Arthur Hugh Clough's "Amours De Voyage": A Poetic Account of the 1849 Siege of Rome

Cora Lindsay
School of Education, University of Nottingham, UK

Abstract

In this paper I talk about Arthur Hugh Clough’s epistolary poem Amours de Voyage, which describes Clough’s first-hand experience of the events of 1840s Europe, a time of uncertainty and rising nationalist agendas. Amours de Voyage was largely written during Clough’s stay in Rome from April to July 1849, the brief period in which the Roman Republic existed and the city was under siege from the French. The poem is an unusual, unromantic and bemused depiction of nationalistic conflict. By the time it was finally published in Britain in 1862, the Italian struggle for independence had become one of the most celebrated and romantic causes of the century. Clough, with his questioning turn of mind, was inherently wary of such emotional responses. This poem epitomises the detached and constructive scepticism with which Clough approached political and national manifestos, questioning blind certainties and often undermining the pomposity of fanaticism through humour.

Keywords: Arthur Hugh Clough, Risorgimento, 1849 Siege of Rome, Amours de Voyage
The poetry of Arthur Hugh Clough (1816–1861) is generally little known in Britain, and when I talk about his work, I usually have to add that he was a contemporary and friend of Matthew Arnold writing at the same time as Tennyson and Browning. These days he is possibly best known for the much-anthologised “Say Not the Struggle Nought Availeth” – a poem of optimism for times of darkness, which was quoted by Winston Churchill in 1941 to celebrate the US entry into World War II.

Amours de Voyage is, I would argue, Clough’s greatest poetic achievement. The poem, or epistolary verse novel, was largely written during Clough’s stay in Rome from 16th April to the end of July, 1849. It is made up of five cantos or chapters, and consists primarily of a series of letters in verse written from the Rome of this time by Claude, an English Oxford undergraduate, and Georgina and Mary Trevellyn, two sisters in a English family travelling in Italy.

The narrators or letter writers are each in some sense typical of the travelling English of the later nineteenth-century Grand Tour. Claude is the archetypal student who is visiting Rome for its classical past; the Trevellyn family are representative of the emerging new type of family and Thomas Cook tourist of the kind that we also see in Dickens’s Dorrit family.

As its title indicates, Amours de Voyage is fundamentally a love story. Alongside the love story, however, the letter writers record their responses to and experiences of the political events of the spring of 1849 in Rome. 1848 was, of course, a year of European revolutions, and is sometimes known as the time of the Spring of Nations. Clough had been in Paris that year during the establishment of the French Second Republic and he travelled to Rome in 1849 partly because of his interest in the Italian independence cause, although he was certainly never a revolutionary in the Romantic Byronic manner. The poem is, among other things, a powerful account of an individual experience of developing conflict and a creative interpretation of Clough’s own first hand experiences in the 1849 siege of Rome, one of the key episodes in the Italian fight for unification and independence.

By the time Amours de Voyage was finally published in Britain in 1862, the Italian Risorgimento and struggle for independence and unification had become one of the most celebrated and romantic causes of the century. It has been termed “the most mythologized political and cultural movement in 19c Europe” and a “revolution marked . . . by heroic sacrifice, cooperation and high-minded ideals that endorsed the validity of the principles of nationalism” (Davies, 2000, p. 2).

Amours de Voyage is set within the events of the spring and summer of 1849, in the aftermath of the flight of the ruling Pope from Rome, the establishment of the Roman Republic and its subsequent defeat by the French after a siege of some weeks. The new president of France, Louis Napoleon, who wanted to prevent Austrian domination of Italy, saw the restoration of the Pope as a way of doing this and of extending his own power in Italy. The French attack and subsequent siege of Rome became central to the romantic narrative of Italian independence. The fight of the small republican army holding out against the imperial French forces was for some not only “the most significant and moving scene of the Risorgimento” but also “a poet’s dream” (Trevelyan, 1907, p. 3).

Giuseppe Garibaldi was the most dramatic of the personalities both in the siege of Rome and in the subsequent events of the Risorgimento. He is generally depicted as the honest, brave, but simple patriot taking up arms against the evils of Austrian, Bourbon and Papal rule and
occupation. The *Illustrated London News* in 1849 described him as “a most picturesque ruffian, the ideal of a brigand – eminently handsome, with a red blouse, braid belt full of pistols, dark wide-brimmed hat and green feather” (*Illustrated London News* 14 June 1849 p. 379), while the Anglo-American writer and historian Elizabeth Wormely Latimer describes him as “beautiful as a statue... mounted on a white horse which he sat on like a centaur” (Wormely Latimer, 1897, p. 379).

With its Roman setting, its account of a siege, its heroic warriors and its use of classical metres, *Amours de Voyage* contains implicit reference to Virgilian and Homeric epic in both its content and form. But while the somewhat effete Claude is most evidently not a heroic figure comparable to Aeneas or Ulysses, any consequently implied criticism is double-edged, and Claude’s scepticism towards the militarism of the Roman Republic serves also as comment on the naïvely unquestioning heroism of other epic warriors.

Matthew Reynolds, in his account of the relationship between poetry and nation building in the mid-nineteenth century, notes that the standard romantic response to Claude’s situation in the Rome of 1849 would be to “fight for liberty [and] make a daring escape with Garibaldi” (Reynolds, 2001, p. 146). Claude, however, excuses himself from patriotic martyrdom, and makes a number of half-ironical lame excuses for his refusal to succumb to death and glory in the Roman cause:

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Why not fight? - In the first place, I haven’t so much as a musket;
In the next, if I had, I shouldn't know how I should use it;
In the third, just at present I’m studying ancient marbles;
In the fourth, I consider I owe my life to my country;
In the fifth - I forget, but four good reasons are ample.
(Amours de Voyage III. iii. 68–72)
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Both in his own correspondence from Rome and his poetic interpretation, Clough notes the mundane, the sense of confusion, and the slightly surreal aspects of a city imminently or already under siege. In a letter to a friend written from Rome on June 21, 1849, he noted the apparent ordinariness of a city under siege:

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It is curious how like any other city a city under bombardment looks. – One goes to … the Palatine to look at the firing; one hears places named where shells have fallen; one sees perhaps a man carrying a bit of one.
(Mulhauser, 1957, Vol. 1 p. 260)
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It is this element of ordinariness, and the correspondingly banal details that yet take on significance and emphasis, which Clough captures so successfully in his poetic interpretation of the siege. In one of his letters, Claude describes the beginning of the French attack:

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Yes, we are fighting at last, it appears. This morning, as usual, Murray, as usual, in hand, I enter the Café Nuovo;
Seating myself with a sense as it were of a change in the weather,
Not understanding, however, but thinking mostly of Murray,
And, for to-day is their day, of the Campidoglio Marbles;
*Café-latte*! I call to the waiter, - and *Non c'è latte*,
This is the answer he makes me, and this is the sign of a battle.
(Amours de Voyage II. v. 95–101)
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The letter opens with what appears to be an emphatic exultation, which is very quickly undercut by the more tentative “it appears”. It continues in narrative mode, with a fluency created by the mirroring of syntax and metre. Claude’s everyday routine as tourist in the city is emphasised by the repetition of “as usual”, the timetabling of sights, and the dependence on Murray (the standard and much-celebrated travel guide to the region). The slowing of pace created by the double trochee in “Café Nuovo” reinforces the semantics of the semi-colon. Clough uses a double trochee again to end line 100 (“Non c’è latte”), only this time it is the apparently throwaway aside (an impression reinforced by the feminine caesura in the fourth line, and the consequent pause before the unaccented “and”) from the waiter, which is given a weighty significance. Clough uses to advantage the first syllable emphasis of the hexameter, so that “this” in line 101 is rendered ironically emphatic. The repetition adds weight to the culmination of the sentence in “this is the sign of a battle”.

After his “milkless nero” Claude watches the first French bombardment of the city from the Pincian Hill, a venue usually recommended to visitors as a viewing point from which to admire the monuments of Rome. He gathers with a group of foreign travellers to watch the French attack almost as if it were another of Rome’s tourist attractions. The central concern of the international spectators, whose passivity is reflected in the alliterative and passive verbs (stand, stare, see), seems to be the risk of getting caught in the rain. The specification of the time, a banal detail in the context of war, reinforces the impression of an organised event, which culminates, however, in the quietly forceful image of “smoke, from the cannon, white”:

Twelve o’clock, on the Pincian Hill, with lots of English, Germans, Americans, French, - the Frenchmen too are protected, -
So we stand in the sun, but afraid of a possible shower;
So we stand and stare, and see, to the left of St. Peter’s,
Smoke, from the cannon, white…

(\textit{Amours de Voyage} II. v. 113–117)

In contrast to this apparently relaxed response to the initial events of the siege, Claude’s letter vii of Canto II captures the uncertain and unsettling atmosphere prior to an escalation of conflict and alludes to the real life episode of the mob killing in Rome of a man suspected of being a Jesuit priest. Claude’s letter begins by aiming at a tone of casual cynicism but soon shifts to a sense of bemusement and disquiet. He has seen something, but does not quite know what it is he has seen:

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; a man was killed, I am told and I saw something.

(\textit{Amours de Voyage} II. vii. 162–166)

Despite the apparently jauntily dactylic and exclamatory beginning, Claude soon slows down into a confused and pensive consideration of what he believes he has seen. The four balanced clauses of lines 162 and 163 reflect a progression growing from conviction to uncertainty. The jerkily short and repetitive clauses are a dramatic articulation of Claude’s startled and disoriented state of mind. The letter moves from an affirmation of the fact in blackly comic
dactyls ("So, I have seen a man killed!") through tentative withdrawal ("I suppose", "I can hardly be certain") into denial ("could never declare I had seen it") and back to confused affirmation again ("I saw something"). The penultimate line of the section echoes the first but emphasises its difference through the transformation of the jaunty dactyls of the first line into an opening double trochee ("But a man was killed..."), significantly slowing the pace and heightening the emphasis on "was" as statement of fact.

Claude’s sightseeing agenda becomes ever more entangled with the disruptions of the conflict. After the forcefully disjointed and uncertain description of the possible murder, the letter shifts into Claude’s documentary and precise account of his return from St. Peter’s:

I was returning home from St. Peter's; Murray, as usual, 
Under my arm, I remember; had crossed the St. Angelo bridge; and 
Moving towards the Condotti, had got to the first barricade, when 
Gradually, thinking still of St. Peter's, I became conscious 
Of a sensation of movement opposing me…
((Amours de Voyage II. vii. 167–171))

The physical progression from landmarks of the Eternal City to landmarks of a besieged republic is obscured by Claude’s habitual reliance on Murray, but finds a mental analogue in the diversion of consciousness from St. Peter’s to the barricades. This drama of recollection and heightened awareness is enforced through a series of rhetorical and metrical effects: the repeated placing of the main caesura after an unstressed syllable, the suspended monosyllables which end lines 168 and 169, the gathering weight and abstraction of lines 170 to 171. The enjambment of "when / Gradually", is followed by the weight of the trochee in “thinking”. This slows the verse down, but the pace shifts radically as Claude moves on to recount the confusion of the killing:

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?
((Amours de Voyage II. vii. 181–186))

After the fragmentary syntax and viciously active participles ("hewing, chopping, “smiting”) of this dramatic passage, Claude proceeds to cross-examine himself at length about the event he has witnessed. At the end of this letter, however, he returns to his persona of sauntering tourist:

But I am thankful to say the government seems to have strength to 
Put it down; it has vanished, at least; the place is most peaceful. 
Through the Trastevere walking last night, at nine of the clock, I 
Found no sort of disorder; I crossed by the Island-bridges, 
So by the narrow streets to the Ponte Rotto, and onwards 
Thence by the Temple of Vesta, away to the great Coliseum, 
Which at the full of the moon is an object worthy a visit.
((Amours de Voyage II. vii. 210–216))
The radical shift of tone and pace from the frenzied movement of the violent crowd to the sedately casual stroll of the tourist is indicated by the emphatic first syllable stress on “but” in line 210. From the main caesura of line 213 (after “at least”) the writer’s manner becomes relaxed and contented, with more than a hint of self-mockery. The self-contained clause “the place is most peaceful” seems to close the episode of confusion almost as if it had never occurred.

Elsewhere Claude deflates the casually glorifying aphorisms of war, transforming them into statements to be ironically questioned and deflated:

Dulce it is and decorum no doubt for the country to fall, - to
Offer one’s blood an oblation to Freedom, and die for the Cause; yet
Still, individual culture is also something, and no man
Finds quite distinct the assurance that he of all others is called on…

(“Amours de Voyage” II.ii.30–33)

The apparent affirmation of “it is” is balanced syntactically and metrically by the more interrogative “no doubt”. The fact that the metrical patterning of the second line mirrors that of the first conveys the impression of a self-contained and incontrovertible couplet, but that impression is undermined and counteracted by the suspended monosyllable “yet”. The repeated enjambment, with two monosyllables suspended at the end of each of these four lines, reflects the need to pause and reconsider an apparent truism, and the initial monosyllables “still” and “finds” give the following lines a meditative and explanatory note.

The Horatian aphorism is picked up again at the end of the same letter, and this time is mediated through the constantly tentative language of Claude, in which “it is” becomes “It may be”, and “no doubt” becomes “Perhaps”. Paradoxically, the suspended monosyllables which end each of the last three lines signal a return to decisive statement; but Claude’s endorsement of Nature’s “plain intentions” (“I shall”) prepares the way for his rejection (“I shan’t”) of the challenge posed by the Horatian aphorism. That rejection, given emphasis by its position at the end of both line and letter, offers a confident two-part prediction which the reader knows to be untrue of “the Romans”, but broadly true of Claude himself:

Sweet it may be and decorous perhaps for the country to die; but,
On the whole, we conclude the Romans won’t do it, and I shan’t.

(“Amours de Voyage” II. ii. 46–47)

In another letter the heroic version of war is set in antithesis to the reality:

The smoke of the sacrifice rises to heaven,
Of a sweet savour, no doubt, to Somebody; but on the altar,
Lo, there is nothing remaining but ashes and dirt and ill odour.

(“Amours de Voyage” II. vi. 153–155)

The archaic concept of sacrificial smoke reflects a sense of the archaic nature of human sacrifice. Line 156 builds up through alliterative dactyls to a mythical “Somebody” who demands such sacrifices, made emphatic by the preceding trochee, but is immediately undercut by the stressed “but”. There are echoes of biblical phrasing in the last line, but these serve only to indicate the ultimate futility of the realities of “ashes and dirt and ill odour”. The political polemicist and classical scholar, F. L. Lucas, writing in 1930, felt Clough’s
underlying sentiment in this section of the poem to be a relevant one in the context of his own time:

Some of us may, perhaps, find that odour not unfamiliar, remembering 1919: and, seeing Mussolini stand where stood Mazzini, may wonder if Clough was, after all, so wrong as our fathers must have thought. (Lucas, 1930, p. 64)

On July 3rd the French army finally entered Rome and Garibaldi escaped with a large part of his army to begin his adventurous trek across Italy, continuing only to enhance his romantic reputation in the English periodicals and elsewhere:

If Song still lived in the Sabine mountains, many a future lay ought to tell how the outlaw of Italian liberty left this conquered city, fooled his French pursuers and gained the mountains …. (Mariotti, 1851 p. 521)

Ultimately Claude and the Trevellyn sisters also escape from French-occupied Rome – the Trevellyns return to England and Claude travels on to the East. Claude ends with disillusionment towards nationalist conflict and any cause which asks individuals to sacrifice their lives. “Whither depart the brave?” he asks, and responds, “God knows; I certainly do not”. (Amours de Voyage V. vi. 6, 16)

Clough died in Florence in 1861, and so did not see the final unification of Italy. When Amours de Voyage was finally published in Britain in a posthumous edition of Clough’s poems in 1862, the Risorgimento and the siege of Rome were popular poetic themes and had inspired massively emotional epic length poems. Some of these are Harriet Hamilton King’s The Disciples (1873), Ernest Myers’s The Defence of Rome and Other Poems (1880), and Swinburne’s chanting, bloodthirsty tirades against priests and monarchs such as “A Song for Italy” (1867). Amidst an abundance of emotional responses to the nationalist rhetoric and romantic associations of Italy, Clough’s Amours de Voyage maintains a detached and quizzical attitude, and his sympathy with the right of the Italian people to their own political state is counterbalanced by his suspicion of emotional militarism.

It was the maturity of Clough’s sceptical view of emotional militarism that Graham Greene recognised when he referred to Clough as one of the few “adult” poets of the nineteenth century (Greene, 1973, p. 58). Greene’s The Quiet American, set in Indochina prior to full-scale American involvement in the region but at a time of escalating conflict, takes its epigraph from Amours de Voyage:

I do not like being moved: for the will is excited, and action
Is a most dangerous thing; I tremble for something factitious,
Some malpractice of heart and illegitimate process;
We are so prone to these things, with our terrible notions of duty.
(Amours de Voyage II.xi.270-273)
Conclusion

*Amours de Voyage* is a powerful representation of a historic event and a depiction of an individual experience of conflict from a unique perspective and in a unique form. Clough conveys very successfully the individual’s sense of the build-up to a conflict – the small uncertainties in single episodes, the increasing mania of nationalist populism and the sense of an individual perspective on events outside his control and comprehension which must inflict many caught up in war and conflict.
References


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**Corresponding author:** Cora Lindsay

**Contact email:** Cora.Lindsay@Nottingham.ac.uk