

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Argument As Empire Formation: The Letters Of Elihu Yale



A chronicle of the history of British empire in India as it was staged from within the confines of Fort St. George in Madras, India has this to say about one of the governor-generals of the British East India company:

An old feeling comes over us directly we leave the highroad and make our own way down the sloped passage across the drawbridge over the moat, past the massive gates and under the echoing tunnel that leads through the mighty walls. Within we see the parapets on which in bygone days the cannon thundered at the foe. We pass on into the great spaces of the Fort; and in our imagination we can people them with ghosts of the illustrious-or notorious-dead. It was here that, in the reign of King James the Second, Master Elihu Yale, assumed the Governorship of Madras, did hard work on the Company's behalf but also made a large fortune for himself, lost his son aged four, quarreled long and bitterly with his councilors, and was at last superseded (Barlow and Milford 1921: 16).

A leading public intellectual, S. Muthiah, who is part of an emergent cultural movement to preserve British architecture in Madras observes of Elihu Yale "Yale, a strong personality who is alleged to have hanged his groom for being absent without leave, got on well with Europeans and Indians alike" (Muthiah 1999: 43).

Elihu Yale was the governor in residence at the fort between 1687 and 1692 as he sought to secure trading rights, within a larger mission of firmly establishing Great Britain as sole economic and political masters of the vast regions of the Indian subcontinent from a tract of land which to this day houses the bedrock of British Empire, Fort St. George. Yale took over the helms of the British East India company at a time when Madras became an embattled zone among the Portugese, Dutch, and the British. The quest for gaining commercial monopoly and its political concomitant, ascendancy over Portugese and Dutch, which subsequently spawned the birth of Empire, consumed the administrative agendas of a succession of governor-generals between mid and end of the 17th century,

including Yale.

Between the grand sweep of history and the finer intricacy of historical figures, between gallantry and notoriety, visionary politics and strategic practices, can be found a series of letters penned by Yale from within the fort. While Yale is sometimes the sole writer, other letters are the work of a cohort of councilors or affectionately called 'the Gang'. The grand irony that the edifice of one of the most expansive, durable, and larger-than-life colonial regimes, that of Britain in India, was put in place through the simplicity and personableness of letters is only matched by the majesty, decorum and strategic choices embedded in the form and tone of the arguments advanced by Elihu Yale in service of the Crown of England as one of its administrative heirs. And there is an uncanny continuity between the tragedy that ensued from the English will to colonize Indian people and the vulnerability of turbulent precolonial times. This can be semiotically traced across the universe of arguments that emerged to manage the exigent and beleaguered enterprise that was the British East India Company. The turbulence can be understood as the effect of embarking upon an expansionist mode that is clearly evidenced in these missives.

This paper has as its critical task retrieval of argument types in selected texts from within the repertoire of letters written by Elihu Yale and on occasion, by his councilors, to consolidate the British East India Company that in turn led to Empire. These arguments are then arranged within two political discourses that provide reciprocal and dynamic contexts for interpretation and criticism. One of these is a discourse of political solicitation that emerges from arguments addressed to local rulers, Nabobs or Nawabs, on the significance of enabling the British to procure sole trading rights over the Portugese and Dutch in Madras and attendant issues. The other which is more of a discourse of political strategy can be found in what basically constitutes internal memos; a series of correspondence with administrative agents who were designated as 'factors'. Jacobs and Jackson's paradigmatic application of the groundbreaking differentiation proposed by O'Keefe to analyze two grounds of arguments has enormous critical value within the aforesaid historical context of political argumentation. This differentiation between making an argument and having an argument is, in fact, the driving force behind the critical maneuvers of this paper (1981: 119). Jacobs and Jackson capture the distinction saying, "argument1 refers to a kind of speech act, something a person makes; argument2 refers to a kind of interaction, something people have" (Jacobs and Jackson 1981: 119). Simply put, this fine differentiation

animates a critical distinction between Yale arguing *for* sole commercial rights in Madras and Yale arguing *that* there are strategic and imprudent ways of doing so. This distinction can be mapped to the addressee of the letters showing the radical contingency of the argument types employed and deployed by Yale to achieve suasive ends of securing British monopoly. In argumentation terms, Yale makes an argument to the ruler while arguing, sometimes vociferously, with British agents in the vicinity. Taken together they constitute an expansionist rhetoric of British empire that compels a philosophical return to the elusive question of the origins of British colonial rule in India and its argumentative underpinnings during a moment that can certainly be imagined as the precolonial moment. Before I proceed to discuss the methodology and present my criticism, I venture into the postcolonial implications of my reading of Yale's letters.

The figuring of the spatial and temporal axes of these letters in terms of the 'precolonial' compels scrutiny of the politics of postcolonial criticism that both underwrites and is in turn rewritten through such an archaeological project. A more conventional postcolonial criticism, such as the incisive essay by Bjork on cold war colonialism, works with the objective of exposing arguments made in postcolonial times that sustain colonialist ideology and practices into an ever unfolding neo (Bjork 1995: 225-231). This paper turns this type of intellectual practice on its head by recovering the discourses made in precolonial times. Such a turning of the postcolonial head runs counter to a critical practice that is concerned with the production of a colonialist ideology in the aftermath of colonial rule, a practice that glosses over discursive intricacies to offer broad texts, in the order of Lyotard's notion of *meta recits* (1984), on the premise that domination/oppression is a concomitant of foreign rule. The trajectory of this critical essayist is to trace an alternate path in postcolonial criticism which foregrounds the interrogation of discursive strategies that led to the founding to British Empire in India. This in some way extends postcolonial intellectual work to negotiate the 'precolonial' which I find to be a catalyst for intellectual enlargement and enrichment of postcolonial scholarship. This points to a moment of suasion prior to a period of force that in Yale's works is realized in the exemplary embodiment of political argumentation even as it is disturbed by a sort of ambivalence of a very different order than the one delineated within postcolonial criticism which focuses on the English-speaking Indian native (Bhabha 1986: 163-84). I specifically mean a sort of vulnerability that comes out of Yale, an Englishman having to master intercultural communication, so as to

overpower the Portuguese and Dutch trading entities in what became a fractious and embattled zone of trade in Southern India. This discursive blending of two very different alignments, as Olson puts it in a far-reaching explication of the argumentative aspects of ethics and effectiveness, was most evident, when much to my ethnographic delight, I found the word 'argue' nesting within this corpus of letters (1995: 81-83). It was spelt and used as such! This aspect of reflexivity provides both academic and political justification for scrutiny of these letters through the critical tools of argument criticism.

Which brings me to the specific postcolonial interventions that I see to be suggested by such a criticism. In contemporary times, my engagement of Yale's letters through the modalities of argument criticism opens up a space, as yet foreclosed within postcolonial criticism, to practice an embedded critique. I embed an aesthetic criticism of the constitutive features of the discourse of political solicitation in these letters in a political critique of the discourse of strategy. As an ambassador of the British Crown, who assumed the reins of the East India Company at the relatively youthful age of 37, just 15 years after setting foot in what was later to become Madras as a company writer (Muthiah 1999: 43), Yale's intercultural sensitivity, decorum, and elegance stand the test of time in that as a culturally-attuned and other-oriented discourse, his letters are ahead of its time and anticipate a very eminent mode of culturally nuanced diplomacy befitting inter-sovereign communication. However his arguments within the discursive parameters of, what has been here termed as, political strategy is much more contingent and precarious and this limits the radical potential of the arguments when taken in its entirety.

What this 'other' more desirable mode of argumentation is or ought to be is a matter of exorcising the demons of deferral, occasioned by the deconstructive turn in rhetorical criticism, by inverting the rhetorical supplement into a cultural *weltanschauung*. I allude to what intercultural communication scholars Chen and Starosta elsewhere refer to as 'third culture building', a dynamic process of cultural synergy geared towards maximizing intercultural possibilities, as a personal orientation towards an even more effective argumentation (Chen and Starosta 1998: 133). This is the political and cultural lesson that I take away from reading Yale. In more disciplinary terms, it marks a turning away from a critic and text centered reading to an actor and performance driven approach to postcolonial criticism where the critic is reflexively bound at once by the ethos of study and scrutiny and the will to instruct the self about otherness in contexts

that exceed and explode the distinction.

1. Methodology for Argument Criticism of Yale's Letters

The textual analysis of the discourse is circumscribed by an ethnographic exploration, commenced and completed in 1999, of the vectors of cultural memory that run across the length and breadth of Madras, now Chennai. These take the form of historical sites such as Fort St. George Museum and various symbols of Yale's times, including his consecration chalis and bridal registry, which were hailed within a ceremonial discourse in the museum at the time when I was conducting my ethnography. The display of key letters as an artifact in the museum sparked my interest and subsequently led me to the archives wherein I found these letters that were intact originals. I here present a close reading of two letters, which have been selected based on an emergent aesthetic criterion of exemplary texts that I am elsewhere developing. I use Jasinski's explication of Beiner's 4-part analytical scheme of political judgment (Jasinski 1990: 195-196). This scheme of coding for role, community, political and temporal orientations can be used a powerful technique whose driving principle is textual groundedness within a political context of judgment. I layer the ensuing readings with contextual interpretations wherein the meanings I ascribe to the discourses and the critical moves I make through them are entirely derived from my intensely personal and sensuous ethnographic understanding.

This is a kind of 'standing in the place' of, what Cox characterizes as, the tense and fruitful interplay of distancing and historicizing of the mythical and mystical consciousness that marks the time before Empire (Cox 1990: 27). This was also the time and space of Elihu Yale, Governor of the British East India Company and founder of Yale University, New Haven, construed centuries later by a nomadic postcolonial from within the affective, auratic, and esoteric space that is the Fort through an ongoing postcolonial rhizomatics, an intellectual practice that is intensely of a time and place which is the here and now of postcolonial India where it took root. McKerrow's (1990: 9) useful distinction between 'weak' and 'strong' senses of the enriching discourses of history tied to Jackson and Jacob's performative differentiation between argument orientations, making and having, brings me back full circle to the critical energies that drive this paper.

2. Reading Yale's letters: Discourses of Political Solicitation and Strategy

The two letters that will be my occupation for the remainder of this paper were retrieved from a host of them written between 1688 and 1689. Schematically, I

first read a letter written solely by Elihu Yale to a local ruler followed by a letter, an internal communication, co-written with his councilors and addressed to a factor of the slowly expanding 'Right Honorable Company', a corporate honorific for the British East India Company. The thematic unity of these letters can be discerned in Yale's concern over what he perceives to be a crisis in the successful management and growth of the company of which he was governor. This crisis is the murder of some factors by seemingly unruly natives in a nearby province whose ruler was the former addressee. To reiterate, my readings are arranged within two argument types that include a discourse of political solicitation and political strategy. These are treated as intersecting and mutually situating argument types.

3. A Discourse of Political Solicitation

I execute my criticism following performative readings of the transcribed letters as inscriptions of an arcane form and texture of English. Within a discourse of political solicitation, Yale appeals to the good offices and graces of the Nabob for the Mogul forces of the Government of Gingelee, which appears to have been a strategic outpost of the emergent trading zone of the British. In both letters, the role played by Yale is one of actor, the community that circumscribes his use of argument is that of British administrative officers and tradesmen, and his political orientation is borne out of both loyalty to the Crown and recognition of the sovereignty of the Indian ruler although these have a different resonance depending on the addressee. The temporal orientation that mark these letters signify a fusion of the synchronic and diachronic through a ritual invocation of the past, as a time of establishing intercultural trust and eliciting and making promises, to the present of the crisis toward a more productive and peaceful future for the British East India Company. The letter to the Nabob, Yale is interested and invested in a delicate rhetorical balancing of what Jasinski refers to as 'interests and ambitions' on the one hand with, on the other, a vision of civic harmony (Jasinski 1990:195). Yale begins his letter stating:

May it please your excellency: "I was lately surprised and astonished with the strange sad news we received from our people in your parts that our chief and second and several others of the company as servants were barbarously murdered in our factory by your forces and that the rest of our people who were saved from these cruelty were carried captives up the country..."

The complementary tropes of 'strange sadness' constitute the argumentative

raison d'être for Yale as he turns it into a *tour de force* of reasoning through evidence of the irony intrinsic to a situation where the benefits that could accrue to the ruler's people, under his benevolent patronage to the British, was undercut by the seeming barbarity and cruelty of his people themselves under his very reign. Such a bold argument is finessed with an ethical use of a qualifier that bespeaks the masterful use of decorum in a politically charged and culturally-loaded context. Yale writes, "I cannot yet be informed nor can imagined it to be occasioned by you since it was by your encouragement and invitation I sent people and ye' honorable Company that" thus sealing the relationship at a time when it faces the threat of hostility and animus. He continues to construct his credibility as an elegant emissary. Yale pays tribute to his agents, living and deceased, as men who have "always deported themselves peaceably and quietly never having given the least occasion of offences or complains against them and much less for such cruel and inhuman usage" (The latter can also be seen to be a loyalty clause and oath since the letters were plausibly subject to scrutiny by higher authorities).

For evidence of what was sad and strange about a situation that was in dire need of attention and action, Yale evokes the goodness of his men whose lives were laid waste by less-than-good natives. This is an iterative evocation. In one place Yale laments "In maintaining and employing many thousands of them (natives) with very little advantage to your honorable company" while in another he all but demands to know why "any of these kindnesses and services deserve such cruel usage as we have received from your people." The force of his perception of injustice done to men who he upholds for their valor and commitment gains momentum in his expression of a tempered sense of outrage as he states in the terminal part of the letter "these bloody villains that so barbarously murdered our people unarmed and in cold blood without the least offence or provocation to you or your Govt..." The warrant is then made that the ruler act in the best interest of his own rule. I consider this move to be a argumentative *coup* because its ground is as much the protection of the interests and agents of the Crown of England as the desire for preservation of sound relations with the local ruler, twin principles that underlie Yale's tenure as governor of the company. Yale makes a fervent appeal to the Nabob:

"but I believe you good and wise I must desire you to make ye case your own and consider of these actions... and repair them as much as possible since I do hereby require and expect a just and full satisfaction for all the Injuries does us and the

Rt. Honorable company that our people under confinement with you be restored to their liberties and our treasure and good, be freely and punctually delivered to them and that they have freedom either to continue at our factor or returned...”

Yale cloaks his pragmatic argument for the utter urgency of the ruler acting in the service of the British, by putting an end to the cruelty perpetrated against his factors, with an aura of solemn and heartfelt reverence, tinged by somber remorse, for the Nabob and the office he symbolizes. And in unifying what could be competing argumentative goals of instrumental and relational outcomes through the trope of the good intentions and character of both his factors and the ruler himself, Yale is a noble and valiant figure of a personalized form of civil and cultured diplomacy. This can be summed up as a unique strategy of making an argument for good action by, to carry in the vein of Jackson and Jacobs, arguing about good actors that entails and is entailed by the goodness of particular actors.

3. Discourse of Political Strategy

This is the point of departure for the letter written to Mr. Fleetwood by Yale and his councilors at Fort St. George. This letter can be located within the discourse of political strategy that is produced through an extensive argument with Mr. Fleetwood about the most efficacious course of action. I find the concept of having an argument to be of analytical value minus the connotations of bellicoseness. This demeanor may be explained by the august manner in which Yale practices a mode of compassionate authoritarianism as he turns the speech act of issuing orders and fiats as Governor to a more evenhanded communication. Yale argues strategy with Mr. Fleetwood as if to invoke the authority of the office of governor without autocracy. In this manner he appears to effectively convey the rhetorical force of decisiveness in a hierarchical form of authority that came to be the hallmark of British rule in India by resorting to a more lateral type of communication. Yale's letter to Mr. Fleetwood begins as an expression of the sentiment of bereavement as he writes, “we were extremely surprised and sorry for your sad news lately received from your parts of the inhuman murder of Mr. Stables and Mr. Hall.” However the use of the words ‘surprise’ and ‘sorry’ can also be read as Yale arguing with Fleetwood on the right course that could have been taken to avert the tragedy and ought to in the future.

In this letter, three sets of distinct and disparate evidentiary units are offered which are nevertheless unified by what they purport to demonstrate. Yale argues in one fell swoop:

“you may accordingly reason and argue the matter with him (possibly a native foreman or supervisor) which we hope will procure your freedom of yourselves and coffers and return to your factory which so we would have you get all the goods you can in readiness and send them to us by your first opportunity... However in your meantime report yourselves with all the ‘sincerity’ and prudence that you may oblige these friendships and enlargement... Our ship from England with considerable supplies of golde, with forces and ammunition fit for any exploit we may have occasion for which you may accidentally let them know of which.”

I especially want to remark on what strange bedfellows the merchandises of gold and ammunition make. Yet a connecting thread across Yale’s letters are cryptic references to ‘presents’ or gifts that were to be offered the local rulers. In this instance, Yale appears to warn that this could become its deadly double, the use of ammunition, should such gestures of amity and friendship be overlooked by the local recipients of gifts. The closing gesture in the letter can also be read as the warrant or projected outcome and justification for the entire communication as Yale bids “Our wishes for your health and liberty’s is all from, Your affectionate friend Elihu Yale, Will Fraser, William Caley, John Littleton, Thomas Wavell, Thomas Gray, and John Cheney.” Simply put, health and liberty can be seen as bearing a synecdochal relation to the company and hence the crown. The vulnerability of this discourse of political strategy then points to a sense of uncertainty and confusion over the right course of action to take by the British. This may be attributed to a paradoxical mode of reasoning the right thing to do. During a time of political siege, certainty over the right course of action is but a masquerade of a *fait accompli*, while in actuality it is argued through a radically contingent and *ad hoc* marshalling of actions of the speculative and retroactive, “what would have worked” kind.

And it is this political indecision over mutually negating courses of action such as confrontation, endearment, ingratiation, and military repression, that disturbs this argument type showing its potential and limits. In short, the various approaches to handling the affairs of the British East India Company undercut each other and hence render the argument into an unsure and uneasy discourse.

4. Translating the Good and Right

Reflecting on what might have secured an otherwise precarious argument type, so as to render it something tentative and provisional, is a road into the future. It could call for a connecting thread across the evidence that conceptualizes

political strategy in terms of political solicitation. The weaving of such a thread is an act of translation where the meaning of the right is thought alongside with the good. In this sense, the right action is bound up by the good. Alternatively I venture to argue that rightness can be discerned *sui generis* as the generation of a priority of actions, an ordering of what 'could have been' based on what 'ought to be', so as to decipher the most effective actions based on a principle of elimination of inconsistency. I close my paper by suggesting that the principle of maintaining friendship through argument, that is both an object and the very form of Yale's letter to Mr. Fleetwood, is a step in the right direction as we inexorably head toward the bearing out of the legacy of British Empire in contemporary times.

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