

The Wrong End of the Stick, or *Caveat Lector*

A Reply to Barry Baldwin

Two years ago in this journal, I published a short and (I hoped) provocative note entitled “Trimalchio’s *Canis Catenarius*: A Simple Solution?”¹ This elicited an intemperate and in several respects inaccurate reply from Barry Baldwin in the next issue,² to which I now reply.

Perhaps I should begin by saying that I don’t quite see what I have done to pull Dr. Baldwin’s chain, as it were. Contrary to the implications of his last paragraph, I can testify that I am not now nor have I ever been a member of the international Deconstructionist movement, nor have I ever aimed at the overthrow of the dominant paradigm, nor, so to speak, traveled along with those who do. I solemnly renounce and abjure Derrida and all his works, and willingly pledge allegiance to the noble principles of logocentrism. My passing allusion to Magritte’s painting ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe’ was intended jocularly and surrealistically rather than deconstructively. That some literary theorists have, as they would put it, ‘fetishized’ the phrase is no concern of mine. In any case, my colleagues in French assure me that it was Foucault, not Derrida, who named a book after Magritte’s painting, and that Foucault was not a deconstructionist.³ If I add that I have read neither, that is neither a boast nor an apology, but a simple statement of fact. In lumping me together with one or both of them, Baldwin is barking up the wrong tree. I hope the dog that he keeps behind his gate is better than its master at distinguishing friends from enemies, and does not make a habit of biting the former and fawning on the latter.⁴

In considering the relationship of the painted dog of *Sat.* 29.1 to the *canis catenarius* of 72.7-9, I tentatively proposed two possible solutions: (a) that Trimalchio had arranged to have a real dog substituted for the painted one in the interval, and (b) that the dog was

¹ *PSN* 24 (1994) 23-24.

² “Drunk ’n Dog: Petronius 72.9”, *PSN* 25 (1995) 16-17.

³ ‘Intertextualists’, whom Baldwin includes in his comprehensive dismissal, are a rather different breed of scholar, and have precisely nothing to do with the issue at hand.

⁴ If it is true, as the Red Dog red dog says, that “you are your own dog”, that will be good news for the criminal classes of Calgary.

still painted in 72.7-9 and our heroes too drunk by then to tell the difference. In introducing the first hypothesis, I said that I thought it “the less likely” of the two. Baldwin takes this as saying that I think the first hypothesis simply false and the second simply true.⁵ One need not be any kind of critical theorist to find this a simplistic way of looking at things: if I had thought that either hypothesis was simply false, I would have omitted it, and if I had thought that either was simply true, I would not have put the query in my title, much less have provided an alternative.⁶ The plausibility of Baldwin’s confidence in his ability (and that of anyone not manifestly insane) to divine the plain meaning of a text so corrupt, lacunose, and culturally alien as Petronius’ is rather undermined by his difficulty in sniffing out and tracking down the meanings of my own decidedly unhermetic words.

Despite Baldwin’s dogged insistence that Encolpius and company are not drunk, or not very drunk, when they attempt to leave the party, the evidence to the contrary is overwhelming. In a quick read-through of my dog-eared copy of Petronius, I noted the following pieces of evidence: Encolpius asks for a drink (*potio*) at 31.5: it is not entirely clear whether he gets one. The guests are served *mulsum*, apparently not for the first time, at 34.1 (*Trimalchio . . . fecerat . . . potestatem clara uoce, si quis nostrum iterum uellet mulsum sumere*). The ‘Opimian’ wine arrives at 34.6. The guests again turn their attention to the wine at 39.1. Finally, Trimalchio (already drunk) says ‘*aquam foras, uinum intro*’ at 52.7. Since we have no reason to believe that Encolpius and his companions are teetotalers or have any reason to abstain while others drink, I think it is safe to assume that they do their share of drinking. This presumption is confirmed, at least for Encolpius, at 64.2, where he says *sane iam lucernae mihi plures uidebantur ardere totumque triclinium esse mutatum*. Though Baldwin denies the consequence, a man who is drunk enough to be seeing double is already well on his way to seeing painted dogs as

⁵ “Hendry considers but rightly rejects another explanation” (17). I do nothing of the sort. In fact, the first is looking a bit more likely: more on this in my penultimate paragraph.

⁶ The fact that no separate article has been devoted to the problem (Baldwin, note 1) proves nothing. For what it is worth, there have now been three in three years. The fact that Smith does not mention it in his commentary (Oxford, 1975) is also irrelevant. His useful but unpretentious school commentary is not a triple-decker monument on the scale of Fraenkel’s *Agamemnon* or Brink’s *Horace On Poety*, and does not purport to answer every possible question that might be asked about its text. In fact, F. R. D. Goodyear’s main criticism in his review (*PACA* 14 [1978] 52-6 = *Papers on Latin Literature* [London 1992] 258-62) was that “scores of matters which demand elucidation receive none”.

real.⁷ The fact that Giton leads the other two on their abortive escape-attempt does not prove that he is sober or even that he is less drunk than Encolpius: since he is impersonating a slave (26.10), it is his job to lead the way, whether he feels up to it or not, and he may easily be sober enough to find the way back to the entrance, but not to tell a real dog from a painted one.⁸ In any case, it is Ascyrtos who falls in first, Encolpius second, Giton not at all: he is too busy pacifying the dog with their precious leftovers.⁹

The disputed passage (72.7) deserves and repays careful analysis: *ducente per porticum Gitone ad ianuam uenimus, ubi canis catenarius tanto nos tumultu excepit, ut Ascyrtos etiam in piscinam ceciderit. nec non ego quoque ebrius [qui etiam pictum timueram canem], dum natanti opem fero, in eundem gurgitem tractus sum.* It is remotely conceivable that Baldwin is correct in arguing that *ebrius* here means ‘soaking wet’ rather than ‘drunk’: no doubt Ascyrtos’ belly-flop (and dog-paddle?) would have splashed a good deal of water on the other two. But we know that Encolpius is drunk (64.2, quoted above), and it seems much more pointed to take *ebrius* as reminding us of that fact and explaining (what needs explaining) why the rescuer falls into the *piscina* himself. In other words, I find a much closer connection between the word and its context: ‘I also, *being drunk*, was dragged in’.¹⁰

The trio is still drunk later on: although we are told that they ‘shake off’ their drunkenness in the baths (*ebrietate discussa*, 73.5), it seems to return when they leave the party, since (as Baldwin admits) we are specifically told that drunkenness contributed to their

⁷ And, as I argued two years ago, the painted dog was sufficiently lifelike to frighten Giton even before the drinking started.

⁸ It is only in modern criminal justice that there is a clear and distinct line between drunk and not drunk, as defined by the percentage of alcohol in one’s blood, and even then the legal limit differs from one jurisdiction to another.

⁹ Baldwin is quite right to chastise me for saying that “Encolpius and his companions” had done so: I would be on my way to the doghouse with my tail between my legs if he had not made a more serious howler of his own in denying that entrance and (abortive) exit are in the same place — more on this below. (If Giton is the only one who feeds the dog, that is no doubt because he, as pseudo-slave, is carrying the food. Some may find it ironic that the contents of the ‘doggy bag’ end up as dogfood.)

¹⁰ Another fact points in the same direction. Giton dries the other two’s clothes while they are in the bath (73.2). Unless he is doing this naked, which seems unlikely, only Encolpius’ and Ascyrtos’ clothes are wet. Since they are the two who fell in the fishpond, it looks as if their clothes are wet for that reason, and not because Encolpius was splashed by Ascyrtos before falling in. Otherwise, why are Giton’s

losing their way (79.2). When they finally reach home, Encolpius is too drunk for sex (79.9), though the other two are not. Since we are not told of any drinking on the way home, they must have been quite sozzled when they left the party — allowance to be made, as always, for what may have been lost in lacunae.

So much for my second hypothesis, which may indeed be wrong, though Baldwin has not proved it. No doubt it would take further evidence and careful argumentation to show that Encolpius is an ‘unreliable narrator’. Unfortunately, my dog ate my notes on the subject, so that will have to wait for another day. In any case, Baldwin’s dogmatic dismissal of my first hypothesis (quoted in note 5 above) has convinced me that I may have been too hasty in preferring the second. To my suggestion that Trimalchio has arranged to have a real dog (72.7-9) substituted for the painted dog (29.1) while the guests are at dinner, he objects that “since the porter tells Encolpius and company that guests are never allowed to leave by the way they came in, this would make no sense”. In fact, it makes perfect sense. They attempt to leave the house by some exit or other, fail to do so, and are only then informed that guests are not allowed to leave by the way they came in. The clear implication is that they were attempting to do just that, and that it was the dog that prevented them.¹¹ Since the dog is described as a *canis catenarius*, he is presumably chained to his post, and so cannot have wandered there inadvertently: the whole point of chaining the dog to his post is to prevent him from wandering the halls threatening the guests and allowing burglars free rein. The place must then be the same as in 29.1, but the dog cannot be the same, unless the narrator is utterly mistaken (as in my hypothesis B). And the real dog has no business being at his post this early in the evening, unless he is there specifically to prevent guests from leaving through the door by which they had entered. That is the problem my paper addressed, and it will not be chased away by vague talk of multiple wandering dogs. In my view (hypothesis A, as reargued here), the dog is not so much a practical joke (as I had argued before) as a very practical and

clothes not also wet? Other things being equal, he was as likely to be splashed as Encolpius, and there is no reason to believe that he was standing further away.

¹¹ And we would expect them to exit by the same way they came in, particularly in a strange house. Note too that the *atriensis* makes no attempt to help them get past the dog and out the door. Once again, this must be because this is the way they came in, and he is not permitted to let them out, though he can apparently direct them to the *balneum* (73.1).

efficient means for preventing the guests from escaping: it is the painted dog of 29.1 that is the joke. Of course, as Baldwin says of his own front gate, a ‘Beware of Dog’ sign usually means that there is a dog in the vicinity. But we cannot assume this in such a trompe-l’oeil labyrinth as Trimalchio’s house, and the dog is certainly not there in 29.1. No doubt the point of my allusion to Magritte could have been made more clearly. What I meant to imply is this. At first, it looks as if *caue canem* in 29.1 is a silly joke and means ‘Beware of this very scary painted dog’ — after all, if you’re not careful, you may break your leg, and no other dog is visible.¹² It is only when we arrive at 72.7-9 that we realize that there is a real dog to beware of, one that keeps invited guests from leaving rather than burglars from entering. Trimalchio’s house is rather like Hades, or a Roach Motel, or the Bates Motel: guests check in, but they don’t check out — not without a great deal of difficulty, anyway.¹³

¹² I may have been influenced by my memories of working in a record store in Chicago some years ago, a store whose owner had a fake burglar alarm: grey strips of tape around all the windows, with bits of electric wire at the corners leading nowhere in particular, and a little sign that said ‘Protected by XYZ Security’ — the whole thing pure bluff. (It didn’t work as well as Trimalchio’s painted dog.)

¹³ I wish to thank Mr. Matthew Devine, along with two colleagues in French who prefer to remain nameless, for their help with this paper.