



A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

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Donne's poem is a closely reasoned farewell consisting of a premise and a conclusion that inevitably follows. The first five stanzas establish the premise: The love that unites the souls of Donne and his lover is spiritual and not physical in nature. Therefore, the last four stanzas conclude, physical separation, since it does not alter the spiritual oneness of their souls, is no cause for mourning.

Donne supports this argument by two striking comparisons. In the first, their souls do not separate, but undergo "an expansion./ Like gold to airy thinness beat." In the second, even if their souls are logically two, they are united like the feet of a drawing compass. His lover's soul, the "fixed foot," occupies the center of an imaginary circle. If Donne's soul, the other foot of the compass, moves outward, his lover's soul "leans and harkens after it."

The exploration of this metaphor in minute detail results in a conceit, a comparison elaborated at considerable length. In this celebrated conceit, one of the best known in English poetry, the feet of the drawing compass function as the "objective correlative" (Eliot's phrase) for the lovers' souls.

The poem's structure resembles a logical argument, but the logic supports an essentially irrational texture consisting of lovers' souls likened to beaten gold and to the feet of a drawing compass. This combination of rational structure and sensuous texture illustrates the characteristic interplay, in Metaphysical poetry, of thought and feeling, ingenuity and emotional intensity.

The ideational lyric of the 20th century, at once controlled and unbridled, cool yet impassioned, is much indebted to this poem and others by Donne.

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