Asst. Instructor Hisham A. Waheed

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

By: John Donne

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say
The breath goes now, and some say, No:

So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
'Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love.

Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears,
Men reckon what it did, and meant;
But trepidation of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent.

Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

But we by a love so much refined,
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do.

And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.

Line-by-Line Explanation

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say
The breath goes now, and some say, No:

The speaker opens with an image of good men dying quietly, softly urging their souls to leave their bodies. These virtuous deaths are so imperceptible that the dying men's friends disagree about whether or not the men have stopped breathing yet.

So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
'Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love.

The speaker argues that he and the lover he's bidding farewell to should take these deaths as a model, and part ways silently. They should not give in to the temptation to weep and sigh excessively. In fact, grieving so openly would degrade their private love by broadcasting it to ordinary people.

Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears,
Men reckon what it did, and meant;
But trepidation of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent.

Natural earthly disturbances, such as earthquakes, hurt and scare human beings. Ordinary people notice these events happening and wonder what they mean. However, the movements of the heavens, while being larger and more significant, go unnoticed by most people.

Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

Boring, commonplace people feel a kind of love that, because it depends on sensual connection, can't handle separation. Being physically apart takes away the physical bond that their love depends on.

But we by a love so much refined,
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

The speaker and his lover, on the other hand, experience a more rare and special kind of bond. They can't even understand it themselves, but they are linked mentally, certain of one another on a non-physical plane. Because of this, it matters less to them when their bodies are apart.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat.

The souls of the lovers are unified by love. Although the speaker must leave, their souls will not be broken apart. Instead, they will expand to cover the distance between them, as fine metal expands when it is hammered.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do.

If their souls are in fact individual, they are nevertheless linked in the way the legs of a drawing compass are linked. The soul of the lover is like the stationary foot of the compass, which does not appear to move itself but actually does respond to the other foot's movement.

And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

This stationary compass foot sits in the center of a paper. When the other compass foot moves further away, the stationary foot changes its angle to lean in that direction, as if longing to be nearer to its partner. As the moving foot returns, closing the compass, the stationary foot stands straight again, seeming alert and excited.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.

The speaker's lover, he argues, will be like his stationary foot, while he himself must travel a circuitous, indirect route. Her fixed position provides him with the stability to create a perfect circle, which ends exactly where it began—bringing the speaker back to his lover once again.

Themes

Love and Distance

John Donne wrote “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” on the occasion of his separation from his wife, Anne, on diplomatic business. The poem concerns what happens when two lovers have to part, and explains the spiritual unification that makes this particular parting essentially unimportant. The speaker argues that separation should not matter to him and his lover because genuine love transcends physical distance.

A valediction is a farewell. Donne’s title, however, explicitly prohibits grief about saying goodbye (hence the subtitle of “Forbidden Mourning”) because the speaker and his lover are linked so strongly by spiritual bonds that their separation has little meaning. Indeed, the speaker characterizes himself and his lover as “Inter-assured of the mind.” Donne created this compound word—which combines the prefix “inter,” meaning mutually and reciprocally, with “assured,” meaning confident, secure, or dependable—to emphasize that the two lovers are linked by a mutual mental certainty about their love. They are so close in this way that the separation of their bodies doesn’t mean much.

The speaker further assures his lover that their souls, as well as their minds, are unified. Physical separation doesn't "breach" or break this bond. Instead, their souls expand outward to cover the distance between them, as a soft metal is beaten to spread thinly over a larger surface area.

The speaker introduces the most detailed simile in the poem when he compares the soul of himself and his lover to the two legs of a drafting compass, in order to explain how they are still connected even when physically apart. The addressee of the poem is the "fixed foot" of the compass, the point that stays on the paper. The speaker is the moving point, which draws the circle. Although one leg of the compass doesn't move, the speaker points out that it "leans" as the other leg moves farther, making a wider circle, and "grows erect" when the other leg comes nearer.

The speaker asserts that his lover will play the "fixed foot" to his moving foot. Although the speaker "must" travel away, he will remain on a "just" path, correct and faithful. Together, the legs of the compass create a circle, which has an associative resonance with the spheres in stanza 4. In the popular philosophy of the time, circles and spheres represented perfection, harmony. The speaker's faith in his lover's "firmness" will make him trace a perfect circle, which ends precisely where it began. This ending also implies a promise of return, since the speaker intends to "end where I begun," coming back to his lover after his travels. True love, in the speaker's summation, not only can withstand any separation, but will always bring lovers back to each other.

Physical Love vs. Spiritual Love

The speaker of Donne's poem argues that visible grief at the lovers' parting would be a "profanation of our joys"—that is, that to loudly mourn would belittle the love the couple shares by proclaiming it to the ordinary world. Yet even as the poem urges a reliance on the power of spiritual connection in order to soften the pain of separation, it presents such connection as rare. The speaker disparages more ordinary, earthly love, as well as any bold proclamations of feeling, as indicative of the need for physical proximity. In doing so, he elevates the quiet surety he shares with his partner as the mark of true, spiritual love.

The speaker begins by describing the quiet deaths of "virtuous men." These deaths are almost imperceptible as the men "whisper to their souls to go," indicating their readiness for death with the smallest possible sound. Their watching friends in fact have difficulty telling whether or not their breathing has actually stopped, because it is already so subtle and faint. The speaker argues that his parting with his lover should imitate the quiet quality of the deaths he describes. He cautions against "tear-floods" and "sigh-tempests," the usual signs of separation, because they make the grief of parting too readily apparent to others. Their particular kind of love, he claims, would be degraded by letting other people know about it. The parting he wants is thus invisible to the outside world. It doesn't make a sound, or show signs of physical grief like tears and sighs.

By referring to the rest of the world as "the laity" (usually used to contrast ordinary people with clergy), the speaker also implies a religious element to the love he shares. He and his lover have a sacred spiritual bond, which other people cannot understand. In this way, the speaker further indicates that the love he's talking about is different from the usual kind. The speaker then contrasts movements of the earth (possibly referring to earthquakes and similar natural disasters) with the "trepidation of the spheres" (although it's commonly used to indicate anxiety and fear, an archaic meaning of the word "trepidation" is a physical trembling motion). The speaker points out that disturbances of the earth are very noticeable, causing "harms and fears." This is an implied analogy for the troubles of ordinary lovers, whose separations are stormy and public. In contrast, the trembling of the cosmos (according to the Ptolemaic model), while actually much more significant, goes unnoticed by people on earth. For the speaker, then, his parting with his lover should follow this example. It's a massive event, yet must remain invisible to outsiders.

The speaker goes on to stress that his refined, highly mental conception of love is different from that of "dull sublunary lovers," who need concrete proximity to one another. "Sublunary" means both "under the moon" and "mundane" or "worldly." Donne thus refers to popular love poetry's use of the moon as a romantic image, yet dismisses this as earth-bound and boring. The "soul" of commonplace love is "sense," or physical sensation. This kind of love cannot cope with absence, because it is essentially about sharing pleasures of the body.

The speaker and his lover, in contrast, have a connection of mind and soul that makes physical presence less important. For them, love has been "so much refined" that it is beyond even their understanding. What they can understand is the link between them, which goes beyond ordinary romantic and sexual feeling. They are "Inter-assured of the mind," and so do not need their bodies to be near each other in order to preserve their love. In this way, Donne implicitly separates mundane, worldly love from what, in his eyes, is more genuine, spiritual connection.

Poetic Devices Used in The Poem

Conceit

Conceit is a figure of speech that uses elaborate means to establish a parallel between two dissimilar things. "Valediction" contains one of the most famous conceits in all of literature: that in which the speaker likens himself and his lover to two points of a draftsman's compass. The speaker sustains this conceit throughout the poem's final three stanzas, ultimately describing how his lover, as "the fixed foot" (line 26), enables him to trace a circle that will "make me end where I begun" (line 36).

Overstatement

Overstatement, which is also known by the term hyperbole (hi-PER-buh-lee), refers to examples of extravagant exaggeration. Poets typically use overstatement for comic effect, and that's exactly what Donne does in his poem's opening stanzas (lines 1–8):

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
  And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say
  The breath goes now, and some say, No:

So let us melt, and make no noise,
  No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
'Twere profanation of our joys
  To tell the laity our love.

Overstatement takes several forms here. On the broadest level, consider the absurd way the speaker compares his parting from his lover to the death of "virtuous men." The speaker references the romantic trope in which the parting of lovers is conventionally depicted as a kind of death.

Simile

A simile (SIH-muh-lee) is a figure of speech that explicitly compares two unlike things to each other, usually using the words "like" or "as." The speaker makes several dazzling comparisons throughout "Valediction." In fact, the poem begins with a sustained simile that the speaker announces in the opening

line: “As virtuous men pass mildly away.” The next three lines continue to develop the first part of the simile, which relates to “virtuous men” whose virtue lies in their capacity to die without struggle. The second—and more relevant—half of the simile comes in the second stanza (lines 5–6):

> So let us melt, and make no noise,
> No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move

Essentially, the speaker aims to ensure a drama-free parting by modeling his departure on the passing of those “virtuous men” who depart from life with neither struggle nor cry. Other similes in the poem aren’t as sustained, but they’re equally bold. For instance, the speaker invites his lover to think of the physical distance between them less as a “breach” and more as an “expansion, / Like gold to airy thinness beat” (lines 23–24). The speaker also uses a simile to introduce his famous compass conceit: “If [our souls] be two, they are two so / As stiff twin compasses are two” (lines 25–26).

Paradox

In literary analysis, the term paradox refers to a statement that appears contradictory but can be interpreted in a way that makes logical sense. In Donne’s poem, the speaker introduces a paradox in the sixth stanza (lines 21–24):

> Our two souls therefore, which are one,
> Though I must go, endure not yet
> A breach, but an expansion,
> Like gold to airy thinness beat.

Immediately after introducing the paradoxical unity of separate souls, the speaker invites his lover to think of their separation not as a spatial “breach” but as a spiritual “expansion” of their love. This reframing of a breach (separated) that’s also an expansion (continuous) is also paradoxical. This paradox them leads into the last section of the poem, where the speaker develops the notion of expansion in a new way that gives the paradoxical idea of two-souls-in-one a more concrete form. In the final three stanzas, the speaker introduces the conceit in which he and his lover are “twin compasses” (line 26). Even though separate from one another, they are, according to this conceit, always connected—two distinct parts of the same metaphysical tool.

وداع بلا حداد

نص: جون دون

ترجمة: فردوس مسعود

كما يَرحلُ الأتقياءُ بهدوء
هامسينَ لأرواحِهم بالرحِيل
تاركينَ أصحابهم بين مُودِّعٍ
ومُعارضٍ

لِنذب بهدوء، بلا ضجيج
بلا دموعٍ ولا تناهيد
ودعي حبنا سراً مُقدساً
لا تدنسُه التُّرهات

إنَّ الزلازل توجس خيفةً فينا
ويحسَبُها الضعيفة قلوبهم عقاباً منزلاً
واهتزازات الأجرامُ السَماوية مهيبةٌ
لكنَّها بريئَة

إنَّ الحبَّ البشري
حبٌ حسيٌّ، لا يطِيقُ الفِراق
يتلاشى وينْدثر
عندَ افتراق الأحباب

لكن حبَّنا السماويَّ متفردٌ
حبٌ مطمئِنٌ
حبٌ لا يكترثُ إن فُقِد فيه الجَسدُ

رغمَ أني راحِلٌ عنكِ
أرواحُنا سَتبقى معنا
لن تفترقا
ستتسعُ المسافاتُ بيننا
تماماً مثلما يتمدَّدُ الذهبُ المنصَهر

إنَّ روحينا
مثل ساقيّ فِرجار
روحُكِ الساقُ الثابِتةُ
لا تتحركُ إلّا إن تحركتْ الأُخرى

رغمَ ثباتِها في المنتصفِ
لكنَّها تصغي وتُذعنُ
حتى تعود ساقها الأخرى

هكذا يجب أن يكونَ حُبنا
كالتقاء ساقيّ الفرجار
ثَباتُكِ وسكونكِ
سيكملُ دائرتي
ويجعلني أنتهي حيثُ بدأتِ.