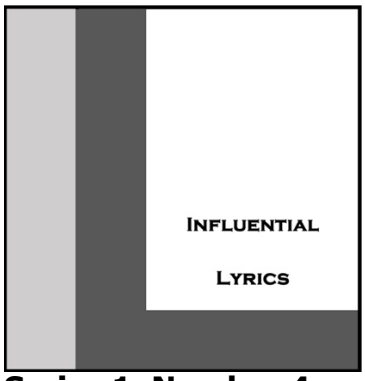

Series 1, Number 4

John Donne
1572-1631

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

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 ourselves 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 th'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.

Podcast (https://influentiallyrics.com/2025/02/12/john-donne-valediction-forbidding-mourning/).

Topics

- Metaphysical Conceit
- Metaphysical Poets

Lines to remember…

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.

Podcast Script

John Donne, "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning"

Intro

The English poet John Donne (1572-1631) is a study in contrasts. His work includes some of the most intense verse in the language about love and sex…but it also includes some of the most profoundly moving religious poetry. His biography reveals periods of great sorrow and poverty…but it also includes his later years as the beloved Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral where people gathered by the thousands to hear him speak. And the poems themselves often present such surprising combinations of images and thoughts that the great 18th-century critic Samuel Johnson considered them to be "heterogenous thoughts" that were "yoked by violence together." As you might imagine, then, there is no such thing as a "typical" Donne poem—after all, his work encompasses everything from philosophical paradoxes to political satires, to frank love poems, to religious devotionals.

That said, the present podcast will focus on one of his most often read lyrics called "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." The poem may not be "typical," but at least it will introduce the stylistic brilliance and the idiosyncratic patterns of thought that we associate with this most influential of renaissance poets. So, without further introduction, here is Donne's "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning":

[poem]

Well that's a puzzling piece! Don't worry if it didn't make much sense to you if you're first encountering the poem in this audio format. You're good company! Many readers have been baffled by the "imaginative ferocity" of Donne's "magpie mind" (to borrow a couple of phrases from Katherine Rundell's recent—and brilliant—biography). But I think if we work through the

poem stanza-by-stanza, you'll come to understand the poem, and you'll get a sense of what makes Donne such a remarkable writer.

We can begin with the title: "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." A valediction is a formal way of saying good-bye or farewell—these are words spoken at parting, like the "valedictory address" at a graduation when the students are saying farewell to their alma mater. But this valediction is a bit unusual in that the speaker offers a sort of command: "forbidding mourning." In other words, this is a farewell speech but one that forbids outward expressions of sadness or mourning—like wearing black clothes, hugging and crying, etc. The poem, as we'll see, explains exactly why such outward shows of emotion are to be avoided.

So, let's have a look at the opening couple of stanzas. We can begin with this peculiar image:

> 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 here is a death-bed scene. The iconic "virtuous men" are dying, but they do so in peace and contentment—they "whisper to their souls to go." These virtuous men, however, are surrounded by "sad friends" who focus not on the departing soul but rather on the body and its last breath: some say "The breath goes now, and some say, No." This is a peculiar opening scene for a love poem to be sure, but its significance will become more apparent when we read the next stanza:

> 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.

Aha! So, it turns out that the strange death-bed scene in the first stanza is an analogy. Apparently, the speaker and his beloved are parting from one another, and they should do so in quiet contentment like the virtuous men who are parting from their souls. The two should "make no noise" Donne says, and there should be no "tear-floods" (that is, excessive crying) and no "sigh-tempests." [It is worth noting that, according to Isaac Walton, Donne's first

biographer, the occasion for the poem was that Donne was leaving on a trip to the European Continent, and this poem was his farewell to his wife Ann.].

What I find especially interesting here, though, are the next two lines: "'Twere profanation of our joys / To tell the laity our love." In other words, crying and sighing and other outward shows of emotion are "profane" and ought not be communicated to the "laity." Today, we tend to think of the word "profane" in a phrase like "profane language"—cursing. For Donne, it means desecrating something sacred. And the word "laity" refers to ordinary members of a religious congregation as distinguished from the clergy who, presumably, are more attuned to matters of the spirit. If we put this all together, a clumsy paraphrase of Donne's stanza would be something like "Let us depart from one another quietly with no outward shows of emotion because our shared love—"our joys" in Donne's words—is a spiritual, even sacred thing that would be cheapened if paraded before the common people."

This distinction between spiritual and worldly/physical domains is central to the remaining stanzas in the poem. The third stanza, for example, develops a contrast between, on the one hand, people's puzzled reaction to an earthquake and, on the other, their obliviousness to movement of the heavenly spheres. Perhaps a more pointed example appears in the contrast between the "dull sublunary lovers" and the more perfect spiritual love shared by the speaker and addressee:

> 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 ourselves know not what it is,
> Inter-assured of the mind,
> Care less eyes, lips and hands to miss.

In other words, the "dull sublunary lovers" relationship is based on physical attraction; the very "soul" of their love is "sense" rather than spirit. As such, these dull lovers can't stand to be apart from one another—they "cannot admit / Absence"—because they love one another's bodies. This stands in contrast to the more spiritual, "refined" love shared by the speaker and

addressee. These two lovers are "Inter-assured of the mind," so it doesn't really matter if they can't look in one another's eyes, kiss one another's lips, or hold one another's hands. They can be separated physically because their spiritual love still connects them. Donne puts this more succinctly in the following stanza:

> 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.

This concept of a spiritual rather than a physical love presents a challenge for a poet like Donne. After all, how can you offer a tangible image to describe something that has no physical existence? The dilemma generates statements that seem contradictory ("Our two souls…which are one"), and Donne finally resorts to a simile: their love is "Like gold to airy thinness beat." It's as though the poet can't say what this spiritual love IS, but he can say what it IS LIKE: a thing of great value ("gold") that expands rather than breaks, and that is of such "airy thinness" as to be almost a wispy, spiritual entity.

But then Donne rethinks this simile, and proposes a much more famous one: if the lovers' souls really are two instead of one…

> they are two so
> As stiff twin compasses are two;
> Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
> To move, but doth if th'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.

The passage is often held up as the quintessential example of a "metaphysical conceit." A conceit—as you may recall from the podcast on Sir Thomas Wyatt—is an extended metaphor typically used to describe some emotion or thought. A *metaphysical* conceit is characterized by a very unexpected, often very witty conjunction of two seemingly very different realms. For example, a famous poem by George Herbert uses the image of a pulley to represent God.

And in the present example, Donne uses the image of a compass—the kind one uses to draw circles—to describe a refined spiritual love. It's unexpected, to be sure, but if we work though the image in the context of the poem, it makes a lot of sense.

First of all, "stiff twin compasses" make a perfect example of something that is both one thing and two things at the same time. In Donne's use of the term, "twin compasses" is a plural word describing a single draftsman's instrument—rather like our use of the phrases "pair of scissors" or "pair of pants" to refer to a single item. And Donne's description of the use of a compass with one "fixed foot" and one that "far doth roam" is an apt way of visualizing these parting lovers. They are parting from one another, but they nonetheless remain joined together at the top like an upside down letter V. What is more, if you imagine this upside down V and one of the legs moves away from the other, the fixed leg will "lean and hearken" after the moving one; similarly, if the roaming leg comes back to the fixed leg, the compass will look like the letter I – it "grows erect, as that comes home." In sum, then, this very unexpected but witty image of the lovers' refined and spiritual relationship works surprisingly well! All that is left for Donne is to complete the conceit:

> 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.

To sum up, then, we have a love poem that begins with a death-bed scene which initiates a series of contrasts between the physical and the spiritual—"sad friends" vs. "virtuous men"; the common "laity" vs. the "joys" shared by the lovers; the earthquake vs. the movements of the heavenly spheres; the "dull sublunary lovers" who love each others' bodies vs. the speaker and addressee who are "inter-assured of the mind"; and so forth. The series is finally capped with this strange and unexpected conceit of the "stiff twin compasses." It's no wonder that Samuel Johnson was dismayed by what he saw as Donne's incongruous thoughts "yoked by violence together"! Fortunately, more recent readers have found much to admire in Donne's work.

So that gives us a small sample of the work of a truly astonishing thinker and writer. I hope this explication has clarified the meaning of the poem and demonstrated the quirky genius of

this most influential of renaissance poets. Thanks for listening, and, as always, I will append another reading of the poem after the closing music in case you want to hear it once again.

Happy reading everyone, and I'll see you again soon with another episode of *Influential Lyrics*.

Further Reading/Listening

Adlington, Hugh, Mary Ann Lund, and Sue Wiseman. "John Donne." *In Our Time* hosted by Melvyn Bragg, BBC Radio 4, 12 January, 2023. https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001gx0k

Rundell, Katherine. "John Donne: England's Greatest Love Poet." *Not Just the Tudors*, hosted by Suzanna Lipscomb, episode 207, 17 April 2023, https://shows.acast.com/not-just-the-tudors/episodes/john-donne-englands-greatest-love-poet

Rundell, Katherine. *Super-Infinite: The Transformations of John Donne*. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2022.

Sperry, Eileen M. "Decay, Intimacy, and the Lyric Metaphor in John Donne." *Studies in English Literature, 1500 - 1900* 59.1 (2019 Winter): 45-66.

ETC....

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And Finally...

Influential Lyrics podcast, 1.4, published [date]