

Rediscovering Matthew Arnold: The Commonplace Reader (of Dante)

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The diary is a social outcast, of no fixed theoretical address. It rarely receives the charity of careful study. It is never to be seen on school syllabi [...] It never comes up as the subject for the didactic or academic exercise of the *explication de texte*. (Lejeune 47)

Describing in a letter to his sister Jane the “simply perfect day” spent hiking the “Morteratsch glacier” and the “Bernina pass to Tirano and Italy,” Matthew Arnold avowed, “I never write a journal, but I tell *my story* in letters, which is the better and pleasanter way” (Arnold VI:107).¹ At sixty-eight years of age, Arnold admitted to having consigned the memory of his life to the epistolary form: a genre of writing that had “sustain[ed]” and “nurture[d] his own development” by letting him “express himself to a sympathetic and intimate but critically intelligent audience” of family members, friends, and correspondents (Machann et al. 15). After decades of painstaking practice in a personal and professional capacity, the Victorian critic recognized this genre of life writing as essential to the construction of his authorial self and to the development of his autobiographical narrative: as a man and a poet, a literary critic and advocate for religious, social, and educational reform.

The satisfaction with letter-writing came accompanied with a stern declaration of aversion for the use of the “journal” (Arnold VI:107) intended

as the French *journal intime*, a site of self-examination and self-disclosure. A pragmatist, Arnold instead preferred the versatility of pre-printed diaries and notebooks as “practical aids for the management of time, as one solution to the problem of an increase in the pace of modern life” (Willis np). Writing frantically across pages, calendars, and margins, Arnold recorded business appointments, school inspections, family trips, and social engagements; financial transactions, bills to be paid and servants’ wages; reading lists and lists of newspapers, magazines, and even friends to whom he had loaned books; books to buy or borrow as well as a miscellaneous array of literary quotations. Like many of his contemporaries, he relied on pocket diaries for “temporal orientation” across present, past, and future personal and professional engagements, for “accounting for time productively spent” (Carter 2) at home and abroad; on a train, in a school or a lecture room; lecturing, writing, or reading. Despite his continued use of the product, Arnold remained wary of the possibilities that these record-keeping tools afforded to the expression of “the abbreviated self” (McCarthy 102). Their small, enclosed spaces were neither as conducive nor capacious enough for the formulation and exchange of ideas, opinions, and commentaries that the letter-page effortlessly granted.

The neat demarcation between genres of self-writing first postulated by Arnold in his letter has heavily informed his process of canonization. Following Arnold’s death in 1888, in fact, the identification, cataloguing, and editing of his known letters (along with any addressed to him available from his various correspondents) catalyzed the efforts of scholars and biographers around the globe. The first two-volume edition of Arnold’s familiar and domestic letters was edited by George E. Russell in 1895 and came “in obedience to the wish” (Russell I: vii) of Arnold’s wife and sisters. The result was a semi-hagiographic portrait unveiling “aspects of his character which could be only imperfectly apprehended through the more formal medium of his published works” (I: vii). Later, Arnold Whitridge’s *Unpublished Letters* (1923), Howard F. Lowry’s *Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough* (1932), Machann-Burt’s *Selected Letters* (1993), and Cecil Y. Lang’s monumental six-volume edition (1996-2001) delineated the “finest portrait”

of the Victorian critic, "representing the main movements of mind and of events of nearly half a century, and at the same time revealing the actual intimate life of the participant-observer, in any collection of English letters in the nineteenth century, possibly in existence" (Lang I:xiv).

Conversely, the notebooks drew erratic attention. According to Arnold's daughter, Eleanor Wodehouse, Viscountess Sandhurst, "a great part of the contents" had been patiently transcribed by her mother, Frances Lucy who "died before she could finish the work" (Sandhurst v). Taking over from her, Sandhurst ultimately published *Matthew Arnold's Notebooks* in 1904, an abridged compendium of the literary entries jotted down every fifth year between 1863 and 1888. Fifty-years later Lowry, Young, and Dunn issued the first scholarly edition, but this offered, once again, more of a cherry-picked selection of the reading lists and quotes ascribed "to their authors and to their proper place" (Lowry et al. xi). It came down to a doctoral student, William Guthrie, to undertake the titanic task of recovering the larger, discarded portion of the forty-four notebooks—a philological enterprise that remained unpublished. Although each edition represented an expansion of the transcribed corpus and improvement of the previous in terms of "capacious, intelligent display of and guidance through the materials," none of the editors advanced "a rigorously developed thesis about them" (Sherman 14). The absence of a clear interpretative stimulus inevitably limited, as Richard Tobias observed, the direct and immediate "effect" of the notebooks "on Arnold scholarship" (Tobias 426).

A common justification among modern scholars refers to the different "level of transparency" (Trapp 336) characterizing Arnold's letters and diaries. The highly transparent nature of the correspondence, in fact, brought biographers, editors, and general readers "near in many ways to the actual man," with each letter acting "as a surrogate for intimate conversation" on which they were themselves "eavesdropping [...] from a later point in time" (Trapp 336). By contrast, the content of the notebooks proved unfathomably opaque. In his review of the 1952 edition, Trilling protested that they "were not what we commonly expect" for "they contained no original observations, no personal memoranda, or germinal notions, or early drafts"

(Trilling 496). Instead of illuminating “the journey of his [Arnold’s] mind” (Lowry et al. xii), Trilling argued, the scattered array of jottings, quotes, and reading lists only made the path unnecessarily more obscure. Half a century later, Lang countered this position by arguing that although “unreadable” when compared to “works and letters [which] can be poured over or dipped into with pleasure,” the notebooks remained “invaluable” sources that “can be used. They must be consulted, for they are a mother lode of information” (Lang I:xxxiv) about Arnold’s private and professional life.

On the occasion of the 2022 bicentenary, my article challenges prejudicial contentions on the unreadability and “generic intractability” (Langford et al. 9) of Arnold’s diaries by re-interpreting the corpus in light of recent developments in the history of the book and reading, diary and life-writing studies. I contend that once re-examined through these lenses, the diaries reveal their greater significance as sites of construction of Arnold’s “self-in-time” and “self-in-process” (Carter 11) as a reader and commonplacer. Book-historians and historians of reading like Robert Darnton, Katie Halsey, Stephen Colclough, and the Reading Experience Database Project (1450-1945) have amply demonstrated that these epitexts provide crucial evidence of reading habits, reading practices, and even responses to reading of “single people, both famous and obscure, of book groups, and of particular classes” (Halsey 2). They proved that the studies of diary jottings, entries, and *marginalia* also “reveal the context in which reading takes place and the negotiations of the individual with the institutions of reading such as book clubs, circulating libraries and booksellers” (Colclough 44).

Overcoming the “artless” appearance and cryptic form of Arnold’s jottings, this article illustrates that the literary entries and the lists in his diaries record his life-long activity as a systematic and dedicated reader of every genre. From classical and modern English and foreign literature to political, religious, and philosophical works, Arnold navigated wide-ranging and extensive reading matter with the help of an ordered “system of note-taking and record-keeping” (Jackson 96) in the diaries. These modern tools of information management provided continuous stimulus for intellectual self-

reflection and self-improvement, inspiring and assisting the Victorian critic in the composition of his poetry and prose writings. The article expounds these dynamics in relation to a specific case-study, reunifying extracted quotes, references and reading lists relating to his thirty-year-long interest in the medieval Florentine poet Dante Alighieri and his *Divina Commedia*. By re-collecting and re-reading epitextual material in dialogue with the published lectures and essays, I want to reassert their value as documentary sources revealing the inner mechanisms of Arnold's readerly reception, intellectual absorption, and writerly re-use of Dantean poetry in his literary criticism.

Chronotopical Coordinates

In her preface, Eleanor Sandhurst recalled that her father acquired "the habit of always having with him a long narrow book" (Sandhurst ix) in his thirties. By 15 April 1888, the day of his death, the Victorian critic had filled the pages of (at least) forty-one diaries, now part of the Arnold Collection in the Beinecke Library at Yale University. William Guthrie's survey specified that the corpus included four distinct brands of pre-printed pocket diaries: Allen's Commercial Diary, Almanac and Bill Book; Lett's Diary, or Bills Due Book, and Almanac; T.J. & J. Smith's Pocket Diary and Almanack; and Arnold's favorite, Pawsey's London Diary, and Almanack, which he first acquired in 1853 and then "purchased annually throughout his life" (Guthrie iv).

The rich diversity of brands Arnold used should be understood through the work of McCarthy (2003), Carter (2015) and Will (2019), who charted the mid-nineteenth-century ascent of the pre-printed pocket diary to best-selling stationery item among British booksellers. In "wide use in England since the 1820s," pocket-diaries were introduced by stationery companies like Lett's and Pawsey's as alternatives to the almanac, one of their longest-running "'steady sellers'" (McCarthy 280). In wide circulation since the sixteenth century, almanacs were annual booklets and pamphlets providing "information about the calendar, the agricultural and ecclesiastical year, and national institutions" and entertainment with their "implausible predictions and miscellaneous anecdotes loosely pinned onto calendar dates" (Maid-

ment np). Accessible in terms of content and price, the almanac could be found in the households of readers of every social background. From artisans to workingmen and middle-class families, consumers regarded it as “the most indispensable” book for their everyday life: “so constant is the need for it that, unlike other books, it is not deposited on the shelf, but lies ready to hand on the table” (Lardner 2).

The pre-printed diaries were designed as alternative instruments of “pocket usefulness” (Raven 274). These new stationery products replaced the educational and reference purposes to cater to the record-keeping and time-management needs of a mass clientele of professionals and clergymen, and men and women of letters. Lett’s alone offered the public “a choice of 55 editions” at an “array of prices and page layouts” (Steinitz 165). The transition from informational to organizational devices was signaled by the reduction of the space devoted to printed matter in favor of “the pages set aside for the writer’s own notes, memoranda, and accounts,” which were “neatly demarcated, using lines, boxes, and labels” (Steinitz 165). Constantly improved in response to consumers’ note-taking habits and practices, by the mid-nineteenth century the narrow and compact design of the diaries came to include “several more blank pages at the back of the volume” (McCarthy 281). For Arnold the expansion of the peripheral space of the diary was a welcome improvement, granting more room for his literary quotes, lists of books and periodicals to read and buy, borrow, and lend. Guthrie’s examination of the Yale corpus detailed that these activities were carried out continuously “from 1852 through 1888, except 1859 and 1878” (Guthrie iii). Never publicly discussed, Arnold commented on his list-making habit in a letter to his wife from New Year’s Day 1882:

I am glad to find that in the past year I have at least accomplished more than usual in the way of reading the books which I had put down to be read. I always do this, and I do not expect to read all I put down, but sometimes I fall too much short of what I proposed; and this year things have been a good deal better. (qtd Lowry et al. x)

Guthrie observed that the estimate of the reading accomplished remains difficult to establish because Arnold only acquired the habit of crossing out titles when he was in his mid-sixties. Nevertheless, both anticipatory and summarizing lists record significant oscillations in his readerly enterprise over the span of three decades, with the number of titles varying from a minimum of five titles in 1859 to an average of seventy titles read in the mid-1860s as well as in the mid-1880s.

Although Arnold was not always consistent in drafting reading lists for each month, the captions he often added are particularly important for contextualizing his reading habits, with self-directed instructions: "To be read out of bed before 8," and "to read for self 2 hours daily" (Arnold, *Note-books* 6). Furthermore, they refer to the (intended) place and/or occasion in which the reading was carried out—"at Fox How" (551), "books for Summer" (565), "at Athenaeum" (565)—as well as document Arnold's patterns of book borrowing. Finally, they categorize the reading matter by language and/or by genre: "Greek, Latin, poetry, literary history and criticism, philosophy and religion, biography, English prose, belle lettres, science and travels" (Guthrie 224). Among these, "Italian" became a consistently adopted heading from 1876. Although meager, the titles listed for reading in those years included different works by the Romantic poet Giacomo Leopardi (*Pensieri di Varia Filosofia e di bella letteratura*, *Storia del genere umano* and *Detti memorabili di Filippo Ottonieri* from the *Operette Morali*, *Discorso in proposito d'una orazione greca di Giorgio Gemisto Pletone*), an unidentified anthology of Francesco Petrarca's poetry, and Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. Before the adoption of this caption, Arnold occasionally recorded his reading of Italian literature as part of miscellaneous lists titled "poetry—des langues vivantes" (*Note-books* 579) and "poetry of modern languages" (581). Most entries, however, were left uncategorized and reflected the eclecticism of Arnold's interest, which ranged from Torquato Tasso's epic poem *Gerusalemme Liberata* to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tragedies by Vittorio Alfieri (*Merope*) and Alessandro Manzoni (*Il Conte di Carmagnola*).

While Leopardi's works accompanied Arnold in the last years of his life, the reading of Dante's *Commedia* occupied his maturation as a literary

critic, from 1857 to 1864. The lists show that Arnold had begun *Inferno*, the first cantica of the *Commedia*, in 1857, completing the reading of the first fifteen cantos by December 1857. The remaining eighteen were covered by January 1858 when he promptly moved on to *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, and the excitement engendered by such achievement was confessed in a letter to Herbert Hill: "I am reading Dante in *Italian* for the first time. O what force!" (Arnold, *Letters* I:372). Listed again among the many "books for the summer" of 1860, the two cantiche were joined by an Italian dictionary, an Italian grammar, and Henry Francis Cary's English blank-verse three-volume translation, titled *The Vision of Dante*. Such combination could signal a more systematic commitment to reading the *Commedia* in the original language with its English translation in an edition that also equipped readers with a *Life of Dante*, a chronological overview of his age, and a detailed commentary to the poem. While it is likely that Arnold purchased the new corrected edition of Cary's *Vision* published by Bohn in 1850, the identification of the Italian edition is more arduous. In a memorandum from 1858, Arnold reminded himself to "bind Dante" (*Note-books*, 564), suggesting that he either had acquired a three-volume edition that he wanted to unify into a single volume, or that he intended to customize his edition with the standard binding used in his personal library.

In September 1861 at Fox How, Arnold completed *Purgatorio* and began *Paradiso*, which proved to be the most problematic and time-consuming of the three. As the the reading dragged over the following two years, the third *cantica* continued to haunt the Victorian critic for more than a decade (1864-68 and 1876-77). In March 1863 Arnold interrupted—or at least alternated—*Paradiso* with the reading of the *Vita Nova*, Dante's book of early love poetry which was drawing renewed interest thanks to the almost simultaneous publication of three English translations by the Pre-Raphaelite poet and painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1861, the Scottish translator Theodore Martin, and the American Dante scholar Charles Eliot Norton in 1862 (Coluzzi, "Rossetti Reconsidered"). The ensuing reference to a "lecture" makes it possible that this reading was functional to the redrafting of "On the Modern Element in Dante," a lecture he had delivered as part of his first cycle

of lectures as Professor of Poetry at Oxford. Originally conceived (and performed) as an extensive academic discussion on the modernity of Dante's poetry, the lecture was later repurposed into an article "only about one-fourth the length" (Super III:406) centered on Theodore Martin's recent translation of the *Vita Nova* for *Frasier's Magazine*. Although the reworking was effective in to earning him a living as a professional critic and reviewer—the diaries show that he received £3.78 from the magazine—Arnold worried that the shift in focus had hindered the broader cultural value of his original intervention. Although he toyed with the idea of including it in the first volume of his *Essays in Criticism* (1865), he ultimately excluded it because the piece did not reflect the overarching aim of promoting a "principle of culture, rather than a programme for or a synthesis of poetry" (Dawson et al. 12). As I discussed elsewhere (Coluzzi, *Dante Beyond Influence*), the much-feared contingent nature of the periodical article did not hinder the significance of his intervention, but rather demonstrated how Victorian periodicals could act as epistemological sites, vehicles for the production and dissemination of critical and scholarly *dantismo* in Britain.

The years between 1864 and 1883 witnessed a deepening of Arnold's critical understanding of the *Commedia* thanks to Frédéric Ozanam's *Dante et la philosophie catholique au treizième siècle* (1845, appeared in English in 1897) and *Les Poètes franciscains en Italie au treizième siècle* (1852). Ozanam's works likely aided Arnold to shed light on the inner poetic potentialities of the Catholic philosophical language used by Dante throughout the whole poem and, most extensively, in *Paradiso*. Read intermittently between 1864 and 1876-1877, in 1880 the entry "Ozanam, Dante vol. 1" (*Note-books* 597) inaugurated a four-year-long integral re-reading of the *Commedia*, carried out in two distinct moments: first continuously in 1880-1881, and then divided between 1882 (*Inferno* 1 to *Purgatorio* 16) and 1883 (*Purgatorio* 16 to end of *Paradiso*).

Extraction and Transcription

While the reading lists historicize (and even locate) Arnold's reading of Dante, the Dantean quotes and notes scribbled over, below, or on the margin

of the daily entries reveal Arnold's behavior as a self-disciplined reader and "textual collector" (Ophir 2). Despite being dispersed across the diaries, this mode of excerption and transcription aligns with "the techniques and conceptual apparatus of commonplacing" (Dacome 604). First systematized by John Locke in his 1706 essay, the commonplace book was designed as a compendium of epigrams, anecdotes, and quotations selected, transcribed onto numbered pages, and organized "by subject and indexed so that the reader's notes were organized and cross-referenced" (Colclough, "Recovering" 8). With minor changes and improvements, commonplacing remained widely employed in nineteenth-century universities, promoted by "educational manuals" as a valuable tool "that lay at the intersection between practices of collecting, reading, classifying, learning and the arts of rhetoric" (Dacome 604). The archives prove that during his years as a student at Oxford, Arnold supplemented his pocket diaries with several commonplace books in which he stored extracts from Burke, Goethe, Chateaubriand, and other authors, tracking his reading in English, Greek, Latin, French, and German.

Although by the mid-1860s Arnold dismissed the use of dedicated blank books in favor of pre-printed diaries, the format of the quotes—brief, memorable and unglossed—configured a revised mode of commonplacing. By recognizing the permanence of this very information-management practice, we can better appreciate the function of the literary entries in Arnold's diaries and see that it aligns to the one that Michel Foucault recognized as underlying the *hupomnēmata* of early imperial Rome, ancestors to the modern commonplace book. As Ella Ophir argues, following Foucault, this early mode of textual collecting helped readers "shape the self not by externalizing, through writing, the internal, but by internalizing, through transcription and 'subsequent rereading and meditation' (Foucault 209), truths, principles, and wisdom gathered from sources external to the self" (2). For Arnold too, the practice of selecting and transcribing short quotes and lengthier passages in between notes of appointments, expenses and exam questions served to nurture his curiosity for "the best that is known and thought in the world" (Arnold, *Complete Prose works* III: 283)² and remain true to the predicament that "a man's life

of each day depends for its solidity and value on whether he reads during that day, and, far more still, on what he reads during it" (Sandhurst vi).

The Dantean entries scattered across multiple diaries reveal the originality of Arnold's readerly experience, unveiling an unconventional susceptibility to the minute beauty and the grand style of lesser-known *loci* of the poem. Neither fascinated by the tragic romance of Paolo and Francesca in *Inferno* V nor wholly absorbed by the sorrowful tale of Count Ugolino from *Inferno* XXXIII, Arnold excerpted lines and passages from *canti* of the *Commedia* that had so far escaped the monotonous preferences of Romantic and Victorian readers. During his inaugural reading of *Inferno* in 1858, his attention was caught by a specific episode in *canto* XXIV, 46-48 when Dante-pilgrim, exhausted by the climb, is unable to continue to the top of the ridge of the eighth circle of hell. Arnold's quote encapsulated the opening lines of Virgil's appeal to gather his forces:

"Omai conven che tu così ti spoltre,"
disse 'l maestro; "ché, seggendo in piuma,
in fama non si vien, né sotto coltre [...]"

"Now must you cast off sloth," my master said.

*"Sitting on feather cushions or stretched out
under comforters, no one comes to fame."*

(Hollander, *Inferno* 438-39)³

In the commentary tradition, the passage has been amply scrutinized as one of "Virgil's most difficult moments as guide to the Christian underworld" (Hollander 449). The Latin poet exhorts the pilgrim to "struggle onward" not so much to reach the "presence of God" (the ultimate scope of his outwardly journey) but to achieve the most "transitory of things": "the reward of earthly fame" (Hollander 449). Notwithstanding exegetical perplexities, within the narrative, the speech had the desired effect of turning Dante-pilgrim from a state of despair and renunciation to hopefulness and determination. The reappearance of the passage in 1861, 1867, and 1868 signals that the words of the Latin poet, a pillar along with Homer of Arnold's personal canon of reading,

continued to echo in Arnold's mind to the point of acquiring the power of a moral imperative: a shift reproduced in the shortening of the tercet to one, "omai convien che tu così ti spoltre" (*Note-books* 67) in 1868. A similar dynamic occurred with a single line excerpted from *Purgatorio* XIV:93 when Dante and Virgil encounter the repenting souls of the envious. The line is spoken by one of them, Guido del Duca, in a monologue on the regret for wasted time: "Del ben richiesto al vero, e al trastullo!" referring to the intellectual and moral "virtues required in the serious business of life" (Singleton 301).

First spotted by Sandhurst, these returns to "certain favorite quotations" exemplify Arnold's "theory of re-reading" (O'Gorman 245) first formulated in "The Study of Poetry" (1880). Frances O'Gorman regarded it as a "critical procedure" that "primarily figures a return to texts as a renewed source of pleasure, a reminder of 'what is really excellent, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it'" (245). More than just a solution to "counter forgetfulness," re-reading enhanced Arnold's poetry-reading from a twofold perspective (245). Indeed, "those 'once agains'" (245) enabled the critic to fulfil his professional task of evaluating literature while concurrently relishing the pleasure of re-discovering true poetical excellence. As I shall illustrate later, in Dante's case the renewal of the readerly experience also prepared the transition of the passage into the public realm of his lectures, articles, and essays. However, to grasp this movement from the private epitext to the public text, we shall also notice Arnold's keen interest in the theological principles underlying the narrative structure of the *Commedia*. During his earliest encounters with the poem, he annotated a fragment of Virgil's illustration of the pilgrim's journey into the netherworld, describing the passage through purgatory and the encounter with the "content souls" of those who "hope" to ascend to paradise through the expiation of their vices in *Inferno* I:118-20:

E vederai color che son contenti
nel foco, perché speran di venire,
quando che sia, a le beate genti.

Federica Coluzzi, "Matthew Arnold, the *Commonplace Reader* (of Dante)"

*"Then you shall see the ones who are content
to burn because they hope to come,
whenever it may be, among the blessed."*

Similarly, Arnold annotated the tercet from *Inferno* XVI: 61-63 in which the trajectory of the journey is described in the simplest possible terms by the pilgrim, yet the meaning of the metaphorical language exceeds the comprehension of those souls in Hell to whom the words are addressed:

Lascio lo fele e vo per dolci pomi
promessi a me per lo verace duca;
ma 'nfino al centro pria convien ch'i' tomi

*"I leave bitterness behind for the sweet fruits
promised by my truthful leader.
But first I must go down into the very core."*

Finally, in 1873 Arnold jotted down two passages from Ozanam's *Dante et la philosophie catholique au treizième siècle* discussing the nature of the souls corresponding to the threefold partition of the afterlife from the early commentators, Benvenuto da Imola and Jacopo Della Lana. Annotated continuously, the first passage details Dante's description of the double nature of the three realms of moral and essential dimensions; the latter, Arnold annotated, dwelled on the same topic but in a more concise manner explaining the three conditions of human life as those of the "viziosi," "penitenti," and "virtuosi."

Despite the vagueness of some entries, the reading lists and the excerpted quotes convey a far-reaching view of the historical development and bibliographical expansion of Arnold's private reading of Dante, with the gradual incorporation of secondary literature, supporting his serious effort to expand his critical understanding of the primary source. Although many commonplaced passages from the *Commedia* remained constrained within the private epitextual space of the pocket diary, others laid foundations for many of Arnold's canon-making interventions in literary and cultural criticism.

From Private Paratext to Public Text: Charting Arnold's Critical Discourse on Dante

Visible or tacit, the commonplacing practice deeply influenced Arnold's use of Dantean references and passages in lectures, essays, and articles. Rather than engaging in exegetical or historical commentary, these critical interventions embedded moments or turns of phrase into broader critical discourses on "the relationship between life and literature, between literature and religion, between form and subject matter, the consequences of literature, the problems involved in evaluating literary texts" (Zweig 140). The tendency toward the appropriation and recontextualization of classical, modern, British, and foreign intertexts populating Arnold's published criticism originated from the assumption that the "whole apparatus of learning," being narrow literary, historical, or even philological scholarship, was somewhat detrimental to "the laborer in the field of poetical criticism" (Eells 19). The academic study of primary texts risked overloading the critic with notions and preconceptions that would cloud his aesthetic and moral judgement of the work and its author. Resting on such an ideological basis, Arnold's discourse on Dante and the *Commedia* was deliberately configured as a form of critical reception, following the path blazed by Samuel Coleridge, William Hazlitt, and Thomas Carlyle during the early decades of the nineteenth century. These were interventions in aesthetic criticism guided by poetics of taste that saw the lecturers expounding passages of the poem and touching on aspects of Dante's life, language, style, and imagery to support their own reflections on poetry and poetical genius, literary imagination and tradition, religious morality, and political idealism.

Robert M. Zweig was the first to recognize the ubiquitous presence of Dante in Arnold's writings. The Victorian critic "mentioned him constantly in *rankings* of great poets" while "lines from the *Commedia* were used as touchstones and as examples of noble sentiments or thoughts" (Zweig 156). It would abide by the same "conditions of excellence" (Arnold I:6) of Greek and Latin classics initially formulated in the "Preface" to the first edition of his *Poems*. Like the texts of the great ancient masters, the modern poem would have served a pedagogical function as "the best model of instruction

for the individual writer" (12). In this sense, Arnold's use of Dantean textuality demonstrated the belief that the Florentine poet had the power to inspire later generations with its literary greatness and spiritual nobility, while guiding them to a fuller understanding of poetical excellence. Arnold recommended the reading of the *Commedia* for educating the poetic intellect and reviving the critical receptiveness of the mind to grasp the true literary excellence that has the power to uplift the spirit of men.

The first ample discussion of the Florentine poet occurred in Arnold's triptych of lectures *On Translating Homer* given as Oxford Professor of Poetry in the winter of 1860-61, published in one volume that same year. Here, Arnold evoked Dante as "a supreme stylist whose full meaning cannot be captured in translation" (Zweig 150): a contention supported by the absence of the paratext in the notebooks. Reproduced in the original Italian without translational or exegetical apparatus, the transcribed quotes were the grounds on which Arnold developed an understanding of "the effect of the terza rima on meaning" and the awareness that this was inevitably jeopardized in translation despite "the conscientious and painstaking" (Arnold I:97) efforts of Henry Cary and Ichabod C. Wright. Notably, while the first translation was included in the reading lists, the work of Wright, one of the earliest attempts at a rhymed translation of the three *cantiche* (1833, 1836 and 1840) was not recorded. What was, indeed, transcribed was the tercet from *Purgatorio* used to exemplify a foundational notion of poetic criticism, that of grand style, through its juxtaposition with passages from Homer's *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

When Dante says:

Lascio lo fele, et vo pei dolci pomi
Promessi a me per lo verace duca;
Ma fino al centro pria convien ch' io tomi,

that is in the *grand style*. (I:137)

For Arnold, the "grandeur" of Dante's style lies in the ability to convey with "rapidity, plainness, directedness, and nobility" (Arnold I:102, 117) the pilgrim's journey through the three realms of the netherworld as willed by God. This passage, taken from a nondramatic and often overlooked dialogue

in the second *cantica* of the *Commedia*, offers a powerful demonstration of the way “the grand style arises in poetry when a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or with severity a serious subject” (I:188), such as the condition of souls in the afterlife. The words spoken by Dante-pilgrim are “grandiose” because they provide for the reader moral edification “neither by preaching nor by didacticism, but by working, in the manner proper to poetry, on the emotions” (Alexander 174).

At a later point in the lectures, Arnold identifies two more tercets from *Purgatorio* XXIII:124-29 as representative of the two foundational types of grand style: the one that “arises from severity” and the one that emerges “in simplicity, where a noble nature and a poetical gift unite to utter a thing with the most limpid plainness and clearness” (Arnold I:190). In one of the most extensive and discursive pieces of Dantean criticism, Arnold also gives a brief explanatory introduction to the passage where “Dante has been telling Forese that Virgil had guided him through Hell” (I:190). Within the episode, he singles out the tercet

Indi m'hai tratto su gli suoi conforti,
Salendo e riguardo la Montagna
Che drizza voi che il mondo fece torti.

‘Thence hath his comforting aid led me up, climbing and circling the Mountain, *which straightens you whom the world made crooked.*’ These last words, ‘la Montagna *che drizza voi che il mondo fece torti,*’—‘the Mountain *which straightens you whom the world made crooked,*’—for the Mountain of Purgatory, I call an excellent specimen of the grand style in severity, where the poet’s mind is too full charged to suffer him to speak more explicitly. But the very next stanza is a beautiful specimen of the grand style in simplicity, where a noble nature and a poetical gift unite to utter a thing with the most limpid plainness and clearness:

Tanto dice di farmi sua compagna
Ch’io sarò là dove fia Beatrice;
Quivi convien che senza lui rimagna.

"So long," Dante continues, "so long he (Virgil) saith he will bear me company, until I shall be there where Beatrice is; there it behooves that without him I remain." But the noble simplicity of that in the Italian no words of mine can render. (I:190)

Although absent from the notebooks, the choice of passage demonstrates Arnold's insightful reading of the *Commedia* and the ability to isolate a moment of deep dramatic affection as Dante-pilgrim details his journey to a friend of his Florentine youth in an unprecedented manner. Differently from the rest of the accounts in the poem (often annotated by Arnold), commentators observed the absolute exceptionality of the dialogue with Forese Donati, "the only penitent allowed to hear the name of Virgil from Dante's lips" and the only one "to whom Dante names Beatrice" (Hollander, *Purgatorio* 525). It is the emotional density of the episode portraying Dante's profoundly human affection for Forese that likely induced Arnold to reinscribe it in his theorization as an example of "truly grand" style (I:190).

Shorter references and longer discussions characterized subsequent lectures and publications. The second documented instance is "Dante and Beatrice" (May 1863), redrafted from a lecture given in March 1862 entitled "On the Modern Element in Dante," for which no manuscript evidence was left, apart from a brief mention in a letter to Arnold's mother. Here, the discourse on the *grand style* is developed further and connected to the idea that "great works, such as the *Agamemnon* or the *Divine Comedy* are shaped by the true art, the architectonicé" (Arnold III:345). An Aristotelian concept derived from Goethe, Arnold described it as the architectonic "power of execution which creates forms" (Gottfried 135). Although the link is kept implicit, Arnold's exaltation of the "completeness of his architectonics" (135) located in the comprehensiveness and organization of Dante's vision explains his focus, as a reader, for the narrative and moral structure of the netherworld, documented by the primary and secondary sources reproduced in the diary entries.

Between the late 1860s and the 1880s, Dante was evoked in three later monographic studies on "Milton" (1868), "Wordsworth" (1880), and "Byron" (1881) collected in *Essays in Criticism: Second Series*. Arnold quoted a

passage from Ulysses' monologue in *Inferno* XXVI:118-20 in the conclusion of an address entitled "*Ecce, Convertimur ad Gentes*" delivered to the Ipswich Working Men's College. This time quoting in English translation, Arnold uttered "the words Dante has given to Ulysses: 'Consider whereunto ye are born! Ye were not / made to live like brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge'" (Arnold IX:427) as an inspirational motto. In an interesting turn, the diaries contain not this passage from Ulysses' bedamning rhetoric but from the perspective of Dante-pilgrim (*Inferno* XXVI:21-24):

e più lo 'ngegno affreno ch'i' non soglio,
perché non corra che virtù nol guidi;
sì che, se stella bona o miglior cosa
m' ha dato 'l ben, ch'io stessi nol m'invidi

*and more than is my way, I curb my powers
lest they run on where virtue fail to guide them,
so that, if friendly star or something better still
has granted me its boon, I don't misuse the gift.*

(Hollander, *Inferno* 476-77)

Read in contrast with the one featured in the published text, the passage transcribed in the intimate epitext reads as a *contro-canto* with the words of Dante-poet as a man who is "fully conscious of his previous 'Ulyssean' efforts, undertaken by his venturesome and prideful intellect, and now hopes to keep them under control" (Hollander 115-16). One could argue that while the words of Ulysses sought to stir the hearts and elevate the minds of the working men in the audience to achieve something greater in their lives, the words of Dante-poet acted as a self-directed cautionary advice for Arnold himself about the risks of the *folle volo*, symbol of *hubris* and the excess that leads the intellect astray from morality.

The last extensive reference to Dante is unrelated to Arnold's lecturing activity and is found in "The Study of Poetry" written as the introduction for T.H. Ward's anthology on *The English Poets* (1880). In the essay, Arnold relied on the *Commedia* as an aid to illustrate his rhetoric of exemplarity that stands out as a rare example of a public explanation of Arnold's private

commonplace practice, with its emphasis on the extraction and collection of "lines of the great masters" that readers should "lodge well" into their own memory. Arnold argues,

Indeed there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as touchstones to other poetry [...] when we have lodged them well in our minds, an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry, which we may place beside them. Short passages, even single lines, will serve our turn quite sufficiently. (IX:168)

The continuity between epitext and text also subsists in the selected excerpts from the *Commedia*. This time, Arnold relies on a triptych of quotes configuring a peculiar Dantean *tableau*:

Take that incomparable line and a half of Dante, Ugolino's tremendous.

"lo no piangeva; sì dentro impietrai.

Piangevan elli [...]"

take the lovely words of Beatrice to Virgil—

"lo son fatta da Dio, sua merce, tale,

Che la vostra miseria non mi tange,

Nè fiamma d'esto incendio non m'assale [...]"

take the simple, but perfect, single line—

"In la sua volontade è nostra pace." (IX:169)

The first extract captures Count Ugolino's "tremendous speech" in *Inferno* XXXIII:50 in which the father shades his despair from his weeping sons as he realizes that they will die of starvation in the Tower where they are kept prisoner: a moment of intense, human tragedy in which Arnold possibly mirrored his own personal experience as he witnessed the death of two of his sons. In the essay, however, the tragic potency of the verb "impietrai" in the final position seems counterbalanced and almost defused by Beatrice's

heartening voice from the *Inferno* II:91-93 as she speaks to Virgil about her heavenly condition. A tercet transcribed in one of his general books, the description contributes to “isolate and detach the character of Beatrice within an immutable composure, and in a world far away” (Chiavacci Leonardi 63). The third and final passage reiterates and reinforces the Beatrician imagery in the ascetical solemnity of Piccarda Donati’s line, which seals the tragic story of her life by revealing that humans can find their peace only in God’s will. Despite the limited popularity of this latter episode, the definition of the verse “simple but perfect” (Arnold I:100) evokes Arnold’s theorization on the *grand style* in *On Translating Homer* in a circular movement that reaffirms the substantial coherence and continuity of Arnold’s discourse on Dante from its earliest formulation to its final definition.

Conclusion

T.S. Eliot famously critiqued Matthew Arnold for lacking “the power of connected reasoning at any length: his flights are either short flights or circular flights. Nothing in his prose work, therefore, will stand very close analysis” (Eliot 346). Uturning this derogatory stance, we may ask: What kind of flight was to be found in Arnold’s hermeneutic interest for Dante? Was it short, circular, or far-reaching? How does it stand the challenge of close (textual) analysis? To answer these questions, we can bring forth Arnold as an historical reader and commonplace annotator. By interrogating a long-neglected corpus of reading lists and literary entries found in his diaries and notebooks through a material and book-historical approach, Arnold’s idiosyncratic yet intensive reading of Dante between 1857 and 1883 demonstrates that this very commonplacing practice lay at the foundation of his “touchstone method,” the comparative approach underlying Arnold’s literary criticism. Unearthing and reading against his canon-making essays and lectures, the epitextual evidence reasserts the historical relevance and cultural significance of Arnold as a forerunning agent of the critical reception of Dante and his *Commedia* in Victorian literary culture.

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Notes

¹ All references to Arnold's letters are taken from *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, edited by Cecil Y. Lang (UP of Virginia, 1996-2001, 6 Vols.) unless otherwise noted.

² All references to Arnold's prose works are taken from Matthew Arnold, *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, edited by R.H. Super (U of Michigan P, 1960-1977, 11 Vols.) unless otherwise noted.

³ All English translations from Dante are taken from Dante, *Inferno*, translated by Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander (Random House, 2003); *Purgatorio*, translated by Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander (Random House, 2003).

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