

A Portrait of Thomas Coryat

:Extracted from the Panegyric Verses and the
Introduction to his *Crudities*

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Introduction

The Elizabethan and Jacobean times witnessed the publication of three extensive travel accounts, *Coryat,s Crudities*,¹⁾ (1611) by Thomas Coryat, *An Itinerary*²⁾ (1617) by Fynes Moryson and *The Totall Discourse of the Rare Adventures and Painfull Perigrinations of Long Nineteene Yeares Travayles*³⁾ (1632) by William Lithgow. All of these authors have been typified by the term 'eccentric'. Andrew Hadfield asserts this in his essay "The Benefits of a Warm Study" referring to them as 'eccentric individuals.'⁴⁾ Employing the term eccentric in regard to these travellers affiliates them and their respective works to a quaint group simultaneously rendering a dissenting image. This invites inquiring whether or not their eccentric image was born owing to travel writing not encompassing as an established genre of literature or simply because their works were offbeat compared to that of the mainstream literary circles prevalent at the time. Moreover, it also raises wider questions over whether the travellers' desire for a unique identity induced them to deliberately adopt a new style apart from the rest. This presumption further highlights the lengthy nature of the publication of volumes by Moryson, Coryat and, Lithgow subsequent to their travels which in itself were quixotic. For a rather practical purpose of scholarship these travellers were studied as a group on the basis of social status. This can be seen below in the words of historian John Stoye, who states:

... peregrinators like Coryat and Lithgow who leapt into print, are very valuable from a historical point of view and build up the picture of a great number of ordinary men, representative of a whole class of their contemporaries...⁵⁾

The popularity heralded by the 'grand tour,' a de rigueur for wealthy Englishmen to obtain an

education inclusive of the wider continental experience, subsequently ushered the establishment of 'travel writing' as a genre. It is widely known that in this newly established genre of 'travel writing,' representation of the 'grand tour' was strictly a privilege available to the affluent. However, it should be noted that the genre itself was a development which evolved from published accounts of travellers, not necessarily belonging to high ranking classes in society but also to ordinary men like Coryat or Lithgow.

Unlike 'travel writing' of the present satellite age the early seventeenth century accounts of travellers were conventional and included a wide variety of angles. Besides antiquarianism, recording geography and history, providing cultural analysis and findings, decorations such as rhetoric, wit, poetry, religious propaganda and political interests were on their agenda. Another important elements included education and dissemination of information to the future generations. An enquiry into the image of the travellers from the life and accounts thus provides a better understanding and grasp of the endeavour of travel that attracted popularity in the Elizabethan and Jacobean era.

For this purpose the paratext meticulously attached to *Coryat's Crudities* provides substantial material. This paper attempts to construct a vignette of Thomas Coryat through select panegyric verses to the *Crudities* showing how Coryat's inclusion of panegyrics of esteemed persons aided him in shaping an identity for himself. In doing so it is interesting to observe, how he also voiced his intentions and announced his objectives to the literary audience.

Andrew Hadfield mentions:

Coryat's ludicrous persona, expressed throughout the prefatory material, may well be a disguise....⁶⁾

Further, the eccentricity with which Coryat was portrayed could as well be a façade in an attempt to catch the eye. Although several references have been made to these verses for painting a general image of Coryat, a thorough scholarly dissection of the panegyric is yet to be published. A probe into the verses also affirms the literary circle Coryat associated with.

Predominantly the place chosen for gathering by the literary circle was the Mermaid Tavern located at Bread Street, to the members of which Coryat sends greetings in his letters from India.⁷⁾ Also called the Friday Street Club or Mermaid Club, met on every first Friday of the month and was probably pioneered by Walter Raleigh in 1603. Attendance of esteemed membership was one of the characteristics of this back ally club. Besides Coryat, prominent figures such as Ben Jonson, William Shakespeare, John Donne, Sir Walter Raleigh, Francis Beaumont, John Fletcher, Robert Herrick, and John Selden affiliated to this circle of elite intellectuals. This itself suggests that it

was through these acquaintances that Coryat earned the large number of panegyric verses to enhance his book.

Claudia Rapp in her essay “Panegyric and Hagiography”, reports that ancient theorists applied the formulae of *exemplum* and *comparatio*. In *exemplum* a classical figure from history or mythology is picked and the subject is made to tread in similar footsteps. In *comparatio* on the other hand a contrast between the subject and another person is made with an intention of either drawing a parallel or professing the superiority of the subject. *Comparatio* is considered the fundamental concept of panegyric.⁸⁾ Borrowing Rapp’s understanding of *comparatio* Coryat can be compared to Will Kemp and Sir John Mandeville. In both instances Coryat is deemed superior to the mediums of comparison.

Tradition of Panegyric

The tradition of the English verse panegyric is said to have commenced with the Stuarts as pointed out by scholar James Garrison. He asserts that panegyrics dedicated to James I by Samuel Daniel and Ben Jonson laid a standard for lesser poets.⁹⁾ The traditional themes of restoration and limitation were first translated from Latin by Samuel Daniel and Ben Jonson, whose panegyrics to James I provide model topics for a host of lesser poets anxious to celebrate, but also to restrict, the early Stuart monarchy.¹⁰⁾ Panegyrics are often used synonymously with “encomium” which in nature are used in praise of or in commendation of a person. However, specifically speaking panegyric, unlike encomium, has a political significance attached to it. The point worth noting is that a well known, influential figure such as Ben Jonson, who conceivably may be deemed one of the leading panegyrists of the time, not only pens down the “character of the famous Odcombian, or rather Polytopian Thomas the Coryate, traveller, and Gentleman author of these Quinke-mestriall *Crudities*” but also edited all the panegyrics to the *Crudities*. This act of Jonson for Coryat was a matter of indubitable pride.

Tomas Hägg in his introduction to *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity* argues that panegyric is a subset of biography. He asserts that “the point is not that panegyrics were necessarily performances, but that they pretended to be.”¹¹⁾ Besides glorifying the person to whom it was dedicated, panegyric verses also voice the background, education and profile of the person who wrote them. This illustrates that persons who chose to adorn the *Crudities* did so not only to praise Coryat but also to flaunt their own literary style and competency. Michael Strachan states that the verses were arranged according to the rank held by the panegyrists. The first twelve contributors being knights, the next batch consisting of members whom Coryat held in high esteem, followed by some famous individuals and the last set of eight were individuals who

enjoyed high status at the time. Finally Coryat closes with his own contribution. Excluding Coryat, a total of fifty nine persons, using their own distinctive style have enriched *the Crudities*.¹²⁾

In order to get a more appropriate grip of what they veritably wanted to get across to the readers back home, it is necessary to probe into the character portraits of the travellers. The eccentric character portrayal of Coryat was a generic assumption most scholars failed to question. Hadfield opines that:

‘...an enormous number of ‘panegyric verses’ from various writers celebrated and obscure, all of which makes up about a sixth of the complete text of the *Crudities*. This material has been almost universally ignored by commentators, who have been more than happy to take Coryat at face value as the bizarre buffoon he represents himself to be.’¹³⁾

Nevertheless, there is ample justification to view these verses in a specific domain and not simply as a result of Coryat’s mere requests to appraise his observations. Since Coryat faced difficulty in obtaining a publisher for his work the latter interpretation is popular but not sound. Despite the fact that the panegyric verses were neglected and underplayed on the grounds that they are mere flattery, they occupy almost one sixth of the work and are worth scrutiny as a framing material for the promotion of the motives and messages the author wanted to convey.

Another interesting and unique aspect that sets apart the verses in the *Crudities* from any other travel accounts in history is their number. In regard to this Coryat makes the least hesitation in making a boastful remark mentioning,

...that I exhibite unto thy view such a great multitude of Verses as no booke whatsoever printed in England these hundred yeares, had the like written... (*CCI*, 20)

Coryat’s bragging was to the extent that he was considering the omission of the verses entirely from the present work in order to accomodate an independent publication for the panegyrics alone. However it was on the insistence of Prince Henry, to whom each one of them had been read out, that the panegyrics came to be included them in the present compilation. Coryat could not but obey since it was the patronage of none other than Prince Henry, that his peregrination was taking the form of a book.

A brief overview of *the Crudities*

After a 1975-mile feat around Continental Europe Coryat returned to England in October, 1608. He had spent approximately five months peregrinating France, Savoy, Italy, Grisons country, Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands. On his return he hoped to publish his experiences and make them available to a wide readership. However it was a rather cumbersome process and he had to make a number of requests to his well-to-do friends. Finally with the patronage of Prince Henry who had a special liking for him his experiences took the form of a voluminous work, *the Crudities* published in 1611.

In the epistle dedicated to Prince Henry, Coryat reveals why his work needed to be transformed into a book. Hoping to further delay improvise his work coryat in prolonged the publication considerably. However a couple of friends urged him to publish prior to his departure on a new mission, just in case some uneventful situation befell him, subsequently impoverishing his countrymen of such an erudite work. Coryat reiterates this in his epistle to the reader as well.

But at length post varias cognitionum fluctuations, by the counsell of certaine of my deare friendes I put on a constant resolution, and determined to expose the abortive fruits of my travels to the sight of the world (after they had for the space of two yeares lurked in a kinde of Cimmerian darkenesse) which if they cannot endure, but will be dazeled with the least glimpse thereof...(*CCI*, 7)

This clearly reveals that a span of two years had lapsed since his return and the publication of his work, the reason probably owing to the size and nature of the book.

Coryat proudly declares that his investigation has been a thorough one, and none of the kind has ever been written. He reports with an incredibly detailed intricacy. Hence restating the distinct worthiness of his work he appeals to the readers to wish him success in his future travels.

...that for the short time that I was abroad I observed more solid matters then any English man did in the like space this long time. For I copied out more inscriptions and epitaphes (said a certaine Knight that shall passe namelesse) that are written upon solid peeces of stone, then any judicious traveller would have done in many yeares. For which cause he branded me with the note of a tombe–stone traveller. (*CCI*, 11)

Coryat also goes on and draws a correlation with Angelus Politianus (*CCI*, 8) who translated *the Iliad* in order to win the patronage of Lorenzo de Medici and further enrolled into Medici's

house. Similarly he and his work with the advocacy of Prince Henry could achieve heights and finally lead to Coryat's enrollment into the Prince's household. This could be interpreted as an indirect hint to the readers suggesting that he was fit to be a member of his patron's household.

Following the epistle to the readers, a character sketch of Thomas Coryate has been conjured by charitable friend Ben Jonson (*CCI*, 16) which is like a kind of hors d'oeuvre. The interfusion of the sketch with the main work is a perfect juxtaposition which leaves a gratifying punch in the mind of the reader. Jonson ends this sketch with a *Characterisme Acrostich*, where he refers to Coryat as 'odde Joviall Author' who has set out to travel at his own expenses.

Jonson's character sketch further declares that,

The word Travaile affectes him in a Waine-oxe, or a Packe-horse. A Carrier will carry him from any company that hath not been abroad, because he is a Species of a Traveller. But a Dutch-Post doth ravish him. The mere superscription of a letter from Zurich sets him up like a top: Basil or Heidelberg makes him spinne. And at seeing the word Frankford, or Venice, though but on the title of a Booke, he is readie to breake doublet, crack elbowes, and overflowe the roome with his murmure. (*CCI*, 17)

According to Andrew Hadfield Jonson's words above intentionally provoke identification with the book and its author, making Coryat and his itinerary an utterly moronic task.¹⁴⁾ I disagree with Hadfield because there is no purpose in defaming Coryat. The reason Jonson jokes is probably to maintain the buffoonish image that Coryat donned in order to earn his bread and also as a humorous curtain raiser to attract audience. It is this very image that got him a place not only among the literary circles but also in the court of Prince Henry.

However it is worth considering whether Coryat and his friends were well aware of the lucrative effect of the buffoonish image. As every argument has two sides to it like a coin, one needs to weigh the pros and cons. The assumption that Coryat was lacking sense does not seem fit because if so was the case he probably could not have won the friendship of the coteries who attested his work and further more it would be impossible to undertake the remarkable feat he accomplished.

Introduction to the panegyric verses opens as below:

I here present unto thee (gentle Reader) the encomiastick and panegyrick Verses of some of the worthiest spirits of this Kingdome, composed by persons of eminent quality and marke, as well as for dignity as excellencie of wit; such as have vouchsafed to descend so low as to

dignifie and illustrate my lucubrations without any demerits of theirs (I do ingenuously confesse) with the singular fruits of their elegant inventions... (CC1, 20)

Through this Coryat is trying to capitalize on the fact that the verses following are of a very exclusive nature not just because they are written by distinguished individuals but because this is the first time ever that such a large number of verses have been attached to any published work.

Thomas Coryat in a sketch

The panegyric verses in *the Crudities* have been authored by some of the prominent poets of the time. This goes on to proclaim Coryat's literary collaborations. The rhetoric of panegyric here also supports the eccentric and buffoonish character of the leg stretcher. Sir Edward Phelips, son of Coryat's godfather notes that Coryat was in a habit of creating new words.

Grammarians sore did stand in feare
The coynage of his words to heare
So uncouth was their sound. (CC1, 22)

In the verse Sir Phelips also reports one of Coryat's coinage 'hyperaspist', which Coryat himself explains in the form a footnote.

He travaild North, he travaild South
With Hyperaspist in his mouth
A word of his devising.
For nature letters pattents gave
To him the priviledge to have
Of words naturalizing (CC1, 24)

In the "Epistle Dedicatorie" it has been applied to Prince Henry, denoting a person who is a protector or a patron, and shall guard one against an enemy. Had it not been for his auspices, Coryat's works would have never taken the shape of a book. This aspect of creating new words has also been attested by Ben Jonson, who refers to Coryat as a 'Bold carpenter of Words'. Michael Strachan lists words like 'umbrella', 'Hyperaspist', 'refocillate' which happen to survive to date. Others such as 'concinnate',¹⁵ 'charlatan', and 'tatterdemalian'¹⁶ were not conceived by him but he advocated their usage. As was the trend of the time a number of new words were being

introduced into the English language. Accordingly Coryat also created words, some which survived and some that drowned with time.

Lionel Cranfield who was one of the main persons who persuaded Coryat to publish his work prior to his departure on a new mission, states how within a short span of five months Coryat was able to compile such a detailed account of his adventure. He further adds that it was his first encounter with such an account. Cranfield as Strachan relates 'had a foot on the ladder of preferment up which he was to climb by way of Customs, the mastership of the Great Wardrobe, and the Court of Wards, to become Earl of Middlesex, and Treasurer twelve years later'.¹⁷⁾ His commending Coryat must have surely hastened the process of publication.

His tongue and feete are swifter then a flight,
 Yet both are glad when day resignes to night.
 He is not proud, his nature soft and milde,
 His complements are long, his looks are wilde:
 Patient enough, but oh his action
 Of great effect to move and stirre up passion.
 Odcombe be proude of thy odde Coryate,
 Borne to be and gracious with the State;
 How much I him well wish let this suffice,
 His booke best shewes that he is deeply wise. (*CC1*, 63-64)

This poetic imagination reveals that a wild looking Coryat was of a benign disposition. On the other hand his hometown Odcombe could take pride in his avidity. Coryat took great pride in being from Odcombe. After leaving Oxford he spent a few years there before embarking on his Continental tour. It was during this time that he arranged a Church Ale to raise funds for the Parish.

Among other supporters, Lawrence Whitaker was another close ally of Coryat. Whitaker who was secretary to Sir Edward Phelips of Montacute too persuaded Coryat to publish his works without delaying it further.

Another panegyrist Richard Badley¹⁸⁾ in his verse states:

Yet cannot I suppress, without disgrace,
 The love thou bare thy Natalitall place.
 For in the midst of thy most Alpish waies,
 When ruinous rocks did threat to end thy daies,

No doubt, thou could'st have wisht thyselfe at home,
To live, and lay thy bones in sweete Odcombe. (*CC1*, 109)

Thus, we can deduce that Coryat was extremely attached to his hometown. It is ironical that neither he nor his bones ever reached Odcombe as he was buried in a small town of India where he breathed his last. Ben Jonson in the same light conferred on him the title 'Famous Odcombian'.

Richard Corbet who was a close acquaintance of Ben Jonson, was a junior of Coryat at Oxford and a proclaimed wit. Although Corbet's verses in praise of Coryat too portray a buffoonish image he stresses that Coryat's work deserved wider readership and therefore its circulation not be restricted to England alone. He writes:

Send of this stuffe thy territories thorough
To Ireland, Wales, and Scottish Edenborough.
There let this booke be read and understood,
Where is no theame nor writer halfe so good. (*CC*, 71)

As can be seen, Corbet recommends that this book be sent across other parts of the kingdom as a superior model for the literary circle there. John Chapman encourages possession of the *Crudities* as a reader. Although the nature of the book may not permit light reading it would definately inspire those interested in travel and if not surely be appreciated for its humorous appeal.

A volume which though 'twill not in thy pocket,
Yet in thy chest thou maist for ever locke it
For thy childrens children to reade hereafter,
Being disposed to travell, or to laughter. (*CC1*, 72)

William Austin who has contributed ninety-six lines states that Coryat printed the book at his own expense. Austin draws a comparison between the works of Sir John Mandeville and that of Coryat mentioning that the famous book of Mandeville too does not detail issues like tombs, epitaphs, stones, Jews, circumcisions, pagans, and the like which Coryat describes in great detail. This habit of Coryat of intricating made the book voluminous thereby hindering its publication.

The famous booke of Mandevill
Tell not of things so strange and evill,

Of jests, mistakings, and misprisions,
 Of Pagans, Jewes, and circumcisions,
 Of Tombs, Sepulchers, dead mens bones,
 Of Epitaphes, of stockes and stones, (*CC1*, 85)

John Jackson also asserted that the book was published entirely out of Coryat's personal funds.

His purse he hath to print
 What hee did write, else, who had read of thee,
 O Wandering Wight? (*CC1*, 96)

Printing the book at his own expense must have been a laborious undertaking for Coryat who came from a very mediocre background. However, before he had set out on his Continental tour he had deposited a sum of fifty pounds with a local draper, who on the safe arrival of Coryat was supposed to reimburse two hundred marks as per the terms of the contract. The draper on arrival was unable to pay and Coryat sued him, following which he won the law-suit and the bill was honoured in his favour. The money received was disbursed towards the publishing cost.

Conclusion

In conclusion the panegyrists who commended Coryat's book used Greek, Latin, French, Italian, Spanish, Welsh, Macaronic, Antipodean and, Utopian to sketch an image of the author and his book. These verses which are meant to commend and laud the person they are dedicated to, probably may seem to blur the true image of the person in question. However these verses cannot be ignored on the basis that they are merely meant to praise. It is true that the main roles that panegyric verses are meant to perform is to extol, but besides this they also are supposed to convey various other circumstances to the reader. As shown above the verses in praise of Coryat not only provide us with an insight into the historical setup but also shed light on the subject of travel in that age. The panegyrist too has a vital role to play beyond just commending, a thorough knowledge of not only the genre but also their respective literary styles goes to reveal a great deal about their command and proficiency as well.

The choice of the panegyrists also indirectly attests the social associations of the subject. In this paper we can observe that Coryat was a member of an influential literary sphere. Panegyrists who have complimented Coryat were also creating a basis for a new genre of travel writing which

was in the making.

The panegyric verses are an invaluable resource for providing an understanding of the finer details of Coryat the traveller. This paper definitely does not qualify to do justice to the portrait of Thomas Coryat. But what it surely does is that it opens a new area of research and dialogue with regard to the panegyrics to *the Crudities*.

End Notes

- 1) Thomas Coryate, for 1611 *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 Odcombe in the County of Somerset, and now dispersed to the nourishment of the travelling Members of this Kingdome*, 2 vols. Reprt. (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1905), 001-10. (Hereafter subsequent cited references to Vol.1 of this edition as *CC1* in parentheses in text.)
- 2) Fynes Moryson, for 1617 *An ItineraryContaining His Ten Yeeres Travell through the Twelve Dominions of Germany, Bohmerland, Sweitzerland, Netherland, Denmarke, Poland, Italy, Turkey, France, England, Scotland & Ireland*, 4 vols. Reprt. (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1618), 001-10.
- 3) William Lithgow, for 1632
- 4) Jyotsna G. Singh, *A Companion to The Global Renaissance: English Literature And Culture In The Era Of Expansion*, (Chichester, West Sussex, Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2009), 102.
- 5) For a better understanding of the role played by Coryat and Lithgow See John Stoye, *English Travellers Abroad 1604-1667: Their Influence in English Society and Politics*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 01-10.
- 6) Hadfield Ibid.61.
- 7) Purchas his Pilgrimes, vol. 4, pg. 477.
- 8) Whitby pg. 278.
- 9) James D. Garrison, *Dryden and the Tradition of Panegyric*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1975), 83.
- 10) Ibid. Garrison, 83.
- 11) Tomas Hägg, and Philip Rousseau, *Greek Biography And Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2000), 2.
- 12) Michael Strachan. *The Life and Adventures of Thomas Coryate*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 126.
- 13) See Andrew Hadfield. *Literature, Travel, and Colonial Writing in the English Renaissance 1545-1625*. (London: Oxford University Press. 1998), 001-10.
- 14) Hadfield, Andrew. 60.
- 15) Strachan: 1962, 117.
- 16) Presently spelled as tatterdemalion.
- 17) Strachan pg. 112.
- 18) Also spelled as Baddeley is probably author of *The Boy of Bilson*, published in1622. See Strachan pg.270.

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- Claudia Rapp. "Panegyric and Hagiography" See page 10
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