John Donne's "Upon Mr. Thomas Coryats Crudities" is one of more than sixty commendatory or mock-commendatory poems affixed to Coryats Crudities Hastily gobbled vp in five Moneths travells (1611), and—with The Anniversaries and "Elegie On the untimely Death of the incomparable Prince, HENRY"—one of Donne's rare poetic ventures into print in his lifetime. That the poem is rarely discussed in Donne criticism is not surprising. For, while the obsequies celebrate Elizabeth Drury and Prince Henry as models of the virtuous life and thus suggest issues that transcend the poems' immediate subjects, Donne's verses on Coryats Crudities are deeply grounded in the details of Coryate's text and character, and they make no attempt to suggest a topic larger (or, as the poem jests, smaller) than Coryate. Possibly the most occasional of Donne's poems, "Upon Mr. Thomas Coryats Crudities" demands that, in order to grasp Donne's allusions, one must actually read the entire of Coryate's enormous book, a task that, paradoxically, Donne's poem asserts is impossible. The poem nevertheless provides insight into Donne's understanding of wit and proves a significant variation upon the all/nothing paradox that entertained Donne throughout his career. Perhaps most importantly, it illuminates Donne's frustrations, at the most troubled moment in his career, with the would-be courtier's strategy for advancement.

Coryats Crudities records Coryate's travels, mostly on foot, through France, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and the low countries, and includes his descriptions of and observations upon cities, buildings, landmarks, and customs. Coryate, Samuel Purchase wryly not-
ed, “was indeed a curious viewer of so much as his bodily eyes could comprehend” (qtd. in Strachan 201), and his narrative is filled with descriptions of simple items like forks, fans, flytraps, and umbrellas that were hitherto unknown or not yet widely used in England, as well as of unique curiosities like the famous clock in Strasbourg’s cathedral, which he describes in meticulous detail in the hope that a similar one can be built at home. He observes the natural as well as the civilized world: he notes with interest that in southern countries the growing season allows a double hay harvest, and he comments upon a horde of frogs whose crossing the road prevented his progress. His eye misses little; he records with an equal attention to detail the luxury of Venetian courtesans, the simple practice of Swiss peasant women braiding brightly colored ribbons in their hair, and the devotions of cloistered nuns behind their grill. Coryate’s particular fascination with funeral monuments—and his willingness to reproduce their oftentimes lengthy inscriptions—earned him the reputation of a “tombstone traveler.”

“The problem with eyewitness accounts,” observes Stephen Greenblatt, “is that they implicitly call attention to the reader’s lack of that very assurance—direct sight—that is their own sense of authority” (34). From the start Coryate recognized that travel narratives are unreliable and that readers had grown to expect that the “part of a traueller” is to “tell a lye” (Coryate 137–38). This creates a tension in his text between his exclamations of wonder at the curiosities that he discovered in the course of his journey and his attempt to disarm his reader’s natural incredulity through a tedious and seemingly endless supply of measurements and transcriptions.

Thus, on the one hand, he constantly professes himself to have been filled with wonder, as when he comments that he had not seen or even read about such things before he saw the Venetian mosaics at St. Mark’s (211), marvels at the competence of the female stage actors whose performance he attends in Venice (247), protests that the goldsmiths’ shops in Frankfurt offer “the most glorious shew that euer I saw in my life” (564), and exclaims that the Heidelberg tun of wine is the most miraculous sight of his travels (488). Yet, on the other hand, he worries constantly about arousing the reader’s scepticism concerning not only the unbelievable marvels that he reports but his very ability to undertake and complete the travels that he records.2 “This strange