First of all, the unavoidable question of *Dipsychus*: why is this wonderfully witty and intelligent work so little known? True, parts of it have been anthologised and achieved a certain popularity: “How pleasant it is to have money, heigh ho!” and “There is no God, the wicked saith...”. But why hasn’t this spurred readers to seek out the whole work? Certainly, there are the textual problems; left unfinished at Clough’s death, with many of the lyrics existing in various versions, it has kept editors (the first being his widow) busy for a century and a half, trying to shape the definitive edition.

However, similar problems exist with other canonical works — including, after all, what is probably the most famous work in all literature, *Hamlet*. So one doesn’t see why that should prove such a major deterrence. Perhaps it’s not a question of *this* particular work, but of Clough as a whole. And all Clough-defenders know that there’s a big problem of reputation — one that goes all the way back to that beautiful but unfortunate elegy of Arnold’s, and then the extremely unfair glancing reference in Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians*... The overall result is that Clough has ended up with the reputation of a literary J. Alfred Prufrock — glumly and ineffectually watching the mermaids from Dover Beach. And while one may one want to read poetry about Prufrock, one doesn’t feel so tempted to read works written by him.

If one attempts to make a summary of *Dipsychus*, it might be difficult to make it sound particularly alluring: a Victorian crisis poem, centred on religious doubt, without any firm resolution. So what’s new?

Well, a good deal, as it turns out. Many Clough defenders have taken up a reference to him in Graham Greene’s novel *The Quiet American*, where the narrator says: “He was an adult poet in the nineteenth century. There weren’t that many of them”
(177). It's not too difficult to understand what Greene meant by this. First of all, there's the frank openness in facing his religious crisis and the equally frank openness in discussing sexual matters; Clough was always willing to face facts, including the disturbing facts, for example, of Victorian prostitution. (He was far too frank on this subject for his widow-editor.) This was part of his general firm grasp of contemporary life; despite his often vexing use of archaisms ("Say not the struggle naught availeth"), there is a strong sense of actuality in his poetry; the world he describes is realistic, believable and living — and all the more troubling for that.

That is what makes his use of the Venetian background so particularly fascinating in Dipsychus. For in an age in which England's greatest novelist — a writer whose descriptions of London make us feel we can touch, breathe, see and hear the bustling city around us as we read — could describe Venice only in terms of a dream, Clough gives us a sharply realistic, acute portrait of the city, with its now rather tawdry festivals, its surly Croat mercenary soldiers, its pathetic prostitutes — and at the same time all its legendary charm and fascination.

I'm interested in seeing the use Clough makes of this setting, for I am convinced that it was not chosen simply as a picturesque background to the troubled ruminations of the protagonist. It has a much more important role and I want to explore just what that role is.

Clearly there are parts of the work that are less Venetian than others: the rollicking song already mentioned, "How pleasant it is to have money" (published elsewhere as "Spectator ab extra"), is actually prefaced with the words, "Written in London, standing in the Park, / An evening in July, just before dark" [241]). And Venice seems to play a decreasingly important role in the second half of the poem. Of course, partly this is due to the overall lack of unity, and to the muddled state of the manuscripts.

But nonetheless, despite the occasional sense of dispersion, I think it fair to say that Venice is essential. The simplest account of the poem's subject-matter is given in the curious Epilogue, in which the poet appears to endeavour to forestall all criticism, by putting it already into the mouth of the poet's querulous uncle; the poet's own defensive description of the poem to his uncle is worded as follows: "[T]he thing which it is attempted to represent is the conflict between the tender conscience and the world" (292). This, as I say, is clear enough and is certainly
not a distortion of the poem; however, the conflict is not reducible to a clear-cut clash between black and white; there exists a whole range of other colours to complicate matters – and most of these colours, naturally enough, are provided by the city of Venice. The city serves, in all its gaudy glory, as a check on any over-hasty urge to pass judgement.

There are only two speaking characters in this mini-drama, although we hear of a number of other significant characters, such as the prostitute, the gondolier and the loutish Croat soldier. In an early version Clough gave the two characters the names of Faustulus and Mephisto, and even in the revised version, Dipsychus directly addresses his attendant Spirit as Mephistopheles. However, the Spirit cannot be simply dismissed as the Devil, just as Dipsychus’s final decision to “submit” to the pressures of the world cannot be simply viewed as a tragic defeat of idealism. There’s a good deal of ambiguity, and Venice’s curious double reputation contributes greatly to this general effect and to the unsettling nature of the whole poem.

Venice is, after all, the ambiguous city par excellence, hovering in a permanent state of in-betweenness, physically between land and water, geographically between east and west, historically between Byzantium and Rome, between Pope and Emperor, between Crusaders and Turks, existentially between nature and culture, morally between Mammon and God – and nowadays between Art Museum and Disneyland. And the British have been ambiguous about the city since the first visitors, marvelling at it, but not trusting it; for Shakespeare it was, in The Merchant of Venice, the city where impartial justice could be expected, but it was also, in Othello, the city of “super-subtle Venetians”, of lechery and treachery.

In the eighteenth century, arguably the period when contacts between Great Britain and Venice were at their most intense, attitudes were noticeably divided. It was the time of the Grand Tour and a visit to Venice was often seen as providing the crowning touch for a young man’s education; and yet all the negative aspects of this always controversial practice seemed to be taken to extremes in Venice – the exposure to the gaudy trappings of Roman Catholicism and to the lax customs and loose morals of southern Europeans. And unlike Rome, the city could not be thought of as little more than a large museum with gratifyingly subservient custodians. Eighteenth-century Venice was all too vibrantly alive and autonomous. As Bruce Redford put it in his
authoritative study of the Grand Tour: "To move from Rome to Venice [...] was to enter an arena of multiple myths and fluid modernity – an arena that refused to arrange itself for the traveler in scenographic simplicity" (82). This perhaps helps to explain the biting satire of Alexander Pope's description of the role that Venice played in the education of a dunce:

But chief her shrine where naked Venus keeps,  
And Cupids ride the Lyon of the Deeps;  
Where, eas'd of Fleets, the Adriatic main  
 Wafts the smooth Eunuch and enamour'd swain. (782)

And yet at the same time many visitors and observers admired Venice as the one free state in a land seen otherwise as under the oppression of obscurantist priests or foreign tyrants. This attitude of political respect was to culminate in Wordsworth's sonnet "On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic", in which the city is actually addressed as "the eldest Child of Liberty" and "maiden City, bright and free" (128). So Venice could be seen, depending on the point of view, as either Venus or Virgin (a paradox that would be taken up in the 1985 novel by Barry Unsworth, Stone Virgin, centred on a Venetian statue of the Virgin Mary modelled on a sculptor's prostitute-mistress), as either a dangerous corrupting influence or as a model to be imitated. Or perhaps both at once.

The romantics appear equally double-minded about the city, with Shelley revelling in its ethereal beauty as long as he can view it as a product of nature ("Ocean's nursling", 246), but driven to disgust the moment he considers its actual inhabitants ("Pollution-nourished worms", 247). This double approach is taken to extremes in Byron's two major poems on the city, which almost appear to be the works of two different poets. As we know, he lived a life of contrasts in the city – and gloried in the possibility of so doing –, spending, for example, mornings with the monks of San Lazzaro, studying Armenian, and evenings dallying with his mistresses (two-hundred, he casually boasts). The division is reflected in his works: on the one hand, he offers us the solemn pre-Baedeker style of "Childe Harold IV", which depicts a sepulchral town where "silent rows the songless gondolier" (vol. 2, 99), and on the other, he presents us the lively Carnival town of Beppo, full of "songs and quavers, roaring, humming / Guitars, and every other sort of strumming" (vol. 1, 371).

However, a certain pedagogical use of the city is common
to both poems. In the one case, Byron is showing us around the town in the role of an elegiac and earnest-minded cicerone, pointing sadly to its former glories and bidding us learn the lesson from their transience, in the other he acts as a knowing "animatore", familiar with all the gossip and local customs, and keen to show us around the town's liveliest spots.

Clough, like so many other writers on Venice, cannot escape the voices of his predecessors (Byron, too, frankly acknowledges his debts to "Orway, Radcliffe, Schiller and Shakespeare's art" [vol. 2, 103]), and prime among these is Byron himself. It is, after all, a poem about learning, about experience - so what could be more suitable than to include the advice of such a knowledgeable precursor? One could say that Byron is almost literally the guiding spirit in this text; he is not only referred to occasionally in directly guidebook fashion - the Lido is "[t]he place where Murray's faithful Guide / Informs us Byron used to ride" (252) - but the echo of his voice can be heard throughout.

The question naturally arises: is it the voice of "Childe Harold" or that of "Beppo"? And this is where the peculiarity of Clough's poem lies, for the poem manages a curious mixture of both tones, to unsettling and fascinating effect. This is true even metrically and rhythmically, so that we pass from the ponderous blank verse of Dipsychus's musings, which may remind us of the tone, if not the form, of "Childe Harold", to the sprightly meters and comic rhymes of the Spirit's lyrics, which are purely Beppo-esque in manner. Dipsychus himself, as his name suggests, is curiously divided - nowhere more so than in his schizophrenic song "I dreamt a dream" (247-250) with its tormented bell-like refrain that switches continually from a merry tinkling ("Ting ting") to a mournful tolling ("Dong dong").

There is no denying that the Spirit gets all the best tunes - or at least the most amusing ones. It might be worth pausing a moment to consider just who this Spirit is. As it happens, he gives us a very good description of himself, in the second half of the work:

O yes! you thought you had escaped, no doubt,
This worldly fiend that follows you about,
This compound of convention and impiety,
This mongrel of uncleanness and propriety. (280)

That sums it up nicely; he is by no means a melodramatically diabolic figure and there are undeniably moments when we can
hardly fail to feel that his down-to-earth cynicism has a point. It has been suggested that there is a change in the character; in the first half, he is clearly the tempter, urging Dipsychus to give way to his baser instincts, while in the second half we can recognise the tones and even the arguments used by some of Clough’s own friends, as they tried to persuade him not to cast his career away for the sake of an empty point of principle. The Spirit has been characterised by one critic as “l’homme moyen sensuel”, always ready to conform and untroubled by metaphysical or religious doubts, and ever ready to deflate Dipsychus’s moods:

If you want to pray  
I’ll step aside a little way.  
Eh? But I will not be far gone;  
You may be wanting me anon.  
Our lonely pious altitudes  
Are followed quick by prettier moods.  
Who knows not with what ease devotion  
Slips into earthlier emotion? (221)

His realm is always the earthly. And as this quotation makes clear (“You may be wanting me anon...”), it is also very important that he is a guide. Here the critic Walter Houghton has given us invaluable help by identifying a journal article by Clough, which is very much to the point. Houghton writes:

What I take to be the shaping plan of the poem occurs in a letter Clough published in the Balance for February 13, 1846. There he said: “The relation in which the moral and spiritual stands, in our age, to the business-like and economic, reminds one of a traveller on the continent, who, much to his discontent, and not without continual but futile interference, is yet obliged, by his ignorance of language and customs and character, to surrender the conduct of his journey to an experienced and faithful, but somewhat disreputable and covetous-minded companion.” (163)

This clearly anticipates the encounter we find in this poem. And it is worth remembering that the Spirit does not overstate his own importance; Dipsychus clearly is lost without him. It is the Spirit who knows all about Venicé, and is ready to explain its customs: “The Assunzione / was always a gran’ funzione” (222). He also knows how to hire a gondola and how much to pay for them. He makes no pretence to any fine aesthetic sense but he knows what ought to be seen: “We’ll turn to the Rialto soon; / One’s told to see it by the moon” (244). He does have
his opinions on architecture, and they go clearly against those of the great new authority on the scene:

Come, leave your Gothic, worn-out story,
San Giorgio and the Redeemtore;
I from no building, gay or solemn,
Can spare the shapely Grecian column...
Maturer optics don't delight
In childish dim religious light,
In evanescent vague effects.
That shirk, not face, one's intellects... (244)

However, he is prepared to concede:

The Doge's palace though, from hence,
In spite of Ruskin's d-d pretence,
The tide now level with the quay,
Is certainly a thing to see. (244)

The Spirit, then, is a guide, and the text suggests that he is the kind of guide one can expect in such a city - and in such an age. Maybe one would be an idealistic fool to hope for anything better. For Clough the question of guidance and leadership was a very deeply-felt one. His biography makes it clear just how much his life had been shaped by some powerfully influential pedagogic figures, starting with Dr. Arnold at Rugby School (who is discussed in the curious epilogue to Dipsychus) and subsequently his Oxford tutor W. G. Ward, a man who was going through his own religious crisis at the time Clough was studying and who made the young man privy to all his doubts and qualms; after Clough's death Ward was self-critical enough to write: "I must count it the great calamity of his life that he was brought into contact with myself" (Kenny, 4). Most of Clough's own religious crisis can be traced back to his contacts with these men and he was fully aware of the dangers of excessive reliance or dependence upon such figures. He himself had played the role of tutor at Oxford and had even acted as a kind of tour-guide for students, taking reading parties to Scotland. The phrase "the anxiety of influence" could have been coined specifically with Clough in mind.

The Spirit is clearly not to be compared to such intellectual or academic guides as Arnold or Ward. He is indeed the very opposite kind of adviser, offering the kind of plain-speaking, anti-intellectual advice that must even have had its attractions for
Clough at certain moments during his tormented moral, philosophical and religious crises:

Like a good subject and wise man,
Believe whatever things you can.
Take your religion as "twas found you,
And say no more of it — confound you! (264)

After all, wouldn’t that make things easier? He also gives practical advice on more intimate matters, like the temptations of the flesh. These too are presented as experiences that form part of a young man’s education:

Trust her for teaching! Go but you,
She'll quickly show you what to do. (224)

He makes no great transcendental claims for sex; it is no life-changing experience:

I tell you plainly that it brings
Some ease; but the emptiness of things
(That one old sermon Earth still preaches
Until we practise what she teaches)
Is the sole lesson you'll learn by it —
Still you undoubtedly should try it.

Ill's only cure is, never doubt it,
To do — and think no more about it. (226)

As always, the Spirit’s arguments are clinched by his resolutory-sounding feminine rhymes, designed to block all further argument. Indeed, they are specifically designed to put a stop to any further “thinking about it”; a neat rhyme, after all, has its own logic, and the Spirit has a good many such rhymes:

And almost every one when age,
Disease, or sorrows strike him,
Inclines to think there is a God,
Or something very like Him. (185)

The Spirit's task, as is clear here, is always to bring Dipsychus back to earth. And Venice too, paradoxically enough, comes into play here. This paradoxical aspect of the city is one that Mary McCarthy has very neatly expressed: “A commercial people who lived solely for gain — how could they create a city of fantasy,
lovely as a dream or a fairy-tale?” (195). For the most part, nineteenth-century visitors – at least until Ruskin brought people’s attention firmly back to the Stones of the city – did not seem to notice the paradox; the fairy-tale vision is what prevails in the descriptions by Dickens, by George Sand, by de Musset... In their accounts of their visits, they regularly fall into swoons or trances; the city casts its spell, enchants them or mesmerises them. They drift around in a dazed dream. “Je vegète, je me repose, j’oublie,” murmurs Georges Sand tipsily. It is Turner’s Venice they describe: a dreamscape where the buildings seem less substantial than the dazzling light and shimmering water, where the palazzi and churches merge mirage-like into their reflections. The whole city is a conjuror’s ephemeral creation, a trick of the light.

Of course, essential to this beautifully hazy view of the city is, as stated, the capacity to drift, and this is made possible by the gondola. The gondola, with its little covered cabin and its gentle motion, provides the perfect observation post for visitors unwilling to engage too closely with the less enchanting features of the city. Byron had sung its virtues as a place of privacy: “Just like a coffin clapt in a canoe / Where none can make out what you say or do” (at the same time giving a comic twist to the clichéd association of the gondola with a coffin) (vol. 1, 375). Victorian visitors seem content themselves to make out very little; Dickens allows the whole city to blur into a sequence of increasingly indefinite adjectives: “unreal, fantastic, solemn, inconceivable throughout...” (626). The important thing, as the Spirit puts it sardonically, is to “[b]e large of aspiration, pure in hope, / Sweet in fond longings, but in all things vague” (287).

At the centre of Dipsychus is the famous gondola lyric:

Afloat; we move. Delicious! Ah,
What else is like the gondola?
This level floor of liquid glass
Begins beneath it swift to pass.
It goes as though it went alone
By some impulsion of its own.
How light it moves, how softly! Ah,
Were all things like the gondola! (237)

The beautifully liquid l-sounds, with the occasional sibilants matching the stirring of the oar, and the recurring soft exclamation of “Ah” (a Victorian sentimentalism, one might think, but here entirely justified by its context; after all, this is the city of
the Bridge of Sighs), all contribute to give us this sense of desirable escape from the “quarrels, aims, and cares, / And moral duties and affairs...” (237) of life. Until, that is, the guilt-ridden Dipsychus remembers that the gondola is not in fact self-propelled. His pangs of social conscience are blithely dismissed by the Spirit, in a stanza that follows the same metrical pattern as that of Dipsychus, but which, with its brief, exclamatory phrases and sharp consonantal epithets, has a very much sharper, sprightly rhythm:

Oh come, come, come! By Him that set us here,
Who’s to enjoy at all, pray let us hear?
You won’t, he can’t! Oh, no more fuss!
What’s it to him, or he to us?
Sing, sing away, be glad and gay,
And don’t forget that we shall pay.
How light we move, how softly! Ah,
Tra la la la, the gondola! (239)

We move from the wishful subjunctive of Dipsychus’s “Were all things like the gondola...” to the meaningless but perhaps less self-deceiving “Tra la la la” of the Spirit. And so the gondola experience (a synecdoche, according to Tony Tanner, for Venice itself [48]) is also sceptically debunked. In the end, it all comes down to that one basic fact: “And don’t forget that we shall pay.” And this leads very naturally into the Spirit’s irresistibly cynical song, “How pleasant it is to have money, heigh ho!” The economic facts of life are not to be escaped from, even – or perhaps especially – in Venice.

To conclude, then, Clough takes Venice as his setting at the very moment in which the city had become, or was becoming, on the one hand, a kind of locus amoenus for wealthy Victorian holiday-makers, in search of harmless escapism, and on the other, the subject of uncompromising lessons in history, philosophy and morality on the part of such stern guides as Ruskin. Clough’s text, with its continual switching between the point of view – or points of view – of the tormented innocent, Dipsychus, and the cynical realism of the Spirit, refuses to come down on either side. It remains an unsettled work, unsettled in form and style, and deliberately unsettling in its implications. It refuses to become either a blithe-spirited lyrical effusion or a moral Baedeker. Perhaps the only conclusion we can draw is that there is a good deal to be said for being Dipsychus – for being of two minds.
And maybe this is one lesson that ambiguous Venice is eminently suited to teach us.

Works cited

ABSTRACT
Arthur Hugh Clough's dialogue-poem *Dipsychus* is an intriguing contribution to what might be defined «tourist literature». While the theme of the «Innocent Abroad» can be said to be a well-established convention in Anglo-Italian literature, Clough is perhaps the first to make a penetrating examination of the specific relationship between the tourist and his guide. Venice provides a suitably ambiguous setting for this conflict between high aspirations and worldly cynicism and also allows the poet himself to come to terms with two overpowering literary «guides»: Byron and Ruskin.

KEYWORDS
Clough, *Dipsychus*. Venice.