The Crisis of Action in Nineteenth-Century English Literature

Markovits, Stefanie

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IN A LECTURE on Wordsworth’s poetry written in the early 1850s, the poet Arthur Hugh Clough qualified his great admiration for his predecessor by remarking on his conservative tendencies, singling out for particular scrutiny his aversion to action. Quoting Wordsworth, Clough noted that “The moving accident, as he says, was not his trade; of event and of action his compositions are perfectly destitute.” Rather, according to Clough’s Wordsworth, “Blue sky and white clouds, larks and linnets, daisies and celandines—these . . . are ‘the proper subject of mankind’; not, as we used to think, the wrath of Achilles, the guilt and remorse of Macbeth, the love and despair of Othello.” Clough ended his review with a warning:

Nevertheless, we fear that the exclusive student of Wordsworth may go away with the strange persuasion that it is his business to walk about this world of life and action, and avoiding life and action, have his gentle thoughts excited by flowers and running waters and shadows on mountain-sides.
This we conceive is a grievous inherent error in Wordsworth. (PPRI: 324, 325)

Clough’s comments are part of a larger debate in Victorian criticism concerning the appropriate role for action in poetry. The discussion often took the form of a comparison between subjective and objective poetry. Subjective poetry, essentially Romantic in origin and psychological in nature, is concerned with interior processes such as thought and emotion. Objective poetry, in contrast, is classical and corresponds to a poetry of action, action being defined by its external, bodily nature. The Victorian debate most famously centered on Matthew Arnold’s programmatic Preface to his Poems (1853). As much a manifesto for his times as was Wordsworth’s Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Arnold’s essay was also written as a response to Aristotle’s dictates in the Poetics concerning the proper roles for action and character in drama. But the Preface to Poems came directly out of Arnold’s conversations with his close friend Clough. The two poets were responding to what they perceived to be the dangerously subjective tenor of the age, in fact and in literature: its tendency to look inward rather than outward, to explore thoughts rather than deeds.

And in the middle of the nineteenth century, the battle over action became particularly visible in the generic tensions of narrative verse. Poets writing at a period of decline for Romantic poetry—and trying to engage with the subject matter of the increasingly popular Victorian novel—struggled with action as a necessary result of their struggles over genre. The result was the phenomenon of the long Victorian poem, frequently incorporating elements from a variety of genres. The question of generic hybridity and its relationship to the place of action and character in literature comes to the fore in one such poem: Arthur Hugh Clough’s Amours de Voyage (written 1849, published 1858). Clough referred to Amours as his “5 act epistolary tragi-comedy, or comi-tragedy.” Moreover, the work, written as a series of letters composed in (mock) epic hexameters punctuated by lyrical elegiacs in a narrative voice, is also in many respects novelistic. Victorian critics were quick to point out this quality, largely on the basis of its presentation of character. Its struggle with genre underlying an obvious concern with issues of action in its subject matter, Amours de Voyage provides a particularly revealing lens through which to explore the crisis in action in nineteenth-century thought and its influence on the literature of the period.
The Life

To see how Amours relates to the wider atmosphere of crisis, it helps first to look at the story that developed around the life of its author. In doing so I follow in the footsteps not only of contemporaries of Clough, but also of modern critics, most of whom find it difficult to separate analysis of Clough’s works from that of his life—for excellent reasons, as I hope will become clear. While the following biographical material is by now familiar to scholars of Clough, I want to emphasize the degree to which “the myth of Clough’s ‘failure’” (as Michael Timko has referred to it) gained such a strong hold on the Victorian critical imagination because of its relationship to what I call the crisis of action.

The popular version of Clough’s life, most famously represented (albeit rather turgidly) by his friend Matthew Arnold in his elegy “Thyrsis” (1866), is of a man whose overacute sensitivity and hyperactive consciousness inhibited his ability to get things done:

What though the music of thy rustic flute
Kept not for long its happy, country tone;
Lost it too soon, and learnt a stormy note
Of men contention-tost, of men who groan,
Which task’d thy pipe too sore, and tired thy throat—
It fail’d, and thou wast mute!

Although Clough produced three major poems (The Bothie of Tober-na-Vualich [1848], Amours de Voyage, and Dipsychus and the Spirit [written 1850, first published, in an edited version, in 1862]) as well as numerous short works of great merit, his is a story of anticlimax. As G. H. Lewes wrote when reviewing his posthumous Poems (1862), “he was one of the prospectuses which never became works: one of that class whose unwritten poems, undemonstrated discoveries, or untested powers, are confidently announced as certain to carry everything before them, when they appear. Only they never do appear.” To a great extent, the myth is the product, ironically, of a single defining act. In 1848, after a few years of holding an Oriel Fellowship, Arthur Hugh Clough found himself unable to subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles and relinquished his post. This decision prevented him from achieving the success both he and his contemporaries had expected. Clough’s deed and its consequences undoubtedly led to his great sensitivity to problems surrounding action in the modern world, a sensitivity that his poetry dramatically reflects.
The favorite student of Dr. Arnold at Rugby, Clough was marked out to be the great man of his generation at a time when the mantle of greatness was handed down like a crown from generation to generation. He was known by his friends at Oxford as “Citizen Clough” for his radical political beliefs—in particular, for his arguments against laissez-faire policies (what Carlyle tellingly translated as “Donothingism”). On a more practical level, he acted as a distributor of meal tickets and administrator of a hospital and soup kitchen for the Oxford Mendicity Society. But when Clough was infected with skepticism in Oxford’s heavy atmosphere of religious doubt, the disease crippled him. He wrote to his sister, “Until I know, I will wait: and if I am not born with the power to discover, I will do what I can, with what knowledge I have.”

Yet just how much one can do without belief is at issue. Perhaps, until we know, all we can do is wait. As an anonymous reviewer pointed out in reference to Clough’s early poem, “Qui Laborat, Orat” (“he who labors, prays”), this is “a beautiful thought concerning one who has never been taught to pray, [but] a pernicious falsehood about one who has rejected the practice. With such a one it will soon be Qui non orat, nec laborat!” Clough’s mentor Carlyle bewailed the crisis in faith by linking it to the passing of an age of natural action:

Action, in those old days, was easy, was voluntary, for the divine worth of human things lay acknowledged. . . .

How changed in these new days! . . . Heroic Action is paralysed; for what worth now remains unquestionable with [the youth of these times]? At the fervid period when his whole nature cries aloud for Action, there is nothing sacred under whose banner he can act; the course and kind and conditions of free Action are all but undiscoverable. Doubt storms-in on him through every avenue; inquiries of the deepest, painfulest sort must be engaged with; and the invincible energy of young years wastes itself in sceptical, suicidal cavillings; in passionate ‘questionings of Destiny’; whereto no answer will be returned.

Without belief in an end (what Carlyle called a “banner,” using a metaphor that brings to mind the banner in The White Doe of Rylstone) to give some kind of narrative intelligibility to effort, the idea of action becomes meaningless. As Hazlitt put it in his Principles of Human Action (1805), “without a power of willing a given end for itself, and of employing the means immediately necessary to the production of that end, because they are perceived to be so, there could be neither volition, nor
action, neither rational fear nor the pursuit of any object . . . : all would be left to the accidental concurrence of some mechanical impulse with the immediate desire to obtain some very simple object.” Why do any one thing instead of another if you cannot know what is right, or even whether such a thing as “the right” exists?

The problem is one that has long confronted intellectuals and continues to do so to this day. Contemporary philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, responding to the current wave of skeptical thought contained in the relativist discourse of multiculturalism, have addressed the need in our society for goals that can impose structures of significance onto a life’s narrative. Not incidentally, both these thinkers approach the issue from the perspective of their Catholic backgrounds—the same perspective John Henry Newman turned to in an attempt to find meaning in action. They argue that without an end that can give agents a sense of direction, life narratives lack a kind of plot coherence. With his loss of faith, Clough seems to have lost his understanding of the trajectory of his life. His religious doubt contributed to his failure to get the first expected of him. Then in 1848, he made the crucial decision to give up his post; as he told his provost, his “objection in limine to Subscription would be that it is a painful restraint on speculation.”

After leaving Oxford, Clough traveled to the Continent, visiting revolutionary France in 1848 and Rome in 1849. But on returning home, he found that many doors to employment had been closed to him by his act of renunciation. Eventually, he departed for a sojourn in America, where he tried to find literary work through the help of his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson. As Clough wrote, “for a man to act—there are no places so hopeless, so unnerving” as the European capitals; perhaps America would provide him with a blank slate of experience, untouched by the consequences of his previous deeds.

Nevertheless, he was to face a second (and oddly analogous) major decision that would eventually bring him home: whether to marry. A letter written at the height of his post-Oxford depression (to Matthew Arnold’s brother Tom in New Zealand, commenting on Tom’s recent marriage) shows how the vocational and domestic choices that Clough made became conflated in his mind in rather revealing ways. Clough announced: “I, like you, have jumped over a ditch for the fun of the experiment and would not be disinclined to be once again in a highway with my brethren and companions.”

Yet the language makes unclear precisely to which pair of actions the “jump over a ditch” refers: is it to Tom’s emigration coupled with his own decision to give up the Oriel Fellowship? Or is it to Tom’s marriage coupled
with Clough’s relationship to Blanche Smith (his future wife), to whom he was not yet officially engaged but with whom his ties were strengthening?

Such connections between questions of marriage and of broader action recur throughout Clough’s writings. Given that there is “little opportunity for elevated action” in marriage, he acknowledged in a letter to Blanche of January 1852, the “single life . . . has some superiorities.” The limited scope of domestic life “does look at times a little ignoble, or at any rate unchivalrous” (PPR I: 172). Note how for Clough, this struggle with the shape that he felt his life should take had generic implications: married life, while not quite the “ignoble ease” feared by Virgil in the Georgics, precludes the possibility of epic deeds. Its usefulness struck Clough as being sadly self-contained, not reaching outside the family circle, the realm of the novel.

But his decision to marry was also couched in terms of its ability to aid him in action. Consider this remarkable statement to Blanche:

To a certain extent it seems to me that the whole world is apt to wear a mere pictorial aspect, that it must be by an effort that I accept anything as fact. This is the meaning of what I have often told you that I “believe in you”—I do not think that I can say the same to anyone else, though I can with less effort or with no effort talk and get on with old familiar . . . but if I am to make a choice, to act . . . I cannot turn, I think, except to you. There has never been in my whole life I may say any act of mine, sealing either friendship or love, up to this time. It has seemed to me a great thing (a thing that at times I doubt the truth of myself) to have done this at all.20

Blanche, then, fills the void of absent (or at least tenuous) religious belief, allowing Clough “to make a choice, to act.” She is his banner. Clough’s faith in his wife became the point from which he could begin to draw other lines of belief; she was proof against a demon deceiver and would let him build out from the morass of the cogito into which he had sunk.21

Blanche herself related in the biographical note to her edition of his works how Clough’s intellect was naturally subject to “a certain inertia, a certain slowness of movement, [which] constantly made it hard for him to get over the initial difficulties of self expression” (PPR I: 40). Yet, she added pointedly, during their years of marriage, “his mind turned more and more to action as its natural relief; and in his family circle his gentle wisdom and patience and great tenderness of feeling caused him to be constantly appealed to” (PPR I: 47). But the actions left open to him were markedly opposed to the great deeds—poetic and otherwise—he had envisioned himself doing, as Blanche’s comment suggests.22 In fact, the poet’s life reads like
that of a character in a George Eliot novel: we may think of him as a kind of Lydgate, whose grand visions of career became tangled in a web of domesticity; or more positively, as a Dorothea, who was able to temper her original enthusiasm for plans and content herself with the “incalculably diffusive” effects of her domestic actions.23

After returning from America to marry, Clough took a job in the Education Office, allowing him to support his wife. In his spare time, he worked laboriously on a translation of Plutarch’s Lives, a slow, steady process in comparison with the more creative work of writing original poetry (“It is odd how much better I like this Plutarch than I do anything which requires distinct statement of opinion or the like”24). And while Clough may have exercised his domestic virtues as a model husband and father—his wife went to some pains to emphasize this25—duty to wife and family did not suffice. He satisfied his social conscience with his dedicated service to Florence Nightingale (Blanche’s cousin) and her cause, activity bitingly summarized by Lytton Strachey:

Though the purpose of existence might be still uncertain and its nature still unsavoury, here, at any rate, under the eye of this inspired woman, was something real, something earnest: his only doubt was—could he be of any use? Certainly he could. There were a great number of miscellaneous little jobs which there was nobody handy to do. For instance, when Miss Nightingale was travelling, there were the railway-tickets to be taken; and there were proof-sheets to be corrected; and then there were parcels to be done up in brown paper, and carried to the post.26

For all their sting, Strachey’s comments were not harsher than Clough’s own in his more critical moments: his foil Dipsychus, the “hero” of his unfinished Faustian dialogue Dipsychus and the Spirit, remarks that “We ask Action, / And dream of arms and conflict; and string up / All self-devotion’s muscles; and are set/ To fold up papers.”27 The “modern Hotspur,” Dipsychus recognizes,

Shrills not his trumpet of To Horse, To Horse
But consults columns in a railway guide;
A demigod of figures; an Achilles
Of computation. . . . (3.2.108–11)

But the work of the modern Hotspur offers a limited kind of heroism: if (and it is a big if) the end were one’s own, “One’s choice and the correlative of the
soul, / To drudge were then sweet service” (3.2.116–17). Presumably, Clough sought such “sweet service” in folding papers and consulting timetables for Florence Nightingale. “This that I see is not all,” Strachey imagines him as having comforted himself, “and this that I do is but little; nevertheless it is good, though there is better than it.”

“All things become clear to me by work more than anything else,” Clough wrote in March 1852 to his future wife. “Any kind of drudgery will help one out of the most uncommon sentimental or speculative perplexity; the attitude of work is the only one in which one can see things properly” (PPR I: 174). The message also belonged to Carlyle: “Man is sent hither not to question, but to work: ‘the end of man,’ it was long ago written, ‘is an Action, not a Thought.’ In the perfect state, all Thought were but the picture and inspiring symbol of Action.”

Or again, “Hence, too, the folly of that impossible Precept, Know thyself. Till it be translated into this partially possible one, Know what thou canst work at.”30 Carlyle’s admonition was to act as relief to burdened skeptics like Clough; setting oneself small, doable tasks provided an escape from self-consciousness. “Solvitur ambulando,” reads one of Clough’s mottoes for Amours de Voyage: “it is solved by walking.” Take it one step at a time; or, as Carlyle put it, “Do the Duty which lies nearest thee, which thou knowest to be a Duty! Thy second Duty will already have become clearer.”

Work then, with its mundane, rather inglorious connotations, takes the place of grander action in a process we will see repeated in George Eliot’s writings. It is this diminishment of the scope of activity that allowed Clough to continue his letter to his wife: “One may be afraid sometimes of destroying the beauty of one’s dreams by doing anything, losing sight of what perhaps one will not be able to recover: it need not be so” (PPR I: 174). That is, the clue need not be lost if the things we choose to do are limited enough in their range. The latter years of Clough’s short life passed uneventfully. He died in Florence, where he had gone to nurse his failing health, in 1861.

Clough in Context

Clough’s life shows why a concern with action manifests itself so strongly in the poetry (most of which stems from 1848–50, the years directly following the renunciation of his fellowship and preceding his marriage); as Joseph Bristow argues, Clough’s work is so infused with an interest in action that “the very word ‘action’ becomes a personification of sorts.”31 In Adam and Eve, for example, which is written over the span of this period,
Clough explores the original myth of the fall into sin as a fall into action. The speculative Adam ponders at the start of the play over the “irretrievable act” that resulted in his expulsion from Eden (2.5). Adam’s son Cain closely resembles the figure of Wordsworth’s Rivers (and, for that matter, Milton’s Satan): he is the consummate actor, and both a sinner and a sympathetic figure for being so. Like his antihero precursors, he is driven to action by his desire to assert his identity:

> a strange impulse struggling to the truth,
> Urges me onward to put forth my strength,
> No matter how—Wild curiosity
> Possesses me moreover to essay
> This world of Action round me so unknown
> And to be able to do this or that
> Seems cause enough, without a cause, for doing it—

> Something I must do, individual
> To vindicate my nature, to give proof
> I also am, as Adam is, a man. (7.10–16, 22–24)

He shares in the Aristotelian conviction that deeds define the man. The act Cain commits, though, is the murder of his brother, and after it, his father reveals to him the most basic truth about action: “One step you stirred, and lo! you stood entrapped” (12.14). It is a truth of which Clough’s decision to give up his post must have made him heartbreakingly aware.

Yet the focus on action becomes particularly apparent in Amours de Voyage, not least because of its generic confusions. While tension arises from the odd conjunction of the hexameters with the lyrical elegiacs that open and close each canto of the poem, the same kind of tension manifests itself in the hexameters themselves. The epic poem, Goethe and Schiller tell us, “represents man as an external agent.”33 In Amours, part of the satire comes from Clough’s adoption of a traditionally active meter to tell the story of a failed love affair between two British tourists during the French siege of Rome in 1849. Moreover, Clough’s “heroes”—the intellectual, somewhat priggish, and highly speculative Claude, and Mary Trevellyn, the similarly sensitive daughter of a well-to-do mercantile family—are markedly unheroic and even ordinary, in the tradition of the realist novel. With his choice of subject, Clough was responding to his sense (expressed a few years later in a review entitled “Recent English Poetry”) that to be popular, modern poetry, like
the novel, must learn to deal with “general want, ordinary feelings,” the stuff of “every-day life.”

So here, Clough novelistically reverses the standard epic hierarchy by making the love story the major plotline of the work. The siege (in marked contrast with that of Troy in the *Iliad*) acts as counterpoint. What is perhaps most notable about the plot of *Amours* is how the love affair fails: anticlimax characterizes the poem as forcefully as it did the life of its author. The punctilious Claude cannot be quite certain of his feelings for Mary: “I am in love, you say; I do not think so exactly” (II.x.263). So Claude chooses to stay in Rome (ostensibly to explore the Vatican marbles) when Mary and her family leave. But after Mary’s departure, Claude finds he has underestimated his emotions and decides to follow her. Cantos IV and V relate the pursuit, showing how crossed communications, missed opportunities, and lost letters confound the lovers. Claude and Mary’s travels across Italy can be mapped out as a mental image of the real complexity of action and plot, providing a kind of antidote to the neatly plotted Victorian novel, where the hero and heroine find each other in the grand finale. *Amours* sputters quite shockingly to its nonconclusion: Claude gives up the pursuit and continues on alone eastward to Egypt; Mary regretfully goes home to England with her family.

While the most overt objection on record to this ending belongs to Emerson (“I cannot forgive you for the baulking end or no end of the *Amours de Voyage*”), Matthew Arnold seems to have been similarly disappointed by his friend’s production: “as to the Italian poem, if I forbore to comment it was that I had nothing special to say—what is to be said when a thing does not suit you.”

Entering into the century’s debate about the role of action in literature, Arnold lamented the absence of “great human action” in the work of modern poets in the Preface to *Poems* (1853). Implicit in this view was a critique of Clough, whom he felt to be infected by a “morbid conscientiousness” that “spoil[ed]” his “action”—nowhere more so than in his construction of the plot of *Amours*. The diagnosis was made around the period Arnold was drafting the Preface and it is probably fair to assume, as Lionel Trilling does, that the tension that developed in the friendship of the poets came in part from Arnold’s fears of catching the speculative infection. He believed he had already succumbed to it in *Empedocles on Etna*, the poem now pointedly withheld from the new volume. “You certainly do not seem to me sufficiently to desire and earnestly strive toward—assured knowledge—activity—happiness.” Arnold wrote, invoking the great Aristotelian telos. And he continued by implying a lack of masculine fortitude in his friend: “You are too content to fluctuate—to be ever learning, never coming to the knowledge of the truth. This is why, with you, I feel it necessary to stiffen myself—and hold fast my rudder.”
these comments shows how close the prescriptions Arnold made to his friend for a healthy life were to his prescriptions for a healthy literature in the Preface. Part of what makes the Preface so interesting as a statement for its times is the way in which Arnold sought to place it within a tradition of such statements. As I have suggested, this tradition begins with Aristotle’s Poetics. The belief in the primacy of action stands behind Aristotle’s description of the relative importance of character and action in drama: “In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray the Characters; they include the Characters for the sake of the action.” In his Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1800), Wordsworth, for reasons discussed in the previous chapter, revised the claim to favor feeling—that is, an internal quality affecting character—over external action: “Another circumstance must be mentioned which distinguishes these Poems from the popular poetry of the day; it is this, that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling.”

Now Arnold strove to revert to the Aristotelian hierarchy. Under the influence of the Wordsworthian model, poets, including Arnold himself, had forgotten the healthy lessons of the ancients:

the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity have disappeared; the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves; we hear already the doubts, we witness the discouragement, of Hamlet and of Faust.

The solution to this state was action, but not any action; rather, the deeds aimed at were those of “great human action,” either modern or (more probably, given the usual “smaller human action of today”) ancient. Such actions would appeal to the “permanent passions,” to the “elementary feelings,” to the “great primary human affections.” The language is almost exactly that of Wordsworth’s Preface, although Wordsworth used those same phrases (“elementary feelings,” “primary laws of our nature”) to support his decision to write of the “beautiful and permanent forms of nature” in the “permanent” language of “humble and rustic life”—that is, of what Clough termed, in his lecture on Wordsworth, “blue skies and white clouds, larks and linnets, daisies and celandines.” Arnold argued with Wordsworth by using his own words against him.

In fact, though, as their mutual opposition to Wordsworth suggests, Clough also accused Arnold of a dearth of epic energy. In his discussion of Arnold’s work included in “Recent English Poetry” (also 1853), Clough singled out Arnold’s poetry for some of those same criticisms he had himself received.
Ironically, he did so by contrasting “A’s” work with that of the Glasgow mechanic poet, Alexander Smith, whose volume *A Life Drama* (1853) would be labeled “spasmodic” by the critic and poet William Edmonstoune Aytoun. Aytoun coined the term in the early 1850s to refer to what he perceived to be the dangerously subjectivist poetry—overly speculative and lacking in plot and action—that was prevalent at the time. His worries closely resembled those of Matthew Arnold in the Preface.  

Actually, Clough had to misread Smith’s poem drastically in order to achieve the required contrast with Arnold. *A Life Drama* tells the tale, singularly lacking in drama, of a lovelorn, Werther-ish young man, who eventually overcomes the loss of his lady to pursue a career in poetry. Yet this is Clough’s description of Walter, the rather milksoppish hero of Smith’s poem:

> Eager for action, incapable of action without some support, yet knowing not on what arm to dare to lean; not untainted; hard-pressed; in some sort, at times, overcome,—still we seem to see the young combatant, half combatant, half martyr, resolute to fight it out, and not to quit this for some easier field of battle,—one way or other to make something of it. (*PPR* I: 363)

We can sense why Clough found the character sympathetic. It was, however, only by learning, with Walter, to prize what the poem calls “the quiet lightning deed,” that Clough could find in Smith’s *Drama* a model for active engagement, and the rhetoric he used to defend his hero is surely inappropriate given the magnitude and type of that engagement (*PPR* I: 367; emphasis added). And when Clough turned his attention in the review to Arnold’s volumes, he did so with the obvious intent of emphasizing precisely those qualities in his friend’s poetry that were singled out by Arnold as flaws in his own character:

> But now, we are fain to ask, where are we, and whither are we unconsciously come? Were we not going forth to battle in the armor of a righteous purpose, with our first friend, with Alexander Smith? How is it we find ourselves here, reflecting, pondering, hesitating, musing, complaining with “A[rnold]?” (*PPR* I: 376)

Moreover, like Arnold in the Preface, Clough saw the problem as characteristic of his times: “for the present age, the lessons of reflectiveness and the maxims of caution do not appear to be more needful or more appro-
appropriate than exhortations to steady courage and calls to action” (PPR I: 377).

The similarity between the friends runs deep. It is emphasized further by the fact that critics have compared both Arnold and Clough to the “shilly-shally” Claude (II.xv.335), the hero of Amours. Contemporaries insisted on biographical readings of Amours, no doubt fueled by knowledge of the poet’s experiences in Rome during the siege (Clough’s letters home actually repeat Claude’s lines in his own voice), the popular version of Clough’s life as a failure, and the handy alliteration between the poet’s and his protagonist’s names.48 More recently, though, Eugene R. August has suggested—on the basis of Park Honan’s evidence that “the real-life counterpart of Marguerite [the lady in Arnold’s series of poems commemorating a failed love affair in Switzerland] was a young woman named Mary Claude”—that Clough actually had Arnold in mind when composing Amours.49 Yet to anyone who has read the materials surrounding Arnold’s Preface, this confusion should come as no surprise. Rather, it demonstrates how much alike Clough and Arnold were, at least as far as concerns the crisis in action in which both participated; Claude resembles both Arnold and Clough because they resembled each other.

One can see this in the way the friends shared the use of certain metaphors favored by writers of the period to describe their sense of aimlessness. In “Blank Misgivings of a Creature moving about in Worlds not realized,” Clough expressed the need for something that could lead him like Ariadne’s thread out of the labyrinth of action and change the wanderings of a Cain or a Don Juan to the purposeful motion of a modern Ulysses or Aeneas:

How often sit I, poring o’er
My strange distorted youth,
Seeking in vain, in all my store,
One feeling based on truth;
Amid the maze of petty life
A clue whereby to move,
A spot whereon in toil and strife
To dare to rest and love.50

Arnold turned to the same phrase in Culture and Anarchy: “our habitual causes of action seem to be losing efficaciousness, credit, and control, both with others and even with ourselves. Everywhere we see the beginnings of confusion, and we want a clue to some sound order and authority.” His
clue would be Hellenism, a “going back” to obtain a “sounder basis of knowledge on which to act”; in contrast, Clough desired not to go back but to go forward, however modestly—this difference was the source of the debate between the friends. But the idea of a “clue” of life took hold of the Victorian imagination. George Eliot, as we shall see, used the same metaphor to describe her characters’ sense of confusion and purposelessness, their need for some rule of action that would guide them.

More strikingly, both poets addressed the failure of epic in their works via the trope of the “battle by night.” Taken from Thucydides’ account of the Battle of Epipolie, where the Athenians, in the confusion of darkness, mistakenly fought one another, the image vividly represents the difficulties associated with action in the contemporary world. Clough used the metaphor first, in The Bothie (1848), in a letter from Philip to his tutor and mentor, Adam, who had recommended his pupil place his faith in the workings of Providence. Philip’s reply shows his mistrust of the distinction between Providence and Circumstance:

Where does Circumstance end, and Providence where begins it?
What are we to resist, and what are we to be friend with?
If there is battle, ’tis battle by night: I stand in the darkness,
Here in the mêlée of men, Ionian and Dorian on both sides,
Signal and password known; which is friend and which is foeman?

He returned to it in “Say not the struggle naught availeth,” which was written during the siege of Rome in 1849. In this instance Clough imagined that the darkness could hide progress rather than confusion: “If hopes were dupes, fears may be liars” (1.5). The third, most famous, use of the battle by night, by Arnold in “Dover Beach” (probably written in 1851), again took a depressing view of the picture, but Arnold notably countered the public disarray with a vision of contrasting private consolation:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night. (lines 29–37)
That the two latter variations on the theme are from, respectively, by far the most famous short poems produced by Clough and Arnold is not a coincidence, as the image (like that of the lost clue of life) partakes of the spirit of the age.

So what made the battle by night such a potent metaphor in the Victorian period, and in particular such an important one for these two poets? Isobel Armstrong has noted that “for both poets, action is figured as combat or battle.”53 But battle no longer consists of the ordered string of events we are familiar with from the Greek and Roman epics—lists of single combat, with the outcomes monitored by (admittedly squabbling) gods and goddesses. Neither is it the haphazard but still nicely consecutive sequences of adventures undertaken by the heroes of romance as they progress toward their goals. Rather, battles have been replaced by revolutions that disintegrated into Reigns of Terror. As Walter Bagehot (who had come under Clough’s influence while completing a Master of Arts at University College London in 1848) argued in an 1859 review of Tennyson’s poetry, Arnold’s preference in his Preface for antique subjects reflected his sense of the illegibility of modern action. After detailing the difference between ancient and modern warfare, Bagehot concluded that “the events of the chivalric legend are better adapted to sustained and prolonged poetry than the events of recent times and of the present day . . . because they . . . present human actions in a more intelligible shape [and] give us a sort of large-hand copy of life which is comparatively easy to understand and imitate.”54 The Battle of Epipolie, while it belonged to the world of “great human actions” for which Arnold felt such nostalgia, was in fact the first “modern” war: it anticipated the impenetrability of deeds in the contemporary world, the way in which motives and consequences ricochet and are redirected under a cloud of confusion. Hence the prevalence of the motif.

The battle by night also figured in a sermon preached by John Henry Newman at Oxford on 6 January 1839 (and published in 1843), with which both Clough and Arnold were likely to be familiar:

Controversy, at least in this age, does not lie between the hosts of heaven, Michael and his Angels on the one side, and the powers of evil on the other; but it is a sort of night battle, where each fights for himself, and friend and foe stand together.55

Armstrong has seen in this passage (“where each fights for himself”) a reference to “the aggressive language of economics and competitive laissez-faire individualism,” used here to describe a “spiritual individualism” more
and more threatened by association with the economic society of contemporary England. In other words, the Battle of Epipolie could also stand for the laissez-faire marketplace in which an invisible hand was the only vestige of government control. (Matthew Arnold’s anarchy, or “doing as one likes,” is a related concept.) In contrast to the political engagements of poets of the previous generation, such as Wordsworth and Byron, who had firsthand experience of revolution, Clough’s early political involvement took the form of a series of writings against laissez-faire policies. The legacy of the Reign of Terror had frightened off the activists. In Amours, when Claude thinks he witnesses the murder of a priest who had been seen fraternizing, he echoes Wordsworth in The Prelude: “I began to bethink me of Paris Septembers, / Thought I could fancy the look of the old ‘Ninety-two’” (II.vii.203–4). So instead of fighting, as he wrote to his friend J. P. Gell in July of 1844, Clough intended “to set to work at Political Economy,” “to see if I cannot prove ‘the Apostle of Anti-laissez-faire.’” He knew that his was a debased revolutionary age, where real change occurred on the Exchange.

Not only did the Revolution of 1789 loom as a specter, but the less grand failure of 1848 also stood as a recent reminder of the uncertainties of revolutionary action. Clough’s attitude toward revolution took on a pronouncedly dilettantish aspect, as his letters from France in 1848 show:

I do little else than potter about under the Tuileries Chestnuts and here and there about bridges and streets, pour savourer la republique. I contemplate with infinite thankfulness the blue blouses, garnished with red, of the garde mobile.

Ichabod, Ichabod, the glory is departed. Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, driven back by shopkeeping bayonet, hides her red cap in dingiest St. Antoine. Well-to-do-ism shakes her Egyptian scourge to the tune of Ye are idle, ye are idle.

“Well-to-do-ism” had taken the place of doing in this atmosphere of Donothingism. In a letter to Tom Arnold, Clough quoted his friend’s brother Matthew: “I think we rash young men may learn from the failure and discomfiture of our friends in the new Republic. The millennium, as Matt says, won’t come this bout.” From Rome, he repeated the lament over a past glorious age of revolutionary possibility: “It is funny to see how like any other city a besieged city looks. Unto this has come our grand Liberty-Equality-and-Fraternity Revolution.” And in the battle by night passage from The Bothie I referred to above, Philip arrives at the same con-
clusion; given the apparent “infinite jumble and mess and dislocation,” “Let us get on as we can, and do the thing we are fit for; / Every one for himself, and the common success for us all” (IX.64, 67–68). The passage neatly demonstrates the nexus of overlapping metaphors: the battle by night, the glancing allusion to laissez-faire (“Let us get on as we can”), and the tantalizing preview of Darwinism (“fit”).

But I would wish to shift the emphasis from what Armstrong describes as a “crisis in individualism”—the idea that “self-culture” had become tainted by its relationship to a culture of the pursuit of private gain—to what I call a crisis in action. Clearly, Adam Smith’s vision of the market radically changed our understanding of useful activity. On the one hand, Smith’s market economy is a tremendously empowering construct for the average person; it suggests that the labors of the farmer in the field and the shopman in his shop are what keep the country going.62 On the other hand, all such activity not only lacks the heroic scope, but also it occurs under the banner of self-profit. “Let me sing the song of the shopman,” Claude ironically declares in a canceled paragraph of *Amours* echoing the opening line of the *Aeneid*, where the song is one of “arms and the man.”63 Industrialization obviously added to the problem of knowing what to make of the new form of action by turning workers into “hands” severed from their thinking minds (not to mention the rest of their laboring bodies) or cogs in a machine. Even the epic action of warfare had been mechanized; as Carlyle lamented, “Battles, in these ages, are transacted by mechanism; with the slightest possible development of human individuality or spontaneity.”64 Clough’s concern over the mechanization of labor appears in *Dipsychus and the Spirit*:

The earth moves slowly, if it move at all
And by the general, not the single force.
At the [huge] members of the vast machine
In all those crowded rooms of industry
No individual soul has loftier leave
Than fiddling with a piston or a valve. (2.3.118–23)

So the emphasis on collective force took away from individuals those very powers that it had seemed so generously to bestow upon them; the broad range of individual acts that were heroicized by the new system could prove significant only when bound into group activity. As Bagehot remarked, “For this is the odd peculiarity of commercial civilization. The life, the welfare, the existence of thousands depend on their being paid for doing what seems nothing when done.”65 As a result of this paradox, the
rhetoric of agency in the Victorian period can often strike one as rather convoluted. Writers were forced to juggle with various understandings of words like *freedom* and *action*; their meanings could be crucially altered depending on whether they were viewed from the perspective of the individual or the collective.

John Stuart Mill’s reflections on the modern status of action demonstrate his awareness of the need for specificity, for qualifications. Of what Armstrong calls the “crisis in individualism,” he declared: “One of the effects of a high state of civilization upon character, is a relaxation of individual energy: or rather, the concentration of it within the narrow sphere of the individual’s money-getting pursuits.” Yet the first formulation of Mill’s statement would have been as troubling to Clough as the latter. I say this because it seems to me that the real focus in Clough’s poetry is not so much on the eighteenth-century problem of benevolence we associate with Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees* (1714), but rather on the question of whether it is really feasible to do anything meaningful at all, given how obscured the ground of action is. Clough’s characters are not selfish in the money-grubbing market sense; but even though they would like to do good, they cannot seem to figure out how to do it. So they end up doing little or nothing. The epic intent is still there—hence the hexameters—but the reality of modern life is that the epic must be a mockery and that hexameters can be read only through the filter of a lyrical narrative consciousness.

Obscurity lies at the heart of the problem of modern action, which is why the battle by night became such a potent image. The Invisible Hand had replaced the Hand of God in the grand scheme of things: Elspie, Philip’s beloved in *The Bothie*, dreams of a “great invisible hand” that will drop the keystone into the bridge being built between her and Philip (7.68); in *Amours*, Claude depends on the strength of “invisible arms” to hold him up over the chasm of his uncertainty (I.xii.243). But given the close relationship between “seeing” and “believing” in a culture built at least in part upon empiricist values, invisibility turns out to create trouble. (The Catholic Church has long suspected as much, and the very visibility of God in Catholicism was surely a large part of its attraction to nineteenth-century intellectuals.) Hence the overwhelming prevalence of darkness as a metaphor, as here in Carlyle:

For young Valour and thirst of Action no ideal Chivalry invites to heroism, prescribes what is heroic: the old ideal of Manhood has grown obsolete, and the new is still invisible to us, and we grope after it in darkness, one clutching this phantom, another that; Werterism, Byronism, even Brummelism, each has its day.***
Carlyle’s list incorporates various postures that the modern protagonist could adopt in lieu of the traditional heroic stance: the suicidal cavilings of Werther, the outcast wanderings of the Byronic hero, and the dilettantish dandyism of Beau Brummel. Clough and his heroes flirted with these attitudes but ultimately found them dissatisfying. Middle-class masculinity could discover little foothold on such uncertain ground. With the domestication of heroism, in fact, the most comfortable heroes seem to have been the heroines. Clough’s admiration for Florence Nightingale reflected his recognition that her activity (including her struggle against constraints placed on her by gender) was more glorious than that of the soldiers for whom she cared. Moreover, as we shall see with George Eliot’s work, women had at least an arena in which their conventionally more restricted battles could be naturally depicted: the novel.

In “The Ethical Current,” the final essay of The Gay Science (1866), E. S. Dallas, one of the pioneers of psychological criticism, made precisely this point while considering the fate of the hero and the literary consequences of contemporary market and social structures: noting both the preeminence of biography as a genre and the fact that “a novel is but a fictitious biography,” he asserted that “now all the more important characters seem to be women.” Not incidentally, Dallas touched in this essay on many of the issues I have raised and will raise, including, for example, “the question of Hamlet.” He also expressed his admiration for Plutarch’s Lives, the very work Clough spent the last years of his life translating. Dallas described how the contemporary vogue for biography indicated the Victorian interest in a history that revealed “the inner life as well as the outer”—that is to say, a novelistic history. Clough’s introduction to his translation shows just how novelistic his attitude to the Lives was: “In reading Plutarch, the following points should be remembered. He is a moralist rather than a historian. His interest is less for politics and the changes of empires, and much more for personal character and individual actions and motives to action.” As Dallas quoted Plutarch remarking, “the most glorious exploits are not always the most characteristic.” Such a distinction between great actions and a sense of individual character is at the heart of what the writers I am looking at are exploring.

Dallas recognized all these tendencies as resulting from transformations in the perceptions of action that accompanied the shift in its quality and scope. The following passage, written in the context of an argument about the preponderance of ordinary men and women serving as the heroes and heroines of biographies, shows his awareness of how difficult it is to chart the course of individual acts through history:
Just as philosophers tell us that every word we utter, every breath we inhale, has, through a million of intermediate links in the chain of cause and effect, a definite influence on the dancing of the leaves in an American forest or on the course of a hurricane in the Indian seas, so we recognise the fact that the action of every unit of a nation or party tells upon the total result of human achievement, and we insist on tracing that action, no matter how infinitesimal, throughout all its ramifications.73

But rather than interesting himself in the ramifications of the spreading of consequences (like, we shall see, novelists such as George Eliot did), Dallas emphasized the effect of an awareness of causal structures on the idea of the heroic. A newly scientific age was unwilling to give up the concept of achievement, but, pace Carlyle, the most effective action need not be that done by the great men of history. Who could tell what mode of life actually did the most good? And given how impossible it was to track consequences, what was the point of trying to do the great deeds? Might not the small ones have as vast impact in the end?

What I find most notable in Dallas’s account, though, is his great mistrust of the process of writing such histories. The passage continues:

We have nothing to do with the question whether this be right or wrong—whether to trace the influence of every little emmet on society may not be as worthless a task as would be an attempt to calculate the effect of the blast of a trumpet on the weather of to-morrow. Right or wrong, there is the fact that we do seek to estimate the influence on society of every petty individual whom we happen to like. A Dissenting grocer, who makes money and extends his operations till he is regarded as a marvel by the country-side, has his life written by a very able man in a very ornate style as the pattern of a British and Christian merchant; a sickly undergraduate who never does anything, but makes up for his nothingness by writing in his diary all his good intentions, is paraded before the world as a favourable specimen of the earnest and evangelical student.74

Perhaps the “Dissenting grocer” and the “sickly undergraduate” (who could be Clough, in the less sympathetic versions of his life story) were actually helping the nation. But history of this sort cannot be written out as a sequence of intentions followed by events. For all his democratic values (he was an advocate of the ability of art to provide pleasure to the masses), Dallas did not seem quite to believe in the usefulness of “infinitesimal”
deeds, because the path of cause and effect is too complicated to trace. The invisible hand writes in an invisible—or at least indecipherable—script.

Clough’s erstwhile disciple Walter Bagehot, in his evolutionary model of government in *Physics and Politics* (1872), was also interested in the change in the idea of heroism: how the “fighting age” had passed, to be taken over by an “age of discussion,” led ideally by a government characterized by what he called (somewhat paradoxically but rather wonderfully) “animated moderation.” Offering a typically pragmatic salve to the popular perception of abdication on the part of the rulers, Bagehot alluded in *The English Constitution* (1867) to the same problem of legibility found in Dallas. In his description of the advantages of monarchy, he wrote: “The nature of a constitution, the action of an assembly, the play of parties, the unseen formation of a guiding opinion, are complex facts, difficult to know and easy to mistake. But the action of a single will, the fiat of a single mind, are easy ideas.” Hence his conclusion: “royalty is a government in which the attention of the nation is concentrated on one person doing interesting actions. A republic is a government in which that attention is divided between many, who are all doing uninteresting actions.” The close resemblance of this argument to the one that Bagehot made in the review of Tennyson’s poetry (concerning the intelligibility of antique versus modern actions as poetic subjects) demonstrates the connections between literary and political modes of action. It is as though Bagehot were arguing here that monarchies make for more compelling plot lines: by allowing for popular comprehension, they keep the masses appeased. Legibility is necessary to safety.

But Clough was looking for a ruler more substantive than Bagehot’s figurehead of a monarch. In a discussion of laissez-faire policy in his “Sixth Letter to Parapedimus” (to the editor of *The Balance*, 20 March 1846), he argued that while the system of the free market may be the best we have, and may indeed work in nine cases out of ten, it is “an instrument demanding perpetual superintendence; a sort of ruthless inanimate steam-engine, which must have its driver always with it to keep it from doing mischief untold.” We hear the longing for genuine leadership. Carlyle had earlier expressed the same doubt as Clough, in almost the same language (note the frequent recurrence to industrial metaphors): “What sound mind among the French, for example, now fancies that men can be governed by ‘Constitutions; by the never so cunning Mechanising of Self-interests, and all conceivable adjustments of checking and balancing; in a word, by the best possible solution of this quite insoluble and impossible problem, *Given a world of Knaves, to produce an Honesty from their united action?* It may be good engineering, but it does sound rather like alchemy; again, the obscurity of the process renders it suspect.
So we can think of the failure of plot in Amours de Voyage as a gesture toward realism: in a laissez-faire world, one ruled by countless individuals, heroes are hard to find, and the courses of actions are to a great degree impossible to read. When the action of plot fails we are left with the subject of Claude’s letters: his reflections on the problem of action in the modern world. It is precisely through Claude’s inaction (in the sense of both impeded external action and heightened internal action) that we come to know his character so well. As Henry Sidgwick noted, Clough’s presentation of character was admirable: “To say that Clough’s dramatic faculty was strong might convey a wrong impression, as we imagine that he was quite devoid of the power of representing a scene of vivid action; but the power of forming distinct conceptions of character, and expressing them with the few touches that poetry allows, is one of the gifts for displaying which we may regret that he had not ampler scope.”

Sidgwick’s comments should be located within the context of what Isobel Armstrong has recognized as a midcentury debate concerning the proper definition of the dramatic. Following in the wake of Romantic poetry’s concern for feelings, critics began to lay down hints for a new understanding of drama that placed greater emphasis on character and less on action—an understanding (Armstrong argues) derived from the idea of romantic projection, or sympathy, found in Keats’s letters. The important action thus becomes a mental rather than a physical one, a process of identification that seems central to both the experience of reading lyric poetry and that of reading novels.

We can see this turn away from Aristotelian action toward something closer to novelistic, or at least lyric, character in William Caldwell Roscoe’s tinkering with the meaning of the term drama. In an 1854 review, he wrote in response to Arnold’s Preface:

Without venturing to contradict Aristotle, we may certainly say that the poetic art is not limited to the representation of human actions, in however wide a sense we may employ the term. We have poems to the Lesser Celandine, to a Mouse, to the Skylark—. . . And an action is not only not the sole, it is not the highest, subject of the poetic art. Man is higher than his actions, and it is in the representation of the whole man that the romantic drama soars far beyond its classical rival.
Roscoe seems to have been suggesting a link, via inaction, between what he called “romantic” dramas and the Romantic lyric, as the reference to poems by Wordsworth, Burns, and Shelley (and the resemblance of his argument to that of the Preface to Lyrical Ballads) indicates. Such use of the word *drama* and its cognates was quite common in the reviews of the period. In *The Eclectic*, C. Edmunds wrote of Browning’s genius as “essentially dramatic, but not in the sense which the word vulgarly bears. Mr. Browning’s is mostly the drama of character, not of incident, or scenic effect.” Brownings’ dramatic monologues, like the monologues (or letters) that make up Clough’s “five-act epistolary tragi-comedy, or comi-tragedy,” typify the shift in interest from incident to the revelation of character through the description of states of mind; as Richard Simpson described Browning in his review of *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69), the monologues “are eminently lyric, because their chief interest is reflective, lying not in the deed or narrative itself, but in the psychological states of the speakers.” It is as though drama were being filtered through lyric in order to cleanse it of action, so leaving a pure residue of character.

According to Isobel Armstrong, by the 1860s critics’ interest in psychology had taken over from their nostalgia for great actions. W. J. Fox’s groundbreaking review of Tennyson’s *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830) already showed the beginnings of this trend—and demonstrated its links to the romantic project, especially as represented by Wordsworth. Fox pointed to “our ever-growing acquaintance with the philosophy of mind and of man, and the increasing facility with which that philosophy is applied”:

This is the essence of poetic power, and he who possesses it never need furbish up ancient armour, or go to the East Kehama-hunting or bulbul-catching. Poetry, like charity, begins at home. . . . The most important department in which metaphysical science has been a pioneer for poetry is in the analysis of particular states of mind. . . . [It has provided a] new world for him [the poet] to conquer. The poets of antiquity rarely did more than incidentally touch this class of topics; the external world had not yet lost its freshness; situations, and the outward expression of the thoughts, feelings and passions generated by those situations, were a province so much nearer at hand.

The review predates the publication of *The Prelude*, but that poem’s interior epic seems to be what Fox was calling for.

The new psychological poetry often focused on depictions of character. Fox argued in his review of Tennyson that works of literature were enjoyed
for the characters portrayed in them: “What is the vitality of the Iliad? Character; nothing else. All the rest is only read either out of antiquarianism or of affectation.” Critics frequently compared poets to portraitists when praising them for their ability to create characters. Fox had noted in particular Tennyson’s talents at drawing women: “Mr. Tennyson sketches females as well as ever did Sir Thomas Lawrence. His portraits are delicate, his likenesses . . . perfect, and they have life, character, and individuality.” He implied that because of the circumscribed nature of their activity, women were especially suitable subjects for the new psychological school of writing: they would sit still more naturally while they were painted. In his review of The Princess (1847) in the Christian Remembrancer, Charles Peter Chretien alluded to early photographic methods: “The Daguerreotype process gives the whole of a landscape faithfully, except figures in quick motion, or the leaves of a tree which are trembling visibly in the wind. Like it, Mr. Tennyson requires all but a dead calm to display his powers to advantage.” Chretien was in fact critical of Tennyson’s unwillingness to take full advantage of his chosen medium’s ability to describe objects in motion. But perhaps activity and the accurate rendition of a consciousness are incommensurable.

As the century progressed, praise for the psychological emphasis became commonplace. An anonymous reviewer in The Eclectic demonstrated how the changing attitudes toward the role of action in poetry reflected awareness of the changing needs of the age. Again, the argument was posed in opposition to Arnold’s tenets in the Preface:

The sweetest songs ever sung do not necessarily relate an action, they chronicle a thought, or a sentiment. . . . how shall we deal with this wondrous living age of ours, so transitionary, so full of hopes and fears; its fettered energies, its phases of faith, its mental revolutions, if we are to have actions alone represented? For our own part we believe there is a world of unuttered thought yet to be uttered subjectively, and that it affords as great and glorious a field for the poet as all the great actions of the past.

Those “mental revolutions,” like Claude’s in Amours, replaced the external revolutions of epic poetry. They are essentially Romantic ground; again, The Prelude seems to provide the model. Indeed, in many of these discussions the epic appears to have dropped off the literary map altogether. Still, we can see in the arena of Victorian poetry—and specifically in the context of the debate concerning the appropriate role for action in poetry that I have been looking at here—how “inward revolution,” as George Eliot and Henry James would term it, gained legitimacy as a subject matter for lit-
erary work. As a reviewer in the *Dublin University Magazine* argued in 1854: “The present age is a metaphysical and a psychological one, and poetry, as the reflex of the age, must, to be popular, exhibit the inner life of man—mental action, feelings, passions, spiritualities.”

**Amours de Voyage**

We can register the shift toward the inner workings of the mind in the way that inaction becomes both subject and method of Clough’s poem. As we have seen, concerns about action and about marriage were intimately related for Clough. The link between them also manifests itself in the plotting of *Amours*, where the hero’s early unwillingness and later inability to commit to marriage stand for his unwillingness and inability to act: the “I do” of marriage seems impossible to him. And a letter to Blanche written in December 1851 (one can only wonder how she felt upon reading it) again demonstrates the connection:

> Fortified by bread and cheese I return and rise to the sublime . . . here in this dim deceitful misty moonshiny night-time of existence we grope about and run up against each other, and peer blindly but enquiringly into strange faces, and sooner or later (for comfort’s sake for the night is cold you see and dreary) clasp hands and make vows and choose to keep together and withdraw again sometimes and wrench away hands and seize others and do we know not what.

Here is another Epipolie: the same confusions, the same blindness, the same longing for a lost plan. The situation resembles that described in Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” only now, rather than providing a sanctuary from the surrounding night-battle, love participates in it. “Il doutait de tout, même de l’amour,” states the second epigraph to *Amours de Voyage*. Like Clough, Claude worries that acts of love are no more genuine than—or, in the language of *Amours*, are as “factitious” as (II.xi.271)—any other kinds of action; they are as much as everything else the result of circumstance and demonstrate neither real choice nor Providential planning. So Arnold’s plea, “Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!” represents merely another prayer to a false god.

*Amours de Voyage*, as its title suggests, plays itself out primarily on the field of Venus rather than Mars, but the great chase across Italy represents a version of the battle by night. So when Clough transfers the language of
laissez-faire from the political realm to that of the novelistic courtship plot, it is actually fitting. Thinking of his “conquest” of the Trellyns—and of Mary in particular—Claude reflects on the mechanics of social life:

I am glad to be liked, and like in return very kindly.
So it proceeds; Laissez faire, laissez aller,—such is the watchword.
Well, I know there are thousands as pretty and hundreds as pleasant,
Girls by the dozen as good, and girls in abundance with polish
Higher and manners more perfect than Susan or Mary Trellyn.
Well, I know after all, it is only juxtaposition,—
Juxtaposition, in short; and what is juxtaposition? (I.xi.220–26)

The tone of this passage is interrogative, but Claude’s question leads him in circles; the at first drawling and then almost desperate repetitiveness of these lines, emphasized by their frequent central caesuras, parallels the endless and meaningless repetitions of the social—and the economic—cycle. Such questions and repetitions are common features of Clough’s verse, and they lend to it the quality of immediacy that makes it so attractive, the sense of our overhearing a man’s thoughts, as they lead one into the next. And the hexameters give Clough room to mimic the somewhat halting flexibility of ordinary speech, with its interjections, hesitations, and qualifications; they provide an example of Clough’s tendency toward what I have called generic hybridity, incorporating the skeleton of the epic, the immediacy and inwardness of the lyric, and the colloquialism of the novel. But because of these features, Clough’s epic hexameters rarely invigorate; rather, their constant rise and fall focuses attention on the difficulties of escape from metrical—and, by association, from social—conventions. The action of the meter is improgressive, anticlimactic, and self-reflexive—again, an inaction.

Clough’s emphasis in this passage on the concept of juxtaposition seems to represent a grab for some notion that will lead him out of the maze of his own verse, but the concept proves to be so ungrounded in any kind of positive knowledge that it only bewilders him further, as the move from a statement of cause (“it is only”) to one of question (“and what is”) indicates. Why, Claude wonders, should he fall for Mary rather than some other girl who would be equally suitable and equally attractive? Is love just the chance collision of two people who are, as the saying goes, in the right place at the right time—a kind of lucky hit in the dark? “Juxtaposition,” within the framework of Amours, fits into two sets of metaphors. The first of these is chemical and has to do with the concept of elective affinities: the idea that elements
have varying inherent tendencies to form combinations and that they will combine and recombine according to these tendencies when placed in solution with each other. Goethe had explored the social and sexual implications of the concept in his novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809), a work that obviously influenced Clough’s reflections on the subject in *Amours.* Goethe’s novel is really more of a thought experiment about Enlightenment than anything else. In it, a hyperrational couple invite into their home a pair of outsiders, only to discover that the foreign elements bring with them dangerous forces of elective affinity. The four main characters find themselves reshuffling their relations according to these affinities, and the results are devastating.

The point that Goethe made—and that Clough worries about—is that there is nothing genuinely elective about elective affinities: we have no choice in these matters, other than the choice to oppose our inherent passions. This restriction proves to be severe. In the jottings of his “1849 (Roma) Notebook” Clough describes how “Mechanical Ethics” (“training of bodies of men”) is taught by Aristotelian habituation: “You get soldiers into the way of marching to music—boys and girls of dancing—schoolboys of taking places—learning off by heart.” But such ethics must be distinguished from what he calls a “Spiritual Ethics,” which is taught not by action but by inaction: “its virtue is negative; to check or suppress inferior vital effluxes—and coalescences—combinations / to withdraw oneself / to decline solicitations.” We can see by the context that the term “Spiritual Ethics” refers specifically to control of sensual attractions; his examples are sexual and gustatory. Clough seems to want to argue that while we can teach a boy to recite his lines by making him say them over a hundred times, we cannot teach a man to love a woman by what we call “going through the motions” of lovemaking: this is not true love (nor true action—again, the connection) but rather something else, “to sham-to-act.” So “doing” in the sexual sense poses a threat to action.

Unfortunately, we have a greater “affinity” for “lower kinds of juxtaposition” (that is, the sexual kind) than for the higher, spiritual ones. Such attraction must be resisted if we ever wish to engage in genuine acts of love. In “Sa Majesté Très Chrétienne,” a Browningesque dramatic monologue composed during the same period as *Amours,* Clough imagines the French king Louis XV’s horror of action, and of sexual action in particular, as so great that he considers castration: “With one short act, decisive for all time / By sharp excision sever the seed of ill.” Clough hardly condones the king’s attitude—in fact, it comes across as pathological—but he seems also to feel some sympathy for his protagonist’s position: “Poor Kings, must forth to
action, as you say; / Action, that slaves us, drives us, fretted, worn, / To pleasure, which anon enslaves us too” (lines 42–44). And Clough’s notebooks show that he shared in the king’s sense that routine inaction provides the only solution to the problem:

If ought there be for sinful souls below
To do, ’tis rather to forbear to do;
If ought there be of action that contains
The sense of sweet identity with God,
It is, methinks, it is inaction only. (lines 59–63)

In part, “Sa Majesté” must be read as a critique of Christian quietism, a revelation of its morbidity, and another push forward in Clough’s campaign for action. And yet the disease, as we can see with Claude, has spread to the secular limbs of the nineteenth century.

Clough located his only hope of genuine acts of love in his belief that the lower, sexual affinities, though strong, were also temporary. Any mixtures formed on the basis of the lower attractions would prove themselves unstable and would, like oil and water, rapidly dissolve into their component elements. Claude uses the language of elective affinity to describe the distinction between genuine love (that which forms a stable molecule from its elements) and mere sexual attraction (a short-lived emulsion):

There are two different kinds, I believe, of human attraction;
One which simply disturbs, unsettles, and makes you uneasy,
And another that poises, retains, and fixes, and holds you. (II.xi.264–66)

But how then do we know that what we are feeling is love rather than mere sexual attraction? The difficulty of distinguishing between the two kinds of attraction leads Claude to follow upon this distinction with the reflection that “action / is a most dangerous thing” (II.xi.270–71). “To act commits us,” as Clough declares in the Roma notebook, and Claude expresses the same worry:

Action will furnish belief,—but will that belief be the true one?
This is the point, you know. However, it doesn’t much matter.
What one wants, I suppose, is to predetermine the action,
So as to make it entail, not a chance-belief, but the true one.
(V.ii.20–23; original emphasis)
Clough, like Aristotle, thought that we are habituated to the good by doing good deeds. Our society trains us in virtue by teaching us to do—at first by rote or under duress, with neither understanding nor belief—what it deems to be right. Eventually we learn to believe in what we are doing; only at this stage can our deeds be said to be truly virtuous. Aristotle’s faith in his system of ethics was predicated on a faith in his society’s system of beliefs. Claude, though, has lost such faith: how do we know that those conventions we are raised with uphold the “true” beliefs? And what kind of action is conventional action, anyway? As Florence Nightingale remarked: “What is conventional life? Passivity when we want to be active.”

The concept of convention, the link between costume and custom, and the parallel double meaning of “habit” (both a costume and a customary act) all show the blurring of the distinction between action and acting, as in these canceled lines from *Amours*, I.v.83–86:

Curious work, meantime, this re-entering society: how one
Sits and perceiving no meaning, consents to converse without meaning
Suffers the gesture and speech to adopt the costume of convention.
Then of a sudden one loses the limit; true Nature immingles,
Lives in the false; the hard seed develops and grows in convention.
Make-belief changes to fact; and acting converts into action.

Again note the repetition in the verse, here heightened by Clough’s adroit use of alliteration and assonance. The slurring of words through repeated syllables, like the slurring of a dandy’s voice, suggests the deep connection between matters of form and of content, and even, perhaps, the subsuming of the content into the form. Each step along the way seems so insignificant: from consenting to converse, we suddenly find ourselves costumed in convention. Each “act” is rendered impure by the slip of a letter or the addition of a suffix that follows quite naturally and almost necessarily from the lost root: from fact (and its corresponding vocabulary of the “factitious”) to acting to action. With so little to separate the words, how can there be much to separate the concepts? The regularity of the dactyls in the second and third lines quoted pulls the reader along in the process of conversion. The two spondaic phrases, “true Nature” and “hard seed,” present a temporary break in the flow of the meter, testifying to an almost elegiac longing for an innate core of self that could swim against the river of costume, custom, conversation, and convention down which Claude is being dragged. But the dactyls pick up again in the final line, as the course of conventionalization is completed.
One can see here how deep the Aristotelian tendency of Clough’s thought ran: “acting converts into action” is as succinct and accurate a description of Aristotelian habituation as one is likely to find. But because of his lack of faith in conventional action, Clough’s description of Aristotle’s lesson comes across as a nightmarish reflection on the impossibility of genuine action—or genuine love. “I am in love, you say; I do not think so exactly,” Claude remarks. And the sad thing is that he really cannot be sure; all he can do is let things progress as they will—laissez faire, laissez aller. Actively to pursue any course is to implicate himself in a possible falsehood; only by abrogating responsibility can Claude maintain his sense of integrity. (Mary seems to understand Claude’s worries: this is precisely what he likes in her. As her sister says—again reflecting the language of laissez-faire—she “lets him go on as he likes, and neither will help nor dismiss him” [II.viii.234]).

Again, Carlyle highlights how Clough’s dilemma is representative of his age; with skepticism, “Genuine Acting ceases in all departments of the world’s work; dexterous Similitude of Acting begins. . . . Heroes have gone-out; quacks have come-in.” Action threatens to become acting in its dramatic sense, tainted by falsehood; as Clough’s hero Claude puts it in another cancel- ed passage of Amours de Voyage, “What is all Action and Life but a series of affectations? / Parts we assume; tinsel drapes we wear and are fain to act up to?”

The alternative to acting, as Clough had noted, is abstinence, willed inac- tion, and for a while Claude attempts this: he avoids any declaration of his intentions; he does not leave Rome with the T revellys. “I do not like being moved,” Claude declares, for the will is excited; and action

Is a most dangerous thing: I tremble for something factitious,

Some malpractice of heart and illegitimate process. (II.xi.270–72)

The dilemma is one Claude, who shares his author’s uncompromising honesty and his capacity for self-scrutiny, will repeatedly confront in the Amours under the name of the “factitious.” Claude hesitates acknowledging his feelings because he distrusts the relationship between emotion and motion. The former leads to the latter, but any falseness in feeling will corrupt the action it generates, so rendering the entire process false and leading to an unforeseeable and uncontrollable chain of events, all subject to the taint of the original act. Yet no matter how much he dislikes it, Claude finds himself moving:
But I am in for it now,—\textit{laissez faire}, of a truth, \textit{laissez aller}.
Yes, I am going.—I feel it, I feel and cannot recall it,—
Fusing with this thing and that, entering into all sorts of relations,
Tying I know not what ties, which, whatever they are, I know one thing,
Will, and must, woe is me, be one day painfully broken,—
Broken with painful remorses, with shrinkings of soul, and relentings,
Foolish delays, more foolish evasions, most foolish renewals.
(I.xii.231–37)

Again the verse progresses relentlessly: repeated words and sounds cause phrase to follow phrase with the appearance of inevitability. Claude’s description of love presages Clough’s nightmarish letter to Blanche of 31 December 1851. And Claude’s vision of the affair turns out to be prophetic of the voyage of love upon which he is about to embark.

That voyage provides the second metaphoric framework in \textit{Amours} for the concept of juxtaposition. Indeed, a version of the travel theme extends through all three of Clough’s major works: \textit{The Bothie} is an escapist “vacation pastoral” located in the Scottish Highlands, the voyage of \textit{Amours} constitutes a leg of the Grand Tour, and \textit{Dipsychus} is set in the tourist’s Venice. Clough’s characters’ status as tourists reflects their sense of homelessness in the world, their alienation from society, and also their restlessness. His travelers are the descendants of the Romantic wanderers: the Cains, the Ancient Mariners, the Don Juans. As the title of the work indicates, \textit{Amours de Voyage} is as much a rumination on the love of—or perhaps, more accurately, the need for—travel, as on the romance that develops between the hero and heroine. In fact, it suggests that these two forms of love actually reflect the same underlying search: a quest for authenticity, a desire to escape the “fictitious” elements of modern life. But the move from Romantic traveler to Victorian tourist should be noted. As James Buzard has shown in \textit{The Beaten Track}, the claim “that ‘the tourist’ is one of the best models available for ‘modern-man-in-general’ derives from . . . an image of the tourist as a figure estranged from the authentic.”

\textit{Amours de Voyage} begins with a reflection on travel as a search for authenticity: “Come, let us go,—to a land wherein gods of the old time wandered,
/ Where every breath even now changes to ether divine” (I, opening elegiacs, lines 3–4). But from the very first, Claude expresses a sense of alienation from his cultural past that renders the quest itself suspect: “’Tis but to prove limitation, and measure a cord, that we travel’; “’Tis but to change idle fancies for memories willfully falser” (I, opening elegiacs, lines 7, 9). The tourism of \textit{Amours} acts as a metaphor for broader cultural alienation.
Where the epic hero once stood, the tourist now gawks. In fact, Clough’s heroes sightsee at Revolution, as though it were one more of the cultural attractions to take in. Clough himself recorded with irony how on the trip to Rome that formed the basis for *Amours*, he found it necessary to disturb the revolutionary hero Mazzini from his political pursuits in order to get a letter of permission to study some rare collections of sculpture (presumably, those very sculptures Claude uses as an excuse for staying behind in Rome). War becomes something that can be appreciated only from the tourist’s perspective. In one remarkable scene in *Amours*, Claude stands amidst a group of fellow tourists atop the Pincian Hill and looks down upon the battle, enjoying the view and pointing out its peculiarities:

> 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 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, by the Cavaleggieri.

(II.v.113–18)

Recall Clough’s letters home during his stay in Paris in 1848, where he talked of “pottering about under the Tuileries’ chestnuts, and here and there about bridges and streets, *pour savourer la république*. ” Claude describes how he gets his first “sign of the battle” one morning when he is sitting in a café, “*Murray*, as usual, in hand”—sensing a change in the weather, “but thinking mostly of Murray”—when the waiter tells him that there is no milk (II.v.101, 96, 98). The passage perfectly describes the tourist’s strange dialectic of nearness to and distance from the visited culture: even as Claude considers the cultural artifacts of the city, he demonstrates his ignorance of its current political truths. In another shocking scene in *Amours*, already mentioned, Claude writes home about seeing a priest attacked by a mob. On the way back from St. Peter’s, “*Murray, as usual, / Under [his] arm,*” he notices a disturbance. As he tells his friend, “So I have seen a man killed! An experience that, among others! / Yes, I suppose I have; although I can hardly be certain” (II.vii.167–68, 162–63). Witnessing a murder is not so different from looking at St. Peter’s, and *Murray* serves as a guidebook to both “experiences.” After all, everything Claude sees comes to him at the tourist’s distance, through gaps in the crowd, in a language he can’t quite comprehend: “History, Rumour of Rumours,” he continues, quoting Carlyle.
The search for authenticity also occurs on the literary level. The movements of Mary and Claude over the crossed and scarred soil of the Italy of the *Amours* seem to reflect the palimpsest-like cultural markings of the terrain on which History and Culture have left so many confusing traces. As Buzard would put it, they are on a “beaten track.” But the traces of ancient greatness appear to Claude as the waste products of a dead civilization:

Rome disappoints me much; I hardly as yet understand, but Rubbishy seems the word that most exactly would suit it.
All the foolish destructions, and all the sillier savings,
All the incongruous things of past incomprehensible ages,
Seem to be treasured up here to make fools of present and future.
(I.i.19–23)

The form of waste, though, most evident in the poem is not that of the actual crumbling structures with which Claude is surrounded (although the opening canto in particular includes several descriptions of the local sights, relayed in a rather jaded guidebook manner). Rather, the cultural detritus that most pervades the poem is that of previous writers who have engaged with Rome.

Clough creates in *Amours* a web of allusions that replicates Rome’s infamous architectural jumble (the same “stupendous fragmentariness” that would so disturb George Eliot’s Dorothea during her honeymoon there). He often does this by quotation. A characteristic example of the process is his revision of Brutus’s declaration, “There is a tide in the affairs of men, / Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.” Claude’s take on the lines of the famous Roman (as written by the most famous of Englishmen) adds only a few words but produces a dramatic shift in meaning: “There is a tide, at least in the love affairs of mortals, / Which, when taken at flood, leads on to the happiest fortune” (IV.iii.33–34). The alteration typifies the paradigm shift in *Amours* from a primary concern for the fortunes of war to the fortunes of the heart. But as modern buildings in the Eternal City stand on Renaissance foundations covering Roman ruins, so the layering here contains many levels: the allusion is also a direct one to the interim text of Byron’s *Don Juan*, a poem that like *Amours* can be thought of as a “novel-in-verse,” a quest-romance travelogue led by a famously passive (although bodily active) hero, who refuses to end his tale with a wedding. (Byron’s narrator quips: “There is a tide in the affairs of women / Which taken at the flood leads”—God knows where.” “Should I incarnadine ever this inky pacifical finger [?]” (II.iv.72), Claude wonders. But Clough’s sense of loss is as much
about literature as about heroism, about the authenticity of the inky finger as that of the bloody one, about the ability to say something in a modern voice rather than through the words of the dead.

From France, Clough had alluded to Wordsworth’s Intimations Ode to describe his own sense of revolutionary disappointment; comparing the Paris he walked through to that of ’89, he noted that “the glory and the freshness of the dream is departed.” Claude also expresses his sense of Romantic belatedness by invoking the famous Ode, the iconic poem of a lost golden age, and it is telling that for him the golden age is one of natural action. He explains why he must discontinue his pursuit of Mary:

There was a time, methought it was but lately departed,
When, if a thing was denied me, I felt I was bound to attempt it; . . .
It is over, all that! I am a coward and know it.
Courage in me could be only factitious, unnatural, useless.
(V.v.77–78, 84–85)

Clough’s quest for a poetic voice through which to express himself authentically has become inextricably tied to the genuine revolutionary experiences of the poets of the past. Wordsworth’s France and Byron’s Italy peep through the cracks of Clough’s Rome. But the connection to these places has altered dramatically: absent “genuine” experience, the only kind of poetry that seems possible is the poetry of tourism.

So travel allows Clough to express his hero’s sense of cultural alienation. But Clough also makes travel represent the almost inevitable failure of plotting in a complicated world. No matter how carefully plans are laid, no matter how often timetables are poured over, something always disrupts one’s intended course. Amours makes particularly adroit use of the phenomenon that the Victorian critic John Addington Symonds, himself a great traveler, called “a natural accident of travelling”: “when once missed,” a sought-after party (here the Trevellyns) “cannot be caught up again.” What results is a parody of the Grand Tour. Take, for example, letter ii of canto IV:

Gone to Como, they said; and I have posted to Como.
There was a letter left, but the camariere had lost it.
Could it have been for me? They came, however, to Como,
And from Como went by boat,—perhaps to the Splügen,—
Or to the Stelvio, say, and the Tyrol; also it might be
By Porlezza across to Lugano, and so to the Simplon
Possibly, or the St Gothard,—or possibly, too, to Baveno,
Orta, Turin, and elsewhere. Indeed, I am greatly bewildered. (IV.ii.19–26)

So is the reader.

Yet the uncertainty generated by travel functions in two directions: while it is difficult when traveling to find someone we are searching for, we inevitably meet random people. Dickens, a Victorian writer who unlike Clough preserved a firm faith in action, as his carefully plotted novels demonstrate, took advantage of such random collisions, the famous “coincidences” that propel his stories. In a statement to John Forster about the plan for *Little Dorrit* (1857), he described his methods:

> It struck me that it would be a new thing to show people coming together, in a chance way, as fellow-travellers, and being in the same place, ignorant of one another, as happens in life; and to connect them afterwards, and to make the waiting for that connection a part of the interest.  

Dickens may have made the original meetings seem accidental, but he ensured (by “connect[ing]” his characters “afterwards”) that our sense of providential planning would be preserved. Clough, though, never reconnects the dots. Claude calls such chance crossings of paths “juxtapositions,” and unlike Dickens, he is very much troubled by them:

> Juxtaposition, in fine; and what is juxtaposition?  
> Look you, we travel along in the railway-carriage, or steamer,  
> And, *pour passer le temps*, till the tedious journey be ended,  
> Lay aside paper or book, to talk with the girl that is next one;  
> And, *pour passer le temps*, with the terminus all but in prospect,  
> Talk of eternal ties and marriages made in heaven. (III.vi.107–12)

Love, then, the idea that two people are “meant” for each other, is merely an “illusion” (III.vi.113), and Claude, unlike most of us, cannot pretend it is anything more. “Where does Circumstance end, and Providence where begins it?” Philip asked in the battle-by-night passage from *The Bothie* (IX.49). Both Claude and Clough find it impossible to hide from this question; inevitably—especially once the idea of Providence is abandoned—the act of falling in love contains an element of chance. You get married to a girl because she happened to be seated next to you on the train.

Of course you can also think of such juxtaposition, more positively, as
a matter of destiny. In his extraordinary poem “Natura Naturans” (1846–47), Clough’s narrator imagines the entire process of evolution as he stares across a railway carriage at a young woman sitting opposite him. The poem is unusual in that in it Clough celebrates those same sexual instincts—elective affinities, here figured as “elections”—that he fears elsewhere:

Yet owned we, fused in one,
The Power which e’en in stones and earths
By blind elections felt, in forms
Organic breeds to myriad births. (lines 41–44)

The narrator continues by ascending a kind of biblically inflected evolutionary ladder: from lichen to lily to cedar to bee to bird to gazelle, and finally, to man and woman. The prime mover in this proto-Darwinian process is the “primal prime embrace” (line 76). But as the poem makes clear by its ending, the “genial heat” (line 77) of sexual energy can be preserved only in an atmosphere where “young Desire” is never “told the mystic name of Love” (lines 87–88). The incident can represent evolutionary destiny rather than random juxtaposition precisely because the encounter in the train is between perfect strangers who never enter the realm of social intercourse; they do not even speak to each other, much less begin talking of “eternal ties and marriages made in heaven.” The man and woman never become individuated; they remain male and female representatives of the human species. Any imagined act between them bears no mark of the individual will; it is essentially collective.

In contrast, Amours de Voyage is plotted like a courtship novel, so love and marriage cannot be avoided. Moreover, individuation (that is, a sense of characters rather than of mere types) stands at its center. This is appropriate to a love story. We like to believe, after all, that we fall in love with people for their peculiarities, for the things that make them different from everyone else we have met. We call the resultant distinct entities their essential selves. But evolutionarily, the essential self is the very opposite of such individuality: it is what we all have in common, the human genome. What can seem like destiny when you think in terms of an entire race appears random when you bring things down to the level of the individual; acts that are meaningful collectively—the workings of the market, the social conventions—can lose their meaning viewed from the perspective of one pair of eyes. Hence Claude’s crisis in action: from where he stands things just don’t make much sense.
As elsewhere in *Amours*, the marriage referred to in the “strangers on a train” passage represents a larger commitment to action. A little later on in the same letter, while musing on the fact of death, Claude comments that “But for the steady fore-sense of a freer and larger existence, / Think you that man could consent to be circumscribed here into action?” (III.vi.123–24). Men can stand to marry, to do the deed that will tie them to one person for the rest of their lives, only because they know there will be an escape in death. Claude's speech weirdly rewrites Hamlet's famous “To be, or not to be” soliloquy. Only here, marriage replaces suicide, and the “something after death”—“The undiscover’d country,” so dreaded by Hamlet, “from whose bourn / No traveller returns”—is positively embraced by Claude, and instead of making him “lose the name of action” would give him the courage to take it. But it is not enough. When Claude gives up the search for Mary, he also forsakes any lingering impulse toward a life of directed action. To believe in action is to look toward to a future in which one’s deeds bear fruit; the move from Italy to Egypt takes Claude into a yet-more-distant past.

Hamlet stands at the center of the debate about action and character in nineteenth-century literature. Emerson wrote that the “speculative genius” of the age was “a sort of living Hamlet.” I suggested in the previous chapter that *The Borderers* owed something to Shakespeare’s great drama of inaction; one can see how both play and character also resonate with my discussion of Clough and *Amours de Voyage*. A. S. McDowall indicates the source of the connection in his belief that “no other English poet has so anatomized the idea of duty, or the possibilities of acting truly, or even (Hamlet always excepted) the possibility of acting at all [than Clough].” Furthermore, the resonance was not lost on contemporary critics, scarcely one of whom missed the chance of bringing it up, frequently in the service of describing Claude as a spirit of his age. In his treatment of *Amours de Voyage* in the *Fortnightly Review*, J. A. Symonds (probably with Arnold’s Preface in mind) compared Claude to both Hamlet and Faust, those two “princes of metaphysical perplexity. However exceptional, his skepticism is natural to himself, and to the temper of his century.” W. Y. Sellars criticized the poem as a debased version of Shakespeare’s play, featuring “a very modern Hamlet [who] is seen playing a weak and common-place part in the very common-place drama of modern English society in Rome.” Today’s critics seem to prefer comparing
Amours to “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” thus emphasizing its modernity. But of course, this comes to much the same thing, as Prufrock is itself a belated Victorian offspring of Hamlet, its hero a man who cannot muster the grandeur of the Prince, but, in the form of “an attendent lord,” shares his inability to act.

Claude himself seems to recognize the justice of the comparison. At one point, he declares his Hamlet-like aversion to being “the observed of such observers” (III.13.279). And when making his excuses for his abandonment of politics in the midst of the revolutionary fervor that surrounds him, he alludes to the Prince’s response to the speech of the Player King: “And what’s the / Roman Republic to me, or I to the Roman Republic?” (III.3.66–67). Moreover, Hamlet also stands at the center of the myth of Clough’s life. Stopford A. Brook was by no means the first or last to compare the poet to Hamlet, but he was unusually astute in his recognition of the double-sidedness of the allusion: “Thus moving, like a Hamlet, through the strifes of theology and religion, he resembles Hamlet in another way. When the Prince is suddenly flung into the storm of action, he takes momentarily a fierce part in it, and enjoys it, till overthinking again seizes on him. Clough repeats this with his life and his poetry is touched with it.”

But as the Romantic predilection for conferring upon it the status of closet drama suggests, Hamlet also featured in a generic argument of the period. The work is Shakespeare’s greatest expression of the art of the monologue (or soliloquy), and a correspondingly problematic example of the dramatic form. Tennyson highlights this oddity by designating his own “little Hamlet,” Maud, a “monodrama.” The debate in the period about the term dramatic (discussed above) often seems to be a debate about the relative importance of action and character in Shakespeare’s plays in general and Hamlet in particular. (As suggested in the previous chapter, Hamlet is particularly relevant to the dispute over the importance of character and action in literature because of the degree to which the Prince’s superbly rendered consciousness relates to his inaction.) Drawing on the Romantic tradition of Shakespeare criticism exemplified by Hazlitt, Victorian critics took it for granted that what made Shakespeare great was the realism of his characters. William Roscoe’s argument against Arnold’s Aristotelianism took precisely this tack: “In Sophocles, the action is predominant, and the characters are interesting as they elucidate it. In Shakespere [sic], the characters are predominant, and the events gain their main interest from the insight which, by their aid, the poet contrives to give us into some human heart.” So Shakespeare himself became a keyword indicating the impor-
tance of character in literary works. Henry Sidgwick turned to Shakespeare in his praise of the “individuality” of Clough’s “personages”: “It becomes as impossible for us to attribute a remembered remark to the wrong person as it would be in a play of Shakespeare.”

But in *Wilhelm Meister’s Lehrjahre* (1795–96), Goethe suggested how to take the debate over genre one step farther. Wilhelm argues that *Hamlet* actually bears a strong structural resemblance to the form of the novel:

> The hero of a novel must be passive [leidend], or at least not active to a high degree; from the hero of a play we demand effective action and deeds. . . . [Hamlet] really only has sentiment, and it is only external events that work on him, so that this play has something of the breadth of a novel.

And Sidgwick seems to have been following a similar train of thought when he introduced his comments comparing Clough’s character presentation to that of Shakespeare with a different comparison: “There is not one of the personages [of *The Bothie* or *Amours*] whose individuality is not as thoroughly impressed upon us as if they had been delineated in a three-volume novel by Mr. Trollope.” So Claude’s Hamletism could also reflect Clough’s more novelistic concerns in *Amours*.

Walter Bagehot advised the heads of constitutional monarchies to follow a policy of “well-considered inaction”—a phrase that reads like a plot summary of *Hamlet*. He again reveals the connection between the political and literary realms by having used the same word in his review of the posthumous edition of Clough’s works to describe the plot of *Amours de Voyage*. Bagehot remarked that while “Mr. Arnold teaches that a great poem must be founded on a great action, . . . this one is founded on a long inaction.” But, he added, “Art has many mansions.” And perhaps Claude’s Hamlet-like propensity for inaction does make him more properly the hero of a novel. Barbara Hardy has argued against the novelistic approach to *Amours de Voyage*: “[Clough] is very unlike a novelist, and especially unlike a Victorian novelist. His motion is very erratic, his fluidity and foreshortening and shuttling are all products of an essentially lyrical form, where history is cut down so that feeling is prominent.” My point is of course that precisely this close connection to the lyrical, this emphasis on feeling—that is, this following of Wordsworth’s prescriptions in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* rather than Aristotle’s in the *Poetics*—makes the poem like a certain kind of novel that is very much Victorian: the novel of character, as distinguished from the novel of plot.
And as Sidgwick’s review suggests, Victorian critics registered the connection (no doubt motivated in part by pressure from the increasing predominance of the novel in the literary marketplace). J. M. Robertson wrote of *The Bothie* and *Amours* as “in essence works of narrative, analytical, psychological fiction” and stressed “the relation that such works bear to the contemporary novel.” Rather conveniently for me, he drew explicit links between Clough’s characters and those of George Eliot and Henry James, the very writers to whom I now wish to turn. Such readers testify to the contemporary sense of the novel as a genre of character. They also testify to a broader shift from the genre of the epic, with its concern for the great deeds of heroes, to the novel, with its concern for consciousness and belief in the “incalculably diffusive” influence of “unhistoric acts,” as George Eliot would memorably phrase it. *Amours de Voyage* stands on the edge of this shift, at the place where the novel, the lyric, the drama, and the epic—and their different attitudes toward action—collide. The generic explosion it represents manifests the disturbance to be found at fault lines.