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An Examination of *A Voyage to Russia (1739):*

The First Travel Account Published by an Englishwoman

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With the publication of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's so-called *Turkish Embassy Letters* in 1763, a "lady traveller" first scored a hit with the British reading public. To describe the *Embassy Letters* as a hit is almost an understatement, however, for it was certainly the most popular nonfictional travel account of the entire eighteenth century. It is also an enduring classic of English literature, having been regularly reprinted right through the nineteenth century and into the contemporary era, an achievement managed by just one other eighteenth-century British travel account – Dr. Johnson's *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland (1775)*— and that work did not enjoy comparable success in its own time.

Yet Lady Montagu's *Letters* was not the first book of (secular) travels published by an Englishwoman. That distinction belongs to Elizabeth Justice's *A Voyage to Russia* (1739), which notably saw two editions more than twenty years before Lady Montagu's *Letters*.

Justice's *Voyage to Russia* is a small octavo of only 59 pages. It was based on the three-year period the London-born writer spent in the mid-1730s as governess to the children of Hill Evans (d. 1740), an English merchant resident in St. Petersburg. She returned reluctantly to England in 1737 as a result of the scandal which enveloped her estranged husband Henry (d. 1763), who was sentenced to transportation to America for stealing sixty books from the Cambridge University library (Gaskell). She published her account as an alternative to accepting the woefully inadequate settlement he offered for the maintenance of their three children. Since the sordid circumstances that had pressed her into indebtedness are fully explained in the *Voyage's* Preface, Justice's book seems a kind of precursor to the so-called 'scandalous memoirs' that appeared around the middle of the century, works written by distressed gentlewomen not only to repair their devastated finances but also, perhaps even principally, to wreak very public revenge upon the men who had wronged them. An additional motive was to contradict reports "That I never have been in *Russia*; but makes it a Pretence only to cover a fantastical Inclination I had to ramble elsewhere." Justice tells us that she could not think of "a more effectual Manner [to] confute these false Reports, than by writing this Narrative" (vii-viii).

Justice adopted the method of subscription publishing – popular in the first half of the eighteenth century but little associated with either female authors or small volumes – which allowed a writer to collect up front half the projected price of a book to defray publishing

costs. The returned governess assembled an impressive list of subscribers representing a complete cross-section of genteel provincial society. Altogether, Justice interested 281 subscribers, including the Wisbich Book Club, in her endeavour. Some 120 of her subscribers were female, which would seem to confirm current assumptions that literacy was almost as widely diffused amongst provincial gentlewomen as gentlemen. The 281 subscribers accounted for a total of 298 copies, as several people listed for two or more. Mr Rogers, a bookseller of Stamford, took four copies, presumably for sale in his shop, while Mr Cecil, who placed the largest order, wanted six.

Since the 600 copies of the *Voyage* Justice had printed in 1739 finally sold out (meaning that about 320 copies had been sold to persons who had not originally subscribed), it can be said that Justice's little book enjoyed a modest success. It probably attracted interest as the first British eyewitness account of Russia that had appeared since John Perry's *The State of Russia under the Present Czar* (1716). Presumably because her finances had deteriorated again, a "Lady of Quality" encouraged Justice to issue a second edition of the *Voyage* in 1746. As a third edition was never published, we cannot know if this work enjoyed the same success as the first. That in 1751 Justice published a brand new composition, a thinly-disguised autobiography entitled *Amelia, or The Distress'd Wife*, suggests that the 1746 edition of the *Voyage* was at least successful enough not to discourage her from undertaking another literary venture.

Whether or not the *Voyage* caused a small ripple in the intellectual life of her provincial community, it had absolutely no impact on the development of British travel writing generally. Its existence went unacknowledged by the periodical press, which did not

review it, and by those who subsequently wrote accounts of Russia. In one respect, Justice's account is probably of more interest today than it was to readers at the time. As Cross points out, the *Voyage* offered "an . . . account of Russian customs and habits . . . seen from somewhat lower down the social scale than usual" (339). Cross uses the word "naive" to describe the below-stairs quality of Justice's writing, and it is undoubtedly appropriate. Given the inhibitions upper-class women felt about having their works printed, it was probably inevitable that the first travel account published by a woman was by a woman from the desperate end of the gentry spectrum.

Of course, the perspective of a governess was not necessarily unproductive – if Justice had been a keen and conscientious observer. Yet, an unfortunate corollary of her relatively humble social origins was a lack of interest in the Russian people. Although the *Voyage* is largely devoted to the subject of Russian customs and manners, it was not a subject that greatly excited Justice's curiosity. If she wrote about these subjects, it was simply because her recollections, superficial as they were, were all she had to offer in return for the price of her book. The bulk of the *Voyage* consists of simple, generally brief descriptions of things which struck her as distinctively Russian. One of the *Voyage's* most amusing passages is one in which Justice discusses the Russian custom of giving eggs at Easter as if it were a practice performed specifically for the benefit of the English living in Petersburg (29-30). Although the suggestion was presumably accidental, it does convey a sense of the English community in Petersburg as a closed little world that virtually circumscribed her entire existence. Apart from the occasional social outing provided by her employer, and possibly also some interaction with other English at their nation's embassy,

Justice's experience of Russia seems to have been confined to what she saw from the corners of her eyes as she hurried about Petersburg gathering the Evans family's daily provisions.

Justice's overriding impression of the Russians is of a frugal, hardy people. "The People are very Strong, and can endure great Hardship," she declared (56). The theme of Russian hardiness constitutes something of a minor refrain throughout the *Voyage*. Recalling an occasion when she saw 32,000 men "exercised upon the Ice," she praised the endurance of the Russian soldiers (21-22). Speaking about the diet of the common people, she "observ'd, they need not lay by much to provide for Food; for they can make an hearty Meal on a Piece of black sour Bread, some Salt, an Onion, or Garlick" (18). As for childbirth, she wrote,

They [the Russians] get over that Indisposition much better than the *English*. I have bought Things of a Woman big with Child; and that Day Week the same Person has come to me, without any Shoes or Stockings on, in the Midst of Winter, and told me, *She had been brought to Bed, and was very well!* Which is a common Thing amongst the Women there (31-32).

Interestingly, Justice found them not only hardy but also healthy. "[H]ere are several Remarkables worthy of Notice," she wrote, "That very few grow mad, or are guilty of Self-Murder: And I never saw either Man, Woman, or Child, that were crooked" (33).

The *Voyage* also contained a certain amount of censure of Russian manners. Justice's chief criticisms concerned the domestic servants, remarks which echo the debate about the morals of the servant class which had been going on in England since the publication of Defoe's controversial pamphlet *Every-Body's Business, is No-Body's Business* in 1725. Apart

from the excessive cold, she observed, the chief difference between Russia and England was the “Unpoliteness” of the servants. In contrast to England, “here the *Russian* Bear-Brutes, with their Heels and Tongues, make as loud a Din up and down Stairs, before we are stirring, as there is at *Drury-Lane* after the Play is over. Such is the servile Politeness of *Russia*” (54). She went on to describe Russian servants as “the most ignorant Creatures living, and have every thing which attends Ignorance, that is, Ingratitude, Dirt and Sauciness; and are, in my Opinion, far inferior to a well-taught Bear” (56-57). She also condemned their fluctuation between vice and repentance:

Before they go to the Sacrament, for about a Week, they seem to be very devout, and to be sorry for every Thing they have done amiss: And if Servants, before they go, they come to their Masters, or Mistresses; ask Pardon for their Faults, and kiss their Hands: But, as soon as they have received it, return to their former Ill Behaviour; and no Good is to be expected of them till the Time draws near for them to receive it again. (29)

Justice also took the opportunity to point out the follies of Russian Orthodoxy.

‘[O]n the *Twelfth-Day* (of Easter),’ she wrote, ‘the Water [in the river Neva] is consecrated by the Priest; and there is a Place erected upon the Ice for that Purpose round an Hole, which is cut therein; and, at that Time, People come far and near to have their Children often dipp’d; tho’ by such Ceremony, several are drown’d in that cold Element. However, that they count as little, or nothing; and comfort themselves with this Saying, *They are gone to Almighty GOD!*.’ (30)

A second occasion when Justice was appalled by the superstition inculcated by Russian Orthodoxy came when she observed a funeral procession. She thought it absurd that, although it was midday, torches were being carried before the corpse.

But one, I was in Company with, told me what they had in their Coffin, which was more so: For there was a Pair of Shoes, some Candles, and a Pass. The Pass was to get them Admittance; but whereto I know not. I suppose they think there are several Degrees of Happiness: For those Passes are to be bought at a Shop in the Market; and the Goodness of the Pass is in Proportion to the Price given.' (32-33)

Justice makes it plain enough that her reluctance to leave Petersburg was not because Russia exerted any special attraction for her, but rather because she had found a cosy haven in the midst of life's storms there. "[I]f I had not received a letter from England; to return to be an Assistant to my own Children, I should have been there till now," she asserted (14). Not only did she thrive on the family environment of the Evans household, but she also relished the material comforts that she, and the rest of the English mercantile community, were able to enjoy in a country where the necessities of life, above all foodstuffs, were both high in quality and remarkably cheap (19-21). An expat rather than a traveller, therefore, she demonstrated the expat's disinclination to socialise with the local population. After praising the quality and cheapness of the food in Petersburg she added the observation that "here is no Want of any Thing but agreeable Company; and, except the Family I am in, there is not a Person that I should not think my Time as lost with, if I conversed with them" (58). Having concluded that books made better companions than Russians, she states that most of her leisure time in Petersburg was spent in her closet perusing the *Spectator* (60).

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