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The Compleat Angler's "Baite"; or, The Subverter Subverted

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Donne's aversion to pastoral landscapes and to country matters in general is well known.[1] His one curious essay into pastoral, "The Baite," has been variously interpreted: sometimes as a heavy-handed failure at conventional pastoral, sometimes as a light-hearted parody of the mode, and sometimes as an anatomy of love to which the pastoral elements are more or less accidental. Two scholars have suggested that Donne departed from his Marlovian original in a direction suggested to him by Sannazaro's *Piscatorial Eclogues*.[2] Of course, the truth is that most of Donne's critics, and especially the major book-length studies, have simply ignored the poem. Evidently, it has not seemed worthy of much critical attention except from a few rather special points of view. Indeed, there is somewhat painful evidence that—much like the poems of Edgar Allen Poe—"The Baite" has been disproportionately attractive to translators and those who are working with non-native English speakers, as if it read better when not read too closely.[3] It seems fair to say that in this century the poem has not notably appealed to the majority of Donne's readers.

It is unlikely that the poem's apparent slightness or irreverence has put readers off, however, for that other seemingly inconsequential poem, "The Flea," has provoked an ample and appreciative response, in our time as well as Donne's. Rather, the problem may be that "The Baite" moves in too many directions at once. A reader may at first find it hard to decide just what the poem's aim or focus is, or indeed whether there is any real coherence among its golden beginning, its satiric middle, and its rueful ending. After all, since it is so directly obligated to Marlowe, only the strongest and most consistent poetic control could give it true life of its own. It may seem hard to escape the conclusion, therefore, that "The

Baite" is too closely derived from "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" to be an independent work, yet at the same time that it fails to make a satisfying response to its predecessor, as earlier Ralegh's poem succeeded in doing so resonantly. The editors of the *Norton Anthology*, that standard guide to the canon and to literary taste, include Marlowe and Ralegh but omit Donne, and one of them remarks that, although "many poets have written replies" to "The Passionate Shepherd," Ralegh's is "the finest."[4] Still, reconsideration of "The Baite" in the light of its uses of pastoral and its relation to its predecessors suggests that it is more coherent —and, as a result, more significant to an understanding of Donne's poetics—than has usually been thought.

Several useful clues to a revaluation of "The Baite" are provided by Walton's treatment of Donne's poem in *The Compleat Angler*. No one who has read that work could forget the wonderful use Walton makes of the Marlowe and Ralegh poems, when Venator and Piscator encounter a milkmaid and her mother while walking across the fields:

> 'Twas a handsom milk-maid that had not yet attain'd so much age and wisdom as to load her mind with any fears of many things that will never be (as too many men too often do) but she cast away all care, and sung like a *Nightingale*: her voice was good, and the Ditty fitted for it; 'twas that smooth song, which was made by *Kit. Marlow*, now at least fifty years ago: and the *Milk-maids* Mother sung an answer to it, which was made by Sir *Walter Rawleigh* in his younger days.[5]

Youth and age, innocence and experience, themes already treated in the two songs, are given new and living embodiment. The complexity of reference and emotion are further increased when the mother tells us that she too once sang Marlowe's song when she was younger, though now that she is old she sings Ralegh's:

> I learn'd the first part in my golden age, when I was about the age of my poor daughter; and the latter part, which indeed fits me best now, but two or three years ago, when the cares of the World began to take hold of me: but you shall, God willing, hear them both, and sung as well as we can, for we both love Anglers. (p. 81)

Passage of time is one of Walton's themes, both as the resultant changes relate to individual lives and as they relate to the more general transformations that have taken place in poetry and politics between the remembered golden age of Elizabeth and the turmoil and rampant injustice (as Walton sees the matter) of the Second Civil War. Another theme of perhaps equal importance is the celebration of a special sense of community, which, by means of that "love" that both mother and daughter profess for anglers, joins the poets of the past, the singers of the present, their songs, and their audiences (fictive and implied) in a common love of beauty, admission of humanity, and defiance of the destructive power of change.

Walton's handling of the two songs makes it seem as if neither ever came from the pages of a book. Instead, he treats them as expressions of a living community and examples of a rustic oral tradition, as well as remnants of a more gracious age of song, which still persists in the memory of a few men and women who survive from that better time. It is Piscator himself who points the contrast between those earlier songs and the harsher music of the present day: "They were old-fashioned Poetry, but choicely good, I think much better than the strong lines that are now in fashion in this critical age" (p. 80). Whether Walton meant Piscator's words to refer to anyone specific among the moderns is uncertain, but certainly George Williamson's application of the phrase "strong lines" to Donne and the Metaphysicals has won general critical acceptance.[6] It must have been to poets like Donne, if not to Donne alone, that Walton was referring.

"The Milk-maids Song" and "The Milk-maids Mothers Answer," as Walton titles them—emphasizing (as Marlowe and Ralegh had done) the presence and importance of his singers—are so complete and satisfying a pair of songs that there is no obvious room for a third to join them. Indeed, at this point none is offered. Only after a goodly number of other songs have been sung, and a night has passed, and Piscator has spent much time describing to Venator the various kinds of flies, and the varieties of live bait, and how to fish for salmon, trout, grayling, pike, carp, bream, and perch, with many digressions along the way, does Walton finally return to the third poem, that is, to Donne's poem. Like Walton himself, who slightly misquotes the words here and there in his usual fashion, Venator tells us he has committed the poem to memory, and he recites it aloud to his master Piscator. "Yes, Master," he begins, "I will speak you a Copy of Verses that were made by Doctor

Donne" (p. 167). So this is to be another oral presentation; but the poem is spoken, not sung, and it is presented as if originally committed to memory from a written text, not from an oral tradition going back to the living poet.

The terms in which Venator praises the poem, that it reveals Donne's ability to "make soft and smooth Verses when he thought smoothness worth his labour," recalls Piscator's earlier praise of the "smooth song" of "*Kit. Marlowe*," as well as his objection to the "strong lines" of the present age. Compared with the former scene in the meadow, the recital of the poem is contextually undramatic, and therefore it evokes little in the way of an emotional response from Piscator or, presumably, from Walton's reader. What enthusiasm there is in Piscator's response is directed toward his pupil's memory and performance rather than toward the poem itself: "Well remembred, honest Scholar," he says when his friend has finished his recital. "I thank you for these choice Verses, which I have heard formerly, but had quite forgot, till they were recovered by your happy memory. Well, being I have now rested myself a little, I will make you some requital, by telling you some observations of the *Eel*" (pp. 167-68).

It is a curiously flat reaction, as if Donne's poem had to be brought into Walton's treatise because, as Venator points out, it alludes "to Rivers, and fish and fishing" (p. 167), yet no sooner is it brought in than Piscator dismisses it without real praise. Clearly Donne's pastoral, piscatorial though it may be, has less to do with the consciously old-fashioned air of Walton's book than either of the earlier songs. The short distance from Walton's stream to his pasture, which the two protagonists cross so easily on foot, might be considered a metaphor for the short distance in spirit between his piscatorial treatise and the conventional concerns of shepherdly pastoral. It is a distance far shorter than the gap between Walton's conservative nostalgia and Donne's convention-breaking irony, even though they share an interest in rivers, fish, and fishing. Appropriately, therefore, Walton invites the reader to imagine Marlowe and Ralegh as figures who once walked through his landscape; but the "Dr. Donne" who wrote "The Baite"—even though, outside the pastoral fiction, he was closer to Walton in time and was the subject of his admiring *Life*—still remains only the author of another book rather than a recalled, living presence within Walton's fiction.

The very nature of Venator's praise gives away part of the difficulty. Donne, we are forced to conclude, is not normally a

"smooth" poet. He is a modern poet, even a revisionist, and as such he represents in poetry an equivalent to those forces in public life from which the whole of *The Compleat Angler* is concerned to withdraw itself. Even though Donne, the poet of "strong lines," is represented by one of his "smoother" works (though, as Walton probably knows, "smooth" doubtfully characterizes the poem), yet "The Baite" marks a retreat from song to speech and from the immediate, living world of Walton's fiction to the second remove of another literary text. Probably Walton admired Donne too much on other grounds to have wished to criticize him openly as a love poet. Yet these subtle indications provide us with evidence from a near contemporary of Donne's for reading "The Baite" in a way that might otherwise be objected to as anachronistic; that is, as revisionist in a peculiarly "post-modern" sense. We know from Carew's "Elegie upon the Death of the Deane of Pauls" that Donne's immediate successors considered him to be a major innovator in poetic method; but only Walton seems to have realized how reflexive and self-consciously literary such a poem as "The Baite" is, and how skillfully it repudiates its predecessors by treating them as mere texts divorced from the world of real events, in a fashion that a twentieth-century semiotician might well admire.

True, Carew says that Donne threw away "The lazie seeds / Of servile imitation" and planted "fresh invention" in their place.[7] Walton's treatment of the poem makes us realize, however, that Donne's rejection of "imitation" involved not only innovation in style and subject matter but also a constant depersonalization of his sources. The opening lines of "The Baite," taken verbatim from Marlowe except for the one key word—"new"—are among the very few lines anywhere in Donne's poetry that can be traced to an individual author or a specific literary work such as the Bible. Unlike the case of most of his predecessors and near contemporaries (such as Spenser, Jonson, Herbert, Vaughan, or Milton), the apparatus of a modern edition of Donne's poems typically lists very few specific, recognizable verbal allusions. Writers in Donne's time ordinarily thought of imitation, or *imitatio*, as a way of relating in a highly personal manner to the writers of past literary works. But Donne habitually alludes to the literary past as if it were an impersonal body of writings rather than the work of individual, once living authors. In that respect, "The Baite" typifies the rest of his poetry. Although it seems to begin on a personal note, with its clear evocation of Christopher Marlowe's poem, we

shall see that its opening lines are, in that respect, deliberately misleading.

"The Baite" opens in the golden pastoral world of Marlowe and Sannazaro, and (except for the one word whose importance a reader could easily miss) it is hard to distinguish the first two stanzas from a typically "smooth" Elizabethan song:

> Come live with mee, and bee my love,
> And wee will some new pleasures prove
> Of golden sands, and cristall brookes,
> With silken lines, and silver hookes.
>
> There will the river whispering runne
> Warm'd by thy eyes, more then the Sunne.
> And there the'inamor'd fish will stay,
> Begging themselves they may betray. (1-8)[8]

Can this be Donne? There is little that is "new" about the poem so far, except that it transfers the aristocratic pursuit of pleasure from meadows to streams—which were, however, already part of the pastoral landscape and which had, moreover, been thoroughly legitimized by the tradition going back to Sannazaro's *Piscatoriae* (1526). So far, the invitation seems as lovely, as inviting, and as free from self-conscious irony as Marlowe's.

The next two stanzas seem at first to continue in the same vein:

> When thou wilt swimme in that live bath,
> Each fish, which every channell hath,
> Will amorously to thee swimme,
> Gladder to catch thee, then thou him.
>
> If thou, to be so seene, beest loath,
> By Sunne, or Moone, thou darknest both,
> And if my selfe have leave to see,
> I need not their light, having thee. (9-16)

Beneath the apparently limpid surface of the poetic style, however, the reader may now begin to recognize a more characteristically Donnean voice. True, there still is nothing here that is not conventional; yet, in Donne's habitual manner, the conventional is beginning to fall into doubt because it is stretched to such outlandish extremes and literalized just where we would expect it to remain metaphorical.[9] Of course, we do not really believe Donne's

tall story about amorous fish or eyes so radiant that they have power to "darken" or eclipse the sun and moon, thus hiding the mistress from intrusive strangers yet simultaneously revealing her to the privileged poet. The effect of these images is to mock all the old conventional images and the poems that contained them: such, on a reflexively literal level, is the actual process that paradoxically includes the person or persona of the new poet and lover, Donne, in his own curious idyll while at the same time excluding all his old-fashioned rivals. As a result, the old chestnuts of the mistress's sun-bright eyes and the cooperative obedience of the lower orders to their human masters are given new and flattering life just because they are treated humorously. A "critical age" (p. 80), as Walton calls his own century, requires comic irony to help disarm its habit of disbelief.[10]

In the second of these two stanzas, the language begins noticeably to darken. Both stanzas are equally complimentary, yet there is an obvious contrast between the pleasant feelings and emotions likely to be aroused in the reader by individual words and images in the first—"swimme," "live bath," "amorously," "gladder"—and the unpleasant or constricting emotions likely to be aroused by some of the words in the second—"loath," "darknest," "have leave," "need not their light." These two stanzas are transitional, because they lead the reader from the simple, pleasant and transparent poetry of the opening stanzas to the painful ironies and stylistic opacities of those that follow:

> Let others freeze with angling reeds,
> And cut their legges, with shells and weeds,
> Or treacherously poore fish beset,
> With strangling snare, or windowie net:
>
> Let coarse bold hands, from slimy nest
> The bedded fish in banks out-wrest,
> Or curious traitors, sleavesilke flies
> Bewitch poore fishes wandring eyes. (17-24)

Donne's contemptuous dismissal of fishing might alone suffice to explain why it is that, as Walton's two fishermen sit beneath a honeysuckle hedge and wait for a shower to go by, Piscator prefers to turn the conversation away from Donne's poem back to the habits of eels. But, of course, Donne has wider intentions than to insult fishermen. Once more, his true targets are pastoral poets and the pastoral mode itself. Ralegh had argued that pastoral

pleasures are bound to fade, not because he considers them unreal, but because he judges that, like all the mortal things of this world, they are transitory. Donne's argument, to the contrary, is that summer, youth, and beauty, and with them all the other pleasures of the pastoral imagination, are simply unreal as poets portray them. The problem is not just that green fields must yield "to wayward Winter," in that time when "Rivers rage, and rocks grow cold" (pp. 82-83), but that it belongs to the very nature of things, in real life as opposed to books, for fishermen to freeze and to lacerate themselves while they engage in an occupation that, when viewed closely, proves filthy and treacherous. No matter, then, whether it is summer or winter, or whether the lover and his mistress are young or old. We may recall Donne's similar dismissal of illusory bookish idealism in "Love's Growth": "Love's not so pure, and abstract, as they use / To say, which have no Mistresse but their Muse."

As Petrarchan and pastoral landscapes reflect a psychology of love, so too the landscape of "The Baite." At first glance, everything is as fresh and bright as gold and silver, silk and crystal. But first appearances deceive: if you step into this watery landscape, all too soon your legs will be cut by hidden shells and weeds. Or, if you catch a fish, it will only be by means of violence, or treachery, or shameful self-abasement. Plumb the depths of love, Donne is suggesting, and the results will be similar. We can recognize fragments from traditional sixteenth-century love sonnets, thoroughly distorted as they are worked into the analogy. The "strangling snare" and the "windowie net," like the "sleavesilke" that makes up the flies, are familiar properties of the false or painted Petrarchan mistress. Just so, the bewitchment of the fishes' "wandring eyes" derives from the oldest cliché in the pathology of courtly love. As these shreds and patches of an idealized love tradition are introduced only to be mocked, a chain of unpleasant images suggests that Donne's landscape is responding to an undercurrent of Ovidian sexuality, one that disgusts the poet as much as it attracts him. As, in "Loves Alchymie," the "Myne" and the "pregnant pot" have an obvious sexual reference, so here the freezing, cutting, and strangling of fish and fishermen alike reflect the poet's violent fear of female sexuality, a fear that can, apparently, only be dealt with by an equivalent counter-violence: "Let coarse bold hands, from slimy nest / The bedded fish in banks out-wrest." As we know, Donne is capable of converting his lovers' sweat into a "fast balme" ("The Extasie"), or, as John Carey

has recently pointed out, of transforming their inner organs and intimate life processes into poetic objects that are rich and strange.[11] But he attempts no such transformation here.

Since the darkest threat implied by Donne's imagery is not so much the treachery of false appearances, whether practiced by anglers or Petrarchan mistresses, as it is the treasonous violence of direct, naked sexuality, his implicit apology to his mistress in the final stanza, which retracts any implication that she may be guilty of artificiality or stealth, cannot be read without a further irony of its own:

> For thee, thou needst no such deceit,
> For thou thy selfe are thine owne bait;
> That fish, that is not catch'd thereby,
> Alas, is wiser farre then I. (25-28)

This mock retraction does not exonerate the mistress from treachery, violence, or intimidating sexuality, but simply relieves her from having to destroy her victims covertly. Her sexuality is so powerful that she need neither conceal nor idealize it. Donne's rueful revaluation of amorous psychology, in which conventional Petrarchan imprisonment to a disdainful or deceitful mistress is transformed into libertine enthrallment to a still more painful and demeaning sexual bondage, is underlined by his treatment of his Petrarchan and pastoral predecessors as the authors of merely literary texts, texts which, in their pretty innocence and idealism, are disconnected from real experience of life.[12] So Donne, responding to Marlowe's poem, takes a tack quite different from Ralegh. Instead of joining Marlowe in his pastoral paradise and arguing with him there, as Ralegh had done, he reduces not only Marlowe but all his fellow pastoralists from human adversaries to the impersonal status of anonymous writings. He attacks his poetic and amatory rivals on grounds not of morality but of comparative reality. His, he implicitly claims, is the real world, the one that truly exists; Marlowe's and Ralegh's is only an imagined world—indeed, nothing but a fiction, and within that fiction no more than an appealing but empty dream.

As we have seen, *The Compleat Angler* is so constructed as to bring Marlowe and Ralegh together, while it separates Donne from them in both textual space and fictional time. The two earlier men are members of a human community, within which Walton includes not only the Elizabethan poets but also his fictional, interregnal singers and their audience. The new man, Donne, does not belong

to this community, nor is his voice permitted to join the debate. This treatment of "The Baite" reveals just how well Walton understands what Donne is doing in his poem. If Donne wishes to repudiate song for speech, then so be it. If he wishes—as so often elsewhere in his poetry—to repudiate dialogue for monologue, so be it again. The iconoclastic Donne simply rejects the tradition of Renaissance debate, in which both sides of the argument have an equal opportunity to express their views and neither feels obliged to win the contest.[13] Instead, Donne pits himself against all his predecessors in a body: not only Marlowe and Ralegh, together with their nymphs and shepherds, but all former authors of pastoral poetry. As Walton recognizes, Marlowe and Ralegh inhabit a social world in which debate takes the form of community; but Donne inhabits a private world, in which all argument is reduced to a wonderfully complex yet always self-reflexive "dialogue of one."

Sidney, Spenser, Jonson, Marvell, and Milton all give opposing arguments full play in their poetry, but much of the time Donne is prepared to crush a potential opponent under his witty logic just as surely as his mistress crushes the flea under her fingernail. As Dwight Cathcart has argued, the Donne of the *Songs and Sonets* is continually sensitive and responsive to the unspoken reactions of his listening mistresses.[14] Yet Donne's lovers seem typically to use this sensitivity not to seek a concensus but to anticipate, to outargue, or to fend off criticism. In Donne's characteristically private poetry, points of view other than his own get very little breathing space. In the middle seventeenth century, however, social poetry was being revived in new forms, by the Cavaliers and others who found in friendship a refuge against hostile political developments. In that situation, reflected clearly enough in the friendship of Piscator and Venator (who have joined forces against the world of business and public affairs and, implicitly, against the Civil War), or by the "*Brother[s] of the Angle*" (p. 84) who are shown holding their singing contest in the country inn, Walton might find grounds for sympathy with the earlier tradition of communal song, and therefore of antipathy for Donnean literary privacy and revisionism.[15]

In "The Baite," Donne first draws his reader in, leading him to expect yet another smooth pastoral song. Gradually he disillusions him, as, under the poet's hands, pastoralism is exaggerated, then twisted, depersonalized, mocked, and rejected. The technique is powerfully effective, but it brings with it its own dangers. There may not be lacking those who, in Yeats's phrase, will take the

example and, in their turn, "mock mockers." Walton's handling of Donne is gentler than that; still, Donne has unquestionably laid himself open to the same kind of treatment by his successors as the one to which he has subjected his predecessors. There is, therefore, a remarkable irony and a curious poetic justice in Walton's handling of the three poems. Taking his cue from Donne, though seeming to mention him only in a belated afterthought, he uses precisely Donne's method to reverse and repudiate Donne's argument. Now Marlowe and Ralegh come alive posthumously as fellow inhabitants of our human world, while Donne is relegated to the status of mere textuality.

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Notes

1 See Heather Dubrow Ousby, "John Donne's Versions of Pastoral," *Durham University Journal*, 37 (1976), 33-37, and Anthony Low, *The Georgic Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 74-88.

2 For the first view, see, e.g., "The Passionate Shepherd; and English Poetry," *PMLA*, 40 (1925), 692-742; and "The Seventeenth-Century Pastoral," in *A Book of English Pastoral Verse*, ed. John Barrell and John Bull (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 141-42. For the second, see George Kitchin, "Jacobean and Later Seventeenth Century Parody and Burlesque," in *A Survey of Burlesque and Parody in English* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1931), pp. 70-73; Frank Manley, "Formal Wit in the *Songs and Sonnets*," in *That Subtle Wreath*, ed. Margaret W. Pepperdene (Atlanta: Agnes Scott College, 1973); and Ashley Brown and John L. Kimmey, eds., "John Donne: 'The Baite,'" in *Satire: An Anthology* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1977), p. 118. For the third, see John Vere, "The Man Behind the Verse," *Bolt*, 1 (1970), 23-27. On the piscatorial eclogue, see John R. Cooper, *The Art of The Compleat Angler* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1968), p. 61; and Peter V. Marinelli, *Pastoral* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 29.

3 See, e.g., items no. 76, 195, 630, 863 in John R. Roberts, *John Donne: An Annotated Bibliography of Modern Criticism, 1968-1978* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1982). I am indebted to this volume and its predecessor for several of my references above.

4 See *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 4th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), I, 744n. The remark is attributable to Hallett Smith; Robert M. Adams presumably made the decision to omit "The Baite."

5 Izaak Walton and Charles Cotton, *The Compleat Angler* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 79-80.

6 George Williamson, "Strong Lines," *English Studies*, 18 (1937), 152-59.

7 From *The Poems of Thomas Carew*, ed. Rhodes Dunlap (1949; Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), p. 72.

8 Text is from *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson, 2 vols. (1951; London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1912), I, 46-47; see also *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (New York: Doubleday, 1967), which gives an identical text.

9 See Frank Manley, "Formal Wit in the *Songs and Sonnets*"; and, for a parallel use of this metaphysical technique, Anthony Low, "A Metrical Device in 'The Exequy,'" *Modern Language Review*, 63 (1968), 7-12.

10 This point is central to the argument of Cleanth Brooks' exemplary essay on "The Canonization" in *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947), pp. 3-21.

11 John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 131-66.

12 On Marvell's similar shift in emphasis from the pains of unrequited love to those of consummated love, see Lawrence W. Hyman, *Andrew Marvell* (New York: Twayne, 1964).

13 On the communal and "playful" qualities of true Renaissance debate, see Roger Deakins, "The Tudor Prose Dialogue: Genre and Anti-Genre," *Studies in English Literature*, 20 (1980), 5-23. As Deakins suggests, whether dialogues are friendly and equal, and seek truth in the balancing of possibilities, or are quarrelsome and unequal, and seek to impose truth by preferring one point of view over another, is largely dependent on such extra-literary matters as the social climate and the condition of politics and religion.

14 See Dwight Cathcart, *Doubting Conscience* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1975), esp. pp. 13-32.

15 On the "private" and "social" modes of poetry and their relation to public life, see Earl Miner's trilogy of books, all published by Princeton Univ. Press: *The Metaphysical Mode from Donne to Cowley* (1969), *The Cavalier Mode from Jonson to Cotton* (1971), and *The Restoration Mode from Milton to Dryden* (1974).