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The Pneumatics of Inspiration in the *Anniversary* Poems*

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1. Wind Instruments

Are John Donne's *Anniversary* poems part of a visionary, prophetic tradition? Barbara Lewalski suggests this when she interprets the last lines of *The Second Anniversarie* as a moment in which Donne seriously sees himself as the poet-prophet: "The purpose, and th'Authority is his; / Thou art the Proclamation; and I ame / The Trumpet, at whose voice the people came" (526-28).[1] For Lewalski, the speaker at the end of the two *Anniversary* poems "is the trumpet (the poet-prophet/priest/preacher) calling the people to hear the proclamation. His meditative progress becomes the means for transforming him into a fit and worthy instrument" (Lewalski 280).[2]

The Second Anniversarie's final example of triumphant *afflatus*, in which the poet-as-trumpet channels a breath of inspiration, closes a set of elegiac poems that seem to renounce the physical world. I am going to argue, however, that, despite the soul's seemingly irrepressible lift away from that decomposing, "Carkas" world (*The Second Anniversarie* 55), the *Anniversary* poems actually ground inspiration in the material realm by the end of *The Second Anniversarie*. In his poems for Elizabeth Drury, Donne ultimately describes inspiration as a reaction involving spiritual and material substances, without subordinating matter to immateriality. Drury, a vulnerable, decaying body,

*See the parallel articles on Donne's *The Second Anniversarie* in this issue, as well as the response by Judith Anderson.

For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <http://www.connotations.de/debanniversaries0251.htm>.

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becomes a permanent, inspiring force for poetry: "Onely in Heauen ioies strength is neuer spent; / And accidentall things are permanent" (*The Second Anniversarie* 487-88). But this beatific vision, I will illustrate, does not strip Drury of her materiality: the breath of inspiration itself is material.

The *Anniversary* poems thus show that Donne's vision—like the divine breath that flows through him as an instrument of God—comes from an attachment to a natural, physical world, rather than a *contemptus mundi* impulse that would turn him away from "this rotten world" (*The Second Anniversarie* 49; cf. Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul* 103).

I am going to shine a light on the *Anniversary* poems' specific version of poetic inspiration through the lens of Stoic physics—without suggesting that Donne himself was a thoroughgoing Stoic physicist or that the poems are primarily Stoic documents. By foregrounding a Stoic sense of *pneuma*, the poet filled with the breath of divine "Proclamation" can remain anchored in a physical realm. The *Anniversary* poems invite this Stoic reading through a constellation of themes. Firstly, Drury embodies an indeterminate, non-Aristotelean connection between spirit and matter, especially in *The First Anniversarie,* when, for example, "the worlds subtilst immateriall parts" (247) are said to be disordered by her death. Secondly, at key moments, the poem describes the soul's attachment to matter; Drury's soul is not imprisoned in her body (*The Second Anniversarie* 221), and her body has such an affinity with her soul that the speaker says "Shee, who left such a body, […] shee rather was two soules" (501, 503), so that her material body appears soul-like. Further, both poems fixate on cosmic coherence in the face of disorder, which was a central problem Stoic physics sought to resolve, precisely through a connection between spirit and matter. Donne knew about Stoic ethics, which show up in his verse epistles to Rowland Woodward and his Lenten sermon for 1628, and which implicitly relied on Stoic physics (see Barbour). Moreover, Stoic physics were "in the air" through Justus Lipsius's 1605 edition of Seneca (see Barker and Goldstein).

Donne, I argue, had his own working sense of *pneuma,* a substance conceived in Aristotelean thought and then reshaped in Stoic philosophy, which straddles the conceptual boundary between material and immaterial. Donne's *pneuma* shows up in his poems and sermons in the Latinate form "spirit," as in "A Fvnerall Elegie," a poem that describes itself as an "Organ" played by "spirits": "But those fine spirits, which doe tune and set / This Organ, are those peeces which beget / Wonder and loue" (27-29). Here again, the poet is an instrument animated by the air. This version of *pneuma* leads back to the most literal, physiological sense of inspiration: the poet's innate heat and breath, which become the building blocks for visionary poems like the *Anniversaries*. The poet's most primary biological instinct—to breathe—establishes a continuum between material and immaterial, between the physics of respiration and the "fine spirits" that appear to lift away from the physical realm with each exhalation. This continuum between material and immaterial, importantly, also holds together *The First Anniversarie* and *The Second Anniversarie*, which are, in many ways, very different poems. *The First Anniversarie*, as Harold Love argues, sets out to prove "the innate corruptness of all matter" (129) while the *Second Anniversarie* (on the surface) celebrates the soul's release from the prison-like body. But an animating current of *pneuma* or spirits, revealed fully in the final image of the poet turned divine instrument, carries through both poems, weaving itself between supposedly opposed substances.

2. *Pneuma*, Prime Matter, and Prophecy

The Stoic sense of *pneuma*, in particular, established a "dynamic continuum" between material and spiritual realms (see Sambursky). Stoic physics are based in biology, starting with the concept of a breath that holds together the living body and also sustains the entire cosmos. In his work *Stanzas*, contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben describes the physiological roots of this *pneuma*:

> It is plausibly from this medical doctrine [a pneumatology first proposed by Diocles of Caristo the third century BCE] that the notion of *pneuma* was derived by the Stoic thinkers, who made it the central principle of their cosmology and their psychology. In the thought of Zeno and Chrysippus the *pneuma* is a corporeal principle, a subtle and luminous body (*leptoteronn soma*), identical to fire, which pervades the universe and penetrates every living thing, in some places more and in some less: it is the principle of growth and sensation. This 'artisanal' (*technikon*) and divine fire is also the substance of the sun and of other celestial bodies, such that it can be said that the vital principle in plants and animals has the same nature as the celestial bodies and that a single principle vivifies the universe. (92)

The poet who can invoke this *pneuma* can see into a shared animating force all around him, from vegetable life to the stars. In this model, matter is the source of divinely inspired poetry, conducted through a vital spirit of *pneuma*.

From a Stoic perspective, when the poet turns himself into a holy trumpet at the end of *The Second Anniversarie*, he is a conduit for generative fire and a nourishing breath of air. This mix of air and fire may seem strange, especially since *The First Anniversarie* famously presents a world where "[t]he Element of fire is quite put out" (206), staging a collapse of an ancient elemental materialist system. And the soul (a feminized "shee" to recall Drury herself) flies past these elements in *The Second Anniversarie*:

> Shee carries no desire to know, nor sense,
> Whether th'Ayrs middle Region be intense,
> For th'Element of fire, shee doth not know,
> Whether shee past by such a place or no; (191-94)

Drury's voyage to the stars begins and ends with breath: Donne closes *The Second Anniversarie* with a divinity breathing through him while the words of the poem literally originate from the poet's breath. While Drury's death leaves the "strongest vitall spirits" (13) drawn out of the world in *The First Anniversarie*, the poet turned trumpet recomposes them as poetry and blows them back into the world by the end of the *The Second Anniversarie*. Donne's poem is itself like the pneumatic

substance that makes the soul's journey from earth to stars possible in Stoic accounts.

Before a reinfusion of vital spirit can happen, *The First Anniversarie* sets up this problem: how does a poet compose poetry when the world is decomposing around him? And how could a poet have an authentic, inspired vision when the correspondence between the matter of poetry and the material world has broken apart? As the poem says: "The art is lost, and correspondence too" (396). Stoic physics offers one possible answer—and a counterpoint to the dissolution imagined in *The First Anniversarie.* A summary description of Stoic *pneuma* explains how disintegration could lead to a return to coherence:

> The most comprehensive answer to the problem of cohesion in antiquity had been given by the Stoics. The Stoics postulated a continuous material medium, the tension and activity of which molded the cosmos into a living whole and the various parts of the cosmic animal into coherent bodies as well. Compounded of air and a creative fire, the Stoic *pneuma* was related to the concept of the "breath of life" that was thought to escape from a living body at the time of death and allow the formerly coherent body to disintegrate into its disparate parts. (Dobbs 224)[3]

Drury's death, from a Stoic perspective, would be precisely a kind of expiration that then leads from decomposition to recomposition. *The First Anniversarie* is about decay and an elemental collapse, leaving the speaker to observe: "So did the world from the first houre decay" (201). But the poet's labor transforms expiration back into inspiration, the creative energy to make a poem, which turns out to be *The Second Anniversarie* itself. Near the ending of *The Second Anniversarie*, the speaker finds a counterpoint to the decay emphasized in *The First Anniversarie*: "Ioy of a soules arriuall neere decaies" (489). The seeming opposition between an impermanent decaying world and a permanent heaven does not hold together in the poet's vision; instead, a non-dualist perspective allows matter to recompose itself in heaven.

Stoic monist physics dovetail with Neoplatonic accounts of divine, "frenzied" thought, like that of the poet-prophet. Again, Agamben weaves together the philosophical strands:

> If in Neoplatonic and Stoic pneumatology *pneuma* and phantasy frequently appear assimilated in a singular convergence, in the *De insomniis* of Synesius they are fused without residue in the idea of a 'phantastic spirit' (*phantastikon pneuma*), the subject of sensation, dreams, divination, and divine influences, in whose sign the exaltation of the phantasy as mediator between corporeal and incorporeal, rational and irrational, human and divine, is accomplished. (93)

Pneuma—here connected to divination—is a breathing space where the material world and the poet's visionary world coincide. Walter Pagel, in his history of Paracelsian physiology and alchemy, points to Stoicism as a philosophical current that emphasized matter's "ambivalent" nature: "In Stoicism also emphasis had been laid on the ambivalent—neither corporeal nor spiritual—character of 'Prime Matter'" (Pagel 84).[4] Elizabeth Drury, who was matter perfected when alive, herself embodies this ambivalence. Stoic materialism's ambivalence, again, allows for spiritual and corporeal to coincide without opposition.[5] The difference between body and soul becomes vapor thin in "The Funerall Elegie":

> One, whose cleare body was so pure, and thin,
> Because it neede disguise no thought within.
> T'was but a through-light scarfe, her minde t'enroule,
> Or exhalation breath'd out from her soule. (59-62)[6]

When Donne writes of Drury's death in *The First Anniversarie* that "the worlds subtilst immateriall parts / Feele this consuming wound" (247-48), he describes a global soul-sickness that cuts across the material and immaterial divide: "immateriall parts" behave like matter, susceptible to corruption. These moments run against the grain that superficially opposes body and soul in the *Anniversary* poems.

Further, in the *Anniversary* poems, matter's ambivalent nature is expressed through poetry itself. At the end of *The First Anniversarie*, Donne claims that poetry has a "middle nature," neither body nor soul:

> Nor could incomprehensiblenesse deterre
> Me, from thus trying to emprison her.

> Which when I saw that a strict graue could do,
> I saw not why verse might not doe so too.
> Verse hath a middle nature: heauen keepes soules,
> The graue keeps bodies, verse the fame enroules. (469-74)

Both *Anniversary* poems end with the poet commenting on his own work as a poetic maker. *The First Anniversarie* establishes poetry as a special kind of matter that cannot be equated entirely with either bodies or souls. The closing "Proclamation" lines of *The Second Anniversarie* recast both poems as the work of a poet-prophet. Inspired, poetic praise thus inhabits a pneumatic in-between space, restricted neither to the raw matter of a grave nor the wholly spiritual. The poet-prophet praises "Shee, of whom th'Auncients seem'd to prophesie" (175) with this intermediary poetic matter.

3. Fire in the Lungs

The pneumatics I am proposing for the *Anniversary* poems also evolve out of the multiple meanings of *pneuma* or *spiritus* in the early modern period, including its Christian theological versions centered on the Holy Spirit. Stoic *pneuma* could be coupled with the idea of a Holy Spirit or *spiritus*, which again appeared as a mix of air and fire in prophetic speech. Donne could think between the classical material substance of *pneuma* and the New Testament event of glossolalia. In a sermon given on Whitsunday (Acts 10:44, "While Peter yet spake these words the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word"), the anniversary of Pentecost, Donne explains the significance of the Spirit that falls: "But Cecidit, He fell, so, as that he possessed them, enwrapped them, invested them with a penetrating, with a powerfull force; And so, he fell upon them All" (*Sermons* 5: 53). The falling Spirit here sounds like a Platonic theory of *furor poeticus*, and the scene alludes to a Biblical passage that emphasizes fire and air (Acts 2).[7]

Donne's vision needs this version of air and fire, even if his hyperbolic praise describes the elements as raw, disordered matter in *The*

First Anniversarie's anatomy: "For Ayre, and Fire but thicke grosse bodies were, / And liueliest stones but drowsie, and pale to her" (367-68). Air and fire appear again as the poet reckons with the suddenly unbalanced elements in *The Second Anniversarie*:

> Haue not all soules thought
> For many ages, that our body'is wrought
> Of Ayre, and Fire, and other Elements?
> And now they thinke of new ingredients. (263-66)

Considering the competing materialisms available in Donne's cultural moment, these "ingredients" could be Paracelsian salt, sulphur, or mercury; they could also be Epicurean atoms. Pneumatic inspiration, however, mixing monism with glossolalia, was one way to reconcile this collapse of elemental materialism's coherence and affirm a unified creative energy to which visionary poetry could be attuned.

In *The Second Anniversarie*, the speaker detours from hyperbolic praise to contemplate infected lungs. In this moment, before Donne becomes a trumpet blowing *pneuma,* he imagines a coughing fit: "And for the putrid stuffe, which thou dost spit, / Knowst thou how thy lungs have attracted it?" (273-74). Donne emphasizes the materiality of air in the lungs through this vivid, if gross, physiological mystery. The mystery is how "stuffe" could come out of the lungs without an obvious way for it to get into them in the first place. Although this mystery is supposed to be irrelevant and blindly worldly, the fact that the mystery is biological and focused on the lungs makes it stand out in a poem about the physical world and a divinely inspired creation (both Drury and the poem itself about her). Donne uses the infected lungs as an example of the "piercing of substances" (276), where matter collides and substances mix. This line is the most Stoic moment in the poem, as Herbert Grierson notes: "this actual penetration of one substance by another was the Stoic as opposed to the Aristotelian doctrine of mixture of substance" (273). Lungs, then, are a place where Stoic concepts, like monism, are tested.

In the process, a constellation forms out of literal breath, inspired poetry, and contested materialisms. Lungs are physical: they emit

"stuff" and they draw together language and air, intellect, and element. Helkiah Crooke's physiology offers an etymology connecting the term *pneuma* to the body: "The Lungs which are the instruments both of the voice and also of respiration, the Grecians cal *Pneumones*, because of the reception of the ayre which they call *pneuma*, or from a word which signifieth breath, for by breathing inward they drawe ayre, and by breathing outward doe put it foorth againe" (Crooke 384). In Crooke's physiological definition, *pneuma* is about air, breath, and language. Lungs are the poet's instruments and the literal conduits of inspiration.

In *The Second Anniversarie*, Donne asks his readers to meditate on their own last breaths: "Thinke thy selfe laboring now with broken breath, / And thinke those broken and soft Notes to bee / Diuision, and thy happiest Harmonee" (90-92). Thus, in the *Anniversary* poems, poetic creativity emerges out of decomposition or entropy at death; the broken breath alternates with harmonious exhalation, like the "exhalation breath'd out from her soule" (62) in "A Funerall Elegie." Drury's body made of breath here fits the *Anniversaries*' pattern of undoing strict divisions between body and soul, while reinforcing matter's fundamental ambivalence.

4. Donne's Trumpet and Orpheus's Lute

The poem that ends with the poet turned into an instrument of God begins with another instrument played by the air. This version of *afflatus* appears at the beginning of *The Second Anniversarie*, when a lute plays itself as its strings crack:

> Or as a Lute, which in moist weather, rings
> Her knell alone, by cracking of her strings.
> So strugles this dead world, now shee is gone;
> For there is motion in corruption. (19-22)

These lines' harmony is uncanny, sounding out of thin air as they describe decay. Donne here evokes, if indirectly, the lute-playing

archetypal inspired poet Orpheus, who travels to the land of the dead and who continues to sing after his own death. The Orphic emblem recalls Sidney's association of Orpheus with devotional poetry: "the learned Emanuel Tremellius and Franciscus Junius do entitle the poetical part of the Scripture. Against these none will speak that hath the Holy Ghost in due holy reverence. In this kind, though in a full wrong divinity, were Orpheus, Amphion, Homer in his Hymns, and many other, both Greeks and Romans" (86). Of course, "corruption" seems to be the antithesis of praise and permanence. But the lute's chord is struck by the atmosphere, by air, which allows the instrument to be played without a human actor in the scene. The atmospheric *pneuma* that surrounds and inhabits everything—in Cicero's summary of *pneuma*, it is connected to meteorology (*On the Nature of Gods* 2.19)—strikes the chord. *Pneuma* is atmospheric; it is inhaled, it passes through things, animates them, like air blown through a trumpet. Drury, who confounds the difference between material and immaterial, is the same force as the atmosphere that hauntingly plays a lute.

The poet too can be something like the lute played by the atmosphere. Drury is the divinely inspired speech that runs through the poet-prophet: "Thou art the Proclamation; and I ame / The Trumpet, at whose voice the people came" (527-28). Certainly, at one level of interpretation, Donne asks readers to recognize the difference between the worldly lute and the heavenly *afflatus* of the trumpet. But these two figures of inspiration still harmonize with each other, and readers can also learn to sense the affinity between them. The physical phenomena that seem corrupt and affect the lute are not of an entirely different order to the spiritual vision of Drury as trumpeted proclamation. The "accident" that makes sounds becomes a "permanent" thing: a prophetic proclamation. Like the lute, the poet is played by an inhuman force, and the poem that results continues to sound without him. The divinity was (and is) in the air all along. Similarly, the anatomy of the world and the progress of the soul harmonize with each other. Although matter is explicitly corruptible in *The First Anniversarie* and abandoned in *The Second Anniversarie*, the two poems' shared

poetic matter is an incorruptible, material substance. And in both poems, Donne is the visionary poet-prophet, arriving at this persona by embracing poetic matter.

At the conclusion of *The First Anniversarie*, Donne answers his own question: "What Artist now dares boast that he can bring / Heauen hither, or constellate any thing[?]" (391-92). Donne, who understood rarified air to become fire, was the artist who could recognize the heat of the stars within his own lungs, and who could reignite the element of fire that had been "quite put out" (206). A modern commentator on Stoicism explains: "This identification of the creative fire of the aether with the creative heat of animate bodies was a Stoic concept (adapted from Aristotle)" (Lapidge 108).[8] The *Anniversary* poems bring the creative heat of the stars back to earth, balancing the potentially destructive force that had burned itself out. Reigniting the element of fire—in a way that does not oppose it to spirit—becomes a path toward visionary poetics.

Adding another context to this concept of celestial fire, Charles Webster explains Paracelsus' intellectual background: "One of the central ideas of the German mystics was the existence of a glimmer of fire (*seelenfunke, seelenfunklein*) in the soul, which was ignited by genuine religious experience" (137). This is a physicist's explanation of spiritual insight: divine illumination throws heat. To feel inspired is to be ignited but also to become sensitized to the body's innate heat. Again, Stoic *pneuma* could be aligned with Christian devotion in a mingling of the spiritual and the material that was available to Donne. And, for a poet, the glimmer of fire that comes with religious experience also recalls the line from Ovid's *Fasti* that Spenser quotes in his mini-treatise on inspired poetics in "October" from *The Shepheardes Calender*: "There is a god within us. It is when he stirs us that our bosom warms; it is his impulse that sows the seeds of inspiration" (96).

In the *Anniversary* Poems, Donne is as visionary as a poet like Edmund Spenser. Donne's path to what *The Shepherdes Calendar* calls "celestiall inspiration," and to a hyperbolic vision of Elizabeth Drury,

starts with the matter of breath, a pneumatics that holds together air and fire, the stuff of lungs and stars. This seventeenth-century devotional vision draws on ancient Stoicism's monism, and illustrates how Donne's prophetic poetics evoked an old strand of fundamentally biological, materialist thought, while also intersecting with the latest debates in the natural sciences.

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NOTES

[1]All references to the *Anniversaries* cite *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, vol. 6.

[2]Lewalski elaborates: "The speaker's characterization of himself as Trumpet calling the people to hear the Lord's proclamation, Elizabeth, alludes generally to the biblical metaphor of the prophet as trumpet of the Lord, blasted by inspiration and proclaiming God's will to the people (Judges 6:34, Ezekiel 33:3-5, 32). It alludes more specifically to the special responsibility and privilege of the priests under the Law to blow trumpets to assemble the congregation for war and for various civic functions, and also to solemnize feasts and celebrations" (277-78).

[3]This version of *pneuma* can be traced back to fragments from Chryssipius and other early Stoics and circulated in part through Cicero's *De natura deorum*. Importantly, it was also made available in the early seventeenth century through Justus Lipsius's translations of Seneca, including his *Physiologia Stoicorum* (1604). See Barker and Goldstein, Cooper; and Toulmin and Goodfield.

[4]Paracelsian materialism was one of the systems that disrupted traditional fourfold elemental materialism by substituting a triad of salt, sulphur, and mercury—the latter identified with *pneuma*—as the building blocks of the physical world. For a detailed account of Donne's relationship to Paracelsian physiology, see Fletcher.

[5]For an account of Donne's non-dualist approach to the body and soul, see Targoff, *John Donne: Body and Soul*.

[6]The reference is to the edition by Shawcross.

[7]Jean Calvin's commentary on Acts 2 further explains the interaction of fire and air: "The doctrine of the gospel did not only sound in the air, but pierce into the minds of men, and did fill them with an heavenly heat (and burning)" (76).

[8]He elaborates: "For the earliest Stoics (Zeno and Cleanthes) the godhead was regarded as equivalent to the fiery aether, the creative fire which is the substance

of the sun and stars (in distinction to terrestial fire, which is destructive)" (Lapidge 100).

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