

# DONNE'S FAREWELLS

## The Separation Of Lovers In Poetry

*An Interpretation of John Donne's Valedictions*

*- Of Weeping and*

*- Forbidding Mourning*

schriftliche Referatsausarbeitung

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## On Donne

If we consider John Donne's life, we soon come to agree that things did not come easy to him. Having to fight for his partnership with Ann Donne and taking great trouble with her father, he learned to merit his love. When his secret marriage with her became known to his father-in-law, he paid for his disregarding of both common and canon law with severe difficulties. Yet not even prison could dissuade him from his relationship with Ann. We can thus easily comprehend the tremendous devotion for his *mistris* expressed so often as well as extravagantly in his poetry. It is hardly imaginable for us any more to think of love as something we have to fight for in the way that Donne had to breach most of his contemporaries' written and unwritten laws. In this way, he even seems to be a very modern prophet of the "rule of love", which today can be found in almost every common piece of song lyrics which undoubtedly take a great part in forming the conception and value of love of people growing up in our time.

So, from our point of view, we should be careful about under-estimating Donne's attitude towards the importance of following the verdict of his heart rather than his head. We are much mistaken if we take such a decision for granted, and furthermore we should also consider our own acting in affairs of the heart when put to the test: I strongly doubt that our common image of "the power of love conquering all" is something very realistic in the career-seeking society values dictating our everyday lives. In referring to all this, I intend to visualize the enormous dedication which Donne actively lived in spite of the serious difficulties he faced. Only then can we gain a picture of the poet doing him justice and approach his work with the basic attitude towards him which is essential for a comprehending reading of the pain implied in his separation poetry.

## A Valediction: of Weeping

It is not altogether clear whether the woman addressed in John Donne's farewell poems is in fact his wife Ann. Although we should naturally assume this to be the case, there is no actual evidence for this to be found in Donne's biography. Although it would make an interesting point about his monogamous lifestyle, we can here neglect the question of the addressee. For us, the meaning of the poem would not be altered - and its background is an item of examination restricted to people delving deeper in Donne's life and spirit than I am here confined to do.

So let us now consider the first stanza of the poem:

Let me powre forth  
 My teares before thy face, whilst I stay here,  
 For thy face coines them, and thy stamps they beare,  
 And by this Mintage they are something worth,  
     For thus they bee  
     Pregnant of thee,  
 Fruits of much grief they are, emblemes of more,  
 When a teare falls, that thou falst which it bore,  
 So thou and I are nothing then, when on a divers shore.

In the parting scenario introduced here the speaker suggests it be better to grieve for the temporary loss of each other together before the separation to assure one another the love which binds them together. By watching his lady cry - and weeping himself -, he does not mourn in vain, but instead gives their parting a value. As the tears roll down his face, the reflection of her adored face is caught in them, and they are thus made meaningful to him; they are "*stamped*" with her image like a coin is stamped with a monarch's portrait, making the substance it consists of even more valuable through its newly-won appearance.

The usage of the term "*pregnant of thee*" is a pun on the common belief of Donne's contemporaries, that lovers could "*look babies*" (make the woman pregnant) merely by intensely staring into each other's eyes, because the reflection of the faces of one another were interpreted as their baby. The mirror image of one's own face in the lover's eye or tear is here portrayed as a sign of pregnancy.

But then the attitude is suddenly slightly shifted: "*that thou falst which it bore*" - realizing that a part of his mistress is caught in each tear he weeps, it becomes sadly obvious to him that he is unable to preserve her image and her beauty if he continues crying, for then he sheds her love for him, and it is lost when the tear containing it hits the ground. He fears "*when on a divers shore*", they might be alienated from each other and thereby not be true - and "*fall*".

On a round ball  
 A workeman that hath copies by, can lay  
 An Europe, Afrique, and an Asia,  
 And quickly make that, which was nothing, All,  
     So doth each teare,  
     Which thee doth weare,  
 A globe, yea world by that impression grow,  
 Till thy tears mixt with mine doe overflow  
 This world, by waters sent from thee, my heaven dissolved so.

Donne here elaborates the image introduced above of the transformation of an item of worth into something altogether more valuable by giving it a surface or meaning. He compares the tears wept by his lady with at first blank globes which are then fashioned into an entire world by the image of

the cause they are shed for (meaning, of course, him). The technique of applying modern scientific patterns to poems, which is regarded as a distinguishing feature of metaphysical poetry, is beautifully demonstrated here.

But the last two lines - very much like in the first stanza - take a different stance regarding the content of the first part of this section: The speaker conjures up an apocalyptic image of a flood of tears drowning the world in sorrow.

He then, consequently, urges his beloved to cease weeping in order not to cause this disaster to happen:

O more then Moone,  
 Draw not up seas to drowne me in thy spheare,  
 Weepe me not dead, in thine armes, but forebear  
 To teach the sea, what it may doe too soone,  
 Let not the winde  
 Example finde,  
 To doe me more harme, then it purposeth,  
 Since thou and I sigh one another's breath,  
 Who e'r sighes most, is cruellest, and hasts the others death.

In comparison of his lady with the moon, he ranks her more powerful and attests her the ability to move the sea (like the moon is responsible for the tides). He tries to calm her unwilling - and unwitting - stirring of the waters which might prove harmful to him on his journey over the ocean. According to his interpretation, his mistress' breath is capable of encouraging the thunderstorms and freaks that threaten every ship.

The speaker then concludes that since both their breaths exchange the same air each unnecessary sigh only accelerates the consumption of vital oxygen, thus hastening "*the others death*". At this point, the initial policy of openly showing one's sorrow of parting from the beloved has been radically reversed to an appeal not to mourn with tears and sighs, for they represent an imminent danger for the departing sea-farer. This wavering of point of view is perhaps one of Donne's most striking characteristics: He is always fit to adopt a new perspective to see things in a different light. In fact, the only thing that he himself pronounced to be positive about at all was change.

With this attitude begins

## A Valediction: forbidding mourning

This poem elaborates - as its title suggests - the appeal for a separation without weeping and sadness about the loss. Donne starts his exploits with the illustration of a deathbed scene:

As virtuous men pass mildly away  
And whisper to their soules, to goe,  
Whilst some of their sad friends doe say,  
The breath goes now, and some say, no:

He describes the ultimate virtue of handling painful situations (of which death is the worst): restraint. The highest form of dealing with sorrow, he says, is to take it in dignity and not trying to deny the inevitable. According to his attitude, worthy men even encourage their souls to leave the body, thus showing insight in the will of God to end their life. From this point of view, it would be truly blasphemous to rebel against death. Dying then becomes so calm that all the sad friends surrounding his deathbed cannot tell whether he is still alive:

In Donne's time, medicine was not very advanced in pronouncing someone dead, and burying people alive was a common tragedy. So physicians often relied on the method of applying a small mirror to the mouth and nose of the dying person and watching for any mist to form on its surface. The breath was also a religious symbol, for people believed that the soul left the body with its last exhalation.

So let us melt, and make no noise,  
No teare-floods, nor sigh-tempests move,  
T'were prophanation of our joyes  
To tell the layety our love.

After visualizing the image of brave men taking the pain of even dying without a word of complaint, the speaker urges his love to follow this honourable example by taking their farewell with dignity. The recurring picture of the *teare-floods* and the *sigh-tempests* illustrates the fears already foreshadowed in the Weeping Valediction: The traveller on a ship has no desire for storms more violent than necessary, simply because they represent a profound hazard to his life.

Furthermore, the speaker claims that it would be inappropriate for them to cause a fuss over their separation, since it would put them on the level of ordinary lovers who - like Donne in the first stanza of the Weeping Valediction - always part in great pain and crying. This would be profane, and so we can assume the bonds between the speaker and his addressed to be something altogether more subtle and valuable than ordinary love.

Moving of th'earth brings harmes and feares,  
 Men reckon what it did and meant,  
 But trepidation of the spheares,  
 Though greater farre, is innocent.

Donne here elaborates a comparison between worldly and spiritual affairs: The "*moving of th'earth*" refers to earthquakes: Their hideous consequences have always busied mankind as well as speculations about their origin. In Donne's time, they were still often regarded as a punishment of God for the sins of men. The "*trepidation of the spheares*" was a model of explanation to account for irregularities in the equinoxes of the planets. Adopting the new world picture of his time, Donne here creates a polarity between earthbound physique and cosmic spirit:

He shows how physical unrest and destruction is harmful to humans, and how in contrast spiritual uneasiness, despite its greater extent, is far less dangerous. This polarity he further evolves in the next stanza:

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

Extending the image of the importance of breaking the boundaries of the earth and roaming the higher spheres with the spirit, the poet now emphasizes that pain of bodily separation is chiefly a problem of dull sublunary lovers: The term "*sublunary*" refers to an ambiguity of firstly: the hierarchy of the heavenly spheres and the necessity to rise above the confines of the moon into higher areas, and secondly: the reign of the moon over earthly creatures. With its inconsistency of waxing and waning as well as its uncanny powers to move the oceans at her whim, the moon is a very eerie and suspicious entity. Thus being under its sway means sleepwalking for many people or, for dogs, even howling at the full midnight moon - being dependant on such an unreliable regent demonstrates the lack of self control - hence the term "lunatic".

So the speaker portrays the sublunary kind of love as something inconstant, swaying more or less at random and entirely bound to the concrete earth and body. In claiming the soul of this love to be "sense", he means what we today speak of as sensations: Those lovers only exist in the physical contact of their bodies and consequently, they cannot endure absence (which can be seen as a pun of ab[lat.]-sense, that is "departure-from-sense") for it extracts the essence of their relationship: namely the body itself.

But we by a love, so much refin'd,  
 That our selves know not what it is,  
 Inter-assured of the mind,  
 Care lesse, eyes, lips, and hands to misse.

Here we now have the contrast to that "*dull sublunary love*", which is so sophisticated, "*so much refin'd*" that even the lovers themselves cannot quite understand or comprehend it. Either way, they

do know that what they have is something far more valuable, and in this fashion are "*inter-assured of the mind*". Donne here ranks his love highest of all values, so that not even reason is an instrument fit to grasp it, because the brain can only hold a limited amount of knowledge, whereas the love for his mistress cannot be held by the heart or mind, but demands the entire cosmos as a suiting container, which makes it necessary for them to expand their emotions beyond the range of the moon. He then concludes that because of this highly spiritual quality of their relationship they have less problems letting go of the other one's body.

Our two soules therefore, which are one,  
 Though I must goe, endure not yet  
 A breach, but an expansion,  
 Like gold to ayery thinnesse beate.

Donne here further develops the conception of a super-physical love in the image of the unity of their souls merely stretching over the distance like an elastic bond, but not snapping. By comparing this to leaf gold, he implies once more the special value of their love: Gold is, apart from its known characteristics, the only material which can be fashioned into layers of such "*airy thinness*", that all other substances would suffer destruction or separation in the attempt of flattening them in this way. Here the unique quality is emphasized which makes such an "*expansion*" possible. Gold is also a special symbol of love and, because it never stains, of eternity and purity.

If they be two, they are two so  
 As stiffe twin compasses are two,  
 Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show  
 To move, but doth, if the other doe.

Again Donne demonstrates his inclination to shift his point of view: Discarding the idea of the unity of the souls, he seems to account for an unheard protest against the symbol of the expanding bond. Instead, he creates a new symbolism of the two souls (should we insist that they are separate) being forged together in a flexible joint like a pair of compasses<sup>1</sup>.

This comparison repeatedly shows the willingness of metaphysical poetry to adopt modern scientific terms for symbolism. He then assigns each foot of the twin compasses to one soul: his lady being the "*fixt foot*" who provides stability to the system, and he himself being the other one which induces movement for the two of them:

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1 Talking of **compasses**, it is imperative to notice that we here refer to the geometrical instrument used for drawing circles and measuring distances on maps and not the magnetic device serving to determine which direction north is.

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

Here, the speaker demonstrates that his mistress will not, as it seems, remain motionless at home, but in striving to keep contact with him, she will instead take part in his movement as she "*leans and hearkens after*" him. This shows his willingness to share at least part of his travelling experience with her, but also points out his necessity to "lean on her": They both depend on one another, for should one of them leave this connection, the entire system and both the individuals would collapse. Using this imagery, he seeks to convince his lady that they both cannot do without each other: It is only naturally comprehensible that Donne should - at least partly - have had an uneasy feeling about leaving his young and desirably beautiful wife alone at home.

Part of this also finds expression in the formula "*and growes erect, as that comes home*". Taking into account such poems as "*The Flea*" and "*To His Mistris Going To Bed*", we can without great uncertainty see this as an allusion to the desire of sexual intercourse after the return of the lover. In Donne's own case, it is easily understood that, after long months of seafaring hardships and abstinence, the homecoming sailor thinks of his wife mostly in terms of sexual pleasure. Since, however, the poet applies the allusion of erection to his lady, we could be led to assume that he tries to impart his forecast of excitement at his return on her.

Talking of the closing of the twin compasses, both feet "*grow erect*" (nearing vertical alignment) as they approach one another again, so we could justly speak of both of them aroused, namely for sexual activity. Also, in treating both parts of the pair of compasses as equal in value, it can further be assumed that in attempting to "persuade" his wife "into bed" immediately after his return he refers to thoroughly physical erections of their two respective bodies, namely to his penis and her nipples as a clear symbolism of prior love-making.

Such wilt thou be to mee, who must  
 Like th'other foot, obliquely runne;  
 Thy firmnes makes my circle just,  
 And makes me end, where I begunne.

In completing the picture of the twin compasses, Donne here emphasizes her importance for the possibility of his voyage. He needs her to support him in order to be able to undertake such daring journeys as he does. Only with her in his center can he draw the perfect circle which is again the symbol of the perfection of their unmarred love. In addition to that, she is also the beacon to show him the way home: "*And makes me end, where I begunne*". In this way, she secures his safe arrival back home.

By demonstrating all this beautiful description of their love, the poet thus achieves his intent to "*forbid mourning*". Having elaborately shown the lack of necessity for a separation in sorrow, he instead pointed out the joys of returning and of having been true to each other in spite of great distance. In referring to her "*firmness*", he pronounces his faith in her love for him which enables him even to leave her for a long time. The "*just circle*" then, indeed, perfectly ends the poem where it begun.

Donne here proves that all early suspicions of not developing a concrete line through the poem are merely premature criticism. He amazes with a seeming inconsistency the image of which later completely collapses, yet there remains an impression of wide ambiguity which sometimes cannot be entirely dissolved due to the many-sided suggestions of Donne's poetry. And still, every piece of it remains perfectly comprehensible and thoroughly enjoyable. The perhaps most striking feature about him as well as other "metaphysics", however, is his startlingly open way of dealing with the things that were important to him, which is slightly uncharacteristic for the period he lived in. It is greatly surprising how much of ourselves we can find today in this poetry. I should say it is mostly this frank handling of items only too human that makes him so fascinating for us even four hundred years later.

## Literature:

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**Winy, James** (1970), "*A Preface to John Donne*", Longman, London & New York