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In your May 1996 issue you printed a short essay titled "On Mathematics in Poetry," by John S. Lew. Perhaps Mr. Lew's explanation of Donne's poem "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" is not quite accurate. I think Donne is talking about a speaker who is saying goodbye to his wife or possibly his mistress. In the first stanza he says they should part as quietly as virtuous men pass very mildly away.

Later in the poem, he compares himself and his wife to the two legs of a compass. He asserts that he will be the roving foot whereas his wife will be the fixed foot. Thus whenever he makes a move, his wife will respond with a move of her own and so will always be aware of his direction and movement. In addition, the figure of the compass means that there will always be a connection between them, and it may suggest in addition that God is the actual mover of the compass.

I think this explanation catches some of the magnificent abstraction of mathematics. I agree with Mr. Lew that only John Donne has achieved such integration between mathematics and the "real world."

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