

Thomas Coryate: Beyond Barbarism and Exotic Locales

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Thomas Coryate (1577? -1617) was a late Elizabethan and early Jacobean traveler and Philomath. He was born in Odcombe, Somersetshire to Reverend George Coryate and Gertrude Williams. His father George was Oxford bred and is said to have received Queen Elizabeth when she visited New College. It was then that he is said to have made a Latin oration in her praise for which he was gifted a purse of gold. Later he served as the rector of Odcombe for a period of thirty-seven years. It is probably the influence of his father that nestled in Thomas a thirst for literary talent.

Although Thomas attended Winchester and Gloucester Hall at the University of Oxford, he left without attaining a degree. After the death of his father, Thomas moved to London and enrolled into the court of Prince Henry of Wales. The Prince was always keen on gaining news about foreign lands and he saw to it that British ambassadors abroad filled him regularly on various matters including foreign policies. It is speculated that through the reference of Sir Edward Phelip¹⁾ Coryate gained an entry among the royals. Fluent in Latin and Greek, Coryate's role in the court was that of an unofficial court jester. According to Fuller²⁾,¹ He carried folly '(which the charitable called merriment), in his very face. There is no concrete evidence which reveals the detailed nature of his employment with an exception to one instance when the Prince's treasurer paid him 10 pounds. Coryate's name is nowhere visible on the Royal payroll which further elaborate on Ben Jonson's³⁾ remarks that Coryate "serued there in his own cloathes, and at his own costs"⁴⁾. Another prominent figure who sheds light on the same is Thomas Fuller in *The Histories of the Worthies of England* who recorded that "Sweet-meats and Coriat made up the last course at all Court-entertainments"⁵⁾

Influenced by members at the Court and the fact that Prince Henry was extremely interested in things foreign it is speculated that Coryate may have decided to go on a trip around Europe in order to secure a stronger foothold in the Court and to encourage other gallants to make similar trips. Coryate was conscious and well aware of his duties as a good citizen which is visible

through the epistle ⁶⁾ dedicated to Prince Henry.

At an age when making such kind of trips had become an established tradition Coryate's foremost travel abroad was around Continental Europe extending over a period of five months. In 1608 at the age of thirty one he set sail from Dover with minimum luggage and money. His onward journey which was completed almost on foot beginning at the port of Calais and extended all the way to Venice and back. Coryate's writings reveal that he paid close attention to minute details from an antiquary-like perspective.

Upon his return to England he wrote a coherent narrative of a five month journey across continental Europe which was compiled into *Coryate's Crudities*, a voluminous narrative running over 900 pages spread over two volumes. Initially Coryate faced difficulty in obtaining a printer who was willing to take up his book for publishing. However with the encouragement of Prince Henry and the intervention of a few well connected people, the *Crudities* were finally published in 1611. The *Crudities* were prefaced by Panegyric verses by some of his well wishers so that it would help raise the value of his book. The panegyric verses dedicated to any author are written and delivered in high praise and are not critical in nature. But in the case of Coryate some of the verses mock him and at times have a rather insulting tone. Coryate tackles this situation very indifferently. These insults rather could be positively interpreted as a source for attention seeking and in turn increasing the readership of his books. Besides, in spite of all these insults and jokes cut at his expense by prominent and esteemed poets there also opens a possibility of the creation of a niche identity for himself. When Coryate was on his way to the *East Indies* he was very proud to see that the famous English traveler Robert Shirley was in careful possession of the *Crudities*. This indeed measures the remarkable popularity of his book.

The *Crudities* includes detailed descriptions of accounts compiled in a manner that could even today contribute to a variety of fields of study such as history, architecture, culture and geography. Moreover it also sheds light on his correspondence with prominent scholars such as Gasper Waser professor of Greek at Zurich. The voluminous nature of the *Crudities* persuaded Coryate to announce the publication of a sequel called *CORYATS CRAMBE, OR HIS COLWORT TWISE SODDEN and now served in with other Macaronike dishes, as the second course to his Crudities.* ⁷⁾

Once again in 1612 Coryate set out on a journey to the *East Indies*. Second to the pioneer English Jesuit, who arrived in India Father Thomas Stevens, Thomas Coryate's adventure did not have any missionary motive nor was he a trader. Therefore it can be said that as he was the first in this respect, there could not exist as many stereo type images or previously painted images which may have marred his gaze.

The second adventure too like the previous one, the impecunious Thomas Coryate made

almost entirely on foot which he began on the 20th day of October in 1612. On his way to the *East Indies* he passed through Troy, Constantinople from where he went to Smyrna, and further onto Alexandria and thence to Cairo. He further went on to make a return journey to Alexandria from where he is said to have gone to Joppa and then to Jerusalem and further onto Sidon, Scanderoon (also called Alexandretta). Continuing his journey he moved to Aleppo and enrolled himself into a caravan bound for Persia. On his way to Persia he came across two Englishmen bound for his homeland, who he requested to carry home his first set of letters, which unfortunately never reached their destination. He passed through Ecbatana, Kazvin and Isfahan from where he finally joined a caravan for Lahore. And eventually from Lahore, Coryate made his way to Agra and finally Ajmer.

It is from Ajmer that he sent home a series of letters addressed to a couple of friends and his mother. These letters were compiled into *Thomas Coryate Traveller for the English Wits: Greeting from the Court of the Great Mogul, Resident at the Towne of Ajmere in Eastern India*.

⁸⁾ The second letter he wrote to his mother was printed separately in London in 1618 under the heading '*Mr. Thomas Coryate to his Friends in England sendeth Greeting: from Agra.*' ⁹⁾ This unfortunately came to be the last piece of communication sent home. He was in Ajmer for almost eight months from where he went to Surat, the factory site of the East India Company where he breathed his last in December of 1617.

Thomas Coryate as we can see from accounts of his journey was a keen observer and participated in the new cultures he encountered on a positive note. However there have been times when he emphasized his religious beliefs, getting into heated arguments to the extent of risking his life in order to defend his religion. Coryate was a model traveler, essentially adjusted to diverse circumstances and spent very little on personal luxuries.

Coryate travelled at a time when the British Empire was planning to expand its borders and a national sentiment was swelling in England. Coryate's writings are a compilation of the cross cultural accounts he experienced firsthand while walking across countries. The phenomenon that Coryate chose to walk most of the journey, he gradually moved from the known into the unknown, depicting and recreating the past from both a personal as well as a historical stance. This depiction was for none other than the wits in England whom Coryate wanted to impress.

It is often argued that writings of the Europeans posed the East as a blank canvas which they could paint with colors of their own choice. In *Colonial Narratives/ Cultural Dialogues*, Jyotsna Singh inaugurates a post-colonial model which she uses as a yardstick to describe early modern English confrontation with Mogul India:

Since the early modern period, this discovery motif has frequently emerged in the language of

colonization, enabling European travellers/ writers to represent the newly “discovered” lands as an empty space, a *tabula rasa* on which they could inscribe their linguistic, cultural, and later, territorial claims.¹⁰⁾

These accounts according to her depict the ‘Other’ as open, accessible and vulnerable suggesting that during the time of exploration the so called ‘discovery’ trope was under constant change. She moves further to conceive how this trope of *discovery* helped the English get a firm foot hold in Mogul India. Through this trope of *discovery* not only did the English gain knowledge about India but they also segregated this newly acquired knowledge into their construed colonial binaries of civilized/barbarous, tradition/modernity and Christianity/heathendom. Singh argues that the usage of these binaries as appearing in the English travel accounts of India comprise a “colonizing imagination” which ‘discovers’ new lands via demarcation of identity and difference, often based upon ideological and mythical distinctions between civilization and barbarism and tradition and modernity:

For instance, even the travellers employed by the East India Company saw an integral connection between their roles as Company functionaries and as compilers of strange and curious knowledge¹¹⁾.

According to Singh’s understanding these binaries were used to the advantage of the colonizers who not only bifurcated all they saw and experienced whether a reality or from imagination, into any of these preordained categories but also rendered them as per their desire. These binaries stimulated the creation of a sense of superiority among the English which finally fuelled them with the courage and strength to conquer the space which was nothing but a notion once.

Singh acknowledges that travel writing in most cases is a blend of fact and fantasy. The travel accounts at the time had a trend to be like fabric woven with both reality and imagination. This fabric was further dyed in accordance with what the public eye at home wanted to see and hear. The depiction of Mogul India through Emperor Jehangir in other accounts by traders and ambassadors¹²⁾ created in the minds of the readers an India which was exotic, rich and full of natural wonder. These accounts created in the English minds a space that was possible to access through trade. India was thus turned into a lucrative space with opportunities.

However Singh is cautious and avoids excessive stress on the impact of travel writing as a major contributor in the colonialism discourses. Instead she emphasizes the “modality of colonialism from one historical moment to another, rhetorically structured by the trope of

discovery”.

Another noted author Stephen Greenblatt¹³⁾, suggests that lands which were included in European texts were all part of the procedure to bring under control these alien cultures. This does not stand true in the case of Thomas Coryate.

All travel writing, it can be argued, cannot be fitted forcibly into a fixed framework making a claim that travel writing has a tendency to conform to a general pattern of the colonizing process with specific reference to Thomas Coryate. It is worth mentioning at this point that, Coryate did not indulge in any kind of political dialogues nor did he make the slightest mention of government policies. Thomas Coryate's adventure was of course a result of his passion for fame, celebrity and his pure love for travel. Moreover he never depicted the Orient as vacant location ready to be dominated and defined by the west.

Conversely Richmond Barbour opts for the ‘exoticism’ trope¹⁴⁾. Through ‘proto-orientalism’ he examines the works of Coryate and Thomas Roe.

Barbour argues that Coryate as well as Roe not only commodify the exotic east but also exploit the binaries of wealthy versus poor and powerful versus corrupt. An examination of the validity of Barbour's argument in the case of Coryate calls for clarification.

Analyzing Coryate's contribution to the English imaginary of pre-colonial India there is a tendency for an acceptable generalization that travel writing, depiction of the East in dramas and other official documents were examined and studied with a disposition that had already been tuned to colonization, exoticism and barbarism.

Nonetheless, to shift the focus from this pre- tuned mindset to a newer paradigm which highlights the existence of persons of another category who did not travel with any such motive of colonizing either mentally or physically. Thomas Coryate belongs to this category of writers. The *Crudities* is a narrative which reveals Coryate's admiration for other cultural societies san a political angle. All the same, it can be said that he was careful and abstained from expressing any opinions on the political institutions of virtually all the places he visited. The *Crudities* has been prefixed with Panegyric verses by almost sixty one elites and literates who reveal exhaustive information regarding Coryate's personality. They too have not breezed past any political stance.

These verses which sum up to almost one sixth of the entire work have for some reason never been academically studied or researched. Regarding, these verses Andrew Hadfield rightly points out “This material has been almost universally ignored by commentators”¹⁵⁾. It should be noted that Coryate was a suitor of knowledge. He traveled to the East seeking knowledge from another society. His account from the East was not anthropological in any sense and nor did his letters reveal an exotic tone. They were simply detailed observations revealing his wellbeing and adventures expressed to people who were close to him. From his account on Venice we can infer

that Coryate through his admiration looks at himself and England as the "Other" in terms of social development. Similarly his letters from the East make a detailed mention of Emperor Jehangir's affluence which was far beyond the imagination of the people at home. Therefore besides being a land of lucrative trading opportunity there could have been no possibility for the English to even think of conquering or colonizing at this point in time. Here it is noteworthy to point out that the *Crudities* was published when Coryate was still alive. In the case of the letters he wrote from the Mogul Court on the contrary were printed after his death therefore there is a very high possibility of them being edited at the hands of the publishers before being set into print. The untimely death of Coryate did not allow him to publish his account and therefore the question of whether the trope of exoticism is applicable to him is a speculation. Thus, introspection into his earlier works becomes compelling for us to understand the true character of Coryate.

A look into the panegyric verses puts the spotlight on the true character of Coryate which has largely been ignored. A deeper study of his image becomes necessary because he always portrayed a buffoonish image, which was but a mere camouflage. The details with which he rendered his accounts itself is self explanatory and that he chose to add humor and self mockery to his advantage which can reveal his dexterity and uniqueness in the field of rhetoric. At home Coryate's mask under which he held his true self and which he probably wanted to change with his literary works.

CONCLUSION

Thomas Coryate the *Odcumbian leg stretcher* travelled the east with no exotic or barbaric mindset. Instead he traversed the land with an open mind trying to describe and assimilate his new encounters with a very balanced approach. It is true that he is marveled on various occasions but not once does get carried away by emotions. The picture of Coryate atop the elephant portrays a rather exotic image, but is a depiction of his strong will and determination. Any situation can be viewed from several perspectives; deciphering and understanding of any written material depends on the takeoff point of the perspective the reader.

Coryate's repeated stress on the fact that he is a private man with no political connections confirm that he is in no way interested in indulging himself in business.

At the point when he wrote the *Crudities* he was criticized for not writing on political issues and only mentioning details of churches, famous monuments and the like very much similar to an antiquary. Maybe if Coryate had indulged in writings based on political issues he would have been known among the mainstream and his works would have been given a deeper thought. But he did not choose an easy path to success, instead he stood by his real ambition and love for travel.

It is very necessary for a reader to keep an open mind when reading such accounts. It is easy to place all early English travelers within the narrow bracket of colonizers be it mental or physical. Thomas Coryate need not be forcefully imposed a mental colonizer. Coryate's sudden death has left a void regarding the extensive account of his eastern adventure which cripples the scholarly research on his true intentions, future plans and the his very understanding of the East. Always open to new cultures and people Coryate was a cosmopolitan in the true sense. While in the East he is said to have mastered various languages to directly communicate with the people. Coryate beckons the youth to travel not only as a source of obtaining knowledge but also introduces the tremendous value of experiencing new cultures. In this sense Coryate was truly an Ambassador of Goodwill.

Notes and Citations

- 1) Sir Edward Phelips IV (also spelt Phillips) was the son of Thomas Phelips who was Coryate's godfather. Edward inherited Montacute House two miles from Odcombe in 1588 and was knighted in 1603. Sir Edward has also contributed panegyric verses to *Coryat's Crudities* written by Coryate. Among the five letters which Coryate wrote from the *East Indies*, one is addressed to Sir Edward and one to his secretary Lawrence Whitaker who was also a special friend of Coryate.
- 2) Fuller T. *Worthies of England – Vol. 3, Somersetshire*. (London: Nutall and Hodgan, 1840):108
- 3) Benjamin Jonson alias Ben Jonson was a contemporary of William Shakespeare and one of Coryate's close allies. Jonson has contributed the first few panegyric verses to the *Crudities* and plays a major role in moulding the character and public image of Coryate.
- 4) Coryat, Thomas. *CORYAT'S CRUDITIES/ Hastily gobled up in five Moneths travells in France, Savoy, Italy, Rhetia commonly called the Grisons country, Helvetia alias Switzerland, some parts of high Germany and the Netherlands; Newly digested in the hungry aire of Somerset, and now dispersed to the nourishment of the travelling Members of this Kingdome Vol I & Vol II (1611)*, (rpt. (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1905)
- 5) Fuller 1840:108
- 6) Coryat 1905 (Vol. I & II)
- 7) Strachan, Michael. *The Life and Adventures of Thomas Coryate* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962) :133
- 8) Coryat, Thomas. *Greeting from the Court of the Great Mogul 1616* (Amsterdam: Da Capo Press, 1968)
- 9) Coryat, Thomas. *Mr. Thomas Coryate to his Friends in England sendeth Greeting: from Agra*. (London: printed by I.B, 1616) (STC Number 5809)
- 10) Singh, Jyotsna G. *Colonial Narratives/Cultural dialogues* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996)
- 11) Ibid:20
- 12) Roe, Thomas. Fryer, John. *Travels in India in the Seventeenth Century*.- New Delhi ; Madras : Asian educational services, 1993.-Extr. : " Calcutta weekly Englishman ".- Reproduced facsimile copy (London : Trubner and Co., 1873)
- 13) Greenblatt, Stephen. *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: The University of

Chicago Press, 1991)

- 14) Barbour, Richmond. *Before Orientalism: London's Theatre of the East 1576-1626* (United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2003)
- 15) Hadfield, Andrew. *Literature, Travel, and Colonial Writing in the English Renaissance 1545-1625* (London: Oxford University Press. 1998)