

My heart goes out to my Creator in love
Who gave me Death as end and remedy

we remember that she observed how easily it might become 'Creator in law'.

Stevie Smith's rare gift as a religious poet was not only to sing of disbelief as our common religious experience, but to laugh self-mockingly at so much seriousness.

'Fish-hooks in Amos': Izaak Walton and the 'Real Truth'

by M. A. Bond

The name of John Donne is not immediately associated with the idea of moderation and the golden mean, but that of one of his earliest and most ardent admirers, and his first biographer, most certainly is. In the description of his equable self as Piscator in *The Compleat Angler*, Izaak Walton offers to posterity a moral ideal which reconciles the turbulent egoism of the age of the English Renaissance with the quietist values of the more mature religious sects.

The nub of Walton's argument lies in the discussion between Venator and Piscator on the First Day of *The Compleat Angler*. 'And for that I shall tell you, that in ancient times a debate hath arisen, and it remains yet unresolved, whether the happiness of man in this world doth consist more in contemplation or in action?'¹ The battle lines are already drawn up between non-utilitarian and utilitarian points of view. On the one hand, 'the nearer we mortals come to God by way of imitation the more happy we are. And they say, that God enjoys himself only, by a contemplation of his own infiniteness, eternity, power, and goodness, and the like.' 'And on the contrary, there want not men of equal authority and credit, that prefer action to be the more excellent; as namely, experiments in physick, and the application of it, both for the ease and prolongation of man's life; by which each man is enabled to act and do good to others, either to serve his country, or do good to particular persons; and they say also, that action is doctrinal, and teaches both art and virtue, and is a maintainer of human society.'

For Walton, the 'happiness of man in this world' is axiomatic. Piscator evidently enjoys it, as witness not only the relish with which Walton creates the figure, but the immense popularity of the book which saw five editions in little over twenty years within Walton's

¹All quotations are from *The Compleat Angler* (1676 edition) (publ. by J. M. Dent & Sons, London 1906, 1964 reprint), 'The First Day', unless otherwise stated.

own lifetime, and subsequently well over three hundred reprints. Piscator is well aware of the blessed state of mental and moral composure he enjoys, and is happy to be able to pass on its benefits to such a willing pupil as Venator. 'We enjoy a contentedness that is above the reach of such dispositions', he says, referring to the 'poor rich-men', burdened with the cares of money-making and the rat-race of the world. The Art of Angling, by which he has attained this state of mind, and which is also the evidence for this very state itself, he considers 'worthy the knowledge and practice of a wise man'; both the occupation and those engaged in it are 'calm and quiet'.

To attempt to explain Walton's stand as an escape from society, forced upon him by the unpopularity of his political views during the Commonwealth, is to miss the moral generality at which Walton himself aimed and which has certainly ensured the continued life of this little treatise on angling. Walton's politically formative years (he was born in 1593) were in the 1610s and 1620s, when it was no sin to be a Royalist and an Anglican, and he made many acquaintances and several friends among people in public and political life at the time, especially through the Church. His particular quality and view of life owes more to the long tradition of Christian social morality, modified by the humanist renaissance, and to Montaigne in particular, whom he quotes with pleasure, than to the specific social and political upheavals of his age.

If the 'happiness of man in this world' was axiomatic as an ideal, what mattered was the means by which it was to be achieved. And in this Walton was a staunch individualist. His values are those of a single man, not those of society, and he does not think in terms of reforming or converting society. His state of mind may be passed on to others, as Piscator succeeds in passing on the Art and Pleasure of Angling to Venator, but the transaction is a personal one, on a one-to-one basis. The idea of propagating his views through the very book he was writing struck Walton as even counterproductive and foolish. In this respect he quotes the bad example of Mr Hales' *A Private School of Defense*¹ as a vain and laughable attempt to teach fencing by book alone, and the joke is on himself as well. Walton's values are private values, his pleasures private pleasures; society benefits only indirectly through the contented individual.

This contented state of mind he achieved through the exclusion of extremes, by following the golden mean. *The Compleat Angler* is full of expressions of mutuality, phrases excluding both one thing and another, including both one thing and another, suggesting neither one nor another. The constructions have the makings of the first two stages of the dialectic, but with Walton this is not a doctrinaire or theoretical construct, but an unconscious assumption, a habit. With Walton there is no suggestion that these early stages should lead on from thesis and antithesis to some new synthesis, which

¹In *Ibid.*, 'The Epistle to the Reader'.

should in turn form the basis of another triad. Walton's view is fragmentary and static; these statements of mutuality do not relate directly to each other in a sequential order, rather they cluster round a centre, a central assumption to which they all contribute in a small way.

It is through these statements that one glimpses the central truth of Walton's attitude. He addresses his book to readers who are 'not too grave or too busy'; he would not want Venator and Auceps to be possessed of prejudice against anglers, nor for them to judge his 'earnestness to be impatience' as he argues the case in favour of angling; he is at pains to give a favourable interpretation to the word 'simple' when applied to his fraternity; he is prepared to accommodate his horse's pace to theirs in the interests of the company; he is considerate for their attention and does not wish to bore them with too much praise of his own Art; finally he 'would rather prove himself a gentleman, by being learned and humble, valiant and inoffensive, virtuous and communicable' than by vaunting some hollow ancestry. It is a picture of kindness and generosity, of honesty and simplicity, of plain, good manners. In his *Epistle to the Reader* Walton acknowledges that the picture is a picture of himself: 'And I am the willinger to justify the pleasant part of it, because though it is known I can be serious at seasonable times, yet the whole Discourse is, or rather was, a picture of my disposition, especially in such days as I have laid aside business, and gone a-fishing'.

This picture of moderation, however, is not yet complete, for it lacks a more than pragmatic basis or justification for the virtue it extols. Here Walton faced a serious dilemma, for his age was already aware of the dichotomy between traditional teaching and the beginnings of science in the broadest sense of experiment and experience. By upbringing and education, and by the influence of acquaintances later in his life, Walton was essentially a believer and a religious man. Religious truths were of primary importance to him, and he naturally searched for a religious justification for his actions. He was an intelligent man, but no intellectual, son of a provincial innkeeper, a tradesman in London for some years to earn his living, and latterly steward of a Bishop. He was connected by marriage to ecclesiastical circles, and moved largely in these for the adult years of his life. He was relatively well read, especially in religious works, and it is precisely the conflict of this reading and his essentially traditional, religious frame of mind, with the practical pursuits of his business and recreational life that offer a most interesting picture of compromise of conflicting elements, not without relevance to the intellectual history of his age.

Piscator begins his justification of the art of angling by speaking of the element in which he takes delight: water. Auceps and Venator had spoken of the air and the earth in favour of Hawking and Hunting respectively, and Piscator goes on, as they did, to claim

tradition and antiquity to support the status of his element. Auceps had spoken of Jove and his Eagle, Venator of Cleopatra feasting Mark Antony with eight wild boars, but Piscator speaks of God and Moses and the Creation. The justification through Jewish/Christian tradition is considered more authoritative than that through classical mythology or legend. But immediately Piscator goes on to offer a justification for the priority of the element of water through scientific experiment. "Take a willow (or any like speedy growing plant) newly rooted in a box or barrel full of earth, weigh them altogether exactly when the tree begins to grow, and then weigh all together after the tree is increased from its first rooting, to weigh one hundred pound weight more than when it was first rooted and weighed; and you shall find this augment of the tree to be without the diminution of one dram weight of the earth. Hence they infer this increase of wood to be from water of rain, or from dew, and not to be from any other element. And they affirm, they can reduce this wood back again to water; and they affirm also, the same may be done in any animal or vegetable. And this I take to be a fair testimony of the excellency of my Element of Water."

These two separate justifications are considered in no way contradictory; both contribute to the argument in favour of the excellency of water. And so it is through much of Piscator's argument, whether he claims support from men 'of no less credit than Aristotle' or 'of no less authority then Josephus', whether he refers to Belus, Seth, Amos ('for in the Prophet Amos mention is made of fish-hooks; and in the book of Job'), to Pliny, to Peter or to Paul. He may feel a little out of his depth with some of the references to antiquity and return to 'observations I can manage with more pleasure', but the two different sources of justification jostle each other with strange compatibility throughout the pages of the book.

There are occasions when the justification through experiment and experience appears to modern readers somewhat unscientific, as for instance, when Walton quotes the authority of a recent pot-pourri of fact and fable, Dr. Casaubon's *Discourse of Credulity and Incredulity* published about 1670, or when he relies on the example of modern churchmen who loved angling—Dr Nowel or Dr Whitaker, or of the late provost of Eton College, Sir Henry Wotton—to recommend his cause. Here is indeed a strange mixture of an appeal to authority, whether written or through a life, but to *modern* authority, and, as such, one that is more comparable to the experience of both reader and writer alike. For Dr Nowel and Aristotle are not similar authorities; the one is a man, an acquaintance, contemporary, while the other is a name, a tradition, a set of arguments. Walton does not hover undecided between the two, he embraces both in an all-inclusive tolerance of opinions and search for justification.

And yet there is some measure of selectivity in Walton's attitude at last. One must look hard and long to find it, for the author is keen to

draw support from wherever he may, not from fear that his case is weak, but from well-meaning desire to show to the incredulous how good his case may be. To find that point where he is able to convince himself with his own arguments, one must look for the intersection of these two circles of support, where authority and experience coincide. Returning to the central theme from which we began, the dispute between the life of contemplation and the life of action, Walton is able to find a practical solution which effectively unites the two sources of conflicting authority. In his own words this point of mutual support, the absence of conflict, the moment of resolution he names 'the real truth'. The phrase occurs but once, and at the crucially revealing moment of resolution in the main debate: 'I shall tell you what some have observed, and I have found it to be a *real truth*, that the very sitting by the river's side is not only the quietest and fittest place for contemplation, but will invite an angler to it.'¹ Walton goes on to support his own observation by biblical authority and by proverb, immediately taking the reader back into the world of 'both this one and that', of mutuality, of support from wherever it appears forthcoming. But the moment of deeper truth, of 'real truth', was there, the moment when Walton found a rock on which to stand in the shifting tides of different authorities in his age.

Neither biblical nor classical authority was to stand for long in the growing current of pragmatic and scientific thought in England in the following century, but Walton found a point of balance, an equipoise at perhaps a watershed, a time when the old authorities were beginning to wane and the new faith in experiment and experience was waxing stronger. Walton found that point of balance in the general inclusion of both, tempered with a fine tolerance, and just a little discreet selectivity where traditional authority and personal experience were found to coincide, sitting beside a stream.

¹See Walton's Life of Dr Sanderson, author of Preface to the Book of Common Prayer of 1662: 'It hath ever been the wisdom of the Church of England to keep the mean between two extremes. . . .'

Next Month in New Blackfriars

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DENIS RICE

on Collusion and Bogus Radicalism.

PHIL BEISLY

on Tragedy and Walter Stein.