notion that this poem is an "effort to generate gratitude" but she notes that Donne is not ready for "the worlds last night" and he rejects the goal of the meditation (25). Diana Treviño Benet, "Witness this Booke, (thy Emblem)": Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and Biography, *Early Modern Literary Studies* (May, 2001: 11).

damnation. By recalling his youthful attempts to convince women to sleep with him, he creates a justification for the vision before him:

No, no; but as in my idolatrie  
I said to all my profane mistresses,  
Beauty, of pittie, foulnesse onely is  
A signe of rigour; so I say to thee,  
To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assign'd,  
This beauteous forme assures a pitious mind (ll. 9-14).<sup>93</sup>

Donne's speaker recalls his lustful youth when he lied to convince women that his poor outward form revealed the sexual potency he possessed. Then, in what resembles an Ignatian colloquy, Donne's speaker addresses God directly using the same strategic logic with which he fooled his mistresses. He presumes to convince God to give him what he wants (salvation) through the same language that he used with his lovers. Thus, the presence of this seemingly beautiful vision of the crucified Christ marked in his heart reveals that he deserves redemption. Yet this logic was a lie when the speaker used it in his youth and so he cannot trust it now. There is a sense that Donne's speaker is not convinced by his own logic, since earlier in the poem he describes the picture of Christ using quite gruesome and fearful language:

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<sup>93</sup> This sonnet also provides a prime example of Donne's manipulation of his biography through his texts. The speaker describes a temporal separation between his profane past and a pious present. Donne often used his works to create a literary fiction about his personal and spiritual development. Perhaps the grandest of his self-imaginings comes in a letter Donne sent as he left for Germany to Sir Robert Carre along with a copy of his potentially controversial and scandalizing treatise on suicide, *Biathanatos*. In the letter he instructs the reader to "Keep it, I pray, with the same jealousie; let any that your discretion admits to the sight of it, know the date of it; and that it is a Book written by *Jack Donne*, and not by *D. Donne*." John Donne, "To Sir Robert Carre Now Earle of Ankerum, With my Book *Biathanatos* at My Going Into Germany," [April 1619] Donne, 387. This participation in the creation of his biography reinforces Donne's understanding of how his literature could serve certain imaginative needs. Just as in these *Holy Sonnets*, by creating a fictional reality, Donne is able to control the effects of his past.



Teares in his eyes quench the amazing light,

Blood fills his frownes, which from his pierc'd head fell (ll. 5-6).

Because of the inconsistency in the speaker's descriptions of Christ, Oliver describes the him as "clutching at the flimsiest of straws."<sup>94</sup> Donne's speaker does not acknowledge fully his own sinfulness; instead, he explores ways to convince himself and God that he deserves pity. By attempting to fool God, the speaker only fools himself; his own language betrays him. Most important, the speaker does not approach a sense of gratitude or humility as a result of imagining the crucified Christ. In fact, Martz notes a "tone of bragging" in the speaker's description of his sexual conquests.<sup>95</sup> Thus, the speaker demonstrates feelings that are precisely counter to the purpose of the meditation, admitting a spiritual regression as he steers two different Ignatian exercises off course. Donne's verse allows him to alter and reverse the process of the *Exercises*; he manipulates Ignatius' method and subjects it to his own creative renderings. By refusing to engage the *Exercises* fully, he removes their challenging immediacy and limits their efficacy as meditation. This sonnet in particular portrays the confluence of the limiting elements of Donne's past. As the speaker entertains both Jesuit devotional life and past sexual transgressions, he attempts to draw on multiple aspects of his history in order to obtain salvation. By expressing this in poetic form, confusion and pain shine through, further underscoring Donne's inability to fully conceal in verse the effects of his past.

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<sup>94</sup> Oliver, 114.

<sup>95</sup> Martz, 84.

*Full Exercises: Fully Fettered*

The previous sonnets portrayed speakers actively reshaping, altering, and resisting the *Spiritual Exercises*. Through various poetic devices Donne dramatizes the tension between struggling for an autonomous selfhood when confronted with the constraining elements of one's heritage and past. However, the strain in the speakers seems greatest when Donne allows them to be fully in contact with the method of the *Exercises*. There are two sonnets that Martz believes follow the Ignatian paradigm to produce a complete meditation. "If poysonous mineralls," and "Why are wee by all creatures waited upon," seem to move through the process of composing a scene through memory, applying understanding to the scene at hand, and posing a colloquy of mercy. However, the reaction of the speakers to full exposure to Ignatius' meditative model reveals Donne's clever ability to abuse the *Exercises* more effectively the closer he gets to them. Both meditations involve reflections upon humanity's place within salvation history and relationship to the rest of creation. Ignatius is very clear about this relationship as defined in the "Principle and Foundation." However, each poem reveals something different about the speaker's interaction with *The Spiritual Exercises*. The full expression of the exercise through verse stresses further the speakers' rejection of Jesuit methods, emphasizing Donne's attempts to process and eliminate his heritage.

"If poysonous mineralls" begins with a grand evasion of responsibility by the speaker as he questions the logic behind the Fall. Donne's speaker equates the sins of humanity to those of inanimate objects and animals:

If poysonous mineralls, and if that tree,

Whose fruit threw death on else immortall us,  
If lecherous goats, if serpents envious  
Cannot be damn'd; Alas; why should I bee? (ll. 1-4).

This speaker's reflection on other created things could not be further from the "Principle and Foundation." Recalling that the "Principle and Foundation" states that the created world should only be used by humanity "as much as it helps [humanity] on to its end," which is to "praise, reverence and serve God"<sup>96</sup>; in contrast the language in this sonnet inverts and defies the meditation. Donne's treatment of the basic principle of the *Exercises* allows the speaker to use the created world to challenge God, providing evidence for why humans ought not to be held responsible for their sins. In the most fantastic example of misplaced responsibility, the speaker blames the fruit of the tree for the Fall. This world-view presents humanity as debased to the level of both animals and minerals. Likewise, it portrays humans as victims who are under-appreciated in this world, "immortals" who have no say in their salvation.

In the second quatrain, the speaker enters into a series of questions that engage his faculty of understanding. These questions betray indignity towards God, as well as a focus on the self, as the speaker tries to sort out the reasons for his situation:

Why should intent or reason, borne in mee,  
Make sinnes, else equall, in mee more heinous?  
And mercy being easie, and glorious  
To God; in his sterne wrath, why threatens hee? (ll. 5-8)

Through the octave, the speaker sees the rest of the world as a constant reminder of the inequity of God's stance toward humanity. The speaker does not approach humility or

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<sup>96</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 26.

even a sense of his own blameworthiness. As in previous attempts by Donne's speakers to rationalize their relationship to God, these lines fail to produce a sense of comfort. Moreover, the speaker cannot take "reason" so lightly as to think that it does not set humanity apart from the animals. By describing reason as "borne in mee" the speaker sees it as a natural trait that should not lead to his damnation. However, this argument is patently specious, and the speaker knows it. The evasion of responsibility in the first quatrain serves as the answer to the speaker's questions about why reason leads to damnation. By using reason to challenge God, the speaker underscores the fact that reason is more than simply a natural attribute for which humans cannot be held accountable. This further complicates Donne's own notions about his responsibility for his religious and social choices.

By reading the octave in this way, we can see how the speaker neutralizes the Ignatian meditation. He challenges God through faulty reason while simultaneously expressing a belief that God is unreasonable. The speaker expresses an innate reliance on God but also disillusion at the strictures of that relationship. This paradox creates an inability to progress towards a sense of self-debasement and abandonment, allowing the speaker to assert further his control over the *Exercises*. Moreover, these questions remain internalized and do not seem to be addressed to anyone other than the speaker. Perhaps they are addressed implicitly to God, but the speaker searches for answers within himself. In reflecting upon humanity's relationship to the animals, the octave of this sonnet only leads the speaker to a sense of bitter resignation, far from the purpose of the "Principle and Foundation."

After the octave, Donne's speaker makes an attempt to return his focus to God, but it rings hollow and shows a lack of trust in God's mercy. Martz views this as "one of Donne's most vehement colloquies, [that gives] the answer that has been implicit and premeditated throughout."<sup>97</sup> The speaker does express an abrupt shift away from his sophisticated argument with himself.<sup>98</sup> However, this supplication reinforces the speaker's evasion of responsibility expressed in the opening quatrain:

But who am I, that dare dispute with thee  
O God? Oh! of thine onely worthy blood,  
And my teares, make a heavenly Lethean flood,  
And drowne in it my sinnes blacke memorie;  
That thou remember them, some claime as debt,  
I think it mercy, if thou wilt forget (ll. 9-14).

Martz notes correctly the speaker's transition from employing understanding to the will in addressing God; however, the speaker fails to produce a humble colloquy. On the contrary, the speaker believes that he can achieve the ends of salvation through flattering God. In doing so, Donne exposes the ultimate paradox of the Ignatian meditative model; perhaps these self-abnegating rituals only amount to sycophantic praise of God.<sup>99</sup> The speaker employs flattery at the start of the sestet by challenging his right to even question God. Likewise, by asking God to use his "onely worthy blood" Donne's speaker addresses God with language often directed toward nobility. This is not a speaker who

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<sup>97</sup> Martz, 52.

<sup>98</sup> For a compelling study of Donne's sophistry in "If poysonous mineralls," see Strier, "Awry and Squint," pp. 383-4.

<sup>99</sup> In *Ignatius his Conclave*, Ignatius criticizes Machievelli's desire to flatter Satan, yet employs his own clever flattery to gain position in Hell. Apparently, Donne viewed obsequiousness to be a primary sin of the Society of Jesus. See *Ignatius his Conclave*, 330.

sees himself as a humble supplicant before God; instead, the speaker uses flattery as an attempt to obtain something from God. This shift from disputation to flattery only reaffirms the speaker's sense that it would be a gross injustice if God were to punish him for his sins. In the final couplet, the speaker hopes to remove agency from God in granting his salvation. By asking that God remove the memory of his sins, the speaker also removes God's ability to show mercy through forgiveness. However, forgetting seems to be Donne's *modus operandi* when approaching pain, sin, and the past. The poetic devices in the *Holy Sonnets* reveal that it is far more therapeutic for Donne to try to forget than to reconcile with his Jesuit heritage.

Ironically, the speaker does debase himself in this poem, but not in a humble reflection. By claiming that reason and intent make him no more deserving of damnation, the speaker also creates a situation where he is no more worthy of salvation. This paradox deepens when we consider that these reflections allude to Donne's station socially as well as spiritually. Julie Yen sees this sonnet as dramatizing a courtier's sense of the "injustice of the political system that had consistently refused to reward him. Others less deserving and less talented had been advanced."<sup>100</sup> Moreover, she sees Donne's Catholic upbringing as just as arbitrary as this speaker sees reason "borne in [him]" (l. 5). This reading sheds further light on Donne's ability to reject Ignatian spirituality by engaging it. Whereas the *Spiritual Exercises* are supposed to lead the exercitant away from worldly desires, Donne's speaker uses the *Exercises* to mask desires for worldly preferment. In one way, this reveals how Donne's speakers control the *Exercises* and use them to their own ends. However, the failure and frustration

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<sup>100</sup> Julie W. Yen, "What doth Physicke profit thee?": The Pharmakon of Praise in Donne's Ignatius his Conclave and the Holy Sonnets," *Donne's Religious Imagination*, Edited by Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi, (Conway AR: UCA Press, 1995), 225.

expressed in the sonnet portrays the tension of a soul torn between abandoning and promoting the self. The tension is often irreconcilable and contributes to the spiritual torpor expressed by the speakers. The paradoxes presented by the speaker in this sonnet illuminate how Donne explores the isolation of inward reflection and the frustration of receiving no answers. The *Holy Sonnets* allow Donne the opportunity to provide his own answers but these often seem disingenuous. In this way, the *Holy Sonnets* expose Donne's struggles between searching for guidance and asserting an autonomous self. By engaging the spirituality of St. Ignatius as he does, Donne asserts his control over an arbitrary yet powerful force in his life. While this speaker does move through the three steps of the Ignatian meditative model, as Martz contests, "If poisonous minerals" represents a rejection of the most basic principles of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The speaker's language creates a poetic of forgetting, and the sonnet models a misinterpretation or misuse of Jesuit meditation; Donne's heritage only becomes discernible in his digressions from it. Yet by performing this act of forgetting through poetry, the speaker discovers the profound influence the Jesuits still hold upon the poet.

Whereas the speaker in the last sonnet revealed a misapplication of the "Principle and Foundation," which led to arrogant flattery of God, "Why are wee by all creatures waited upon" comes very close to constructing a speaker that proceeds through the full meditative process toward the goal of an Ignatian exercise. Yet, by following the exercise, the speaker reveals a lack of personal connection to God. In previous sonnets, the speakers reveal a spiritual stagnancy and an inability to move toward resolution. However, in their challenges to God and their emotional pleas, for better or worse, the speakers voice a level of interaction with God. In this sonnet, God is more distant than

ever. In fact, the speaker addresses only animals throughout the sonnet, never speaking directly to God. As we have seen, Donne attempts placing his speakers in conversation with the *Exercises* to varying degrees. In moving fully through this exercise, the speaker further dilutes the emotions and insulates the poet from the meditative experience.

This sonnet, using language specifically out of the *Exercises*, engages a fundamental tenet of the “First Week.” In reflecting on one’s sinfulness, the exercitant is asked to make “an exclamation of wonder with deep feeling, going through all creatures, [and questioning] how they have left me in life and preserved me in it.”<sup>101</sup> Donne’s speaker in the octave proceeds in precisely this manner. Following the meditative model, the speaker first proposes the question to be meditated upon and then engages his understanding by entering into conversation with different animals:

Why are wee by all creatures waited on?

Why doe the prodigall elements supply

Life and food to mee, being more pure than I,

Simple and further from corruption?

Why brook’st thou, ignorant horse, subjection?

Why doest thou bull, and bore so seelily

Dissemble weaknesse, and by’one mans stroke die,

Whose whole kinde, you might swallow and feed upon? (ll. 1-8).

Donne’s speaker seems to express through this interrogation of animals a true sense of humility. By expressing disbelief at humanity’s right to rule over other created beings, the speaker approaches an understanding of the grace of human existence. Unlike in other *Holy Sonnets*, the speaker avoids rationalization in response to these questions.

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<sup>101</sup> Ignatius, *Exercises*, 52.



Instead, the sestet moves to an “exclamation of wonder” precisely as demanded by the *Exercises*, and then enters into a colloquy of mercy:

But wonder at a greater wonder, for to us  
Created nature doth these things subdue,  
But their Creator, whom sin, nor nature tyed,  
For us, his Creatures, and his foes, hath dyed (ll. 11-14).

These closing lines approach a pious understanding of the gratuity of God’s love for humanity. However, the speaker seems absent from the lines shifting from using “I” in the octave to “us” in the sestet, distancing the poet and the speaker from the exercise. Moreover, it is unclear whom the speaker addresses in these lines. Martz believes that the speaker “addresses himself, the representative of all [hu]mankind.”<sup>102</sup> This reading has merit when considering Raspa’s contentions about the universal nature of Jesuit devotional poetry.<sup>103</sup> But the final couplet is troublesome in its syntactical ambiguity. “Their Creator” refers to “these things,” which are the animals addressed in the octave. This implies that God is not the creator of those included in “us.” Similarly, the final line offers more obscurity. If it represents a series, then God died for the unclear “us,” “his Creatures” (the animals in the octave), and “his foes.” There is enough ambiguity here to read the speaker as doubting his relationship to God. Is the speaker a foe to God? At least for this reader, the sense of wonder is replaced by a sense of confusion. This time the speaker remains distant from the exercise, but Donne remains quite capable of derailing even the most structured Ignatian exercise, through his ambiguous poetics.

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<sup>102</sup> Martz, 44.

<sup>103</sup> See above, p. 18.

“Why are wee by all creatures waited on?” seems the weakest of the *Holy Sonnets* because the speaker does “not give the impression of being engaged on an emotional level.”<sup>104</sup> The speaker seems eerily absent from this poem, especially considering our discussion thus far of Donne’s poetic voice asserting itself over the *Spiritual Exercises*. Yet, it is interesting that the speaker seems the least engaged in the sonnet that, in language and structure, most closely follows an Ignatian meditation. The speaker’s absence emphasizes the poet’s distance from the sonnet and thus the meditative act. If fettering a meditation to verse provided Donne with the ability to remove its emotion and “allay” its pains, then “Why are wee by all creatures waited upon?” is perhaps the most successful example of Donne’s conscious attempts to reject the *Spiritual Exercises* as a meditative form that held power over him. Scholars tend to overlook this sonnet because of its almost mechanical depiction of devotional poetry. However, the speaker provides us with another example of the paradox in poetry; he has found a way to hide the poet’s emotional connection to the Jesuits in plain sight.

*A “Triple Fool” in Mourning: Holy Sonnet XVII*

For most scholars, *Holy Sonnet XVII*, “Since she whom I lov’d,” would not be included in an examination of the influence of the *Spiritual Exercises* on Donne’s *Holy Sonnets*. Since this sonnet was most likely composed after Ann More’s death in 1617, Donne would have already received Holy Orders in the Anglican Church. Now firmly established as a Protestant minister, there was less need to address the *Spiritual Exercises* or to contend personally with the Jesuits. However, this sonnet is pertinent to my study

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<sup>104</sup> Oliver, 152.

because “Since she whom I lov’d” reveals Donne’s continued use of poetry as a therapeutic device in an attempt to control strong emotions and to limit their grasp on him. Donne’s therapeutic approach remained consistent even toward the end of his production of poetry as elucidated in this sonnet.

Donne’s speaker reflects upon the loss of a beloved spouse, furthering the separation that death began. Donne filters this emotional loss through verse, creating a speaker that participates in the rejection of his spouse. This allows the poet to labor toward closure by methodically working to erase the memory of his wife and his loss. As in many of the *Holy Sonnets*, “Since she whom I lov’d” explores a tension between spiritual motives and secular desires, between inordinate attachments and abandonment to God. The opening lines illustrate this challenge as the speaker questions whether his wife was a hindrance to his relationship with God:

Since she whom I lov’d hath payd her last debt  
To Nature, and to hers, and my good is dead,  
And her Soule early into heaven ravished,  
Wholly on heavenly things my mind is sett.<sup>105</sup>

In this quatrain, Donne’s speaker produces an ambivalent response to the death of his wife by employing obscure language and syntax. The speaker seems to be reflecting a sense of relief in realizing that his wife will no longer present an obstacle to loving God. However, whether the speaker truly expresses a desire to concentrate fully on God is not clear. By expressing that his “good is dead,” the speaker articulates both positive and negative feelings toward this loss. Likewise, by opening the poem speaking about his wife paying her “debt to Nature,” he could be recognizing that her body, a thing of

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<sup>105</sup> Donne, *Holy Sonnets*, 253, ll. 1-4.

nature, will do him no “good” (l. 2) and that he is now focusing on loving his wife's soul, a “heavenly thing”(l. 4). Accordingly, the speaker’s ability to focus solely on God remains inconsistent in the opening quatrain. The ambiguity in these lines reinforces the paradoxical approach Donne’s speakers pursue when assuming the poet’s pain.

The speaker proceeds to acknowledge the positive influence that his wife had upon him, as she led him “[t]o seeke God; so streames do shew their head” (l. 6). Thus, losing her might be to his spiritual detriment. However, this stream imagery is loaded if we recall Donne’s “Satyre III” where he reflects upon following worldly potentates instead of seeking God directly:

As streames are, Power is; those blest flowers that dwell  
At the rough streames calme head, thrive and do well,  
But having left their roots, and themselves given  
To the streames tyrannous rage, alas are driven  
Through mills, and rockes, and woods, and at last, almost  
Consum’d in going, in the sea are lost (ll. 103-08).<sup>106</sup>

Donne’s speaker in this satire believes the only way to ensure that one is acting rightly is through a direct connection with God. He fears being caught up in worldly attachments and thus being pulled away from God’s love. The speaker in “Satyre III” believes that the stream has the power to draw you dangerously away from God. Thus, perhaps *Holy Sonnet XVI* expresses a similar sense that in following his wife as a connection to God, the speaker has been drawn further away from the source.

The water imagery continues in “Since she whom I loved” as the speaker confirms and denies the hold the love for his wife has over him:

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<sup>106</sup> Donne, *Satyres*, 98.

But though I have found thee, and thou my thirst hast fed,  
A holy thirsty dropsy melts mee yet.  
But why should I begg more Love, when as thou  
Dost wooe my soule for hers; offrings all thine (ll. 7-10).

The speaker reflects his contrasting feelings of desire and fulfillment: he is both “fed” and “begg[s] more” and he “thirsts” yet has an excess of fluid in “dropsy.” Moreover, through the language of the poem, Donne cleverly addresses the loss he feels, even though he claims to have achieved a level of freedom to love God. Using a pun on Ann Moore’s name, he begs “more Love” (l. 9). Thus, while rejecting her love for that of God, he recognizes the loss he feels and the desire he still has for his wife. Immediately following this pun, the speaker reverts to his process of separation from his spouse. God courts Donne’s soul in her place and it seems, unlike Ann, that God offers his/her entire soul. In a final flourish similar to “This is my playes last scene,” Donne’s speaker ends the reflection with a rejection of the physical world “[l]east the World, Fleshe, yea Devill putt thee out” (l. 14). But the theatrics of this final line represent a ploy to cover up the emotions of the grieving spouse. The speaker attempts ineffectively to muster this condemnation of the world, lacking the same conviction that we saw at the end of “This is my playes last scene.”<sup>107</sup>

“For she whom I lov’d” provides Donne with an outlet for his mourning which follows the process of rejection through engagement inherent in many *Holy Sonnets*. By placing his speaker in contact with his dead spouse, he does not “simply com[e] to terms with the loss of a beloved spouse but also, somewhat cruelly, reject[s] her along with the

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<sup>107</sup> See above, p. 18.

secular world with which the poem associates her.”<sup>108</sup> Donne’s speaker works to eliminate his wife from the poem revealing calculated attempts to alleviate grief by placing it in verse. By the end of the poem, the speaker’s spouse has all but disappeared from the verse. Donne produces poetically a method for forgetting, for controlling memories that torture him, by simultaneously praising and defaming his love for his wife through his speaker. Yen notes that this allows Donne to “exert his artistic power over grief and death by creating a text that is meaningfully and calculatingly difficult – a text that deliberately betrays itself as text with many turns and twists and ambiguities. The reader suspects that he did so *as an artistic assertion of his control over Nature*.”<sup>109</sup> Just as he engages and rejects his wife and his grief in this sonnet, Donne acknowledges and combats the Jesuits, men “who by *nature* had a power and superiority over [his] will,” by placing his speakers in contact with the *Spiritual Exercises*.<sup>110</sup> Thus, poetry for Donne provides a therapeutic outlet through which he controls those things over which he naturally has no control, allowing him to inaugurate a fictional poetic self that he presents to the world: a self that speaks for him, suppresses his pains and his past, and at times betrays him.

### *Conclusions*

By examining Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* in light of “The Triple Fool” we come to understand the way poetry serves the poet’s attempts to wrestle with his past. As a devotional aesthetic, Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* work to limit the controlling aspects of the

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<sup>108</sup> Marotti, 279.

<sup>109</sup> Yen, 209. Emphasis added.

<sup>110</sup> Donne, *Pseudo-Martyr*, 313. Emphasis added.

*Spiritual Exercises* on the speakers. By expressing the meditative experience through the liberating and limiting medium of poetic language, Donne allows his speakers to contend with the rigorous requirements of St. Ignatius. In doing so he creates a poetic self in tension between self-expression and self-negation. This serves Donne's imaginative needs as it provides a stage through which he can express and negotiate the conflict with his past. By reestablishing the Jesuit influence on the *Holy Sonnets*, we rediscover an avenue through which we might better understand the spiritual paralysis displayed by Donne's poetic self. Donne had a clear understanding of what he wanted his poetry to say about him and how it could complicate and confound his self-representation. As a result, his *Holy Sonnets* provide a method through which Donne contends with his past and tries to gain control over it. Critical discourse that ignores the Ignatian influence on these poems allows Donne to succeed in creating a "poetic of forgetting."

Yet, the speakers in these poems revolt against the poet's wishes, since the poetry enshrines Donne's struggle with the *Spiritual Exercises*, remembering for him the pains of his past. The poems both serve and deny the poet's purpose of establishing an autonomous spiritual self, free of the constraints of his heritage. The only way to recognize this tension is to approach Donne as a poet who infused his biographical and social self into his poetic personas. In the "*Holy Sonnets*," Donne struggles to negotiate between the tradition into which he was born and his own notions of merit that ignore arbitrary identity markers. Accordingly, the speakers in these poems articulate a deep desire for individuation as well as the fear of the isolation that results from it. Poetic language allows Donne to express the paradoxical challenges of eliminating one's past without destroying one's selfhood, of acknowledging one's heritage without limiting self

expression. Donne's speakers attempt self-assertion but fail to fully stem the constraining elements of a past that still held sway over the poet. By examining these poems in light of Donne's Jesuit influence we come to understand the spiritual torpor of speakers trying to repress inherited traditions that were central to Donne's sense of identity.

This study not only sheds light on the significance of the Jesuit connection when reading the *Holy Sonnets*, but also poses interesting questions for broader Donne scholarship. As the speakers struggle with self-abnegation, humility, and submission, Donne illustrates an emergent conflict in early-modern England between individual and collective identities. When writing these sonnets, Donne was still struggling to assume a position within his society. Thus, the speakers share part of Donne's frustration between his self-conception compared to the way society perceived him. Although his works often express desires for individuality, he recognizes that "to be no part of any body, is to be nothing."<sup>111</sup> Unfortunately for Donne, being defined by his association with the Catholics and Jesuits made him nothing in his society. So his speakers serve Donne's need to contain and forget that part of his identity. In doing so, they express the isolation of having no social selfhood. Eventually, Donne assumes a new socially defined identity as the Dean of St. Paul's, which helps to solidify his sense of self. Perhaps this contributed to the decrease in his production of poetry; he has succeeded in forgetting his past. However, it would be interesting to examine his sermons for a shift in his appreciation of one's individual versus incorporated identity. Moreover, the sermon as genre could afford Donne with new ways to approach his sense of selfhood in relationship to God. During Donne's seclusion in Mitcham, however, the prosodic

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<sup>111</sup> Gosse, 191.



intricacies of the *Holy Sonnets* allow him to both acknowledge and attack his Jesuit upbringing, to conceal and express his pains, as he works toward suppression and closure with his past.

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