Superlative Clough

GREGORY TATE

'BESIDE ME, – in the car, – she sat, / She spake not, no, nor looked to me' (ll. 1-2).[1] Arthur Hugh Clough's 'Natura Naturans' (1849) recounts a train journey in which not much happens. The woman who sits next to the poem's speaker pays him no attention, but her proximity nonetheless elicits a response which he frames in extravagant terms. In his mind, she is

> As unsuspecting mere a maid
> As, fresh in maidhood's bloomiest bloom,
> In casual second-class did e'er
> By casual youth her seat assume;
> Or vestal, say, of saintliest clay,
> For once by balmiest airs betrayed
> Unto emotions too too sweet
> To be unlingeringly gainsaid.
>
> (*Poems*, ll. 25-32)

The hyperbole that runs throughout this stanza ('as . . . e'er', 'for once', 'too too sweet') is at odds with the absence of action and interaction which the speaker concedes in the poem's opening lines, and this linguistic excess invites an ironic reading. The irony is perhaps directed by Clough at his speaker, who does not just record his own emotions, but, with no evidence,

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attributes similarly ardent feelings to the woman; 'Natura Naturans' can therefore be interpreted as one of the several poems in which Clough critiques the predatory male sexuality that underlies Victorian idealisations of women. The hyperbole may also imply the speaker's own acknowledgement of his overreaction: his interruption of his rhapsody with 'say' suggests that his 'vestal' metaphor, and his syntax in general, is studied and self-aware. The stanza's tone is exemplified in its superlatives ('bloomiest', 'saintliest', 'balmiest'), which, instead of denoting specific relations of magnitude, are employed as deliberately imprecise markers of emphasis, and which, in the case of 'bloomiest bloom', are reduced to tautology, the adjective forestalling rather than describing the noun. Their syllables compressed to fit the stanza's buoyantly regular iambic metre, the superlatives appear self-consciously designed to convey exaggeration for exaggeration's sake.

A ready recourse to superlatives is a prominent feature of Clough's poetry and prose. It is a curious stylistic preference for a writer whose work is usually seen as being characterised by what Clough himself termed 'double-mindedness', a doubtful and interrogative stance both towards his own thoughts and feelings and towards the world.[2] Reviewing the posthumous 1862 edition of Clough's poems, Walter Bagehot observed that 'the marked peculiarity, and, so to say, the *flavour* of his mind, was a sort of truthful scepticism, which made him anxious never to overstate his own assurance of anything'.[3] But Clough frequently overstates things, and so there appears to be a mismatch between his words and his world-view. An examination of his superlative adjectives, however, suggests that his 'truthful scepticism' can be understood not as a state of mind but as a heuristic process, in which the expression of assurance – that can then be questioned, qualified, or countered – is a necessary step. And this process is linguistic and literary as well as epistemological in its focus: it is informed not just by Clough's liberal politics and his doubts about Christianity, but also by his views on the English language and his self-conscious awareness of the peculiarities of his style. Superlatives, for Clough, offer a means of testing the validity of arguments and opinions by exaggerating and interrogating the grammar of their expression.

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In 1865 the poet William Allingham identified Clough as 'an Englishman of our own day with its novelties and problems, intellectual, cultivated, thoroughly honest and singleminded, and possessing moreover a marked degree of originality' (*CH*, p. 200). Allingham uses 'singleminded' in the earliest sense cited in the *OED*, meaning 'sincere in mind or spirit; honest, straightforward', rather than 'having but one aim or purpose', but his choice of adjective nonetheless suggests how Clough's habitual scepticism might be interpreted not as anxious equivocation or duality but as a kind of persistent resolution.[4] 'You are the most conscientious man I ever knew', Matthew Arnold told him in 1853, 'but on some lines morbidly so, and it spoils your action'.[5] After Clough's death, Arnold was more fulsome in his praise of his friend's 'single-hearted care' for knowledge: 'in the study of art, poetry, or philosophy, he had the most undivided and disinterested love for his object in itself, the greatest aversion to mixing up with it anything accidental or personal'.[6] This view of Clough as 'undivided' and single-minded goes some way to explaining his use of superlatives, and he, in turn, praised others in similarly superlative terms. In an 1849 letter to Arnold's brother Tom, he asks: 'do we not work best by digging deepest? By avoiding polemics, and searching to display the real thing? If only one could do the latter', he laments, before naming Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, and Ralph Waldo Emerson as writers who succeed in 'digging deepest' (*Correspondence*, i. 274).

Clough upends such a hierarchy of literary value, however, in his 1853 review of some 'Recent English Poetry', in which he expresses a preference for polemic over analysis. The review reads Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna* and Alexander Smith's *Poems* as representatives, respectively, of 'the extremes of ascetic and timid self-culture, and of unquestioning, unhesitating confidence', and argues that 'upon the whole, for the present age, the lessons of reflectiveness and the maxims of caution do not appear to be more needful or more appropriate than exhortations to steady courage and calls to action'.[7] Clough criticises Arnold, just as Arnold criticises Clough in the same year, for prioritising 'conscientiousness' ahead of 'action', for choosing the wrong side in what Clough describes in the epilogue to

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Dipsychus and the Spirit as 'the conflict between the tender Conscience and the World'.[8] The question of whether or not it is possible to negotiate between the 'extremes' of decisive action and rigorous introspection is among the main concerns of Clough's writing, and one of the purposes of superlatives such as 'digging deepest' is to emphasise, through the grammar of extremity, the opposition between them. Clough retains a structuring binary between action and introspection throughout 'Recent English Poetry', but he silently adjusts its terms over the course of the review: in its opening pages, the 'timid self-culture' which he sees as typifying recent poetry is contrasted not with polemical 'exhortations' but with the Victorian novel's detailed observations of modern society, its attention to 'these indispensable latest addenda', the 'positive matters of fact, which people, who are not verse-writers, are obliged to have to do with'.[9]

Clough's binary of action and caution is founded on a distinction between the different kinds of knowledge that motivate action. The phrase 'these indispensable latest addenda' implies that 'reflectiveness' is an ongoing process, in which a writer's self-examinations are (or should be) corrected and modified by observations of the world. The dangers of verse-writing that marginalises facts are also highlighted in a lecture on Wordsworth which Clough delivered to students at University College London in the early 1850s, in which he deplores Wordsworth's 'false or arbitrary Positiveness':

> We ought to hold fast by what is true, but because we hold wilfully fast it does not follow what we hold fast to is true. If you have got the truth, be as positive as you please; but because you choose to be positive, do not therefore be sure you have the truth.

This over-assurance is linked to Wordsworth's 'mawkish' subjectivism: rather than 'looking directly at an object and considering it as a thing in itself, and allowing it to operate upon him as a fact in itself, – he takes the sentiment produced by it in his own mind as the thing' (*AHC*, pp. 227-8). Clough's scepticism in this lecture and in 'Recent English Poetry' is directed not at polemical certitude but at any wilfully self-affirming habit of

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mind (whether Wordsworthian 'positiveness' or Arnoldian timidity) that refuses to ground itself in 'positive matters of fact'.

The mode of poetic realism which Clough champions in his prose is also enacted, according to Isobel Armstrong, in the grammar of his poetry. Clough's is 'a highly adjectival style', 'exact and literal', the 'solidity' of which 'comes from his habit of attaching general adjectives to concrete nouns or very specific adjectives to abstract nouns'.[10] For Armstrong, the grammatical constituents of Clough's style perform a realism that is dependent on a reciprocal exchange between empirical observations and speculative generalisations. Superlative adjectives arguably incorporate both sides of this exchange at the same time. The deliberately vague superlatives in 'Natura Naturans' join the concrete to the abstract through exaggeration, elevating a particular person, thing, or quality beyond comparison. At the same time, as Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey Pullum note, more precise superlatives possess an 'inherent definiteness' and singularity: 'superlatives generally confer definiteness on the noun phrase containing them and are therefore incompatible with indefinite determiners' ('the brightest girl in the class', not 'a brightest girl in the class').[11] These superlatives also act as a bridge between the empirical and the theoretical, because their assertions of pre-eminence imply a generalising argument, a claim which starts with a specific noun but which expands to encompass that noun's relation to others of its kind.

When he met Emerson for the first time in Oxford in 1848, Clough described him to Tom Arnold as 'the quietest, plainest, unobtrusivest man possible', glossing this compliment by adding that 'he is much less Emersonian than his Essays. There is no dogmatism or arbitrariness or positiveness about him' (*Correspondence*, i. 215-16). Emerson was an important influence on Clough's opposition to false positiveness: as Fergus McGhee points out, 'in a culture saturated with knowingness, Clough and Emerson repeatedly pressed the claims' of the unknown.[12] In his essay on 'Intellect', Emerson writes: 'how wearisome the grammarian, the phrenologist, the political or religious fanatic, or indeed any possessed mortal, whose balance is lost by the exaggeration of a single topic! It is incipient insanity'.[13] Clough shared this distaste for dogmatism, and it

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led him to have second thoughts about Emerson. After visiting Emerson at his home in Massachusetts in 1852, he wrote in a letter to Carlyle that 'I find him altered from what he was in England – whether the effect of time or difference of place, I don't know. He seems to have much more of a made-up mind than I thought he had then' (*Correspondence*, ii. 342-3). But it remains striking that Clough chose to convey his first impression of Emerson's freedom from exaggeration – an impression which he was later compelled to revise – in exaggerated terms: 'the quietest, plainest, unobtrusivest man possible'.

This sketch of Emerson's character is typical of Clough's superlatives in its rhetorical excess and its relaxed approach to grammatical convention. Clough did not wholly subscribe to Emerson's view of grammarians as 'wearisome'. Perhaps in part because of his lifelong involvement in education – he worked successively as a tutor and fellow at Oriel College, Oxford; as Professor of English at University College London; and as an examiner in the Education Office – he was interested in Victorian debates about English grammar. But he was sceptical of grammatical prescriptivism, and his superlatives often flout the rules of usage promoted by grammarians, most conspicuously through his use of synthetic or inflectional rather than analytic or periphrastic forms ('unobtrusivest' instead of 'most unobtrusive') when custom dictates the opposite. John Daniel Morell, Clough's colleague in the Education Office in the 1850s, advises in his 1857 *Grammar of the English Language* (a book which Clough owned) that adjectives which 'consist of more than one syllable' are 'generally compared by prefixing *more* for the comparative, and *most* for the superlative'.[14] But, despite their reputation for prescriptivism, other Victorian grammarians insisted that this rule was historically contingent and of recent date. Fitzedward Hall observes in *Modern English* (1873) that longer inflectional superlatives, 'once very frequent both in prose and in verse, have gone out of vogue, – chiefly because some of them offend the ear, – to such a degree as now to be accounted, with an exception or two, if not affected, poetic licences'. These words, 'which were none too harsh for our forefathers', are 'very generally shunned by our contemporaries', although Hall notes as an exception a

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writer whom Clough knew personally and whose work he admired: Carlyle.[15]

It is surprising (to say the least) that Clough saw Carlyle as a writer who avoided polemic, and that he complained to him of all people about Emerson's 'made-up mind', because Carlyle's fame was founded to a large extent on his intemperate tone and rebarbative language. As Helen Small puts it, 'Carlyle's goading sarcasms, vehement exhortations, stylistic excesses make for a kind of rhetoric' which 'does not aim at participation in argument' but at provocation.[16] His reputation for obdurate conservatism grew over the course of his career, alongside his self-conscious use of a rhetorical style designed to play up to that reputation. But, as early as his 1831 essay 'Characteristics', he was employing superlatives to articulate a vehemence which was directly opposed to the kind of open-minded questioning habitual to Clough. Carlyle warns his readers of the psychological, moral, and social dangers of 'Sceptical or Inquisitory Metaphysics', in which knowledge 'must be torn in pieces, and certainty anew sought for in the endless realms of Denial': 'Hopeless struggle, for the wisest, as for the foolishest!'[17] Despite the two writers' differing philosophical and political views, the grammar of Carlyle's style here – pairing an everyday inflectional superlative ('wisest') with an unusual counterpart ('foolishest') in an effort to upset readers' linguistic expectations and to emphasise his rhetorical point – is frequently emulated by Clough.

Carlyle's stylistic influence was widespread among writers of Clough's generation, and some were unhappy about its ubiquity: Arnold warned those who asked his advice to 'flee Carlylese as the very devil!'[18] Clough, however, was happy to acknowledge his debt to 'Carlylese', describing his prose style in one of his essays as 'the noise of a penny imitation of the great Carlylian trumpet'.[19] His 'penny imitation' of Carlyle is just one example of the habit of reworking the styles of other writers, and different registers of language more generally, which is evident throughout his prose and his verse. In contrast to William Allingham, who celebrated Clough's 'marked degree of originality', an unimpressed critic insisted in the *Saturday Review* in 1888 that he 'is always an echo. Longfellow,

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Tennyson, Browning, Matthew Arnold, Emerson, ring by turns on the ear trained to detect such ringing', sounding in (or out of) concert with his 'imitated Carlylese' (*CH*, p. 331). To this list of echoes might be added the Bible, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, Goethe, Pierre-Jean de Béranger, Jacobean dramatists, nursery rhymes, and Oxford undergraduate slang. Clough's originality is founded on imitation, and his writing demonstrates Clara Dawson's argument that the Victorian understanding of 'style' is 'the product of various rifts in the perception of an artwork. It performs the split between subject matter and poetic manner, but also between singularity and repetition, between originality and fashion'.[20] Clough mimics other writers' styles, and self-consciously repeats his own stylistic quirks, in an effort to reflect on the assumptions that inhere within them. In particular, he redeploys Carlyle's rhetorical exaggerations in the service of a heuristic scepticism that aims to 'dig deepest' by voicing and examining a range of contending arguments in their most extreme forms.

The provisionality of Clough's superlatives is exemplified in a lecture on Shakespeare, in which he asserts that '*the highest that man can attain to* is the Consciousness of his own feelings and thoughts, the recognition of himself: which is the first step towards also discerning the characters of others'. An attainment that is initially presented as a superlative end in itself is immediately reconfigured here as the means to another, and presumably higher, end. Similarly, discussing his preference for reading rather than seeing performances of Shakespeare's plays, Clough comments that 'the eye may well be called the purest of the senses and the readiest means of transmitting impressions. But the inner sense is yet clearer and to it belongs by means of Words the highest and rapidest transmission of impressions'.[21] The unusual inflectional superlative 'rapidest' magnifies the effect of 'highest' through its grammatical peculiarity, but it simultaneously acts as a check on Clough's other superlatives, usurping the pre-eminence of 'purest' and 'readiest' and privileging the ideal at the expense of the empirical. The not-so-superlative purity of the eye is also diminished by a comparative phrase ('yet clearer'), and another instance of this self-qualifying grammar appears in *The Bothie of Toper-na-*

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Fuosich, as the garrulous coiner of words Lindsay is designated 'Master of newest inventions, and ready deviser of newer' (*Poems*, p. 594). Both in his prose and in his poetry, Clough's grammar enacts Carlyle's cautionary observation in *The French Revolution* that 'so many highest superlatives achieved by man are followed by new higher; and dwindle into comparatives and positives!'[22]

John Addington Symonds wrote in 1868 that 'nothing is more true of Clough's mind than that it worked by thesis and antithesis, not reaching a clear synthesis, but pushing its convictions, as it were, to the verge of a conclusion' (*CH*, p. 228). Symonds's comment is astute: the typical unfolding of any line of Clough's thinking involves the withholding of resolution in favour of an open-ended process of dialectical scepticism. Clough's adjectives push his arguments on, as his superlatives are revised or amplified in ways that invite further rethinking, but he more often than not forgoes the comfort of a definitive conclusion. Yet his lecture on Shakespeare indicates that he was in some circumstances willing to posit more or less clear syntheses, in which superlatives are modified by comparatives and then subsumed within a more comprehensive superlative. These syntheses are expressive of the 'liberal irony' which Anna Barton identifies in his writing: open-minded about open-mindedness and sceptical about scepticism, 'Clough cannot quite commit to indifference'.[23] Sometimes a superlative is genuinely a superlative. In unpublished lines which were drafted as part of *Amours de Voyage*, Clough's protagonist Claude tells his correspondent Eustace that

> No, I am not, you may trust me in any true sense a Sceptic,
> Not in the highest things a Sceptic, however I seem so.
> Look you, most people accepting, as Time or Locality, Birth or
> Education suggests, some *particular* things, are therefore
> Credited largely for faith, heaven help us, in *things in general*.
> I who sincerely believe, as I fancy, in *things in general*,

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> That is, in God, you know, am a sceptic forsooth, as I do not
> Make-up instanter my mind to believe in your *things in particular*.
> I am, believe me, at bottom nor sceptic nor unbeliever,
> Misbeliever perhaps, as I go the wrong way about it;
> So it would seem; yet rather account me an over-believer
> Young and romantic; perhaps as you say too a little bit cracky.
>
> (*Poems*, p. 636; Clough's emphases)

Conventional definitions of scepticism and faith, Claude argues, are founded on a confusion of 'the highest things' with 'particular things', the ideal with the commonplace. He uses the superlative adjective to resolve this confusion, and to reinstate the distinction between the socially and historically contingent 'things in particular' of which he is sceptical and 'things in general', the highest truths in which he sincerely believes. This binary, in conjunction with the verbal amplitude of the poem's hexameter lines – which find room both for exasperated exhortations ('look you', 'heaven help us') and for self-checking qualifications ('as I fancy', 'that is') – enables Claude to present himself as an 'over-believer', whose seeming scepticism is founded on the vehemence (perhaps the excess) of his single-minded honesty.

The distinction between 'highest things' and the accidents of 'Time or Locality' is mirrored in two words that represent opposite ends of the wide spectrum of Claude's vocabulary: the colloquial 'cracky' ('crazy') summarises other people's perception of his wrong-headed dismissal of conventional beliefs, while the legalistic 'instanter' articulates what he sees as his principled critique of those beliefs. The words highlight a duality in modern English – its simultaneous dependence on Old English and on a range of other languages, especially Latin – that was a central concern of Victorian philology and of Clough's thinking about the history of the English language. In

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the manuscript of a lecture on the subject, he presents 'things in particular' and 'things in general' as the respective domains of competing linguistic influences:

> Strong & primitive notions are expressed in A. S. The foundation of the language thus once laid, a learned labour came to enrich this popular idiom by adding to it the metaphysical tints & words of generalization which were wanting to it.[24]

This model of a hierarchical but harmonious relation between the popular realism of Anglo-Saxon and the metaphysical generalisations of 'learned' language is almost immediately upset by Clough's identification of the two idioms as historical opponents. One of the 'less favourable results' of the 'French conquest' of England in the eleventh century was the dilution of English through 'an infusion of bastard Latin': 'adjectives stripped themselves of their terminations; the old language suffered the fate common to all conquered & sacrificed languages. Many beauties inherent in the Teutonic idioms disappeared all at once'.[25] These comments raise the possibility that Clough's imitation of the Carlylean inflectional superlative, with its Old English '-est' termination, is an expression of his agreement with Carlyle's Germanophilia. They also suggest a degree of sympathy with the Victorian linguistic nativism that aimed to define the English language as a nationally 'pure' outgrowth of Anglo-Saxon.

The American philologist George Perkins Marsh argued in 1860 that 'there was, for a long time, an increasing inclination to reject the regular comparative and superlative degrees' of adjectives and adverbs 'and to substitute in all cases the comparison by *more* and *most*, a construction Norman in form'. This inclination 'seriously threatened the literary and linguistic as well as the political nationality of England, but happily we have now returned to our native allegiance, and the legitimate and expressive Saxon inflection has recovered its lawful ascendancy'.[26] For Marsh, the kind of inflectional superlatives used by Carlyle and by Clough constitute part of a political as well as a

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stylistic reorientation of writing in English, a welcome recognition of the language's 'native allegiance' to its Anglo-Saxon roots. This linguistic chauvinism is, however, at odds with Clough's liberal politics and with his self-checking scepticism, which is expressed in characteristically strident terms in his lecture on language: while he laments the extinction of the 'beauties inherent in the Teutonic idioms', he also criticises the 'German barbarisms' of Carlyle's style.[27]

As Joseph Phelan has pointed out, while Clough at times suggests that 'different cultural traditions, especially Anglo-Saxon and French ones', are, 'at their deepest level, simply incompatible with one another', his writings also display a 'willingness to absorb words of foreign origin' into English.[28] In another lecture, on 'The Development of English Literature', he claims that the writers of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are famous 'wherever English is spoken or studied. It is to these that foreigners desirous of learning our language most naturally recur', and 'for models in English writing the tradition not yet obsolete of our fathers refers us imperatively hither'. This is because

> English prose before the age of Dryden was in the hands for the most part of men, who read and preached more than they talked and had learnt to compose Latin before they set themselves to write the vernacular. But Latin is by the inherent nature of its grammar and construction a language singularly alien to the genius of a natural English style. French, which was the chief reading of the English writers, after the Restoration, both as a living and as a modern language, was a far more useful auxiliary.
>
> (*AHC*, p. 243)

Clough's concerns about linguistic interchange in this lecture are not ideological but aesthetic and pragmatic: he regrets the mismatch in 'grammar and construction' between English and Latin specifically rather than the influence of other languages in general. And he implies, in contrast to Marsh and other

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nativists, that a 'natural English style' is characterised in the past and the present alike by an openness to other linguistic traditions. This view of literary history is instantiated in the eclectic style of his own poetry, throughout which competing idioms and influences overlap with and modify each other.

Inflectional superlatives complicate Clough's opposition between Anglo-Saxon realism and Latinate metaphysics because they frequently combine the two languages, joining the Old English termination to Latinate or Romance bases, and because they demonstrate the capacity of adjectives to address the concrete and the abstract simultaneously. But the dialectical pattern of Clough's poetic thinking typically involves the revision rather than the demolition of binaries, and his adherence to the widespread Victorian distinction between northern and southern languages and cultures, and to the related clichés about national temperament, is evident again in 'Resignation'. Written during his visit to Rome in 1849, this poem revels in a grotesque comparison between the city's architectural and historical grandeur and the messy corporeality of its inhabitants' daily lives. The speaker laments that the 'Northern pilgrim' finds himself 'Foot-deep in dirt in classic land' (*Poems*, ll. 38, 42), but then accedes to this contrast as an inevitability:

> Ah Nature, if indeed thy will
> Thou own'st it, it shall not be ill!
> And truly here, in this quick clime
> Where, scarcely bound by space or time,
> The elements in half a day
> Toss off with exquisitest play
> What our cold seasons toil and grieve,
> And never quite at last achieve;

'In such a clime, who thinks, forgives; / Who sees, will understand' (*Poems*, ll. 51-8, 70-1). The dualist opposition between 'Northern' and Mediterranean Europe is presented here as grounds for connection, as the speaker, invested with the spatial and temporal freedom of the Italian elements, expresses his

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sympathetic admiration of their 'exquisitest play'. His argument seems to be that the rapidity of the transitions between extremes in Italian culture and climate enables a comprehensive (and consoling) overview of the natural forces that underpin those transitions.

The involved exuberance of his language indicates that this might be a parody of the more muted claim, in Matthew Arnold's 'Resignation' (published in 1849), that '*Not deep the poet sees, but wide*'.[29] The manuscript of Clough's 'Resignation' is headed with the words 'now you shall have some sweet pretty verses, in *your* style'.[30] But if the poem is a rejoinder to Arnold's, it shows Clough's determination to adapt the styles of other writers to suit his own concerns. Paul Giles has observed that 'by juxtaposing high and low cultures in parodic and unstable relationships, Clough translates national identity into a dialogical phenomenon'.[31] 'Resignation' suggests that Clough considers the relations between different national identities to be similarly informed by a juxtaposition of the elevated and the down-to-earth. Rome subverts English expectations: it may be '*rubbishy*', as Claude says in *Amours de Voyage*, but in 'Resignation' the city's grimy vitality frees the speaker from his preconceptions (*Poems*, i. 20; Clough's emphasis). The inflectional superlative 'exquisitest' encapsulates this liberation in two ways. It is unusual among Clough's superlatives in deliberately disrupting the regularity of the poem's metre, a formal hitch that conveys to the reader the pleasurable culture shock which Rome elicits in the speaker. And, because it is both Latinate and 'Northern' in its morphology and etymology, the adjective enacts on the level of grammar the cultural exchange on which the poem's argument is founded.

Throughout his poetry, Clough's cosmopolitan promotion of intercultural dialogue is balanced by a concern about the misunderstandings and appropriations in which tourism often results, and by a scepticism towards the extravagant claims of tourists. In *The Bothie*, for example, two Oxford students recount their travels through Scotland:

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Drumnadrochet was *seedy*, Glenmorison *adequate*, but at
Castleton, high in Braemar, were the *clippingest* places for bathing,
One by the bridge in the village, indecent, *the Town-Hall* christened,
Where had Lauder howbeit been bathing, and Harrison also,
Harrison even, the Tutor; another like Hesperus here, and
Up the water of Eye half-a-dozen at least, all *stunners*.
And it was told, the Piper narrating and Arthur correcting,
Colouring he, dilating, magniloquent, glorying in picture,
He to a matter-of-fact still softening, paring, abating,
He to the great might-have-been upsoaring, sublime and ideal,
He to the merest it-was restricting, diminishing, dwarfing,
River to streamlet reducing, and fall to slope subduing.
(*Poems*, iii. 145-56; Clough's emphases)

As is typical of Clough's poetry, the first six lines juxtapose different linguistic registers, the Scottish place names and the italicised Oxford slang, with purposive self-consciousness. The superlative 'clippingest', magnifying a slang term meaning 'excellent, first-rate', epitomises the affected newness of the language used by Lindsay ('the Piper'): the *OED* cites this as the earliest instance not just of the superlative but of 'clipping' itself.[32] Although Lindsay's magniloquence is presented as excessive, Clough was by no means hostile to linguistic innovation: he commented in his lecture on language that 'to devolatilize the breath and to restrict a language to the limits of the lexicon is mere folly'.[33] Inflectional superlatives, as derivatives of other words, occupy an uncertain place in lexicons: in the *OED*, some (such as 'highest') are awarded their own entries; others ('deepest') are discussed in the entries of their bases; and less conventional specimens ('bloomiest', 'unobtrusivest') are not included at all. This indefiniteness offers Clough licence to invent new superlatives that reflect the intellectual and formal interests

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of his poetry: the inflectional 'clippingest', in contrast to the periphrastic 'most clipping', fits within the dactylic metre of *The Bothie*'s hexameters, a poetic form founded on the models of Greek and Latin epic.

In reworking the English language to suit an imported poetic form, Clough is following the example of Byron, who often deploys unusual inflectional superlatives in the ottava rima of *Don Juan*.[34] The interplay of metre and grammar in *The Bothie* enacts the habitual irony of Clough's superlatives, as metrical regularity both offers a kind of formal endorsement of Lindsay's slang and emphasises it to satirical effect. The next six lines juxtapose exaggeration with realism, exuberance with control, as Lindsay's evocation of 'the great might-have-been' is tempered by his friend Arthur's adherence to 'the merest it-was'. The superlative 'merest' denotes a minimal foundation of fact that cannot, for Arthur, be dispensed with, anchoring Lindsay's 'sublime' imaginings in empirical precision. But, for the most part, adjectives are crowded out of these lines by present-participle verbs, as Clough highlights the way in which adjectival description is a matter of active and subjective choice. The comedy of *The Bothie*'s mock-epic metre, contrasting idioms, and discordant voices is directed here not just at Lindsay's exaggerated language but at the traditions of masculine heroism and adventurous travel that inform it: Clough shares with Byron a joy both in telling tall tales and in cutting them down to size.

Clough frequently employs superlatives in this way, to dramatise the excessively single-minded perspectives of his poems' male speakers, and to balance exaggerated idealism with cautious realism. When the protagonist of *The Bothie*, the radical student Philip Hewson, sets out his political convictions in the poem's second part, he celebrates working women ahead of middle-class and aristocratic ladies, extolling the 'chivalry' that 'Stirs in the veins of a man at seeing some delicate woman / Serving him, toiling – for him, and the world; some tenderest girl' (*Poems*, ii. 75-7). Philip's grammar gives the lie to his chivalry, as the adjacency of 'tenderest' to the indefinite 'some' shows that he is imagining an idealised and impersonal superlative of feminine devotion. And the sexual objectification involved

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in this ideal is evident in his fantasy of a woman 'Comely, with well-poised pail over neck arching soft to the shoulders, / Comely in gracefullest act' (*Poems*, ii. 100-1), as his inflectional superlative confirms that his politics are motivated in part by his view of the aesthetic charm of female labour, a view which is an inversion rather than a rejection of conventional class-based definitions of beauty and grace. Philip acknowledges the reductiveness of his beliefs, however, after falling in love with the working-class Elspie Mackaye. They marry at the end of the poem, and Philip's friend Hobbes sends him a letter that alludes to the biblical story of Jacob, who marries the sisters Leah and Rachel. '*Which things are an allegory*', Hobbes writes,

> For this Rachel-and-Leah is marriage; which, I have seen it,
> Lo, and have known it, is always, and must be, bigamy only,
> Even in noblest kind a duality, compound, and complex,
> One part heavenly-ideal, the other vulgar and earthy:
> For this Rachel-and-Leah is marriage, and Laban their father
> Circumstance, chance, the world, our uncle and hard task-master.
>
> (*Poems*, ix. 166-72; Clough's emphases)

Hobbes's allegory teaches Philip a lesson which, by now, he has already learned: the indivisibility of the 'heavenly-ideal' from the 'vulgar and earthy'. Clough returns to this lesson throughout his poetry: it is foundational to his understandings of language, of the interchanges between different cultures, and of gender and sexuality. In characteristically Cloughian syntax, Hobbes uses a superlative adjective and then immediately undermines it, insisting that even things which appear exemplary are complex and contingent, and suggesting that the superlative degree is inapplicable to the realities of life.

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The Bothie's sober assessment of the duality of marriage is, however, reframed in more idealistic terms in 'The Silver Wedding', in which Clough writes, of a couple celebrating their anniversary, that 'the subtlest alchemy of years' has transmuted the dreams of their youth 'to genuine substance here at last':

> Come years again! as many yet! and purge
> Less precious earthier elements away,
> And gently changed at life's extremest verge,
> Bring bright in gold your perfect fiftieth day!
> (*Poems*, ll. 27-8, 49-52)

While Hobbes figures marriage as inescapably and permanently compound, an amalgam of the heavenly and the earthy, this poem imagines it as an ongoing process of sublimation, a process enacted in the shift from the clogged and compressed syllables of line 50 to the measured iambic regularity of line 51. This regularity is guaranteed by the inflectional superlative 'extremest', which argues that time's 'subtlest alchemy' has as its end a conclusive goal, a perfect refinement attainable in an old age that the poem identifies as the 'verge' between life and death. In this instance, Clough use a comparative ('earthier') not to qualify or diminish a superlative, but to trace an unambiguous ascent from the physical to the spiritual.

As is often the case with Clough's superlatives, especially those in the poems (such as 'The Silver Wedding' and 'Natura Naturans') that were written in his twenties and published in *Ambarvalia*, it is difficult to say whether 'extremest' expresses a youthful earnestness (which is genuine in its amazement at the thought of being married for fifty years), or a self-conscious recognition of its own excess. Another *Ambarvalia* poem, 'Qui Laborat, Orat' ('who works, prays'), suggests that the earnestness is genuine, but also that Clough was already prepared, in these early poems, to interrogate his superlative assertions. Confronted by the silence of God in answer to his prayers, the poem's speaker tries to find another way to communicate with the divine:

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With eye down-dropt, if then this earthly mind
Speechless remain, or speechless e'en depart,
Nor seek to see (for what of earthly kind
Can see Thee as Thou art?) –

If sure assured 'tis but profanely bold
In thought's abstractest forms to seem to see,
It dare not dare thee dread communion hold
In ways unworthy Thee, –

O not unowned, Thou shalt unnamed forgive,
In worldly walks the prayerless heart prepare,
And if in work its life it seem to live,
Shalt make that work be prayer.

(*Poems*, ll. 9-20)

The first two stanzas here elaborate a dualism, summarised in the superlative adjective and the qualifying and qualified verbs of 'In thought's abstractest forms to seem to see', which maintains that any effort to connect the earthly to the divine is almost certain to fail. 'Abstractest' represents Clough's effort to push this argument to its conclusion: even at the height of its intellectual and spiritual abstraction, the 'earthly mind' cannot commune with God. But while lines 9-16 emphasise the vastness of the gap between the earthly and the divine, the next stanza collapses the distinction between them through its Carlylean invocation of the spiritual value of work. The juxtaposition of these two arguments across the turn from one stanza to the next – the first divorcing the concrete from the abstract and the second rejoining them – is emblematic of the fluctuation between contending viewpoints that characterises Clough's self-questioning in his poetry.

This style of argument, in which stanzas within the same poem or the voices of different speakers act as palinodes to each other, also underpins the dialogic form of *Dipsychus and the Spirit*. Although his name labels him as the epitome of 'double-

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minded' incertitude, Dipsychus is often unequivocal in his expression of his opinions, and his vehemence is matched by the corresponding conviction of his interlocutor, the Spirit who goads and tempts him. Superlatives in *Dipsychus and the Spirit* are shared equally between the two speakers, and they demonstrate how, in John Maynard's words, the poem 'objectifies confusion and self-division into dramatic dialogue', a method that 'works as a dialectic' and that 'allows for expression of a wide range of positions, including extremes, thus providing an ideal medium for Clough's restless openness to the strong points in different ideas as well as his rather merciless exposure of weak ones'.[35] This dialectic unfolds not just in the exchanges between Dipsychus and the Spirit but across Dipsychus's assertions in successive scenes. He veers between extreme positions throughout the poem, and it is precisely this intellectual toing and froing that the Spirit diagnoses as his main problem:

> You feel yourself, to loathe and yet be fain,
> And still to move and still draw back again,
> Is a proceeding wholly without end.
> So if you really hate the street, my friend,
> Why, one must try the drawing room, one fancies:
> Say, will you run to concert and to dances
> And with my help go into good society?
> The World don't love, 'tis true, this peevish piety:
> E'en they with whom it thinks to be securest,
> Your most religious, delicatest, purest,
> Discern, and show as well-bred people can,
> Their feeling that you are not quite a man.
>
> (*AHC*, I. iv. 7-18)

The inflectional superlatives work in conjunction with these lines' unstressed rhymes and catalectic iambic metre (which is maintained through the expedient use of 'most religious' rather than 'religiousest') to recall the mockingly elevated tone of Byronic satire, as the Spirit lampoons the timid scruples with

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which Dipsychus tries to justify his unending indecision about whether or not to involve himself in the life of 'the World'. The Spirit presents his advice in the style of a Byronic attack on disingenuous cant, but his intemperate language raises questions about the legitimacy of this attack: ending with the unforgivingly monosyllabic accusation 'that you are not quite a man', his lines summarise the way in which, in this poem as in *The Bothie*, Clough employs unusual superlatives to critique, through exaggeration, literary and social conventions of aggressive masculinity.

While the Spirit frames submission to society's gendered expectations as common-sense pragmatism, Dipsychus rejects his advice, seeing it as a violation of a moral distinction between the real and the ideal. When the Spirit castigates him for refusing to confront a soldier who has insulted him – 'Go up to him. You must, that's flat. / Be threaten'd by a beast like that!' (*AHC*, I. vi. 8-9) – Dipsychus replies:

> For grosser evils their gross remedies
> The laws afford us, let us be content
> For finer wounds the law would, if it could,
> Find medicine too – it cannot: let us bear;
> For sufferance is the badge of all men's tribes.
>
> For these no code of delicatest enactment
> No court of honour's subtlest precedents
> No rules, no judges, can ensure defence.
>
> (*AHC*, I. vi. 62-9)

The positives and comparatives of the first five lines ('gross', 'grosser', 'finer') are displaced by superlatives in the next three, as Dipsychus's adjectival grammar sets out a hierarchical opposition between the mundane matters which lie within the remit of social 'laws' and the subjective moral feeling that transcends their jurisdiction. The polysyllabic phrase 'delicatest enactment' correspondingly

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exceeds the limits of Clough's blank verse, inviting a satirical assessment of the self-importance of Dipsychus's 'peevish piety' and supporting Daniel Kline's observation that 'the central linguistic contest' of this poem is 'between the plain-spoken, idiomatic language of the Spirit and the more self-consciously styled, classical and high literary language of Dipsychus'.[36] Yet the two speakers' shared use of inflectional superlatives also highlights the similarities between their voices, both of which typify Clough's writing in their use of a register that is neither straightforwardly idiomatic nor literary, but deliberately idiosyncratic, designed to defamiliarise and therefore to question the arguments which it conveys. And Clough directs this critical distortion not just at his speakers but at himself. In an 1848 diary entry he employs superlatives to diagnose a case of writer's block: 'the sweetest securest undisturbedest solitude' and a good night's sleep 'hath so, with adroitest ministers, with delicatest tuning key, renewed me, readjusted me, harmonized me that I seem to myself as it were some instrument of happiest unity, some harp of perfectest concord'.[37] But, still, he finds himself incapable of writing verse. His language here highlights the proximity of the poem's debate about pragmatism and idealism to another of his abiding concerns: the conflict between work and self-contemplation. Like the Spirit and in contrast to Dipsychus, Clough in his diary uses the adjective 'delicatest' mockingly, as an expression of the self-defeating impotence of refined sensibility.

As Julia Saville has noted, the exaggerated language of *Dipsychus and the Spirit* resounds with Carlylean echoes.[38] Dipsychus's effort to hold the moral high ground by resisting the Spirit's exhortations to violence can be read as a rebuttal of Carlyle's claim, in *Past and Present*, that 'in all battles, if you await the issue, each fighter has prospered according to his right. His right and his might, at the close of the account, were one and the same'.[39] Dipsychus unequivocally separates 'might' from 'right', but in the next scene in the poem's manuscripts he reinstates Carlyle's infamous conflation of the two:

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Ring ding ring ding; tara, tara,
Away and hush that preaching, fagh!
Ye vulgar dreamers about peace
Who offer noblest hearts to heal
The tenderest hurts honour can feel
Paid magistrates and the Police.
O piddling merchant justice go,
Exacter rules than yours we know,
Resentment's rule, and that high law
Of whoso best the sword can draw.

(*AHC*, I. vii. 93-102)

The ordering of degrees of adjective in the previous scene is reversed in Dipsychus's song: his grammar descends from superlatives to a comparative ('exacter') and a positive ('high'), tracing a deductive argument that begins with his elevated moral sense but that ends in violent action, and which is summarised in the seemingly conclusive rhyme of an abstract noun and a physical verb, 'law' and 'draw'. Between the two scenes Dipsychus jumps from one extreme to its opposite, imitating the voices of Carlyle and the Spirit here and appearing to accede to their views. But the next line of the song indicates that his revelling in the snobbery and machismo championed by the Spirit is a fantasy, a speculative and temporary performance of an alternative stance. Dipsychus changes tack again, expressing a nonchalance that immediately undercuts the bluster of the preceding lines: 'Ah well and yet –' (*AHC*, I. vii. 103).

Despite the Spirit's cynicism, it is difficult not to sympathise, to some extent, with his irritation at Dipsychus's persistent alternating between contrary opinions:

To burn forsooth for Action, yet despise
Forsooth, its accidence and alphabet,

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> Cry out for service, and at once rebel
> At the application of its plainest rules,
> This, you call life, my friend, reality,
> Doing your duty unto God and man.
>
> (*AHC*, II.iv.118-23)

His ire in these lines is targeted at Dipsychus's refusal to adhere to the realism that was a prominent aspect of Clough's thinking. The superlative phrase 'plainest rules', like *The Bothie*'s 'merest it-was', describes a groundwork of empirical reality without which abstract nouns such as 'duty' and 'service' are, in the Spirit's view, baseless nonentities. And his linguistic metaphor sets up an equivalence between these 'plainest rules' and the rules of grammar: 'Action' is dependent on a prior willingness to learn and utilise what the Spirit refers to in a deleted draft in the poem's manuscript as 'its merest accidence and alphabet'.[40] Accidence, 'the branch of grammar which deals with the inflection of words, grammatical morphology', offers a guide to the pragmatic application of abstract rules, a guide which is put into practice in the Spirit's superlative adjectives.[41]

Yet if Clough is likely to have endorsed the realism of these lines, he would have been less happy with their dogmatism: the Spirit's 'accidence' metaphor identifies him as the kind of prescriptive grammarian or lexicographer of whose work Clough was sceptical. Throughout his writing, he deploys superlatives in ways which subvert the arguments they express and which flout the morphological conventions of English: the inherent excess of these adjectives offers him a means of articulating clear positions while also maintaining a self-conscious distance from them. In 1862 David Masson wrote that the 'modern scepticism' of Clough's poetry refuses to go 'in search of other ground, of a more definite footing'. Instead, 'what we see in Clough' is a 'resigned and humble satisfaction with that speculative state as the truest attainable, a kind of jealous watchfulness lest he should be lured or driven out of it, a kind of resolution never to go backward or forward from it' (*CH*, pp. 146-7). But Clough's resolution is dynamic rather than static:

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across his poetry as a whole, he attains the 'truest attainable' perspective not by humbly occupying the speculative middle ground, but by fluctuating back and forth between contending arguments. This sceptical dialectic was not without its frustrations, as he indicates in an 1853 poem:

> To spend uncounted years of pain,
> Again, again, and yet again,
> In working out in heart and brain
> The problem of our being here;
> To gather facts from far and near,
> Upon the mind to hold them clear,
> And, knowing more may yet appear,
> Unto one's latest breath to fear
> The premature result to draw –
> Is this the object, end and law,
> And purpose of our being here?
>
> (*Poems*, p. 313)

Starting with an infinitive verb and finishing with abstract nouns, the grammatical course of this poem is similar to that of the Spirit's attack on Dipsychus: both trace a process of reflection that aims, but fails, to synthesise opposing viewpoints and to incorporate particular facts within general laws. But while the Spirit's lines are derisive of double-mindedness, the end of this poem (and the 'end' of 'our being here') is an unanswered and unanswerable question which perpetuates ambivalence. The asking of this question 'again, again, and yet again' is painful, but the language of the poem nonetheless takes pains to ensure that there is always time to repeat it. The adjective 'latest' in the eighth line is expedient not just formally, guaranteeing the poem's octosyllabic metre, but also semantically: involving both the exclusively 'poetic' sense of the word as synonymous with 'last' or 'final' and its everyday meaning ('most recent'), it typifies Clough's superlatives in being simultaneously absolute and interim.[42] Echoing the 'indispensable latest addenda' of

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'Recent English Poetry' (written in the same year), this poem's 'latest breath' reiterates his view, which underpins the permanent provisionality of his single-minded scepticism, that the writer's task of gathering and questioning facts must be 'a proceeding wholly without end'.

University of St Andrews, UK

NOTES

[1] *The Poems of Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. F. L. Mulhauser (Oxford, 1974); hereafter *Poems*.
[2] *The Correspondence of Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. F. L. Mulhauser, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1957), i. 62; hereafter *Correspondence*.
[3] Michael Thorpe (ed.), *Clough: The Critical Heritage* (1972), p. 162 (Bagehot's emphasis); hereafter *CH*.
[4] *OED* entry for 'single-minded', senses 1 and 3.
[5] *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols. (Charlottesville, Va., 1996-2001), i. 254.
[6] Arnold, *On Translating Homer: Last Words* (1862), pp. 68-9.
[7] Clough, 'Recent English Poetry', *North American Review*, 77 (1853), 1-30: 22.
[8] *21st-Century Oxford Authors: Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. Gregory Tate (Oxford, 2020), p. 213; hereafter *AHC*. References to *Dipsychus and the Spirit* are to this edition rather than to *Poems*, because it follows more closely the ordering of the poem's scenes in Clough's manuscripts.
[9] Clough, 'Recent English Poetry', p. 3.
[10] Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (1993), pp. 186-7.
[11] Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 1168-9.
[12] Fergus McGhee, 'Clough, Emerson, and Knowingness', *Review of English Studies*, 71 (2020), 413-32: 416.
[13] Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Intellect', in *Essays* (1841), pp. 327-49: 341.

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[14] John Daniel Morell, *A Grammar of the English Language* (1857), pp. 31-2 (Morell's emphases). For Clough's ownership of 'Morell's English Grammar', see the inventory of his books in MS Eng. misc. c. 359, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, fos. 152-9: 156.
[15] Fitzedward Hall, *Modern English* (1873), pp. 188-9.
[16] Helen Small, *The Function of Cynicism at the Present Time* (Oxford, 2020), p. 96.
[17] Thomas Carlyle, 'Characteristics', *Edinburgh Review*, 54 (1831), 351-83: 371.
[18] Frederic Harrison, 'On Style in English Prose', *Nineteenth Century*, 43 (1898), 932-42: 941.
[19] Clough, 'Review of Mr Newman's *The Soul*', in *The Poems and Prose Remains of Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. Blanche Clough, 2 vols. (1869), i. 293-305: 305.
[20] Clara Dawson, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of Evaluation* (Oxford, 2020), p. 78.
[21] Clough, 'On Shakespeare', Clough–Nightingale Papers 7, Balliol College, University of Oxford, fos. 2 and 5 (Clough's emphases).
[22] Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, ed. Brent E. Kinser and David R. Sorensen (Oxford, 2019), p. 172.
[23] Anna Barton, *Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Liberal Thought: Forms of Freedom* (2017), p. 186.
[24] Clough, 'Lecture on Language', MS Eng. misc. d. 511, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, fos. 202-32: 214^{v}.
[25] Ibid., fos. 215^{r-v}.
[26] George Perkins Marsh, *Lectures on the English Language* (1860), p. 312 (Marsh's emphases).
[27] Clough, 'Lecture on Language', fo. 210^{r}.
[28] Joseph Phelan, 'Arthur Hugh Clough, Francis James Child, and Mid-Victorian Chaucer', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 59 (2019), 855-72: 860-1 and 869.
[29] *The Poem of Matthew Arnold*, 2nd edn., ed. Kenneth Allott and Miriam Allott (1979), l. 214 (Arnold's emphases).
[30] Clough, MS Eng. poet. d. 129, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, fo. 56 (Clough's emphasis).

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[31] Paul Giles, *Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature* (Oxford, 2006), p. 112.
[32] *OED* entry for 'clipping' (adjective), sense 2c.
[33] Clough, 'Lecture on Language', fo. 217^{r}.
[34] See Richard Cronin, 'Byron, Clough, and the Grounding of Victorian Poetry', *Romanticism*, 14 (2008), 13-24: 20-1.
[35] John Maynard, *Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 65.
[36] Daniel S. Kline, 'Educated Speech: Victorian Philology and the Literary Languages of Matthew Arnold and Arthur Hugh Clough', Ph.D. thesis, Ohio State University (2007), p. 215.
[37] *The Oxford Diaries of Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford, 1990), p. 253.
[38] Julia F. Saville, *Victorian Soul-Talk: Poetry, Democracy, and the Body Politic* (2017), pp. 116-17.
[39] Carlyle, *Past and Present* (1843), p. 15.
[40] Clough, MS Eng. poet. d. 135, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, fo. 21^{r}.
[41] *OED* entry for 'accidence', sense 2.
[42] *OED* entry for 'latest', senses 1 and 3.

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