

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

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**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*

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## Arthur Hugh Clough's *Amours de Voyage*: A poetic representation of the 1849 Siege of Rome

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 and 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 travelling English family.

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 whom 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 the political events of the spring of 1849. 1848 was, of course, a year of European revolutions, as is sometimes known as 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 creative interpretation of Clough's own first hand experiences in the siege and a powerful account of an individual experience of developing conflict.

By the time *Amours de Voyage* was finally published in Britain in 1862, the Italian 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 brief existence of the Roman Republic was a key episode in the Italian fight for unification and independence. 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 in which *Amours de Voyage* is set 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).

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 Rome 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:

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)

With its Roman setting, its account of a siege 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.

Both in his 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 ordinariness of a city under siege:

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)

It is this element of ordinariness, and the apparently banal details, 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:

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)

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:

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...  
(*Amours de Voyage* II.v.113-117)

In contrast to this relaxed response to the initial events of the siege, Claude’s letter vii of Canto II captures the uncertain and unsettling feel prior to an escalation of conflict and alludes to the 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.  
(*Amours de Voyage* II.vii.162-166)

The account continues and takes on a staccato and disjointed note that reflects the growing sense of chaos, confusion and frenzy in the city and in what the writer sees:

... and now the  
Crowd is coming, has turned, has crossed that last barricade, is  
Here at my side. 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?  
(*Amours de Voyage* II.vii.178-185)

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)

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 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)

Ultimately Claude and the Trevellyn sisters escape from 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. *Amours de Voyage* is a powerful representation of a historic event, 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. Elsewhere for nineteenth-century writers and indeed for other writers since, the Siege of Rome became another part of the national and romantic narrative of the Risorgimento. Clough was unique in his rejection and deflation of that emotional picture of conflict.

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