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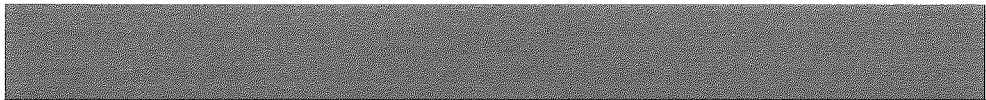
DIRETTA DA
FRANCESCO MARRONI

Pubblicazione del Dipartimento
di Scienze Linguistiche e Letterarie

Università degli Studi
"G. d'Annunzio" Pescara

22

Edizioni Tracce



*Volume stampato con il contributo del Dipartimento di Scienze Linguistiche
e Letterarie dell'Università degli Studi "G. d'Annunzio" di Chieti*

ISBN 978-88-7433-496-4

Direttore Responsabile: Domenico Cara
Supplemento a:
"Tracce - trimestrale di scrittura e
ricerca letteraria"
Edizioni Tracce
Via Eugenia Ravasco, 54
65123 PESCARA

RSV
Rivista di Studi Vittoriani

Anno XI

Luglio 2006

Fascicolo 22

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Renzo D'Agnillo

"Now in Happier Air": Arthur Hugh Clough's *Amours de Voyage* and Italian Republicanism

If sadness at the long heart-wasting show
Wherein earth's great ones are disquieted:
If thoughts, not idle, while before me flow
The armies of the homeless and unfed:
If these are yours, if this is what you are,
Then I am yours, and what you feel, I share¹.

In the concluding lines of his sonnet "To a Republican Friend" Matthew Arnold directly associates his own socialist sympathies with those of Arthur Hugh Clough. However, though both men acutely felt the need to respond to the political, religious and spiritual crisis of their times through their poetry, they did so in quite different ways. As is well known, they held a high regard for each other as intellectuals but could both be contemptuously dismissive of each other's verse. Arnold himself derided Clough's anti-classical approach and, as one recent critic puts it, "immersion in the ceaseless flux of the contemporary"², an orientation he viewed as antithetic to the whole purpose of poetry whose concern should be with universal rather than worldly themes. In his view, politics and poetry were factors that should be kept definitely apart (his own sonnet excepting). Bearing in mind the contemporary issues that dominate *Amours de Voyage*, it is small wonder that, on being sent a copy, Arnold did not even deign to read it. Yet the poem represents a central moment in Clough's artistic maturity in which he breaks away from the confines of his cultural horizons and personal dilemmas.

¹ *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allot (2nd edition Miriam Allot), London, Longman, 1979 (1965), p.

² Dorothy Deering, "The Antithetical Poetics of Arnold and Clough", *Victorian Poetry*, 16 (1978), p. 17.

The immediate subject of Clough's epistolary poem (which, like his earlier poem of the previous year *The Bothie of Tober-Na-Vuolich*, is written in hexameter metre) concerns the vicissitudes of an English intellectual tourist (Claude) during the downfall of Giuseppe Mazzini's 1849 Roman Republic³. Clough drew so extensively on his own visit to Rome when writing his poem that several of his contemporaries considered its anti-hero as a thin disguise for the author himself⁴. The theme of the contemporary European political arena (and Clough's visit may be seen as a sort of political pilgrimage in support of the republican cause), is played off against the existential and philosophical predicaments of the main protagonist. Furthermore, it is through Claude's perceptions that the juxtaposition of the remnants of a long-gone glorious Ancient Roman Empire are juxtaposed with the new, and decidedly more prosaic, Mazzinian republic. In this way, Clough offers an explicit critique of the vain endeavours of human history, whilst simultaneously dramatising the confrontation between the historical and cultural tradition and the modern consciousness which fails to perceive a logical continuity between past and present. This article will focus almost exclusively on the second canto of the poem in which the theme of republicanism and the

³ For reasons of space I deliberately exclude from the present discussion the poem's other theme, namely the failed love story between Claude and Mary Trevellyn.

⁴ Anthony Kenny, *Arthur Hugh Clough, A Poet's Life*, London, Continuum, 2005, p. 173: "To treat Claude's letters as autobiographical statements is to insult the poet's remarkable creative power. It was no small achievement to make the reader identify with [...] the vexations and sorrows of a character who is presented, initially at least, as a clearly odious person". But see also David Williams, *Too Quick Despairer. A Life of Arthur Hugh Clough*, London, Rupert Hart-Davies, 1969, p. 87, who, whilst admitting that "Clough would never allow himself to become as cynical and as nihilistic as Claude" also observes: "Here is the man he sometimes — not always — felt himself to be: a crippled, paralysed person, someone who had the natural, instinctive man in him throttled into lifelessness by too much indoctrination, too much moralising [...]". Robindra Kumar Biswas, *Arthur Hugh Clough. Towards a Reconsideration*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1972, p. 302, offers the most stimulating comparative analysis between Claude and his creator, suggesting that "Claude is at least as much observed as he is expressed" and concluding that he "exits on a perilous edge between counter-judgements". As I also suggest later, Clough's identification with Claude is more problematic than initially appears.

poetic subject's reactions to the political turmoil is highlighted and expanded. In doing so, it will also explore the way in which Clough constructs his poem by setting up an ironic interrelationship between his own self and his fictional anti-hero.

Upon Clough's arrival in Rome (after a rough sea voyage from Genoa to Civitavecchia)⁵ Giuseppe Mazzini's Republic was barely two months old. The latter had been governing as effective dictator in a triumvirate together with Carlo Armellini and Aurelio Saffi, since March 1849, following the escape of Pope Pious IX to Naples subsequent to the failure of his experimental government. During his three-month 'vacation' Clough was to witness the initial victory of Garibaldi's army against the French incursion, followed by the eventual triumph of the French siege led by General Oudot. When he eventually left, the republic was dissolved with both Mazzini and Garibaldi forced to flee abroad. Clough's correspondence to friends and relations not only documents the social and political upheavals he witnessed during his Roman sojourn, but also offers an intriguing insight into his own paradoxical and enigmatic responses to these events. The compositional process of *Amours de Voyage* is such that whole sequences of the poem are basically literal transcriptions from his letters. In his first communication to his mother, two days after his arrival, for example, Clough describes his initial decidedly anti-conventional impressions of the eternal city:

St Peter's disappoints me: the stone of which it is made is a poor plastery material. And indeed Rome in general might be called a rubbishy place; the Roman antiquities in general seem to me only interesting as antiques — not for any beauty [...] I have seen two beautiful views since I came, one from San Pietro in Montorio, the other from the Lateran Church over the Campagna —⁶.

⁵ Clough arrived in Rome on April 16 1849 staying till 17 July.

⁶ *The Correspondence of Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. Frederick L. Malhauser, Oxford, Clarendon, 1957, Vol. 1, p. 217.

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Both the language and tone of Claude's first letter to Eustace are an almost direct replica of Clough's own words:

Rome disappoints me much, — St Peter's, perhaps, in especial
Only the Arch of Titus and view from the Lateran please me:
[...]
Rome disappoints me much; I hardly as yet understand, but
Rubbishy seems the word that most exactly would suit it⁷.

Not only the same observation, but also the same deliberately supercilious adjective is used, erupting after a hesitant phrase ("I hardly as yet understand") to create an almost comic effect (reinforced on a phonic level by the semi alliteration in *Rome/rubbishy*). Thus, far from expressing the typical tourist's delight at the capital city, Claude, in no way dissimilar to Clough, displays a distaste verging on boredom with his new surroundings, as if it is all too wearily familiar to him. He is also quick to wryly expose the ludicrously false rumours spread by the press. Clough's allusion to one such instance in the same letter to his mother: ("The story of the proposed sale of the belvedere Apollo to the Americans is as simply a joke [...]"⁸) is also referred to in one of Claude's letters to Eustace:

[...] and although it (*The Times*) was slightly in error
When it proclaimed as a fact the Apollo was sold to a Yankee,
You may believe when it tells you the French are at Civita
Vecchia (AV, p. 187).

However, to merely recognise the extent to which Clough drew from his correspondence while composing *Amours de Voyage* provides little insight into the dynamics of the intratextual dialogue he deliberately establishes between his letters and his poem. What is discovered if one pursues this dialogic relationship is the way in which they illuminate and parallel each other in a

⁷ *The Poems of Arthur Hugh Clough*, (2nd edition), ed. F. L. Malhauser, Oxford, Clarendon, 1974, p. 169. All subsequent quotations refer to this edition and will be cited in the text as AV followed by page numbers in brackets.

⁸ *The Correspondence of Arthur Hugh Clough*, cit., p. 217.

series of attitudes, from the earnest to the ironic, to make up a composite picture of the imaginative possibilities afforded by his Roman experience. This is what makes *Amours de Voyage* such a disturbingly open-ended poem, one whose anti-hero, intellectually over-cautious and sceptical to the point of self-deconstruction, whilst no doubt reflecting certain facets of his creator, is bestowed with a sufficiently autonomous identity as to render any direct link with Clough both plausible and questionable. It is almost as if Clough is simultaneously tempted as well as reluctant to establish a correspondence between himself and his own character. This ambivalent attitude is also symptomatic of the sense of self-dissociation which marks his temperament during this period. Indeed, what is striking is the extent to which the performative function of Clough's language in his letters and his poem seems deliberately aimed to forge an attitude of cynicism and disillusionment that has quasi-theatrical suggestions. Time and again he furnishes his correspondents with deliberately humdrum accounts of the turbulent events he witnessed, with everything seeming to occur at twice remove, as in the following observations from a letter to F. T. Palgrave on June 21:

It is curious how much like any other city, a city under bombardment looks [...]

I wrote you a few lines about 'the Terror' but somehow did not send them.

Assure yourself that there is nothing to deserve that name [...]

[P. S.] Alas, it is hopeless. — I am doomed to see the burning of Rome, I suppose: —

The world perhaps in the same day will lose the Vatican and me!⁹.

This curious combination of understatement and candour runs throughout Clough's letters. The following lines to his sister exhibits an almost perverse insensitivity towards the actual events narrated which fade to insignificance behind the deflated rhetoric:

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 260-261.

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Perhaps it will amuse you hereafter to have a letter commenced while guns are firing and, I suppose, men falling, dead and wounded. Such is the case on the other side the Tiber while I peacefully write in my distant chamber with only the sound in my ears¹⁰.

Here, understatement, (ie. the casual acknowledgement of men falling dead and wounded), and the embedding of the main action within a subordinate clause, are devices Clough uses to deliberately create an attitude of indifference and detachment. On the one hand, the effect of this attitude is self-reflexive in that it reveals more about Clough than the nature of the events he witnessed. On the other, it may be pertinent to see in the deliberately affected tone of his letters a sort of prelude for the composition of the poem.

The main motives for the feelings of dejection and apathy that penetrate the heart of nearly everything he wrote in this period are easily explainable. The Clough who arrived in Rome was a man distraught by moral dilemmas and professional predicaments. One who may very well have felt, to quote Claude's words in the poem, that:

It is a blessing, no doubt, to be rid, at least for a time, of
All one's friends and relations [...]
All the assujettissement of having been what one has been,
What one thinks one is, or thinks what others suppose one
[...] (AV, p. 170).

Besides his spiritual crises which had caused such friction with the university authorities at Oxford, and later in London¹¹, Clough had witnessed first-hand the momentary triumph of the provisional republican government in France a year earlier, only to leave the country a few days before its defeat by a more moderate, conservative force. By 1848 the Chartist movement in

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹¹ Clough had previously resigned from an Oriel fellowship after his refusal to subscribe to the 39 articles. Now, his religious and moral frictions with the governing body of University Hall would, on his return from Italy, eventually lead to his resignation from that secular institution.

England, whose development Clough had also followed with sympathetic interest had also been finally suppressed. Furthermore, before the recent success of the Whig parliament, the Tories had practically dominated English politics uninterrupted for half a century. Now already the mood seemed to be swinging back. In January 1849 Blackwood's published its damning article *The Year of Revolutions*, severely castigating liberal policies for having almost completely ruined the country with the total acceptance of free trade and its overturning of every stable principle of British society. Worst of all, it was held guilty for supporting practically every revolutionary cause abroad with the consequence that:

So rapid was the succession of revolutions when the tempest assailed the world last spring (1848), that no human power seemed capable of arresting it; and the thoughtful looked on in mournful and impotent silence, as they would have done on the decay of nature or the ruin of the world¹².

There were therefore sufficient reasons for Clough's dejected state when he left England's shores that summer of 1849. But although the defeat of the revolution in France may have somewhat deadened his initial enthusiasms, it did not shake the foundations of his ideological principles which remained solidly aligned to the republican cause (there would be no Wordsworthian weeping over ruined churches for him, rather a gnashing of teeth at "how riling it is to be conquered"¹³). It seems nevertheless very likely that, by 1849, Clough had lost the little faith in the efficacy of political action he continued to nurture, so that it may be no accident that he chose to cast the main protagonist of *Amours de Voyage* in the role of a bored, snobbish and cynical intellectual English tourist, initially indifferent both to the republican cause and the political upheavals he witnesses. On another level, it may be pertinent to wonder whether Claude is intended as a sort of an alter-ego, or, perhaps more to the point, a full look at the worst at

¹² *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, January, 1849, p. 2.

¹³ *The Correspondence of Arthur Hugh Clough*, cit., p. 267.

his own scepticism and tendency to abstract himself from life around him. Or it may even be the case that Claude is a means through which Clough explores thoughts he himself had difficulty in externalising. These are questions few critics have posed, let alone answer satisfactorily.

There is surely a nice irony in the fact that the unprecedented freedom Clough discovered whilst composing his great poem was during a siege. As Biswas puts it: "he exploded into a new clarity after realising the imprisoning self-definitions into which he had allowed himself to be guided by his responsiveness to the pressures of conformity"¹⁴. Not only, but his change of perspective also makes him see his fellow countrymen in a different light. In the poem Claude frequently castigates English responses to the destiny of Mazzini's republic, including such distorted interpretations of Italian events as the biased accounts in *The Times*. As a result (in contrast to Dickens who could not help but see London when he beheld Rome just five years prior to Clough's arrival), Claude is made to state that: "Rome is better than London because it is other than London" (AV, p. 170), — further on he also self-disparagingly confesses how he and his friend George can only "turn like fools to the English" (AV, p. 170) in their despair for company. Although no such anti-English sentiments are to be detected in Clough's own letters, it may be pertinent to see him using the poem to voice opinions he would not have readily voiced to his correspondents (including his spatial separation from them).

Canto II pinpoints the key events of the fall of Mazzini's republic from the approach of the French troops at Civitavecchia to their final occupation of Rome. The lyrical poem with which it opens evokes a possible spirit of place amid the loss, change and corruption represented by Rome:

Is it an illusion? Or does there a spirit from perfecter ages,
Here, even yet, amid loss, change, and corruption, abide?
(AV, p 185).

¹⁴ Biswas, *op cit.*, p. 291.

Clough met, and one who was only too aware of the limitations of his triumph. Clough even seems undaunted by his hero, displaying an impatience that can only be described as ungrateful when, seeking Mazzini's help for a special permit to visit the Vatican, he is kept waiting in an anti-chamber while the man deals with a French envoy. Yet, on his being received, Mazzini devotes no less than half an hour of his politically precious time to the pestering tourist poet. Admittedly, in a later letter, with French canons banging at Rome's gates, Clough does have the presence of mind to realise the embarrassment of bothering "the Dictator any further with my trivial English-tourist importunities"¹⁷. There is, significantly, no meeting in the poem between Claude and Mazzini. Although invoked, the real hero of the poem never appears so that Claude is denied any interrelation with him.

Canto II follows the chronological sequence of the actual historical events as reported in Clough's letters in impressionistic and selective lines, but the perspective also shifts from the general to the specific. In his second letter to Eustace, whilst speculating on the possibility of a French invasion, Claude ponders on the clash between the egotistical interests of the individual self and those of the community at large. His own justification for not participating in the cause (in which he also includes the Roman people themselves) is made on the mere basis of the primal instincts:

On the whole we are meant to look after ourselves; it is certain
Each has to eat for himself, digest for himself, and in general
Care for his own dear life, and see to his own preservation
[...] (AV, pp. 187-188)

Claude's cynical conclusion, that however "sweet it may be and decorous, perhaps, for the country to die; but [...] the Romans won't do it, and I shan't" (AV, p. 188), not only fails to conceal the cowardice behind his realism, but is also contradicted in the very next letter when, having built barricades to keep out the French army he wonders: "Will they fight?" this time only to immediately

¹⁷ *The Correspondence of Arthur Hugh Clough*, cit., p. 257.

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answer "I believe it" (AV, 189). However, ironically, in denouncing the war as "vain and ephemeral folly" (AV, p. 189) in order to justify his own position, he does so by contrasting it with what he feels to be of real worth (i. e. "pictures/Statues and antique gems"), that is, the very things he had denounced as "rubbishy" in his first letter!

Claude's fourth letter in Canto II, in which he abstractedly ponders whether he would have the inclination to save a British female from distress if circumstances demanded it of him reveals Clough's irony towards his character at its sharpest. For the very fact of Claude asking such a question at all deliberately subverts the conventional values of the typical Victorian gentleman he supposedly represents. Clough's hexameters brilliantly emulate the faltering oscillations of his anti-hero's hypocritical discourse with their skilful incorporation of parenthetical observations and blasé remarks:

Am I prepared to lay down my life for the British female?
Really, who knows? One has bowed and talked, till, little
by little,
All the natural heat has escaped of the chivalrous spirit.
Oh, one conformed, of course; but one doesn't die for good
manners
Stab or shoot, or be shot, by way of graceful attention
(AV, pp. 189-190).

Besides his obviously flippant tone (particularly evident in the word-choice "female"¹⁸) Claude's resistance of any involvement in war is finally ridiculed in the absurdly formal register and comical metonym of the line: "Should I incarnadine ever this inky pacifical finger" (AV, p. 190). His letter continues with a series of questions, rather than answers or justifications and his conclusion whether "all this [...]" be "but a weak and ignoble refining" (AV, p. 191) further exposes the self-delusive and inconclusive nature of his reflections.

¹⁸ Walter E. Houghton, *The Poetry of Clough. An Essay in Reevaluation*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1963, p. 129, notes: "To question the validity of dying for the women of England is bad enough. To refer to them as 'females' is to betray the whole code of the chivalric hero. This *was* shocking".

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It may be pertinent to wonder to what extent Clough had Mazzini at the back of his mind while writing these sequences. For Mazzini himself would not hear of anybody holding a neutral position (and Clough's ultimately passive sympathy of Mazzini's cause, also echoed in Claude's response, is undoubtedly symptomatic of such an attitude). In his essay "On the Condition of Europe" Mazzini is quite adamant in his condemnation of people who are non-committal stating that to adopt such an attitude is impossible "without falling into moral degradation" (263)¹⁹. The following observations in his essay "Faith and the Future" emerge all the more challengingly as a comment not only of the character of Claude, but surely also of Clough himself:

[...] Analysis can never regenerate the peoples. Analysis is potent to dissolve; impotent to create. Analysis will never lead us further than the theory of individuality, and the triumph of the individual principle could only lead us to a revolution of Protestantism and mere liberty. The Republic is quite another²⁰.

It was Mazzini's complaint that England adopted precisely this passive, neutral position, when it should have been helping those nations to retrieve their national identities. Thus, in a sense, both Clough and Claude (as representatives of England) become the antagonistic protagonists of a silent ideological confrontation played out on a sub-conscious level. This neutrality leads Clough, both in his letters and his poem, to convey the surprising ordinariness of war, the complete lack of heroic and triumphant tones: "It would seem very small to you if you saw it as I am doing"²¹, as he says in one letter. Claude's fifth letter in Canto II, in which he describes himself walking through the streets of Rome, Murray guidebook in hand, contains a similar sense of the mundane. The shift to the present tense underlines the limited perspective of the man's vision, with everything seeming to elu-

¹⁹ *Mazzini's Essays*, ed. Ernest Rhys, London, Walter Scott, 1887, p. 263.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²¹ Letter to his mother, *The Correspondence of Arthur Hugh Clough*, cit., p. 253.

de meaning just as it is being narrated (AV, p. 192):

So we stand in the sun, but afraid of a probable shower;
So we stand and stare, and see, to the left of St Peter's
Smoke, from the cannon, white — but that is at intervals only —
Black, from a burning house, we suppose [...]
So we watch and wonder; but guessing is tiresome very
(AV, pp. 192-193).

Clough's reports of the battles were essentially based on hearsay. One of these episodes concerns the apparent killing of a priest, which he refers to in a letter to P. T. Palgrave dated July 4:

But a priest who walked and talked publicly in the Piazza
Colonna with a Frenchman was undoubtedly killed. I know
his friends and saw one of them last night. Poor man, he
was quite a liberal ecclesiastic, they tell me: but certainly
not a prudent one²².

This particular episode is given dramatic prominence in one of the central moments of the poem which questions the whole idea of reportage and its role in creating moments of history, however restricted it may be, as in this case, to an ordinary individual:

So I have seen a man killed! An experience that, among others!
Yes, I suppose I have; although I can hardly be certain,
And in a court of justice could never declare I had seen it.
But a man was killed, I am told, in a place where I saw something
(AV, p. 196).

The whole passage is symptomatic of the paradoxes and ontological uncertainties that characterise Clough's poetic macrotext. Here the inability to state a fact is comically rendered in the retraction from "I have seen [...]" to "I suppose I have to I can hardly be certain". The accelerated narrative rhythm of the sequence describing the killing is all the more indistinct, uncertain and confusing:

²² *Ibid.*, p. 265.

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[...] In the middle they drag at something. What is it?
Ha! Bare swords in the air, held up! There seem to be voices
Pleading and hands putting back; official perhaps; but the
swords are
Many, and bare in the air. In the air? They descend; they
are smiting,
Hewing, chopping — At what? In the air once more
upstretched? And
Is it blood that's on them? Yes, certainly blood! Of whom, then
Over whom is the cry of this furor of exultation? [...]
History, Rumour of Rumours I leave it to thee to determine!
(AV, pp. 196-198)

Although Claude definitely witnesses something, he only hears from someone else what has presumably happened. He himself cannot be certain of the facts²³. The fragmentation of the syntax and alternating exclamations and interrogations leave only an indistinct impression of chaotic images. There remains the idea of history as nothing but glorified rumour. Thus, the deliberate pun on *Rome* and *Rumour*, which plays on the semantic interconnection between *Rome*, *rumour* and *History*, suggesting that history is nothing more than the ultimate rumour. Since man is incapable of making sense of his own history, it is left to the impersonal forces of history (with a capital H) to ultimately interpret men's destinies.

The background to Clough's poem may seem deeply rooted in contemporary issues, as Arnold would have no doubt complained, but such preoccupations are where it begins, not where it ends. For Clough there is always a direct equation between poetry and life because only by engaging with real life can poetry serve any spiritually beneficent purpose. Neither do the political references themselves constitute the whole story of the poem (most of which is later concerned with Claude's embarrassingly disastrous courting of Mary Trevellyn, but which also contains reflections

²³ That Clough himself corrects his version of the priest's fate in the very same letter above only to add another story based on hearsay about a man "hewed to pieces for shouting Viva Pio IX, A basso la repubblica" (*ibid.*, p. 266) adds further poignancy to the irony of his descriptions of the events in the poem.

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on other topics including art and religion). In a sense, it is true that by filtering events through the perspective of Claude, Clough creates the objective correlative of the turmoil and dilemmas that were raging in his own subconscious. But in doing so, he also sheds any blind acceptance of idealisms, political or otherwise, in the attempt to grasp objective, universal truths as well as the truth about his own self.