A Valediction Forbidding Mourning’s Textual Analysis

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.”

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.

“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.