What Is ‘the Breath of Our Nostrils’? *Ruach* and *Neshamah* in John Donne’s 1622 Gunpowder Day Sermon

Patrick Gray

In the early seventeenth century, as fragile religious pluralism on the Continent degenerated into all-encompassing, international sectarian conflict, and England itself lurched rapidly towards what would become a civil war, John Donne found himself engaged in high-stakes domestic peace-making between the Crown and restive Puritans. With fellow Calvinists under threat in Bohemia, Protestant nationalists proved increasingly unwilling to accept King James’s protracted efforts to secure Infanta Maria Anna of Spain, a Habsburg and a Catholic, as a wife for his son Charles, the English heir apparent.

Correspondence between Englishmen at the time, as well as reports from foreign diplomats, give a picture of a nation on the verge of open rebellion. As Thomas Cogswell observes, ‘Never before in James’s reign had a single political issue so deeply divided the kingdom’.¹ Sermons, in particular, proved occasions for public protest. In April of 1622, John

P. Gray (✉)

Department of English Studies, Durham University, Durham, UK

Knight preached a sermon at Oxford that could be construed as arguing in favour of the assassination of tyrannical monarchs, in keeping with emerging Huguenot theories of a right to resist political suppression of the Reformation. Knight was arrested and his books burnt, but James remained alarmed. A Protestant version of the 1605 Gunpowder Plot was no longer an unthinkable prospect.²

On 4 August 1622, in a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury, James issued *Directions concerning Preachers*, setting out strict limits to what the Crown would thenceforth allow as the content of sermons. No preacher 'under the degree of a Bishopp or deane (at the least)' was henceforth to 'presume to preache in any popular auditory the deepe poynts of *Predestinac[i]on Election Reprobac[i]on* or of the *universality Efficacity Resistability or Irresistability of gods grace*', but instead was directed to 'leave theise themes to be handled by learned men', 'as being fitter for the Schooles & universities than for simple auditories'. 'Noe preacher', moreover, 'of what title or denominac[i]on soever' was henceforth to 'fall into any bitter Invectives & undecent rayleinge speeches against the persons of either Papists or Puritanes'. Above all, 'no preacher of what title or denominac[i]on soever' was henceforth to 'presume ... to declare, limit, or bound out ... the power prerogative jurisdic[ci]on Authority or Duty of Sovereigne princes, or otherwise meddle with theise matters of State'.³

Despite the unpopularity of James's foreign policy, Donne had reason to feel indebted to the king. As a younger man, an intellectual prodigy with a taste for libertine poetry, Donne seems to have dreamed of a career in civil service, perhaps as a diplomat on the Continent. As the son of Catholic recusants, such a position would have allowed him to avoid awkward questions about the precise nature of his own theological commitments. These hopes for a secular future overseas were dashed, however, when he eloped with his patron's niece. Following many years of unemployment, Donne finally took Holy Orders only after repeated encouragement from James, as well as what seems to have been a crisis of conscience.⁴ The king was also instrumental in his appointment to the Deanship of St Paul's.

By royal command, Donne gave an initial sermon in defence of James's *Directions* at St Paul's on 15 September 1622. Contemporary accounts reveal great anticipation of the event among his contemporaries, as well as some measure of approval afterwards, although one, at least, John Chamberlain, reports in a private letter that Donne 'gave no great satisfaction, or as some say spake as yf himself were not so well satisfied'.⁵ James for his

part was delighted; he praised the sermon as 'a piece of such perfection as could admit neither addition nor diminution' and recommended publication.⁶ Hoping, perhaps, for an even more spectacular encore, James then asked Donne to preach a second such sermon at St Paul's on 5 November 1622: Gunpowder Day.

At liberty to choose his own text for the occasion, Donne singled out a cryptic verse from Lamentations: 'The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the Lord, was taken in their pits' (4:20). Although the passage today may seem obscure, the choice in its original context is well-informed and artful, allowing Donne room for Janus-like equivocation. As his audience was keenly aware, whether the phrase in Lamentations, 'the anointed of the Lord', refers to a good king, Josiah, or a bad king, Zedekiah, was at the time a notorious textual crux. The Geneva Bible glosses 'the anointed' as Josiah; Calvin in his commentary as Zedekiah.

The phrase 'the breath of our nostrils' in Donne's chosen text, an allusion to Genesis 2:7, introduces yet another deep-rooted enigma. What does 'breath' refer to here, metaphorically speaking? Like St Augustine's exposition of Genesis 2:7 in his *Commentary on Genesis against the Manichees*, Donne's learned exposition of Lamentations 4:20 rests on fine distinctions between 'breath,' 'soul', and 'spirit' in the languages of Scripture: *neshamah* vs *nepesh* vs *ruach* (Hebrew); *pnoē* vs *psychē* vs *pneuma* (Greek).

In sum, as Donne seems to have intended, making sense of his argument in this high-stakes, highly visible sermon, much less his own theological and political commitments, is no easy task. Following his reasoning requires understanding, not only several scholarly disputes, but also what Donne's audience at St Paul's would have been likely to perceive as at stake in the possible resolution of these controversies. Before turning to the nub of the matter, to wit, whether hot Protestants should obey a king who was seeming cooler by the day, Donne works through and dismisses several less obviously topical debates which then serve as precedents.

Is Lamentations a history or a prophecy? Does Lamentations 4:20 refer to Josiah or to Zedekiah? Does the word 'pits' in this verse refer to a grave, a prison, or a pitfall? Does the circumlocution 'the breath of our nostrils' in Genesis 2:7, as well as Lamentations 4:20, refer to human breath, to the soul, or to God himself, as the Holy Spirit? Throughout Donne's sermon, these and other recondite, seemingly harmless brainteasers serve as proxies for more pressing, obviously

political, and dangerously provocative questions that he is reluctant to approach more directly.

Is James more like Josiah or Zedekiah, that is to say, is he a good king or a bad king? Is the Protestant Reformation in England analogous to the destruction of Jerusalem described in Lamentations, or should the contemporary resonance of Lamentations be re-imagined with the Catholic Church in the role of Babylon? Finally, and most importantly, just how closely is King James's authority to be identified with that of God himself? In terms of the two rival meanings of 'the breath of our nostrils', is he more like *ruach* or like *neshamah*? In each case, Donne works assiduously not so much to resolve the controversy as to complicate it beyond repair, so that in the end, he can wave it aside as unimportant.

James himself did not attend Donne's sermon at St Paul's Cross, but he did commission a scribal copy, which Donne corrected in his own hand before sending on.⁷ No intellectual slouch in matters theological, and a man of much stronger opinions, James seems to have been, insofar as we can tell, altogether less pleased with Donne's second, more ambiguous defence of his *Directions*. No record of any subsequent royal praise has been found, and no recommendation of publication either, which, Jeanne Shami speculates, 'may indicate his less than enthusiastic reception'. 'After 5 November', Shami notes, 'we find no more special commissions for Donne in the pulpit. Nor is Donne promoted either by James or by Charles to the bishopric that the "absolutist" reading of his politics predicts'.⁸

Izaak Walton's seventeenth-century life of Donne emphasizes the role of divine providence in guiding a man of manifest genius towards Protestantism.⁹ Reacting against Walton's quasi-hagiography, twentieth-century biographers R. C. Bald and John Carey proposed a rival vision of Donne as a calculating careerist whose conversion to the Church of England was motivated less by any genuine change of heart than by the mercenary impulse of worldly ambition.¹⁰ This sense of Donne as concerned above all with patronage and advancement was then taken up by critics in the 1980s such as Jonathan Goldberg as an explanation for his sermons in defence of the absolutism of James I.¹¹

In the 1990s, critics such as David Norbrook and Annabel Patterson, as well as Shami, began to question this revisionist account of Donne's life and motives.¹² Dennis Flynn, for example, shows that Donne 'behaved without much ambition in the early years of the reign of James I,' even turning down several attractive offers of employment.¹³ Annabel

Patterson draws attention to his close friendships with parliamentarians strongly opposed to James's efforts to consolidate power.¹⁴ Richard Strier mocks the idea of an 'oppositional' Donne; even Strier, however, sees Donne's service to the established church and state as a matter of 'principled loyalty,' rather than status-driven 'toadying'.¹⁵

As Achsah Guibbory explains, 'critical disagreement has centered on the question of what Donne's position was in the 1620s, when the English church was the site of escalating religious conflict that would eventually lead to civil war'.¹⁶ Still more specifically, the focus of the controversy remains still today Donne's two sermons in 1622 justifying James's *Directions*, which Norbook concedes have become 'notorious', and Strier describes more vividly as 'quite a camel for the oppositionists to swallow'.¹⁷ One appealing compromise between these two camps is Arthur Marotti's more recent emphasis on what he identifies as Donne's 'obvious ambivalence'. Donne was 'sometimes ill at ease with the role of official apologist', he observes, 'both before and after his appointment as dean of St Paul's'. His defence of James's edict is fascinating because it is 'at odds with itself'.¹⁸

In the case of Donne's Gunpowder Day sermon, such doublemindedness is especially pronounced. Starting straightaway with his choice of text, Donne seems to move at times in two opposite directions at once. 'The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the Lord, was taken in their pits / Of whom we said, Under his shadow we shall live among the heathen': for Donne, this passage would have been more than usually familiar. He translated the entirety of Lamentations into poetry on more than one occasion, working from the Latin version of Tremellius, a convert from Judaism to Protestantism. In his own translation, Donne writes:

Th' anointed lord, breath of our nostrils, he
Of whom we said, under his shadow we
Shall with more ease under the heathen dwell,
Into the pit which these men digged, fell.¹⁹

'Pits' becomes more clearly here a pitfall; otherwise, however, Donne sticks remarkably close to his source. The poem, moreover, seems to be his only translation directly from Scripture. Given Donne's praise for the Sidney translation of the Psalms, Graham Roebuck finds himself compelled to wonder 'why he completed only one such exercise'.²⁰

Then again, Donne's singular interest in Lamentations may not be entirely surprising. As John Klause lays out in some detail, for Elizabethan Catholics such as Donne's family, the prophet Jeremiah's description of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians held a special resonance. 'Bare, ruined Jerusalem was, simply, Catholic England'.²¹ In the 1580s and 1590s, the recusant composer William Byrd, for example, wrote numerous motets grieving for '*Sion ... deserta*' and '*Ierusalem ... deserta*'. Donne signals his departure from this tradition by foregrounding in a subtitle that his source is Tremellius, a Protestant, rather than the Catholic Vulgate. In his Gunpowder Day sermon, Donne casts Catholics in the role of Babylonians and his fellow Protestants as imperilled Jews.²²

For contemporary Protestants, interest in Lamentations arose more immediately out of a different tradition of politicized interpretation. As Graeme Murdock explains, 'Many Calvinists found the life of King Josiah to be an excellent model for contemporary magistrates'.²³ Josiah was responsible for what is now sometimes known as the Deuteronomic Reform, a set of thorough-going changes to the practice of worship in Judah inspired by the high priest Hilkiah's discovery of 'a book of the law of the Lord given by Moses', presumably, the Book of Deuteronomy, during a renovation of the Temple of Solomon (2 Chron. 34:14).

In the second Book of Kings, when Josiah hears this 'book of the law of the Lord' read to him, he tears his clothes and proclaims, 'Great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book'. Calling the people of Judah together, 'he read in their ears all the words of the book of the covenant which was found in the house of the Lord' (2 Kings 22:13, 23:2). We might compare here Donne's description of King James in his Gunpowder Day sermon as 'a most perfect Text-man, in the Book of God' (4:256). Seized with renewed religious zeal, Josiah purged the Temple of Solomon of 'all the vessels' dedicated to the worship of anything other than Yahweh, destroyed all sites of pagan worship throughout Judah, and banished or killed all 'idolatrous priests' (2 Kings 23:3–24; cf. 2 Chron. 24:2).

In the sixteenth century, following the death of Henry VIII, Protestants such as Thomas Cranmer, Hugh Latimer, and Martin Bucer cited Josiah in particular, anointed king of Judah at the age of eight, as an illustration of their hopes for his successor, Edward VI, crowned at the age of nine, and England's first monarch to have been raised as a Protestant. Calvin himself wrote to Edward from Geneva to second their opinion.²⁴

For John Knox and the other authors of the 1560 Scots Confession of Faith, the example of Josiah shows that kings are 'not only appointed for civil government but also to maintain true religion and to suppress all idolatry and superstition'.²⁵

The story of Josiah encapsulates what contemporary English Protestants hoped for from James. In contrast to Edward VI, however, James I seemed to them more like Josiah's successor, the bad king Zedekiah, who 'did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord his God, and humbled not himself before Jeremiah the prophet speaking from the mouth of the Lord'. Following his example, 'all the chief of the priests, and the people, transgressed very much after all the abominations of the heathen; and polluted the house of the Lord which he had hallowed in Jerusalem' (2 Chron. 36:12, 14). Against Jeremiah's advice, Zedekiah led a rebellion against Babylonian rule which resulted in disaster. King Nebuchadnezzar razed Jerusalem to the ground, including the Temple, and took many of its people back to Babylon as slaves. Zedekiah himself was caught attempting to flee and carried off to life imprisonment.

Lamentations mourns the loss of one of these kings, but which one? Zedekiah or Josiah? And is this king the same king whom Jeremiah describes as 'the anointed of the Lord' in the specific verse Donne singles out? As Donne explains at the outset of his sermon, in the second Book of Chronicles we learn that after the death of King Josiah, '*Jeremy lamented for Josiah, and all the people speake of him, in their Lamentations*' (4:240; cf. 2 Chron. 35:25). By this light, Donne proposes, the 'anointed of the Lord' may be taken to refer to Josiah, 'for so Saint *Hierome*, and many of the *Ancients*, and many of the Jewes themselves take it' (4:240).²⁶ But not everyone would agree. Calvin, in particular singles out Jerome as 'grossly mistaken' for thinking that the Book of Lamentations is 'the Elegy which Jeremiah composed on the death of Josiah'.²⁷

The Geneva Bible of 1560, which had been displaced by the Bishops' Bible of 1568, followed by the authorized translation of 1611, now known as the King James Version, glosses Lamentations 4:20 as referring to Josiah. As Donne concedes, however, in his 1622 sermon, it is 'more ordinarily, and more probably held by the Expositours' to refer to 'the transportation and the misery of an ill King, of *Zedekiah*' (4:240). 'This verse has been ignorantly applied to Josiah, who fell in battle long before the fall of the city', Calvin insists, and 'cannot be understood except of King Zedekiah'. 'He had fled by a hidden way into the desert, and he thought that he had escaped from the hands of his enemies; but he was

soon seized, and brought to king Nebuchadnezzar. As, then, he had unexpectedly fallen into the hands of his enemies, rightly does the Prophet say metaphorically, that he was taken in their snares'.²⁸

Throughout the sermon, Donne minimizes the importance of the identity of the king in question, Josiah or Zedekiah, and instead emphasizes his status as 'the anointed of the Lord', as well as, especially, Jeremiah's description of him as 'the breath of our nostrils'. 'We argue not, we dispute not now,' Donne insists; 'we imbrace that which arises from both, That both good Kings, and bad Kings, *Josiah* and *Zedekiah*, are the *anointed* of the Lord, and the *breath of the nostrils*, that is, The life of the people' (4:240). The phrase itself, 'the life of people', reveals the likely influence of the gloss on this passage in the base text for the King James Bible, the 1602 edition of the Bishops' Bible. Unlike the Geneva Bible, which specifies that 'breath' here refers to Josiah, the Bishops' Bible is more ambiguous: 'the breath' is 'the lyfe, meaning the king, who is called the lyfe of the people, for that the people are like an headlesse body that hath no lyfe in it, when they be left without a king or governour'.

What does it mean, however, to say that the king is '*Spiritus narium*', that is, '*the breath of our nostrills*'? In keeping with Genesis 2:7, which it cites as precedent, the gloss in the Bishops' Bible suggests a relatively mundane interpretation. Breath as 'lyfe', comparable to a human head, corresponds to the Hebrew *neshamah* (cp. Greek *pneuma*, 'breath'). Donne, however, chooses a more exalted reading: breath as the Hebrew *ruach* (cp. Greek *psychē*, 'spirit'), which he identifies with God. Later in the sermon, Donne walks back this line of argument. But it is striking here, not least as an extravagant compliment to James.

'First', Donne argues, '*Spiritus*' refers to the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. 'He is called by this Name, by the word of this Text, *Ruach*, even in the beginning of the Creation, God had created Heaven and Earth, and then *The Spirit of God*, *sufflabat*, saith *Pagnins* translation, (and so saith the *Chaldee Paraphrast* too) it *breathed upon the waters*' (4:252).²⁹ 'The Attribute of the Holy Ghost and his Office, which is, to apply to man the goodnesse of God, belongs to Kings also; for, God gives, but they [that is, kings] apply all blessings to us'. King James is like the Holy Spirit insofar, in particular, as he 'moves upon *the waters*, by his royall and warlike *Navy at Sea* (in which he hath expressed a speciall and particular care)' (4:252).

As the Bishops' Bible notes in its gloss, Lamentations 4:20 alludes to Genesis 2:7: 'the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and

breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.' Omitting all mention of Genesis 2:7, however, at least for the moment, Donne turns instead to Genesis 1:2: 'the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters'. He also cites a 1528 Latin translation, Sante Paganini's, esteemed for its literal translation of the Hebrew, which allows him to translate the Hebrew verb *לעִתְּפָהֶם* (*al-marahaefeth*; *lit.*, 'hovering over, brooding over') that the King James version translates as 'moved' as 'breathed' (Latin, *sufflabat*) instead, emphasizing the connection to literal breath. Part of the rationale behind this decision is that the Hebrew term typically translated in English as 'spirit,' רוּחַ (*lit.*, 'wind'), that Donne transliterates as *ruach*, and that appears in Lamentations 4:20, as well as Genesis 1:2, is not the same as the Hebrew term הֶקֶשֶׁן (*lit.*, 'breath') that Donne transliterates as *neshamah* and that appears in Genesis 2:7.

How much Hebrew did John Donne know? Judith Scherer Herz notes that Donne frequently translates and explains single Hebrew words throughout his sermons. Anthony Raspa, by contrast, points out that 'literally all of Donne's references to past and present Hebrew writers are to the Latin translations of German, Italian, and Spanish translators'.³⁰ Borrowing Matt Goldish's concept of a 'third-order Hebraist', Chanita Goodblatt makes a convincing case for some truth to both perspectives: Donne was someone 'who could read *some* Hebrew, but who knew and used significant amounts of Jewish literature in Latin and vernacular translation'.³¹ In this case, Donne seems likely to have known enough about Hebrew to know that the difference between *ruach* and *neshamah* is theologically significant.

Briefly put, the crux of the contrast between the two terms has to do with agency. *Ruach*, like wind, comes from without. *Neshamah*, like breath, comes from within. This distinction is not as pronounced in post-exilic Hebrew, but nonetheless still apparent. Part of what can make it difficult to grasp for English speakers is not only the evolution of biblical Hebrew, however, wherein figurative language gradually weakens the force of the original distinction, but also the assumption throughout the Old Testament that strong emotions can be understood, like madness, as more closely analogous to wholly external forces such as the weather or divine providence than to actions such as speech or internal deliberation that we today tend to see as more susceptible to our own individual control. As H. Wheeler Robinson explains, the term *ruach* 'was originally applied both to the "blowing" of the wind and to the "blowing" or

panting of men and animals in distress or excitement'. Thus, it became by extension 'strong passion (anger, zeal, impatience)'.³²

In his sermon, Donne initially translates *neshamah* in contrast to *ruach* as 'the *soule*, the immortal *soule*' (4:256). This translation, however, is questionable. Notably, Donne departs here from standard contemporary practices of English translation. In the Geneva Bible, the Bishops' Bible, and the King James Bible, the word used to translate *ruach* is indeed 'spirit', in keeping with the Septuagint, which uses πνεῦμα (*pneuma*; *cp.* Latin, *spiritus*). The English word 'soul', however, is used to translate a different Hebrew term, נֶפֶשׁ (*nepesh*), again in keeping with the Septuagint, which uses a different Greek term, ψυχή (*psychē*; *cp.* Latin, *anima*).

In the Geneva Bible, the Bishops' Bible, and the King James Bible, as well as Patristic commentary, the Hebrew term *neshamah* is typically translated not as 'soul' but as 'breath'. In his commentary on Genesis 2:7 in his *City of God*, St Augustine, in particular, takes pains to emphasize that in the Septuagint, *neshamah* is translated as πνοή (*pnoē*; *cp.* Latin, *spiraculum*, in the Vulgate; *flatum*, in Tremellius) rather than *pneuma*.³³ Donne himself eventually suggests that *neshamah* might be better translated as 'temporal life,' rather than 'soul' (4:256). The closer equivalent in Hebrew, however, of this concept, 'temporal life', would be *nepesh*.

Whereas the primitive, concrete, site-specific definition of *ruach* is 'wind', and *neshamah*, 'breath', the original meaning of *nepesh* is 'throat' or perhaps 'gullet'. As Paul MacDonald explains, 'A further meaning is 'desire or longing', that is, to satisfy the need for food, drink, or air taken in through the throat'.³⁴ By extension, over time, *nepesh* comes to mean something like life itself. As Horst Seebass puts it, *nepesh* is not 'simply 'life', however, 'but rather the individuation of life'.³⁵ MacDonald clarifies the distinction: 'An individual does not *have* a *nepesh* in the sense of a separate or separable possession; rather, an individual *is* a *nepesh*'.³⁶ This soul or self, moreover, seems to be seen in the Old Testament as inseparable from embodiment; especially, breathing.³⁷ *Nepesh* is like what Aristotle means by *psychē*: a form that can be separated from matter only in concept.

In his commentary on Genesis against the Manichaeans, St Augustine compares human beings to mud. 'Just as water,' he explains, 'collects earth and sticks and holds it together when mud is made by mixing it in, so too the soul by animating the material of the body shapes it into a harmonious unity, and does not permit it to fall apart into its constituent

elements'.³⁸ In his second sermon on Genesis 1:26, Donne cites and agrees with this commentary of St Augustine's and offers a further elaboration, drawn from the *Thesaurus* of St Cyril of Alexandria. As the soul is the form of the body, so also the image of God is the form of the human soul. 'This Image is in our soule, as our soule is the wax, and this Image is the seale' (9:79).³⁹

St Cyril's choice of metaphor recalls, not coincidentally, Aristotle's in his *De anima* ('On the soul'), where he dismisses the possibility that the soul could be separated from the body: 'one need no more ask whether body and soul are one than whether the wax and the impression it receives are one'.⁴⁰ In addition to Aristotle's more familiar categories of form and matter, and in keeping with the elaborate hierarchies of form characteristic of Neo-Platonism, St Cyril's adaptation of this conceit introduces, in effect, a further layer of existence, the image of God, which stands in relation to form as form does to matter.⁴¹

Turning back to Donne's 1622 Gunpowder Day sermon, an analogous sense of simultaneous differentiation and entanglement seems to inform Donne's description of the relation between spirit (*ruach*) and breath (*neshamah*). As a lower category in the 'chain of being', so to speak, *neshamah* is presented as inseparable from *ruach*, albeit distinct. Donne not only mistranslates *neshamah* as 'soul', however, rather than as 'breath', but also equivocates on its relation to *ruach*. Are these two concepts different or the same?

Donne begins his exposition of the phrase 'the breath of our nostrils' by comparing King James to *ruach* in the sense of the Holy Spirit, that is, God himself, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. As the sermon goes on, however, Donne backs away from this flattering gloss, probably because he knows it is tenuous at best and at worst a flagrant departure from longstanding interpretive consensus. 'We carry not this word *Ruach*, Spirit, so high'. Instead, Donne proposes, he will 'take the word literally, as it is in the text [*sc.* in Lamentations 4:20]; *Ruach*, spirit, is the *Breath* that *we breathe*, the *Life* that *we live*'. 'The King', Donne maintains, 'is that *Breath*, that *Life*, and therefore that belongs to him' (4:252).

Here at last we arrive at the core of Donne's argument, which he takes up thereafter as a preacherly refrain. King James, he insists, 'is our *Breath*; *our Breath is his*' (4:253). As in the case of contemporary doctrines of predestination, the logic here remains, however, somewhat elusive. Donne's case rests, in effect, on a conflation of what would normally be considered two very different types of possession. Is my breath the

king's in the sense that his own breath is, or his hand, or his foot? If so, then what need to exhort me to obey him? Or, contrariwise, if I am, by contrast, capable of independent agency, in what sense am I his?

Donne's argument is in keeping, nonetheless, with a surprisingly sophisticated sense of the relation in the Old Testament between *ruach* and *neshamah*, as well as *nepesh*. As Paul MacDonald explains, whereas *neshamah* means 'the breath of an animal being', *ruach* refers to 'the power or force behind the wind or breath'. 'No human can control the wind; only the divine power of Yahweh can do so; thus, by analogy, it is the breath of God which instills or *inspires* the life-force in living things, though *this* breath (not the animal's breathing) is only observable through its effects'.⁴²

Walter Eichrodt makes a similar observation as regards the relation between *ruach* and *nepesh*. 'If *nepesh* is the individual life in association with a body, *ruach* is the life-force present everywhere and existing independently against the single individual. We might say that the same force is considered from different points of view'. Whereas *nepesh* is 'individual', however, 'and comes to an end with the death of the individual,' '*ruach* is universal, and independent of the death of the creature; it does not die'.⁴³

Was Donne aware of the resonance between his argument and Hebrew assumptions about the relation between 'breath' (*neshamah*) and 'spirit' (*ruach*)? The connection is more likely to have been indirect: an effect of the influence of this connection on the Christian concept of the Holy Spirit. Donne's former naval commander, Sir Walter Raleigh, for example, tackles some of the same concerns in the opening to his *History of the World*. As a young man, Donne travelled with Raleigh to the Azores on an expedition against the Spanish, and it is likely that he would have been familiar with this work, Raleigh's *magnum opus*. Here, after citing a wide range of Christian authorities, Raleigh defines 'the Spirit of God' as 'the infinite active power of God, which then formed and distinguished, and which now sustaineth and giveth continuance to the Universal'.⁴⁴

In any case, howsoever derived, whether directly or indirectly, in his 1622 Gunpowder Day sermon, Donne's core conceit turns out to correspond to a well-informed Jewish sense of the relation between the divine as 'spirit' and the human as 'breath'. As he repeats several times, the king is our breath, and our breath is his. 'First our *Breath*, that is, *sermo*, our *speech* belongs to him' (4:252–53). In fact, the Latin word *sermo* neither itself means 'breath' nor derives from any older word for breath, but

instead from the proto-Indo-European root *ser-, meaning approximately to line up, bind, or join together.⁴⁵ Donne's angle in this first example, however, is not so much etymological as topical. By re-imagining sermons as *sermo*, 'speech', and speech as a form of breath, he is able to connect his chosen text more readily to his commission: a defence of James's *Directions concerning Preachers*.

Following the same through-line of argument, Donne then turns to various other possible definitions of 'breath'. 'Princes' in general 'are our breath'; '*Our breath is theirs*', and 'it is theirs especially, *in our prayers*'. Breath is not only 'speech', but '*Breath is life too, and so our life is his*'. Our lives are the King's, not only to die for him, if need be, but also to 'live for him', in the sense of living '*peaceably*', '*honestly*', and '*industriously*' (4:253–55). Donne then stops short, however. Our bodies may indeed be subject to the Crown. But what about our souls? Here Donne stands on more precarious footing. As Shakespeare's Henry V says, giving voice to a pervasive belief, 'Every subject's duty is the king's; but every subject's soul is his own'.⁴⁶

As if for support at this most delicate juncture, Donne now turns at last to Genesis 2:7. 'When the breath of life was first breathed into man, there it is called by another word, *Neshamah*, and that is the *soule*, the immortall soule'. 'Is the King the breath of that life?' Donne asks. That is to say, 'Is he the soule of his subjects so, as that their *soules* are *his*; so, that as they must sinne *towards men*, in doing unjust actions, or sinne *towards God*, in forsaking, and dishonouring him, if the King will have them?'. James himself, Donne assures his audience, 'would be the first man, that would say, *No, No*; your souls are not mine, so' (4:256). In more straightforward, abstract language, what Donne asserts here is that King James does not claim that his right to demand obedience from his subjects supersedes their more fundamental obligation to revere and worship God, as well as their responsibility to preserve justice in their actions towards each other.

Once again, however, Donne introduces a distinction only to collapse it forthwith. 'He claimes not your souls so', he insists, 'It is *Ruach* here, it is not *Neshamah*; your life is his, your soule is not his, in that sense'. 'But yet, beloved', he goes on,

these two words are promiscuously used in the Scriptures; *Ruach* is often the soule; *Neshamah* is often the temporall life; And thus farre, the one, as well as the other, is the Kings, That hee must answer for your soules; so they are his; for hee is not a King of bodies, but a King of men, bodies and

soules; nor a King of men onely, but of Christian men; so your Religion, so your soules are his; his, that is, appertaining to his care, and his account. (4.256)

Donne's conclusion here builds upon the peculiar nature of his argumentation up until this point. Again and again, Donne invokes a notorious scholarly controversy only to dismiss it as unimportant: whether Lamentations is prophecy or history; whether Lamentations 4:20 refers to Josiah or Zedekiah; whether *ruach* means anything substantively different from *neshamah*. These abstruse, inconclusive inquiries lay the groundwork for his analogous response to the burning political question of the moment: whether James's subjects should obey him with regards to religion.

Therefore, though you owe no obedience to any power under heaven, so as to decline you from the true God, or the true worship of that God, and the fundamentall things thereof, yet in those things, which are, in their nature but circumstantiall, and may therefore, according to times, and places, and persons, admit alterations, in those things, though they bee things appertaining to Religion, submit your selves to his directions; for here, the two words meet, *Ruach*, and *Neshamah*, your lives are his, and your souls are his too; His end being to advance Gods truth, he is to be trusted much, in matters of indifferent nature, by the way. (4:256–57)

In closing, Donne's solution, once again, is to try to minimize the significance of the division in question, drawing this time more explicitly, if only in translation, on the Stoic notion of ἀδιάφορα (*adiaphora*; Greek, 'things indifferent', i.e., ethically irrelevant).⁴⁷

Donne is not simply apologizing for King James, however, by whatever means he can. Instead, his argumentation in this, his most high-profile performance, can be understood as of a piece with his perspective throughout his sermons. As Jeanne Shami observes, Donne consistently rejects 'the rhetorical style of either-or, of separation and division'.⁴⁸ In a 1620 sermon on Matthew 18:17, for example, 'Woe unto the world because of offences', Donne urges his audience 'to detest' the polarizing assumption 'that there is nothing done, if all bee not done; that no abuses are corrected, if all be not removed; that there's an end of all Protestants, if any Papists bee left in the world'. Instead, Donne proposes, 'reduce all to the precious mediocrity' (3:182–83).

Contesting Donne's supposed lack of principle, Joshua Scodel proposes, like Jeanne Shami, that Donne can be better understood as

deliberately and consistently pursuing the *via media* or 'middle course' that since Elizabeth I has come to be considered a defining feature of Anglicanism, even against the current of his historical moment.⁴⁹ In his first sermon preached at St Paul's, for example, Donne proclaims straightaway, 'we decline wranglings, that tend not to edification' (3:365). In his sermon on Matthew 18:17, Donne unabashedly begs his countrymen not to be 'so ombragious, so startling, so apprehensive, so suspicious'. 'Leaving fundamentall things, and necessary truths', he laments, 'we wrangle uncharitably about Collaterall impertinencies' (3:175). Here in his 1622 Gunpowder Day sermon, Donne's dazzling, sometimes dubious argumentation as regards Josiah and Zedekiah, as well as *ruach* and *neshamah*, can be understood by this light as neither unprincipled flattery nor unchecked absolutism, but instead as a paradigmatic example of his lifelong aversion, like Erasmus before him, to rarefied theological polemic as a 'thing indifferent'. For Donne, power politics is not a temptation, but instead an unwelcome distraction from the very different demands of Christian ethics.

NOTES

1. Thomas Cogswell, *The Blessed Revolution: English Politics and the Coming of War, 1621–1624* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 52.
2. Richard Serjeantson, 'Preaching Regicide in Jacobean England: John Knight and David Pareus', *The English Historical Review* 134/568 (2019), 553–88.
3. King James VI and I, *Directions Concerning Preachers*, in *King James VI and I: Selected Writings*, ed. by Neil Rhodes, Jennifer Richards, and Joseph Marshall (New York: Routledge, 2016), 379–84, at 383.
4. Dennis Flynn, 'Donne's Politics, "Desperate Ambition", and Meeting Paolo Sarpi in Venice', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 99/3 (2000), 334–55.
5. John Chamberlain, *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, ed. by Norman Egbert McClure (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1939), 2:451. On the reception of this first sermon on James's *Directions*, see Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Reading and Writing in Early Modern England* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 98–100; Jeanne Shami, *John Donne and Conformity in Crisis in the Late Jacobean Pulpit* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 110–15; and Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 390–92.

6. Recounted by the Earl of Carlisle in a congratulatory letter to Donne; quoted in R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life*, ed. by W. Milgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 435.
7. British Library MS Royal 17.B.XX; reprinted in *John Donne's 1622 Gunpowder Plot Sermon: A Parallel-Text Edition*, ed. by Jeanne Shami (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1996).
8. Jeanne Shami, *Conformity in Crisis*, 204, 138.
9. Izaak Walton, 'The Life of Dr. John Donne', in Walton, *The Lives of Dr. John Donne* [et al.] (London: Thomas Newcomb, 1670), 12–81.
10. Bald, *Life of Donne*, and John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* (London: Faber, 1981).
11. Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983). Cf. Debora K. Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and the Dominant Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).
12. David Norbrook, 'The Monarchy of Wit and the Republic of Letters: Donne's Politics', in *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. by Elizabeth D. Harvey and Katharine Eisaman Maus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and Annabel Patterson, 'Quod oportet versus quod convenit: John Donne, Kingsman?' in Patterson, *Reading Between the Lines* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 157–206.
13. Flynn, 'Donne's Politics', 339.
14. Annabel Patterson, 'All Donne', in *Soliciting Interpretation*, 37–67.
15. Richard Strier, 'Donne and the Politics of Devotion', 94, in *Religion, Literature, Politics in Post-Reformation England, 1540–1688*, ed. by Donna B. Hamilton and Richard Strier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 93–114.
16. Achsah Guibbory, 'Donne's Religion: Montagu, Arminianism, and Donne's Sermons, 1624–1630', *English Literary Renaissance* 31/3 (2001), 412–39, at 413.
17. Norbrook, 'Monarchy of Wit', 22; Strier, 'Politics of Devotion', 94.
18. Arthur Marotti, 'John Donne's Conflicted Anti-Catholicism', *Journal of English and German Philology*, 101/3 (2002), 358–79, at 369; cf. Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation*, 98–100.
19. John Donne, 'The Lamentations of Jeremy', in *John Donne: The Divine Poems*, ed. by Helen Gardner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 35–48, at 46.
20. Graham Roebuck, 'Donne's Lamentations of Jeremy Reconsidered', *John Donne Journal* 10 (1991), 37–44, at 38.
21. John Klaus, 'The Two Occasions of Donne's Lamentations of Jeremy', *Modern Philology* 90/3 (1993), 337–59, at 345.

22. John Donne, 'A Sermon upon the Fifth of November 1622: Being the Anniversary Celebration of our Deliverance from the Powder Treason', in *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. by G. R. Potter and E. M. Simpson, 10 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–1962), 4:235–63, at 239–40.
23. Graeme Murdock, 'The Importance of Being Josiah: An Image of Calvinist Identity', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 29/4 (1998), 1043–59, at 1048.
24. Murdock, 'Josiah', 1047–51.
25. Article 24, citation 5, on 1 Peter 2:14; quoted in Murdock, 'Josiah', 1048.
26. Cf. St Jerome, *Commentary on Zechariah*, 12:11–14.
27. Calvin, 'Preface' to *Commentary on Lamentations*, in *Calvin's Commentaries*, 22 vols (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), vol. 11, *Lamentations*, trans. by John Owen.
28. Calvin, *Commentary on Lamentations*, 4:20.
29. The source that Donne, like Calvin, calls the 'Chaldee paraphrast' is now known as the Targum Onkelos. Cf. Sir Walter Raleigh on Genesis 1:2: 'Some of the Hebrews convert it to this effect, *Spiritus Dei volitabat*: the Spirit of God did flutter; the Chaldaean Paraphrast in this sense, *Ventus à conspectus Dei sufflabat*, or, as others understand the Chaldaean, *Flabat*'. Quoted from Raleigh, *The History of the World in Five Books*, 1.1.6 (London: Thomas Basset, et al., 1687).
30. Anthony Raspa and Judith Scherer Herz, 'Response', *Renaissance and Reformation* 20 (1996), 97–98.
31. Chanita Goodblatt, *The Christian Hebraism of John Donne: Written with the Fingers of Man's Hand* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 22.
32. H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), 17.
33. Augustine, *The City of God*, 8.24.
34. Paul S. MacDonald, *History of the Concept of Mind: Speculations About Soul, Mind and Spirit from Homer to Hume* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 2.
35. Horst Seebass, 'nepesh', in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, 15 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974–90), 9:498–519, at 9:510.
36. MacDonald, *Concept of Mind*, 6.
37. For a thorough review of the scholarly consensus that the Hebrew concept of the self is monist, as well as an argument that it might sometimes nonetheless be considered dualist, see Richard Pleijel, 'To Be or to Have a *nepesh*?' *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 131/2 (2019), 194–206.

38. Augustine, *On Genesis Against the Manichees*, 2.7.9; quoted in Gerald P. Boersma, *Augustine's Early Theology of the Image: A Study in the Development of Pro-Nicene Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 213.
39. For further discussion of variations on this conceit in Donne's poetry and prose, see James Jaehoon Lee, 'John Donne and the Textuality of the Two Souls', *Studies in Philology* 113/4 (2016), 879–918. For a contemporary review of commentary on the *imago Dei*, see Raleigh, *History*, 1.2.1.
40. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, trans. by W. S. Hett (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press for the Loeb Classical Library, 1957), 412b.
41. Cyril of Alexandria, *Thesaurus* 34 and *In Joannem* 11; quoted in Walter J. Burghardt, *The Image of God in Man According to Cyril of Alexandria* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1957), 72.
42. MacDonald, *Concept of Mind*, 7.
43. Walther Eichrodt, 'The "soul" (*nepeš*)', in Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols (London: SCM Press, 1967), 2:131–45, at 136.
44. Raleigh, *History*, 1.1.6.
45. August Schleicher, *A Compendium of the Comparative Grammar of the Indo-European, Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin Languages*, trans. by Herbert Bendall, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1877), 2:206.
46. William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, ed. by T. W. Craik (London: Routledge, 1995), 4.1.175–77.
47. On ἀδιάφορα in the Epistles of St Paul, see James L. Jaquette, 'Life and Death, "Adiaphora", and Paul's Rhetorical Strategies', *Novum Testamentum* 38/1 (1996), 30–54. On *adiaphora* in Calvin's *Institutes*, see Edward F. Meylan, 'The Stoic Doctrine of Indifferent Things and the Conception of Christian Liberty in Calvin's *Institutio religionis christianae*', *Romanic Review* 28/2 (1937), 135–45. On the concept of 'things indifferent' as a recurring influence in medieval and early modern Christian intellectual history, see G. R. Evans, 'Sancta Indifferentia and *Adiaphora*: "Holy Indifference" and "Things Indifferent"', *Common Knowledge* 15/1 (2009), 23–38.
48. Shami, *Conformity in Crisis*, 80.
49. See, e.g., Gale H. Carrithers, Jr., *Donne at Sermons: A Christian Existential World* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1972), as well as Joshua Scodel, 'John Donne and the Religious Politics of the Mean', in *John Donne's Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross*, ed. by Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway: University of Central Arkansas Press, 1995), 45–80.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Boersma, Gerald P. 2016. *Augustine's Early Theology of the Image: A Study in the Development of Pro-Nicene Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Burghardt, Walter J. 1957. *The Image of God in Man according to Cyril of Alexandria*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.
- Donne, John. 1996. *John Donne's 1622 Gunpowder Plot Sermon: A Parallel-Text Edition*. Ed. Jeanne Shami. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- MacDonald, Paul S. 2003. *History of the Concept of Mind: Speculations About Soul, Mind and Spirit from Homer to Hume*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Mix, Lucas John. 2018. *Life Concepts from Aristotle to Darwin: On Vegetable Souls*. Cham: Springer for Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pleijelm, Richard. 2019. To Be or to Have a *Nephesh*? *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 131/2: 194–206.
- Richardson, W. F. 1976. Pneuma in the Septuagint. *Prudentia* 8/2: 99–114.
- Shami, Jeanne. 2003. *John Donne and Conformity in Crisis in the Late Jacobean Pulpit*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- van Kooten, George H. 2008. *Paul's Anthropology in Context: The Image of God, Assimilation to God, and Tripartite Man in Ancient Judaism, Ancient Philosophy and Early Christianity*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- van Ruiten, Jacques T. A. G. M., and George H. van Kooten, eds 2016. *Dust of the Ground and Breath of Life (Gen. 2:7): The Problem of a Dualistic Anthropology in Early Judaism and Christianity*. Leiden: Brill.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.