

## Donne's Poetry

### Context

John Donne was born in 1572 to a London merchant and his wife. Donne's parents were both Catholic at a time when England was deeply divided over matters of religion; Queen Elizabeth persecuted the Catholics and upheld the Church of England established by her father, Henry VIII. The subsequent ruler, James I, tolerated Catholicism, but advised Donne that he would achieve advancement only in the Church of England. Having renounced his Catholic faith, Donne was ordained in the Church of England in 1615. Donne's father died when he was very young, as did several of his brothers and sisters, and his mother remarried twice during his lifetime. Donne was educated at Hart's Hall, Oxford, and Lincoln's Inn; he became prodigiously learned, speaking several languages and writing poems in both English and Latin.

Donne's adult life was colorful, varied, and often dangerous; he sailed with the royal fleet and served as both a Member of Parliament and a diplomat. In 1601, he secretly married a woman named Ann More, and he was imprisoned by her father, Sir George More; however, after the Court of Audiences upheld his marriage several months later, he was released and sent to live with his wife's cousin in Surrey, his fortunes now in tatters. For the next several years, Donne moved his family throughout England, traveled extensively in France and Italy, and attempted unsuccessfully to gain positions that might improve his financial situation. In 1615, Donne was ordained a priest in the Anglican Church; in 1621, he became the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, a post that he retained for the rest of his life. A very successful priest, Donne preached several times before royalty; his sermons were famous for their power and directness.

For the last decade of his life, before his death in 1630, Donne concentrated more on writing sermons than on writing poems, and today he is admired for the former as well as the latter. (One of his most famous sermons contains the passage beginning, "No man is an island" and ending, "Therefore ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.") However, it is for his extraordinary poems that Donne is primarily remembered; and it was on the basis of his poems that led to the revival of his reputation at the beginning of the 20th century, following years of obscurity. (The renewed interest in Donne was led by a new generation of writers at the turn of the century, including T.S. Eliot.) Donne was the leading exponent of a style of poetry called "metaphysical poetry," which flourished in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Metaphysical poetry features elaborate conceits and surprising symbols, wrapped up in original, challenging language structures, with learned themes that draw heavily on eccentric chains of reasoning. Donne's verse, like that of George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and many of their contemporaries, exemplifies these traits. But Donne is also a highly individual poet, and his consistently ingenious treatment of his great theme--the conflict between spiritual piety and physical carnality, as embodied in religion and love--remains unparalleled.

### Analysis

John Donne, whose poetic reputation languished before he was rediscovered in the early part of the twentieth century, is remembered today as the leading exponent of a style of verse known as "metaphysical poetry," which flourished in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. (Other great metaphysical poets include Andrew Marvell, Robert Herrick, and George Herbert.) Metaphysical poetry typically employs unusual verse forms, complex figures of speech applied to elaborate and surprising metaphorical conceits, and learned themes discussed according to eccentric and unexpected chains of reasoning. Donne's poetry exhibits each of these characteristics. His jarring, unusual meters; his proclivity for abstract puns and double entendres; his often bizarre metaphors (in one poem he compares love to a carnivorous fish; in another he pleads with God to make him pure by raping him); and his process of oblique reasoning are all characteristic traits of the metaphysicals, unified in Donne as in no other poet.

Donne is valuable not simply as a representative writer but also as a highly unique one. He was a man of contradictions: As a minister in the Anglican Church, Donne possessed a deep spirituality that informed his writing throughout his life; but as a man, Donne possessed a carnal lust for life, sensation, and experience. He is both a great religious poet and a great erotic poet, and perhaps no other writer (with the possible exception of Herbert) strove as hard to unify and express such incongruous, mutually discordant passions. In his best poems, Donne mixes the discourses of the physical and the spiritual; over the course of his career, Donne gave sublime expression to both realms.

His conflicting proclivities often cause Donne to contradict himself. (For example, in one poem he writes, "Death be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so." Yet in another, he writes, "Death I recant, and say, unsaid by me / Whate'er hath slipped, that might diminish thee.") However, his contradictions are representative of the powerful contrary forces at work in his poetry and in his soul, rather than of sloppy thinking or inconsistency. Donne, who lived a generation after Shakespeare, took advantage of his divided nature to become the greatest metaphysical poet of the seventeenth century; among the poets of inner conflict, he is one of the greatest of all time.

### **"A Valediction: forbidding Mourning" Summary**

The speaker explains that he is forced to spend time apart from his lover, but before he leaves, he tells her that their farewell should not be the occasion for mourning and sorrow. In the same way that virtuous men die mildly and without complaint, he says, so they should leave without "tear-floods" and "sigh-tempests," for to publicly announce their feelings in such a way would profane their love. The speaker says that when the earth moves, it brings "harms and fears," but when the spheres experience "trepidation," though the impact is greater, it is also innocent. The love of "dull sublunary lovers" cannot survive separation, but it removes that which constitutes the love itself; but the love he shares with his beloved is so refined and "Inter-assured of the mind" that they need not worry about missing "eyes, lips, and hands."

Though he must go, their souls are still one, and, therefore, they are not enduring a breach, they are experiencing an "expansion"; in the same way that gold can be stretched by beating it "to aery thinness," the soul they share will simply stretch to take in all the space between them. If their souls are separate, he says, they are like the feet of a compass: His lover's soul is the fixed foot in the center, and his is the foot that moves around it. The firmness of the center foot makes the circle that the outer foot draws perfect: "Thy firmness makes my circle just, / And makes me end, where I begun."

### **Form**

The nine stanzas of this Valediction are quite simple compared to many of Donne's poems, which utilize strange metrical patterns overlaid jarringly on regular rhyme schemes. Here, each four-line stanza is quite unadorned, with an ABAB rhyme scheme and an iambic tetrameter meter.

## Commentary

"A Valediction: forbidding Mourning" is one of Donne's most famous and simplest poems and also probably his most direct statement of his ideal of spiritual love. For all his erotic carnality in poems, such as "The Flea," Donne professed a devotion to a kind of spiritual love that transcended the merely physical. Here, anticipating a physical separation from his beloved, he invokes the nature of that spiritual love to ward off the "tear-floods" and "sigh-tempests" that might otherwise attend on their farewell. The poem is essentially a sequence of metaphors and comparisons, each describing a way of looking at their separation that will help them to avoid the mourning forbidden by the poem's title.

First, the speaker says that their farewell should be as mild as the uncomplaining deaths of virtuous men, for to weep would be "profanation of our joys." Next, the speaker compares harmful "Moving of th' earth" to innocent "trepidation of the spheres," equating the first with "dull sublunary lovers' love" and the second with their love, "Inter-assured of the mind." Like the rumbling earth, the dull sublunary (sublunary meaning literally beneath the moon and also subject to the moon) lovers are all physical, unable to experience separation without losing the sensation that comprises and sustains their love. But the spiritual lovers "Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss," because, like the trepidation (vibration) of the spheres (the concentric globes that surrounded the earth in ancient astronomy), their love is not wholly physical. Also, like the trepidation of the spheres, their movement will not have the harmful consequences of an earthquake.

The speaker then declares that, since the lovers' two souls are one, his departure will simply expand the area of their unified soul, rather than cause a rift between them. If, however, their souls are "two" instead of "one", they are as the feet of a drafter's compass, connected, with the center foot fixing the orbit of the outer foot and helping it to describe a perfect circle. The compass (the instrument used for drawing circles) is one of Donne's most famous metaphors, and it is the perfect image to encapsulate the values of Donne's spiritual love, which is balanced, symmetrical, intellectual, serious, and beautiful in its polished simplicity.

Like many of Donne's love poems (including "The Sun Rising" and "The Canonization"), "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning" creates a dichotomy between the common love of the everyday world and the uncommon love of the speaker. Here, the speaker claims that to tell "the laity," or the common people, of his love would be to profane its sacred nature, and he is clearly contemptuous of the dull sublunary love of other lovers. The effect of this dichotomy is to create a kind of emotional aristocracy that is similar in form to the political aristocracy with which Donne has had painfully bad luck throughout his life and which he commented upon in poems, such as "The Canonization": This emotional aristocracy is similar in form to the political one but utterly opposed to it in spirit. Few in number are the emotional aristocrats who have access to the spiritual love of the spheres and the compass; throughout all of Donne's writing, the membership of this elite never includes more than the speaker and his lover--or at the most, the speaker, his lover, and the reader of the poem, who is called upon to sympathize with Donne's romantic plight.