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# Robert Persons's Precarious Correspondence

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## Abstract

The Jesuit mission to England during the reign of Elizabeth depended a great deal on written correspondence with Rome and other missionaries “in the field.” As the superior of the mission, Robert Persons wrote frequently and sometimes voluminously to his colleagues and associates, as well as to interested lay people and political figures. This article considers the effect of the urgency and the unpredictability of his correspondence. He was often on the run, so letters could go astray, be intercepted or delayed. Letters took two to three weeks to reach Rome, and generally crossed each other, so that policy discussion was subject to a degree of guess-work and anticipation. With the capture and execution of Campion, Persons's flight to France, the vicissitudes of Scottish and French politics (which crucially affected the fortunes of the English Catholics), and the growth of factionalism within the exile community, ignorance or misunderstanding could play a significant role in determining strategy and forming attitudes. Our own interpretation of Elizabethan Catholicism has also been affected by the loss of much of this correspondence at the suppression of the Society.

## Keywords

Robert Persons – Pedro de Ribadeneyra – Alfonso Agazzari – Claudio Acquaviva – Venerable English College – missionaries – correspondence network – occupations – José de Acosta – Spanish dissidents

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A complete record of Robert Persons's correspondence would be a thing worth having.<sup>1</sup> There are some tantalizing gaps. In August 1580, during the first months of the Jesuit mission to England, he sent the secular priest William Watts (c.1560–c.1582) to Scotland, ostensibly to find out if refuge could be found for priests suffering persecution in England. When Watts wrote from Scotland a year later, Persons enclosed at least part of his report in a letter to Father General, Claudio Acquaviva. It is clear that by this stage Persons's instructions to Watts had got mixed up with a diplomatic initiative by the Spanish ambassador to London, Bernardino de Mendoza (c.1540–1604). Missing letters from Persons to Watts and some of the Scots lords would throw some light on the question how soon, if at all, the Campion–Persons mission acquired a political edge.<sup>2</sup>

In this case, it appears that Watts was careful not to commit anything to writing that would compromise the mission. In August or September 1581, he sent a courier to deliver a letter to Persons of which we have at least a partial copy, as well as a verbal message that Persons never received, because he had already fled to France in the wake of Campion's arrest at Lyford Grange in July. So it may not be a crucial letter that we lack to make up the historical account. But there are some whole categories of letters that are missing: letters to and from Antonio Possevino (1533–1611), for example. The prominent Jesuit diplomat headed a mission to Sweden in 1577, to which was attached Persons's mentor and friend William Good (1527–1586). Only one letter to Good has survived, so far as we know, but it was enclosed in a letter to Possevino and it is unthinkable that Persons did not correspond more extensively with a confere so deeply involved in trying to negotiate the restoration of Catholicism in the Baltic region, where the Lutheran establishment was analogous to

1 Persons normally signed his letters "Rob. Personio," but the spelling "Parsons" is often used in contemporary documents, especially by his opponents. "Persons" has generally replaced "Parsons" in recent historical scholarship.

2 For Persons's letter to Acquaviva, October 21, 1581, enclosing Watts's report, see Thomas M. McCoog, S.J. (ed.), "Robert Parsons and Claudio Acquaviva: Correspondence," *AHSI* 68 (1999): 79–182, at 98–110, and Leo Hicks, S.J. (ed.), *Letters and Memorials of Father Robert Persons, S.J.: Vol. I (to 1588)*, Catholic Record Society (CRS) 39 (CRS: London, 1942), 95–115. McCoog gives an account of Watts's mission in *The Society of Jesus in Ireland, Scotland, and England 1541–1588: "Our Way of Proceeding?"* (Brill: Leiden, 1996), 178–181; see also Michael J. Yellowlees, "So strange a monster as a Jesuiste": *The Society of Jesus in Sixteenth-Century Scotland* (House of Lochar: Isle of Colonsay, Argyll, 2003), 78–82. For the interpretation and dating of Watts's involvement in political intrigue and the mission, see A. Lynn Martin, review of McCoog, *Society of Jesus*, in *The Month* 30, 2nd n.s. (June 1997): 246–247; and, more generally, Thomas M. McCoog, S.J., "And touching our society": *Fashioning Jesuit Identity in Elizabethan England* (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies: Toronto, 2013), 55–88, 349–369.

English Protestantism. Yet there are no letters to or from Persons in the Possevino papers.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, apart from a possible reference to a letter from “señor R.” in 1606, we have not been able to locate any correspondence with Luisa de Carvajal (1566–1614), who was closely associated with Persons and his assistant Joseph Creswell (1557–c.1623) in Madrid, and later moved to Valladolid before she embarked on her Quixotic personal mission to England.<sup>4</sup>

If such letters as these we desire, and lack, were ever written, they may be lost forever. They are a reminder just how precarious Persons’s correspondence was. Indeed it was the very condition of his existence as director of operations for the Jesuit mission, especially when he was in exile in France, the Netherlands, and Spain, removed both from the mission field and the decision-making center in Rome. The implications of that precarious contingency are the subject of my essay. I begin by sketching the main lines of the correspondence network, and explaining what traces we have of it. Then I consider the risks involved, the quest for security and the consequences of interception and delay. This leads me to compare two versions of a particular letter written in 1584, one version composed for Pedro de Ribadeneyra (1527–1611) in Spain and the other for Alfonso Agazzari (1549–1602) in Rome: this presents a picture of Persons caught between the preoccupations of pressing business and the occupation of his calling. Since at the same time he was engaged in significant writing for publication, the analysis of his correspondence offers us an insight into the character of his apostolate of writing.

In the years leading up to the English mission, Persons was in Rome, corresponding with his fellow Englishmen, Edmund Campion (1540–1581) in Prague, William Good in Sweden and Poland, and William Allen (1532–1594) in Douai. Once the mission party reached England in the early summer of 1580 he wrote

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- 3 See Persons to William Good, after March 19, 1579 (Hicks, *Letters and Memorials*, 5–28) and to Acquaviva, June 16, 1581 (McCoog, “Parsons and Acquaviva,” 88–93). Antonio Possevino was secretary of the Society of Jesus 1573–1577, overlapping with Persons’s period of formation in Rome. He was sent to Sweden in 1577 as papal nuncio to King John III, with a view to the reconversion of Sweden. See M. Scaduto, “Possevino, Antonio” (*DHCS* 3201–3203); John Patrick Donnelly, S.J., “Antonio Possevino: From Mercurian’s Secretary to Papal Legate in Sweden,” in *The Mercurian Project: Forming Jesuit Culture 1573–1580*, ed. Thomas M. McCoog, S.J. (IHSI: Rome and St. Louis, 2004), 323–349; and Oskar Garstein, *Rome and the Counter-Reformation in Scandinavia*, 2 vols. (Universitetsforlaget: Oslo, 1963–1980), 1: 89–257. Possevino’s letters can be found in ARSI, *Opp. NN* 328.
- 4 Luisa de Carvajal to Joseph Creswell, London, July 16, 1606, in *The Letters of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza*, ed. and trans. Glyn Redworth, 2 vols. (Pickering and Chatto: London, 2012), 1: 183–186, at 186. See also Redworth’s *The She-Apostle: The Extraordinary Life and Death of Luisa de Carvajal* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2008), 75, 176–177 and *passim*.

regularly to Father General Everard Mercurian and the rector of the English College in Rome, Alfonso Agazzari, reporting on the progress of the mission and the escalating persecution. After his escape to the continent in the autumn of 1581 he seems to have received a torrent of letters from lay people and clerics in England. He then became involved in diplomatic and military negotiations with the Guise, the Spanish monarchy and the papacy, entailing correspondence with ambassadors and nuncios, and ultimately the prince of Parma. The regular stream of letters to the superior general (now Acquaviva) and Agazzari continued. Much of this had to do with mission business and the aptitude and placement of Jesuit priests. He took a special interest in William Weston (c.1550–1615) in Seville and Robert Southwell (c.1561–1595) in Rome. Were there letters to and from Jasper Heywood (1535–1598), now superior in England, and William Holt (1544–1599), in Scotland? They were crucial to the mission's future, but their letters to Persons have not survived.<sup>5</sup>

In 1585, Persons accompanied Allen to Rome, and the record of correspondence contracts. Some of his activity in advising on the *impresa*, the English colleges, and Allen's elevation to the cardinalate is reflected in letters to the Spanish court, Cardinal Alessandro Farnese (1520–1589), and Parma, but there is little trace of letters about the direction of the English mission itself. After he was sent to Spain in 1588, he kept up the correspondence with Acquaviva and with the then rector of the English College in Rome, Joseph Creswell, but the latter, full of news about the new foundations at Valladolid and Seville, has for the most part disappeared.<sup>6</sup>

Where did all those letters go? Diplomatic correspondence ended up, for the most part, in the different divisions of the Vatican archives, now known as *Segr[eteria] Stato Francia, Inghilterra, Spagna*, etc. Father General's letters—copies of those he sent, the originals of those he received—are preserved in the Jesuit Archives in Rome. That leaves the correspondence with Agazzari and the various English Jesuits. Many of Persons's letters to Agazzari were copied for distribution amongst the Jesuit communities in Italy. But the originals would have been kept in the English College in Rome, where Persons was rector from 1598 until his death in 1610. He almost certainly kept a personal collection of letters, including those from the preceding years. But the papers at the

5 See Dennis Flynn, "The English Mission of Jasper Heywood," *AHSI* 54 (1985): 45–76.

6 Grene omitted many of Persons's letters to Creswell from his transcriptions, noting cryptically, "Many other letters of Father Persons this yeare are about matters concerning the Seminary of Valladolid: privileges to be obtained at Rome for it &c." (Archives of Stonyhurst College, Lancashire, *Coll P* 498, now held at the Archives of the British Province of the Society of Jesus, ABS1).

English College were dispersed at the suppression of the Society in 1773. Almost twenty years later, James Connell wrote to Charles Plowden (1743–1821):

One Kirk, an alumnus of the English College, a great friend, I hear, of Berrington's carried off with him to England a great number of original letters taken out of the archives of the English College: After the abolition [of the Society] orders were given to examine and clear the archives, [and] whole baskets of papers were then thrown out by persons who little knew the value of many of these papers. He selected out those which, as he thought, were worth keeping, and carried them with him to England.<sup>7</sup>

Fortunately, not all these letters have disappeared without trace. In the seventeenth century the Italian Jesuit Daniello Bartoli (1608–1685) made extensive notes from them for his history of the Society in England.<sup>8</sup> He was assisted by Fr. Christopher Grene (1629–1697), who kept copies of some of the letters, and made notes, summaries, and extensive transcriptions in his *Collectanea*, which eventually were lodged at Stonyhurst, though some have subsequently migrated to the provincial archives at Farm Street in London. Baskets were not, I believe, required for the latter move.

Then came Fr. Leo Hicks (1888–1968), who began the work of identifying and transcribing the Persons papers from his base at the house of writers at Farm Street. In 1942, the Catholic Record Society published the first volume of his edition, but Hicks's collected material has remained in boxes, to be consulted by several generations of scholars since, and augmented by subsequent archivists, including Francis Edwards (1922–2006), author of the standard biography.<sup>9</sup> Further letters have since come to light, notably the bundle in the Fondo Gesuitico (650/641) which was restored to the Roman Archives of the Society by Benito Mussolini through the intercession of the Jesuit historian, archivist, and diplomat Pietro Tacchi Venturi (1861–1956).<sup>10</sup> These were

7 August 4, 1792, quoted by Francis Edwards (ed. and trans.), *The Elizabethan Jesuits* (Phillimore: London, 1981), 370, n. 15. John Kirk (1760–1851) was a student at the time of the suppression and author of *Biographies of English Catholics in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. J. H. Pollen and E. H. Burton (Burns & Oates: London, 1909). Charles Plowden, S.J., was minister to the English Jesuits at Bruges at the suppression in 1773, went to Stonyhurst in 1794, and in 1817 became provincial, after the restoration of the Society.

8 Daniello Bartoli, *Dell'Istoria della Compagnia di Giesu, L'Ighilterra* (nella Stamperia del Varese: Rome, 1667).

9 Francis Edwards, *Robert Persons: The Biography of an Elizabethan Jesuit, 1546–1610* (Institute of Jesuit Sources: St. Louis, Missouri, 1995).

10 McCoog, "And touching our society", 144.

consulted by John Bossy in the 1990s, who inferred a more morally compromised characterization of Persons than is to be found in Hicks or Edwards.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, some letters in the State Archive in Naples, known to or transcribed by Hicks, have been destroyed, either by war or damp.<sup>12</sup>

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The correspondence has been vulnerable in its preservation and availability. That is secondary to our understanding of the risks and uncertainties experienced by the correspondents themselves. Would the letter reach the destination? Were the couriers reliable? Might the letters be intercepted and compromise either the bearer or the operation? The Scottish Jesuit William Crichton, for example, was taken at sea with incriminating letters and memoranda which, according to one report, he tried to tear up and throw into the sea but were apparently pieced together again.<sup>13</sup> So Persons would send duplicates by alternative couriers.<sup>14</sup> Or he would write another, similar letter a day or so later. It may be that he deliberately chose to write some of his letters to Acquaviva in Italian rather than Latin, so that they would be more impenetrable in the Low Countries and France.<sup>15</sup>

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- 11 John Bossy, "The Heart of Robert Persons," in *The Reckoned Expense: Edmund Campion and the Early English Jesuits*, ed. Thomas M. McCoog, S.J. (Boydell: Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1996), 141–158.
  - 12 E.g. Archivio di Stato, Naples, *Carte Farnesiane*, fascio 429, fol. 407; the whole document, according to Hicks, was in Persons's handwriting, but has now been destroyed (Hicks, *Letters and Memorials*, 285–286). The current Persons Correspondence Project has been established to complete and correct Hicks's work, incorporating McCoog, "Parsons and Acquaviva," which draws on the additional material from the Fondo Gesuitico. The new edition will address the fragmentary nature of the correspondence by including letters written to Persons and providing entries for all letters of which we have definite traces, in the way of references or hints, even if there is no actual text.
  - 13 See Yellowlees, "So strange a monster", 97–105, and the first part of Crichton's Memoirs, ed. J. H. Pollen in *Mary, Queen of Scots and the Babington Plot* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 1922), 151–168.
  - 14 See, for example, Persons to Agazzari, June 11, 1584 (Hicks, *Letters and Memorials*, 205–215) and to Acquaviva, July 10, 1584 (McCoog, "Parsons and Acquaviva," 138–141), complaining that he had sent five letters by consecutive posts, and expressing surprise that so few had reached the general.
  - 15 He wrote to Acquaviva in Italian for the first time on May 3, 1582 (McCoog, "Parsons and Acquaviva," 120–121) but continued to use both languages without apparent reason for choice in each case.

A further constraint was the unpredictability of delivery and response, which affected the chain of command. The tension between home staff and the generals in the field has been the subject of some interesting analysis of military culture as reflected in Elizabethan drama.<sup>16</sup> This seems applicable also to Jesuit maneuvers, and even more complicated when we appreciate that Persons was the middleman between Rome, England, and Scotland. Gradually it became established that he would make most of the decisions, consulting Rome on general principles, but it would be an over-simplification to suggest a neat division of roles: Persons the tactician, Acquaviva the strategist. From the dating, it appears that letters from France could take three weeks or a month to reach Rome, and so it might be almost two months before Persons received a reply. We shall see how such vicissitudes affected the placement of Thomas Marshall when a missionary companion was sought for William Weston.

In 1583, with so many priests in jail, including Heywood, there was a leadership vacuum in England, so Acquaviva called William Weston from Seville and John Gibbons (1544–1589), rector of the college at Trier, to confer with Persons in Paris. Gibbons repeatedly pleaded his pusillanimity until Father General agreed to let him stay where he was.<sup>17</sup> Weston slowly made his way to France and spent much of the summer of 1584 with Persons, helping him revise the *Book of Resolution*, before leaving for England in early September, along with the lay brother Ralph Emerson (1553–1604).<sup>18</sup> Persons proposed Thomas Marshall (1545–1589) as his assistant, and Acquaviva approved on July 29. But when Marshall arrived in Paris, shortly after Weston's departure, Persons judged him unsuitable for the mission and suggested to Acquaviva, in a letter written on September 15, that he should go to the English College in Rome, instead, as confessor. While he awaited the superior general's reply, he seems to

16 See Nina Taunton, *1590s Drama and Militarism: Portrayals of War in Marlowe, Chapman and Shakespeare's "Henry V"* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2001), 23–91, 93–125. Taunton refers to *The Practice, Proceedings and Laws of Armes* (1593), by Matthew Sutcliffe, who crossed swords with Persons in the "Watchword" controversy, 1598–1603.

17 On Gibbons, see Acquaviva to Allen, October 10, 1583, ARSI, *Franc.* 1–I, ff. 173<sup>r</sup>–174<sup>r</sup>, printed in "Some Correspondence of Cardinal Allen, 1579–85; from the Jesuit Archives," ed. Patrick Ryan, S.J., CRS 9 (CRS: London, 1911): 12–105 (95), and Acquaviva to Persons, January 29, 1584 (McCoog, "Parsons and Acquaviva," 129–130).

18 On Weston's movements, see Persons to Acquaviva, June 11, 1584 (McCoog, "Parsons and Acquaviva," 135–136; Hicks, *Letters and Memorials*, 201–205), August 20, 1584 (McCoog, "Parsons and Acquaviva," 146–149), and September 15, 1584 (McCoog, "Parsons and Acquaviva," 149–151; Hicks, *Letters and Memorials*, 240–243). On his contribution to works prepared for the press, see Persons's *Punti per la Missione d'Inghilterra*, ed. and trans. J. H. Pollen, in *Miscellanea IV*, CRS 4 (CRS: London, 1907), 1–161, at 156–157.

have changed his mind, so Marshall was all ready to sail when Persons next wrote, on November 12. Clearly he had not yet, after almost two months, received a reply from Acquaviva. The general had in fact written on October 22, confirming the earlier decision to divert Marshall from the English mission. The disconsolate Marshall grudgingly accepted the directive and left for Rome instead on January 17, 1585.<sup>19</sup>

What emerges from this narrative is that it took a long time for decisions to be finalized, so that the direction of the mission was fluctuating and unpredictable. There is a curious example here of Acquaviva relying on Persons's judgment, closer to the mission field, but nevertheless carrying sufficient authority for Persons not to press his revised view. A closer examination of the correspondence of those months may suggest even more about the effect of such contingency.

In the summer of 1584, Persons was in turmoil. He had spent some of the preceding winter visiting the camp of the prince of Parma as Farnese gradually fought his way to Antwerp. He returned to France in May, and based himself at the professed house in Paris. It was hard to know what to do. Persecution was increasing in England; the Guise military plans to save English Catholicism had stalled. Allen was writing in defense of recusants and priests against the charges contained in Burghley's *Execution of Justice in England*, even as he continued to be involved in some of the schemes that lent plausibility to Burghley's case: Francis Throckmorton (1554–1584) was arrested in 1583, and Charles Arundel (1539–1587) and Lord Thomas Paget (c.1546–1612) went into exile when a mole at the French embassy revealed details of a Guise invasion plan endorsed by Allen and Persons.<sup>20</sup> The intelligence network seemed to be closing in on Persons, and he no longer felt safe, either in Paris or in Rouen. He preferred to work on his *Book of Resolution*, now retitled *A Christian*

19 Persons to Acquaviva, May 29, September 15, and November 12, 1584 (McCoog, "Parsons and Acquaviva," 133–134, 149–151, and 155–156; Hicks, *Letters and Memorials*, 240–243 and 255–259); Acquaviva to Persons, July 29, 1584, October 22, 1584 (McCoog, "Parsons and Acquaviva," 146, 153–154); Persons to Agazzari, January 17, 1585 (McCoog, "Parsons and Acquaviva," 173–175).

20 William Cecil, *The execution of justice in England for maintenaunce of publique and christian peace, without any persecution for questions of religion* (Christopher Barker: London, 1583), was answered by William Allen, *A true, sincere, and modest defence, of English Catholiques* (Fr Persons' Press: Rouen, 1584). On the "Throckmorton Plot," see John Cooper, *The Queen's Agent: Francis Walsingham at the Court of Elizabeth I* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2011), 157–161; John Bossy, *Under the Molehill: An Elizabethan Spy Story* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2001) and *Giordano Bruno and the Embassy Affair* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1991).



*Directorie*,<sup>21</sup> and within months he was to inform Mary Queen of Scots that he and Allen had decided to follow the spiritual rather than the military course.<sup>22</sup> He wanted to be back in Rome and take stock of his vocation, but he also wanted to be on hand to help missionaries on their way to and from England.<sup>23</sup>

It was under these circumstances that he found occasion to write to Pedro de Ribadeneyra. Ribadeneyra, who joined the Society as a teenager and wrote the first official biography of Ignatius Loyola, had been to England at the end of Mary I's reign and continued to take a close interest. In all probability he met Persons in the Roman College in the 1570s. By then, having been asked to retire from active Jesuit life in Rome, he was residing at the Jesuit retreat house, Jesus del Monte, in the small town of Loranca near Toledo, where he occupied himself in writing.<sup>24</sup> Persons now wrote to him to let him know his fortunes and his present condition. He carefully and scrupulously explained the rationale of his posting in France, and then elaborated on the state of persecution.<sup>25</sup> This may have prompted Ribadeneyra to embark on his history of the Reformation conflict in England, a project which was accelerated in 1587 after the raid of Francis Drake (c.1540–1596) on Cádiz and the publication of Nicholas Sander's *De schismate Anglicano*, edited by Allen and Persons in 1586.<sup>26</sup>

By sending this digest of news to Ribadeneyra, then, Persons seemed to be signaling his commitment to the Spanish connection. He had been to the Spanish court in 1582 to 1583, to promote the Guise invasion plans; he had lived for a while among the Spanish Army of Flanders; and he was associating himself more and more with the Spanish cause. Later, despite the failure of

21 *A Christian directorie, guiding men to their salvation* was published by his press in Rouen later in 1585, a revised and amplified version of *The first booke of the Christian exercise, appertayning to resolution* (Fr Persons' Press: Rouen, 1582).

22 Persons to Mary Queen of Scots, October 10, 1584 (Hicks, *Letters and Memorials*, 246–252).

23 For details of Persons's movements and engagements at this time, see Edwards, *Robert Persons*, 98–115.

24 M. Ruiz Jurado, "Ribadeneira, Pedro de" (*DHCJ* 3345–3346).

25 Persons to Ribadeneyra, September 10–12, 1584 (Hicks, *Letters and Memorials*, 227–240).

26 Pedro de Ribadeneyra, *Historia ecclesiastica del scisma del reyno de Inglaterra* (Christopher Plantin: Antwerp, 1588; published also in the same year in Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Zaragoza, and Lisbon), a free adaptation of Nicholas Sander, *De origine ac progressu schismatis Anglicani*, ed. Edward Rishton (J. Foigny: Cologne, vere Rheims, 1585), re-edited by Robert Persons and William Allen (Bartholomew Bonfadini: Rome, 1586). On Persons, Ribadeneyra, and Sanders, see Victor Houlston, "The Missionary Position: Catholics Writing the History of the English Reformation," *English Studies in Africa* 54, no. 2 (October 2011): 16–30.

the Armada, he was to migrate to Spain for several years, setting up English colleges and treating Spain as the chief auxiliary base for the English mission. The account of persecution given now, in 1584, was clearly intended to rally support, using Ribadeneyra as an intermediary. But it could also serve another purpose: as news for the Jesuit community at large. And so Persons copied the letter and sent it to Agazzari in Rome. This version was copied and re-copied, so that there are multiple witnesses to be found as far afield as Siena and Parma. As such, it resembles and perhaps supplies the place of an annual letter. It was the custom in the Society for each province to compile an annual letter, so that a collection could be published each year in book form. The English mission was not a province, so it was not until 1592 that regular annual letters were published on the progress of the mission. The sole exception was the letter of 1581, which was published with the others for that year, in 1583.<sup>27</sup>

From what we can gather from the various witnesses, Persons first drafted a letter to Ribadeneyra in his own hand. A fragment of this first draft has survived and is extant in the Archdiocese of Westminster Archives.<sup>28</sup> This confirms our understanding that Persons kept the drafts of his letters and some were conveyed to England at the suppression. After sending a fair copy to Spain, he revised the opening of the letter and had it copied for Agazzari, omitting the summary of his own situation with which the Italian would be familiar. Once it got to Rome, it was copied several times and distributed to various Jesuit communities for their encouragement and perhaps envy.<sup>29</sup>

It is the disjuncture between the two versions of the letter that is worth closer scrutiny. In the Ribadeneyra letter, Persons spends two paragraphs explaining why he is in France. He concludes, "These are our occupations [*occupationes*], Reverend Father, and truly they are of their own nature somewhat troublesome and difficult; but for the sake of Christ we must, so far as we may, endure them,"<sup>30</sup> before then delineating the state of persecution. Writing

27 Annual Letter of the English Mission for 1581, published in *Annuae Litterae Societatis Iesu anni MDLXXXI* (Roman College: Rome, 1583), 205–211.

28 Westminster Diocesan Archives, London, MS III, no. 98, ff. 385–387.

29 There are at least seven full copies of the Agazzari version, including one in Siena (Siena Public Library, Cod. C. X. 2, f. 33) and one in Parma (Bibliotheca Palatina, BPP, MS. Pal. 651, *Relationi*, ff. 97<sup>r</sup>–100<sup>r</sup>).

30 "Atque hae sunt occupationes nostrae, Reverende Pater, satis quidem in se molestae et difficiles, sed Christi tamen causa quousque liceat preferendae." The Latin text and English translation for this and related letters differ slightly from the printed versions in Hicks, *Letters and Memorials*, and McCoog, "Parsons and Acquaviva," following extensive collation with the manuscript evidence.

to Agazzari, however, he omits all the introductory material and begins his account of persecution with an adaptation of the sentence, thus:

Since I know very well how heartily Your Reverence hears about our English affairs, and with how great an affection you follow them in your compassion and care, I have decided to write more expansively about these very things at this time. Our occupations [*occupationes*], my dear Reverend Father, are troublesome and difficult enough in themselves.<sup>31</sup>

The term *occupationes* now points forward to the matter to come rather than reviewing what has come before. And it has a slightly different association: even though they are “our occupations” in both, in the Ribadeneyra letter they refer more generally to Persons’s responsibilities; in the Agazzari version they relate to news.

To Ribadeneyra, then, he was able to give just a hint of the personal frustration and difficulty that went beyond a sense of obstacles to be overcome in the onward progress of the mission, to a characterization of his life’s work. A few months later, after the capture of Emerson and the exile of the priests in the Tower,<sup>32</sup> he used the same word in a crucial letter to Acquaviva (February 12, 1585):

But the occupation [*occupatio*] of these matters (if it please your Paternity that I should persevere therein) will hold me for 3 or 4 months more, nor do I think it possible to extricate myself from other affairs [*aliis negotiis*] before that time. I hope, however, to be free of everything around the end of the ensuing summer for your Paternity to place me wheresoever. And perchance for some reasons it will not be expedient for me to stay longer in England, especially if this close treaty between England and France, which is currently under discussion, should come about. [...] As for what your Paternity adds: that I shall perhaps be able in Rome to expend some

31 “*Cum optime sciam quam libenter R. V. res nostras Anglicanas audias, quantoque easdem commiserationis et charitatis affectu prosequatur, copiosius hoc tempore iisdem de rebus scribere statui. Occupationes nostrae Reverende mi Pater satis quidem in se molestae, et difficiles sunt [...]*.”

32 The entry in the *Douay Diaries* for March 3, 1585, lists Thomas Worthington, William Bishop, John Coll[eton], William Warmington, John Barnes, Thomas Stephenson, and Edward Rishton, “cum aliis,” as having arrived “inviti et reluctantes” [unwilling and reluctant] by ship, having been sent into exile from the Tower of London: *The First and Second Diaries of the English College, Douay*, ed. T. F. Knox (David Nutt: London, 1878), 204.

quite useful effort on matters English, I must urgently ask your Paternity to grant me this retreat free from that bother, at least for a time. For I shall have gained very little, if I change my location but retain the same kind of occupations [*occupationum*]. Nay, I shall be crushed with far more distractions [*pluribus distractionibus*] where you are than here if I once lay myself open to these matters.<sup>33</sup>

Here the meaning of the word is closer to its origins—"a taking possession of, a seizing"—suggesting a sense of being embattled. And indeed it is in this letter that Persons begs to be freed of such concerns, which are putting him in a state of turmoil:

For I feel myself very weakened as a result of these dealings with the world [*his cum saeculo commerciis*]; and although I have had keener desires, nevertheless, the importunity of affairs [*negotiorum importunitas*] in no way allows me to satisfy myself. Moreover passions of the spirit have come forth and grown strong and unless I find time and room to be able to apply myself wholly and earnestly to this business, I do not see how I can subjugate them.<sup>34</sup>

The term *occupatio* fluctuates, then, from the objective notion of "business," to the more personal idea of "vocation," to the more radical sense of "being taken

33 "*Sed harum iam rerum occupatio (si Paternitati Vestrae videbitur ut in illis perseverem), ad 3 vel 4 menses adhuc me tenebit, nec ante illud tempus, etiam videor mihi posse me commode aliis negotiis extricare. Circa finem autem huius aetatis sequentis, spero me omnibus rebus liberum fore, ut Vestra Paternitas quocumque me loco colloquet. Et fortasse propter aliquas rationes non expediet ut diutius, his locis Galliae vicinis Angliae subsistam, maxime si hoc arctum foedus quod modo inter Angliam Galliamque tractatur, effectum sortiatur. [...] Quod autem Vestra Paternitas adiungit me posse fortasse aliquam operam non inutilem Romae etiam in Anglicanis rebus, ponere, roganda mihi est Vestra Paternitas summopere, ut si hunc receptum mihi concesserit, ab ea molestia mihi liberum concedat, saltem ad tempus. Nam parum admodum lucratus fuero, si locum commutavero, genus autem idem occupationum retinero; immo longe pluribus distractionibus istic opprimar quam hic, si semel ad illa negotia me patefecero*" (Persons to Acquaviva, February 12, 1585; McCoog, "Parsons and Acquaviva," 160–164).

34 "*Sentio enim me diuturnis his cum saeculo commerciis debilitatum valde, et licet nunquam acriora habuerim desideria; tamen negotiorum importunitas nullo modo mihi ipsi satisfacere me permittit. Passiones etiam animi valde creverunt et convaluerunt, et nisi tempus locumque nanciscar, quibus huic negotio sedulo totusque possim incumbere, non video quo modo potero subiugare.*"

captive,” as in “occupied territory.” Acquaviva himself had encouraged Persons in 1582 by describing his occupations as *fructuosae*, but things had changed a lot since he had been exhilarated by Persons’s news then.<sup>35</sup>

It may be worth pausing for a moment to wonder how the derivative use of the word in English affected the Latin usage in Persons’s vocabulary. The semi-otic intercourse between Latin and the vernacular must be a significant factor in the fashioning of early modern culture, and we can only guess at its operation here: the modern idea of an “occupation,” as a career or vocation, is not registered in Latin dictionaries but was beginning to emerge in English.<sup>36</sup> Thus Othello could cry in anguish, believing his Desdemona to be false: “Othello’s occupation’s gone!” (*Othello* Act III Scene iii line 361). Whatever the linguistic ambiguity, here was a word central to Persons’s identity. He was a man of business, but he found business disturbing and distracting. Later he would write an account of the fortunes of contemporary Catholicism and entitle it “Domesticall Difficulties.”<sup>37</sup> The God he served and the cause he promoted was one that he passionately believed in, and every obstacle and hindrance obscured the triumphant operation of Providence. He felt his vocation to be in a parlous and precarious state indeed, and his letters betray, just occasionally, that nervous tension between steering his charted course and picking his way through unknown territory.

It is telling that the more reflective version of the letter was written to Pedro de Ribadeneyra. Ribadeneyra supported Persons and Allen in the build-up to the *impresa*, but his conception of it, and of the struggle for religious supremacy in England, went beyond Persons’s. He was the spiritual proponent of the Catholic Reformation *par excellence*, and some of the intensity of his reading

35 “I was overjoyed by your Reverence’s letter to me dated 28 December, informing me of your condition and *fruitful undertakings* in the Lord” (“Valde exhilaratus sum Reverentiae Vestrae literis quas ad me dedit 28 Decembris, ex quibus cognovi eius statum et *occupationes* in Domino *fructuosas*,” Acquaviva to Persons, February 17, 1582; McCoog, “Parsons and Acquaviva,” 112–114; my emphases).

36 Among various entries for “occupation,” *Holoet’s Dictionary* (1572) lists “occupation, crafte, or mistery” with the Latin equivalents *techna* and *ars* (with French equivalent *mestier*); *technicus* is “having an occupation,” and “to leave his occupation” is *se arte sua remouere*: Richard Holoet, *Huloets dictionarie: newely corrected, amended, set in order and enlarged [...] by Iohn Higgins* (Thomas Marsh: London, 1572), sub “occupation.” These confirm that *occupatio* had not acquired the meaning in Latin that it was developing in English. Grateful thanks to my anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to these entries, and to Janet Graffius for helpful suggestions.

37 Robert Persons, S.J., “A Storie of Domesticall Difficulties in the Englishe Catholike cause,” ed. J. H. Pollen, S.J., CRS 2 (CRS: London, 1906), 48–185.

of history seems to have infected Persons. His Spanish version of Sander's *De schismate Anglicano*, published in time for the sailing of the Armada, was more passionate and thematic than that prepared by Allen and Persons during the same period, and when the Armada failed he, like them, was forced to review the workings of Providence. Their subsequent printed works were congruent but differently inflected. Responding to the royal proclamation of October 1591, against Jesuits and seminary priests, Persons wrote his *Philopater*, published widely throughout Catholic Europe in 1592,<sup>38</sup> while Ribadeneyra worked on his continuation of Sander, the *Segunda Parte*, published in 1594 to Persons's great satisfaction. Earlier, he had produced his *Treatise on Tribulation*, a reflection on the failure of the Armada and its significance for the Spanish people. It was a brave act of soul-searching for the nation.<sup>39</sup>

The suggestion, here, is that Ribadeneyra represented a moral and spiritual sounding-board for Persons. Significantly, Agazzari is addressed in a more familiar, perhaps more agitated, fashion: he is "my dear Reverend Father," where, in the equivalent sentence, Ribadeneyra is "Reverend Father," a figure treated with greater respect or wariness. In a letter to Acquaviva some eight and a half years later, Persons would give an account of a conference with Ribadeneyra in Toledo in March 1593.<sup>40</sup> Persons had met King Philip II in Madrid and briefed him on the question of a general congregation of the Society. A group of disaffected Jesuits in Spain was challenging the position of the general, arguing that as the Society expanded, he should be relieved of the burden of appointing rectors of colleges and provincials. They demanded a general congregation of the Society to deliberate on the matter. Persons was anxious to defend the general's powers, and urged the king to use his influence

38 [Robert Persons, S.J.], *Elizabethae Angliae Reginae [...] in Catholicos sui Regni Edictum [...] per D. Andream Philopatrum* (Richard Verstegan: Antwerp, 1592, under the false imprint Joannes Faber: Augsburg, and published in the same year in Lyon, Rome, Prague, and Cologne), commonly known as the *Philopater*.

39 Pedro de Ribadeneyra, *Segunda parte de la Historia Ecclesiastica del scisma de Inglaterra* (Juan Iñiguez de Lequerica: Alcalá, 1593, and published in 1594 in Lisbon and Antwerp); *Tratado de la Tribulación* (first published 1589), ed. J. Ignacio Tellechea Idígoras, Colección Espirituales Españoles (Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca / Fundación Universitaria Española: Madrid, 1988). For analyses of Ribadeneyra's approach, see José María Jover Zamora and María Victoria López-Cordón Corteza, "La concepción maniquea de Europa como componente de la mentalidad barroca," in *El Siglo del Quijote (1580-1680)*, ed. Ramón Menéndez Pidal, 2 vols., *Historia de España* 26 (Espasa-Calpe: Madrid, 1986), 1: 361-382, at 373-380, and Carlos Gómez-Centurión, *La Invencible y la empresa de Inglaterra* (Nerea: Madrid, 1988), 62-70.

40 Persons to Acquaviva, March 22, 1593 (ARSI, *Hisp.* 135, ff. 147-149).

in the same cause. On his way back to Seville, he met Ribadeneyra in Toledo, and was shown a letter from José de Acosta (1539–1600), the leader of the dissidents but also the very Jesuit who had been sent to Spain with Persons in 1588 to deal with the question of the freedom of movement of Jesuits to and from Spain. Acosta was on his way to Rome to seek Pope Clement VIII's support for his views on restricting the role of the general, and indeed was to secure appointment as chairman of the Fifth General Congregation, which met in December.<sup>41</sup> Ribadeneyra then showed Persons his own reply, which expressed disquiet about a congregation called by force.

From Persons's letter to Acquaviva, it is clear that he and Ribadeneyra concurred in their view that to curtail the general's powers was to restrict the freedom of the Society to serve God. The simplicity of the constitution of the Society was what enabled it to function so effectively to His greater glory. Thus he wrote to Clement VIII on April 15, 1593:

You are a most affectionate father to [the Society], and a most wise pastor who knows and has seen and had experience what great advantage ensues to the Church of God from the labors of these her sons, on whom now the Devil would like to bring confusion under various pretexts of reforms and of the public good. I say the Devil, because in all sincerity and before God I declare that in the course of these four years or more that I have been in Spain I have weighed in my mind as best I could and with complete impartiality the aims of some few dissatisfied members of this Society who are said to be the source of these broils; and the conclusion I have been able to come to is this: firstly, that there is little spirit of piety as a rule in the schemers and little evidence of a religious life; next, there are clear signs of ambition in some of them, and again manifest jealousy of the Italian nation on account of our Fr. General belonging to it.<sup>42</sup>

41 On these developments, see Thomas M. McCoog, S.J., *The Society of Jesus in Ireland, Scotland, and England, 1589–1597: Building the Faith of Saint Peter upon the King of Spain's Monarchy* (Ashgate: Farnham, 2012), 97–99, 135–138, 229–235; Edwards, *Robert Persons*, 133, 157–158.

42 “Padre amatissimo d'essa, e pastore sapientissimo che sappia et habbia visto et sperimentato quanto importino alla chiesa di Dio le fatiche di questi suoi figliuoli, le quali il demonio vorrebbe adesso turbare con varii pretesti di riformazioni e ben publico: Dico il demonio perchè in rei veritate et *coram Deo* affirmo che in questi 4 anni e più che sono stato in Spagna ho considerato il meglio che ho potuto e con ogni indifferenza le pretenzioni di alcuni pochi inquieti della medesima Compagnia che disconsi esser cause di queste turbationi e quel ch' ho potuto giudicar è stato questo; primo poco spirito

We can detect in this assessment the same passionate yearning for untrammelled occupation that is evident in the 1584 letter. As he labored for the good of the new colleges in Spain, as he travelled to provincial congregations to observe the progress of the dissenting faction, as he directed the missionary postings to England, he was as pre-occupied as ever. The disaffected Spanish Jesuits were suspicious of the Italian-dominated Jesuit curia and looking to King Philip II to further their own interests. Persons needed to serve, and to serve he needed to be free of faction. Where Othello lamented, when he lost faith in Desdemona, that his occupation was gone, Robert Persons, faced with the prospect of fragmentation, clung to his occupation: the freedom of the Society to work for the restoration of the faith in England and the unity of Christendom.

What conclusions can we draw, then, about Persons's precarious correspondence? As a writer, he was simultaneously engaged in polemical dispute in print, and with strategic negotiation, in his letters. In both of these he was to some degree reacting to immediate needs. But he was inclined also to step back from the struggle and reflect on his vocation. Contact with Ribadeneyra encouraged him to transform his writing into an apostolate; that is, to re-work the conflicts and difficulties of the everyday direction of the mission into a coherent perspective on the campaign. This perspective can be more clearly discerned in his printed works than in his letters,<sup>43</sup> but in the letters we can observe the underlying currents of anxiety, agitation, and resolution. The gaps in the correspondence and the indeterminacy of the text, resulting from the contingencies of language, dispatch, reception, delayed response, and precarious archiving, intensifies our awareness of Persons's ambivalent *occupationes*.

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ordinariamente nelli pretensori e poco essemplio di vita religiosa, poi segnali evidenti d'ambizione in alcuni, e dopo questo emulazione manifesta contro la natione Italiana per esser il Nostro P. Generale di quella" (Persons to Clement VIII, Archives of Stonyhurst College, Lancashire, *Coll P* 327–29, now held at ABSI, at 328b).

43 Victor Houlston, *Catholic Resistance in Elizabethan England: Robert Persons's Jesuit Polemic, 1580–1610* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2007).