

# An Expatriated Adventurer: Charmian Clift and the Utopian Possibility

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## Introduction

Charmian Clift's first novel, *High Valley*, which she co-authored with her husband, George Johnston, was published in 1949; and her last newspaper column appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1969. Clift adapted her literary identity as she moved from Australia to London to Greece and back to Australia. This pattern of relocation and adaptation complicates discussions of binary representations of 'home,' 'away' and 'expatriation' in her work as Clift modulates genres according to location and publishing demands. Clift's writing about 'home' from different locations demonstrates, I argue, a utopian-inspired search for an environment in which she could be 'at-home' in a social, intellectual and creative sense. Sociologists write of this sense of prospective belonging as that which connects the individual to a social world and is 'generative of social change' (May 363). Scholarly accounts, notably the work of Paul Genoni and Tanya Dalziell, attest to the sociability of Clift's literary journey. Here I am interested in the philosophical dimensions of the search to belong and in particular the work of Ernst Bloch because of his ideas about the importance of constant anticipation to utopian thinking and practice. Clift, as a self-described 'yea-sayer' consistently anticipated the next home on the horizon.

Clift published memoir-style accounts of her life in Greece in *Mermaid Singing* (1956) and *Peel Me a Lotus* (1959), and she co-authored fiction with Johnston in this period as well as producing solo fiction. While undertaking this writing she also compiled notes and drafts towards a major work of autobiographical fiction in which she could use the 'I' rather than the persona of the artistic adventurer deployed in works such as *Peel Me a Lotus*. Clift's search for belonging as stated is examined in relation to Bloch, described as 'utopia's most prominent theorist' (Johns 193). Johns argues that Bloch 'shows how art and culture capture the daydream [of an individual's desire] and serve the function of catalysing hope and sketching a roadmap for achieving a better future' (193). Bloch's utopias are therefore of a different hue to the historical concepts associated with an imagined society, a literary form, a political call to action, or a discontent with one's present society (Viera 6). Here I discuss *Peel Me a Lotus*, together with selections of journalistic output post-1965 and drafts of unpublished work (1962 and 1968), to demonstrate Clift's consistent return to dreams of personal and social betterment while at the same time her interest in autobiography remained in an 'unfinished state,' a situation that Bloch identifies as part of his understanding of utopian thinking (309).

In this dream-landscape Clift's genre transitions are part of a continuous process of a journey of hope in which each arrival or return to a known landscape provides a point of apparent renewal. In each re-location, Clift deftly mines the cultural context and often exotic attractions of the landscape to help sustain a lifestyle devoted to writing. At the same time, her unpublished notes show that Clift returns to writing material for a narrative based on her own life. This process of public creative production and private re-writing meant that Clift continually self-mythologised in her bid to find a creative identity. In writing her life as fiction, Clift dwelt in porous literary territories. As Gillian Whitlock argues in relation to 'life-writing,' 'this category

of life-writing, bringing together as it does biography, autobiography, and travel writing, has no generic unity, yet it makes connections between some texts that traditional genre or subject groups separate' (244). As both Clift's struggle to write as 'I' and the general subject of fictionalised autobiography are well documented, the intent in this essay is to consider the literary output from a philosophical perspective in order to link the forms of fiction and autobiography and utopian writing, noting Robert F. Sayre's argument that autobiographies and utopian works 'are not such antithetical works at all' (20).

The two dimensions of autobiography and utopian writing can be seen at work in Clift's willingness to undertake the prospect of living in the Greek islands. Clift and Johnston were contracted originally to undertake a short-term project in Kalymnos, Greece, which they published as *The Sponge Divers* (1955). But as Johnston claimed later on the 1969 book jacket of Clift's *Peel Me a Lotus*, published by William Collins, part of the family's move from Kalymnos to Hydra was initiated by his belief in a 'lotusland,' a dream that he could write novels. Clift shared George's wish to escape from the city and find a place in which she could 'stumble off the treadmill' (Clift, *Peel* 19) and be a part of the 'reckless romantic thing' of moving to Greece (11). Although when the couple purchased a house on Hydra in 1956 Clift expressed some trepidation about their financial future, she liked the idea of living in another culture: '[i]t seemed a fine thing to be buying a house here,' she wrote (10). Clift could begin to imagine a life in which she could write full-time and raise her family. In this scenario the physical beauty of the Greek islands provided an idyllic environment in which she could take advantage of the location and lifestyle to extend her literary repertoire by writing travel memoir as well as fiction. According to Sayre travel literature is a 'source of utopian writing' (27) so Clift's utopian sensibility in much of the work from Hydra was not unusual.

Pursuing this 'reckless romantic thing' is supported by a utopian approach in her experiments with literary form—as evident in her memoirs *Mermaid Singing* and *Peel Me a Lotus*—and in her constant notes towards a work of autobiographical fiction. This utopianism was not, however, applicable only to her time in Greece. Clift's hopes for the future, from the time she left Kiama, New South Wales, were inspired by immediate practical concerns and also thoughts of a creative future that she might find in the next city or country. As the discussion of Ernst Bloch's work below recognises, utopianism can provide a powerful impetus for continual change in which one strives after a goal that is unachievable (while always remaining on the horizon) but is nevertheless embedded in lived experience rather than a striving for an ideal state or commonwealth. In Clift's writing, we see a persistent engagement with utopian ideals of an imagined literary destiny; a career path that she envisaged before she left Kiama.

### **Clift and the fine superstition of utopian thought**

In order to tease out aspects of utopian thinking, it is useful to unpack Bloch's proposition that utopianism refers to the desire for a state of becoming, based on a principle of hope that is grounded in material activity rather than an 'idle bed of mere contemplation' (158). In *The Principle of Hope* (1959) Bloch characterises utopianism as a driving force of human society in which the unfinished forward dream offers a 'methodical organ for the New' (157). Bloch presents the utopian function as a model that expresses 'the dream of a better life' (156), a comprehensive notion that is not tied to the idea of an 'ideal state' (156). Although Clift and Johnston were depicted in contemporaneous journal articles as living in Greece in the midst of a utopian commonwealth of creative artists (Ruth Striber's 1960 *Women's Weekly* article, 'Australians Find a Dream Life on the Isles of Greece,' is a case in point), Clift's attitudes seem to align more closely with envisioning Hydra as providing a sense of possibility for an

imaginative home. It was here she could practise her ideals of engaging with the culture and rituals of Greece while enjoying the relationships of an expatriate community. Jorge Sotiris described Clift's life on Hydra as a representation of the "tight little island" she fled in youth—'Kiama magnified to encompass an entire nation' (78). For Sotiris, Clift expresses a utopian desire for a sense of home that speaks to a condition of being 'at home' socially, culturally and politically, but, crucially, this home is always out of reach. In Bloch's schema, individuals look to a future that is 'part of the "anticipatory consciousness" or awareness of possibilities that have not yet taken shape but could one day be effected' (Johns 193). Clift's sense of anticipation was demonstrated both during her life in Australia prior to leaving for London, her time in Greece, and the first stage of her return to Australia.

Future-dreaming is central to this utopian process of anticipation. Clift, in her 1959 memoir of her first year on Hydra, *Peel Me a Lotus*, expresses the rush of freedom experienced in settling into island life. She saw herself as 'shooting out on the current, out and away into the wide blue frightening loneliness of freedom' (191). This writing is reminiscent of the 'fabula of anticipation' (11) that William Boelhower argues typifies immigration autobiographies. In Clift's case, the anticipatory fabula is co-opted to serve her migratory status given that her original intention to settle on Hydra had not been to be an immigrant and is rather the result of a union of a philosophical position and economic pressures. In her published and unpublished writings, there are constant references to a freedom that is on the horizon and the necessity of pursuing this ideal, in spite of interruptions by the 'dislocated psyches' (159) of the transitory visitors who occupy 'traps of tables and wine flasks' along the water-front of Hydra and the disturbances amongst her own social circle of writers and artists (163). In 1986 Clift's son, Martin Johnston, said in a radio interview that his mother hated a lack of independence above all things and that 'this is a value that comes through in all her writing, it's the other side of her passion for a fairly untrammelled freedom, certainly on a personal level and I think on every level' (Martin Johnston). Garry Kinnane, George Johnston's biographer, refers to various accounts that reveal Clift valued a sense of 'personal freedom' (184), but claims: '[t]hese were not ideas Clift was prepared to examine, for they were more matters of belief' (184). The crucial connection that Kinnane does not make is the one between Clift's desire for personal freedom and the independence that she found in her writing.

Midway through *Peel Me a Lotus* Clift reiterates her dream for the future while looking at her sleeping children: 'Through them we are committed wholly to life: the enterprise is sound. One can work a little longer, try a little harder . . . Against all reason I find myself sneaking a sight on another of those staging-posts of mine. When the new manuscripts are finished . . .' (144). The book generates a discourse of hopefulness in spite of the difficulties of everyday life on the island. Clift acknowledges the feelings of 'terror and desire' inspired by her adventurism (158) and the impact of her actions on her children. At one point she states that she feels 'marooned,' acknowledging that there is a great difference between 'living simply because you choose to and living simply because you must!' (126). The narrative concludes, however, with Clift and her friends socialising in a collective endorsement of commitment to a creative life. Clift anticipates that the enterprise is 'sound' although there are early warning signs of the economic and social difficulties ahead.

Clift consistently represents her position on Hydra as one of insider and outsider. She is a central figure in a fluctuating expatriate circle that talks international artistic ambitions while her everyday life encompasses Greek customs and rituals. Bloch writes of the 'unfinished forward dream' as one of the conditions of the utopian function (157), a state that in turn signals 'expectant emotions' such as 'anxiety, fear, hope, belief' (74), as noted in the 'terror and desire'

statement in the passage quoted above. Clift writes as an insider about the difficulties of island life and the problems of impending commercialisation, but she also enjoys being able to comment on Greek life from an expatriate's perspective. Bloch reminds us that 'nothing is as exotic in a foreign country as the foreigner himself' (371), and he argues that artists who believe that they will work best when far from home in a 'pre-formed' environment demonstrate a 'fine superstition' (372) in relation to their work as this hope is only sometimes actualised. The foreigner/artist carries the utopia of an imagined creative enterprise to a new location that is often perceived to have greater historical and cultural depth than the nation of origin:

It may not be accidental that the happily transformed stay commits us to the wish that significant things be achieved in this uncommon place. Nothing has a stronger effect on such plans and hopes than an environment which is removed from the habitual diffusion, a vivid environment which itself seems pre-formed. At the rough table in the loggia of this country-house, the wine in front of us, under sturdy old arches through which the Roman sky peeps—here work seems to succeed . . . This is a fine superstition, and it has achieved unusual things which justify belief. Out of this differently erotic, productive pathos of travel Shelley wrote his 'Prometheus Unbound' in the bushes on the Palantine Hill. (372)

George Johnston might have achieved greater literary success than Clift in actualising the 'fine superstition,' as evidenced by the success of the autobiographical *My Brother Jack* (1964), a novel written on Hydra. Yet Clift and Johnston's first co-authored fiction, *High Valley*, written in Australia, signals their early interest in a utopia of place. Set in Tibet, the book was influenced by Johnston's travels in this region but its authors were conscious of the 'challenge faced by travel writers in negotiating the territory between myth and reality . . .' (Genoni and Dalziell 2). Writing from Hydra allowed Clift to experiment further with the nexus of myth and reality but the 'reality' of her travel memoir mode in *Peel Me a Lotus* proved 'too un-Arcadian' for the international market of the late 1950s or early 1960s (Wheatley 365).

When Clift returned to Australia, she said that she wanted to 'move on' stating: 'I desperately needed to discover or rediscover something' (Wheatley 439). Her essays provided her with a form in which she could comment on the realities of the everyday while including a brief philosophical query or statement. Manuscript records demonstrate, however, that she was still committed to the goal of a fictional autobiography. Bloch states that one of the most important of the expectant emotions of utopianism is hope, so that there is a 'will to journey to the end where everything turns out well thus always pervades utopian consciousness' (98). Clift's return to Australia did provide her with another opportunity to find something new, in that she found a fresh voice as a popular columnist in syndicated Australian newspapers and honed the craft of the essayist as commentator and conversationalist.

### **Clift as columnist**

Clift's essays in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (1965–68) represent her interest in Australia as a progressive post-World War Two nation. She was encouraged by changes in the nation's cultural, social and political landscape that had occurred while she was in Greece. Despite her initial reluctance to leave Hydra, the essays indicate that Clift adapted quickly on her return to Sydney, perhaps because she held fast to a utopianism based on continual change. Clift's utopia is a home in which she can fulfil her creative dreams and continually re-craft her identity as an adventurer in life. In Clift's narrative of her return, we see her enthusiasm for the ideas and technologies on offer in 1960s Australia. In 'Coming Home,' the first essay in the *Images in*

*Aspic* (1965) collection, Clift positions herself as a migrant. She recalls the moment she left Hydra as a break in her emotional attachment to Greece, and she feels she is being carried to the brave new world of Australia (2). She also thinks back to the time before she left Australia for a life as an ‘expatriated adventurer’ and acknowledges how ‘misleadingly romantic’ that sounds (3). Yet, she also writes about the tensions of this experience, saying that in Greece, ‘I have been an alien living on police residence permits that could be revoked at a day’s notice’ (4).

It was relatively uncommon for talented Australians to return from overseas at this historical moment. So the Clift-Johnston homecoming can be seen as a hopeful sign of cultural change, and a signal that Australia was now an acceptable cultural milieu for well-known members of the mid-century literary diaspora. The feeling was somewhat mutual, as Clift’s response to her return was to write about the sense of optimism in Australia in 1965, claiming that ‘I do sense deeply a hope and an expectation of such a natural wonder. There *is* a feeling of imminence here’ (6). In her newspaper essays, Clift settles quickly into her role as an informed cultural commentator, often choosing to foreground the ‘imminence’ and what was ‘about to become’ in the new Australia. In a 1965 essay, ‘Omens of Promise,’ she writes about handing out ‘symbolic gold stars to government bodies and private enterprise who have supported the arts, telling readers that ‘[t]here’s so much promise suddenly. I think they are awarding their own country the best gold stars of all’ (Clift, *Images* 144). In spite of column opinions in which she took Australia to task over what she considered to be outdated political or social issues, she continued to be a ‘yea-sayer’ who looked forward to the ‘promise’ of Australia. This portended future is celebrated in her descriptions of the landscapes and towns that she visited with family and friends. Europe re-appears occasionally in the columns but usually as a site of political turmoil (as in her account of the 1967 Colonels’ Coup in Greece), or in comments about the traditions and manners of Greek communities.

Progress and promise are dominant discourses in her essays, but occasionally another perspective is suggested. In a 1965 essay, ‘An Exile’s Return,’ she writes about the return of her Greek friend, Yanni Tsakrios, ‘aged about 45 years’ from Australia to Kalymnos. Clift and Johnston, who met Tsakrios on Kalymnos in 1955, sponsored his passage to Australia. Ten years later, Yanni decided to return to Greece because he found there is ‘no life’ in Australia. ‘These people are dead,’ he tells an incredulous Clift who had not long returned herself (Clift, *Images* 95). She replied, ‘Go back to what?’ (96). Clift’s highlighting of Yanni’s rejection of Australian culture suggests that she was beginning to doubt her earlier enthusiasm for the new Australia, and she began to worry that ‘the milk and honey of the Promised Land seems to have curdled’ (96).

Thereafter Clift becomes more equivocal about her sense of belonging to Australia. In the essay ‘On Being a Home-Grown Migrant,’ written 16 months after her return, Clift says ‘I think I am glad we came back’ (Clift, *Trouble* 102). She does, however, cling to the hope that Sydney is ‘still becoming, a place where anything might happen’ (103), a place where one might be able to enact change. This interest in ‘still becoming’ resonates with the dynamism of Bloch’s form of utopianism. When Clift recounts stories about the various public engagements she undertakes, she is happy to take part in the city’s cultural life; indeed she looks forward to a ‘blossoming’ of suburbia’ (103). But by 1967, the hoped-for promise is beginning to be questioned. Wheatley argues that in ‘Report from a Migrant, Three Years After,’ Clift questions what has happened to the sense of imminence that she had perceived three years earlier, a vision that was perhaps negated by national politics and the lottery that sent young men to the Vietnam

War (519). She remains hopeful, however, although wondering why she does not 'give in' and stop searching for 'the good, the true and the beautiful' (249).

### Clift as autobiographer

Clift's attempt to write an autobiography continued throughout her journalism years. In her application for a Commonwealth Literary Fund fellowship in November 1968, she stated that she had begun the work six years previously, in 1962, when in Greece. It is, she wrote, 'about a girl called Cressida Morley, who has appeared already in *My Brother Jack*, but I invented her first' (Wheatley 423). Clift wrote 30,000 words of this novel, which was to be called 'The End of the Morning.' Her final essay, 'On *Clean Straw for Nothing*,' published posthumously, concerns Johnston's novel *Clean Straw for Nothing* (1969), which also featured the character of Cressida Morley. She promised she would read the book one day 'or when I feel I've really earned my own small bundle of clean straw' (Clift, *Being* 316). Her particular bundle is presumably the novel that she hopes will be completed from 'The End of the Morning' drafts.

The draft sections written between 1962 and 1969 are titled variously 'Greener Grows the Grass' and 'The End of the Morning,' and collectively establish evidence for her enduring ambition to produce an autobiography in which she would emerge as the 'I.' Sections of the autobiographical work were written in Greece while Clift was also writing the fiction *Honour's Mimic* (1964), set in Greece. On her return to Australia Clift continued to develop the autobiographical material. In her drafts, Clift remembers her family life in Kiama. She presents an increasingly introspective view of her childhood as she moves towards an intense, personalised, and critical view of her family. Many of these drafts are fragmentary and difficult to date. At times, there are references to events in her early life in which we can see connections to her life on Hydra. For example, she describes the group of older men, including her father, who gathered nightly outside a Kiama grocery shop to talk politics. This narrative brings to mind the Hydra waterfront where Clift, rather than her father, would take centre stage. But the sociability of Hydra is missing from this version of life in Kiama which is represented critically and includes accounts of children who are beaten by their parents and girls who die from abortions. Clift, sometimes as Cressida Morley, expands on the restrictions that drove her away from Kiama to seek adventure in Sydney and by so doing begins to complicate the utopianism of her earlier writing. For example, the narrative of a happy childhood described in her June 1965 interview with Hazel de Berg is not represented in the study of Tom Morley, the father figure of the fictional family. This is a portrait of a family that is not encountered in Clift's published work or earlier accounts of her younger life. Her many re-drafts of this writing in her papers at the National Library of Australia show that she found the autobiographical fictional form difficult, and confronting 'home' even more disturbing:

But my father, with cold bulging eyes and smooth bulging cheeks stuffed full of shepherd's pie, already had his old Sunday paper folded over to the chess problem and was where I could never reach him. . . . In politics he voted Labor, but he would have voted Communist if there had been a Communist to vote for; he had passionate faith in the great Russian experiment. He was a theoretical Marxist, vehement in argument, although actually the stupidity and apathy of the average working man exasperated him to fury . . . Cordelia wooed and placated him, Ben feared him, and I lied to him for a crumb of approval. I don't think that any of us (except Cordelia perhaps) loved him, not in the way we loved our mother.

As the archived papers evidence, Clift struggled to find the autobiographical form that would allow her the freedom to interrogate her childhood and her family, but she persevered in private if not in public. In her interview with de Berg she had said she was not at all sure 'she was a novelist at all,' but she was interested in television and theatre, saying 'I think I'd like to write a play . . .' The Commonwealth Literary Fund fellowship of 1968 was granted to produce a work of fiction and Clift clearly wanted to return to this project but by 1968 there was also a wider market for her work in other genres: her television adaptation of *My Brother Jack* had been well received and the syndication of her essays for newspapers and magazines had made her a household name. This new career was both welcome and problematic, in that the journalism and documentary work came with shorter deadlines, and Clift's family responsibilities eroded time that could be spent on writing autobiographical fiction.

## Conclusion

Greece, and in particular Hydra, functions as one phase in Clift's search for an identity that encompasses the complementary aspirations of liberation politics and imaginative creation. Clift and Johnston were not the only writers who were entranced by Hydra but Clift was distinctive in her representation of the expatriate experience, the aesthetics of the landscape, and the realities of the everyday during a period of cultural change following World War Two. Henry Miller, who visited the island in 1939, wrote about the 'purity, this wild and naked perfection of Hydra [which], is in great part due to the spirit of the men who once dominated the island' (60). According to Miller, Hydra was 'aesthetically perfect' (60). For a time the landscape of Hydra satisfied Clift's utopian sentiments but finally her dream of the 'fine superstition' of the travelling artist began to unravel. Clift remained determined to write autobiographical fiction after her return to Australia as her series of notes and incomplete drafts attest. This type of unfinished state is, according to Bloch, a part of the process of utopian desire, in which a 'longing, wish, will, waking dream, with all the visualizations of the Something that is missing' is experienced (309). In her published work, Clift developed the personas of novelist, cosmopolitan adventurer, dedicated artist, and consummate essayist as she kept moving forward, constantly re-creating literary and social identities. In the later stages of this trajectory, Clift responded to the exigencies of life in Australia while attempting to keep her autobiographical project alive. The vision of the fictional 'I' propelled Clift forward but added to her frustration as the attainment of that vision appeared to become ever more distant. Bloch wrote that 'Hope is thus ultimately a practical, militant emotion, it unfurls banners' (112). In Australia Clift wrote of resistance to the politics of the day in her 1966 essay 'Banners, Causes and Convictions' (Clift, *World*) and she welcomed the change of attitude from post-war apathy to a more robust dialogue about politics and culture. In essays written from 1965 onwards, Clift was able to maintain a sense of hope, just as she had imagined a progressive future at other points in her literary journey. However, the something-that-is-missing of autobiographical fiction remained on the Blochian horizon, finally beyond her reach.

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