

A SCHOLAR ABROAD

ROGER ASCHAM (1515-1568)



Roger Ascham, like his fellow scholar Sir Thomas More, conducts most of his correspondence in Latin, which in his time is the international language of Europe, but while he is in Germany he switches to the vernacular often enough to give English literature its earliest distinguished letters of travel. In particular, the first and much the longest of these missives introduces the genre of the journal letter composed over many days, a genre which is to culminate in Swift's *Journal to Stella*.

A Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge and a Protestant, Ascham delights in the Greek and Roman studies of the Renaissance Christian humanists. In 1550, however, he is pulled away from his academic life when he is sent to Germany as secretary to Sir Richard Morison, Edward VI's Ambassador to the Emperor Charles V. In the letters by which he sustains his friendships with Edward Raven and other colleagues at Cambridge, his delight in observing foreign cities and societies accompanies a concern about the fortunes of the reformed religion in a Christendom threatened by its own disunity as well as by the Turkish Empire. He also includes sufficient personal matter to provide a self-portrait.

The reader of Ascham's letters is treated to observations of scenes and buildings:

The palatine of Rhene is also a great lord on this river, and hath his name of a castle standing in the midst of Rhene [the Rhine] on a rock. There be also goodly isles in Rhene, so full of walnut trees that they cannot be spent with eating, but they make vile of them. In some of these isles stand fair abbeyes and nunneries wonderfully pleasant. The stones that hang so high over Rhene be very much of that stone that you use to write on in tables; every poor man's house there is covered with them.

Writing of a city recently burnt by the Emperor, Ascham describes how

the Duke of Cleves is building it anew, enlarging the town three hundred feet round about from the old walls ... is building a castle, so fair and large as the Emperor might dwell in; so strong to repulse the Great Turk.

Ascham has no doubt about the strength of his own nation and writes from Augsburg:

England need fear no outward enemies. The lusty lads surely be in England. I have seen on a Sunday more likely men walking in Paul's church than I ever yet saw in Augusta, where lieth an Emperor with a garrison, three kings, a queen, three princes, a number of dukes, &c.

Ascham's patriotism includes his love of his national drink; but after he discovers "this wine of Rhene ... so good, so natural, so temperate," he confesses, "I was afraid when I came out of England to miss beer; but I am more afraid when I shall come into England, that I cannot lack this wine."

At Tillemont, in the Low Countries, Ascham moralizes:

I saw nuns and papists dance in the middle of the town at a bridal. These be news to you, but olds to that country, where it is leful [lawful] to that Babylonian papistry to serve BACCHUS.... The stark papist in England would spew up his papistry and become a whole Christian at the sight of these dregs of Rome.

Being shown relics of St. Ursula, this Protestant declares, "If these things were left as monuments of antiquity, not as allurements of papistry ... I would delight both to see them myself, and praise them to other."

Ascham's continued exploration of the classical world is an important part of his life on the Continent. "Five days in the week," he says, "my lord [the Ambassador] and I continually do study the Greek tongue"; he scours goldsmiths' shops for ancient coins; and he is eager to learn of new scholarly undertakings. At Augsburg, he meets Jeronimus Wolfius, a translator of Demosthenes and Isocrates, and rejoices to learn from him "that one BORRHEUS ... hath even now in printing goodly commentaries upon ARISTOTLE's Rhetoric."

Mindful of his own uncertain future—if the ailing boy Edward VI dies, a Catholic Queen Mary will succeed him—Ascham is torn between desire for advancement in the King's service and his love of the retired life of a university scholar. He adjures Edward Raven, "Purpose, my Edward,

to live in godliness and learning; for that is life only. I see emperors, kings, princes, &c. live not, but play their lives upon stages” and wistfully declares, “He that is able to maintain his life in learning at Cambridge, knoweth not what a felicity he hath.”

It is instructive to compare Ascham’s travel letters with the *Report and Discourse of the Affairs and State of Germany* he writes for his friend and fellow scholar John Astley. This *Report*, in which he lights on very unkind behaviour by the powerful, as opposed to religious differences or desire for liberty, as the primary cause of the current wars, contains much lively characterization and some moralizing but little of the news about his doings and feelings that seasons the letters.

Of his English letters, those from Germany are easily the most interesting, though Ascham later writes movingly of his widowed mother-in-law’s poverty and of his own depression at the prospect of leaving his wife and children (during his time in Germany he is still a bachelor) without means after his death. A letter to the Earl of Leicester hints that it is his extraordinary ability in the role that allows him, a known Protestant, to serve as Mary Tudor’s Latin Secretary; he declines a minor ecclesiastical position under the Catholic Mary, but accepts one under the Protestant Elizabeth.