

Inferno Canto 1

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Canto I

Argument

The writer, having lost his way in a gloomy forest, and being hindered by certain wild beasts from ascending a mountain, is met by Virgil, who promises to show him the punishments of Hell, and afterward of Purgatory; and that he shall then be conducted by Beatrice into Paradise. He follows the Roman poet.

Midway the path of life that men pursue
I found me in a darkling wood astray,
For the direct way had been lost to view.
Ah me, how hard a thing it is to say
What was this thorny wildwood intricate
Whose memory renews the first dismay!
Scarcely in death is bitterness more great:
But as concerns the good discovered there
The other things I saw will I relate.

In the midway[1] of this our mortal life,
I found me in a gloomy wood, astray
Gone from the path direct: and e'en to tell,
It were no easy task, how savage wild
That forest, how robust and rough its growth,
Which to remember only, my dismay
Renews, in bitterness not far from death.
Yet, to discourse of what there good befel,
All else will I relate discover'd there.

[1: "In the midway." The era of the poem is intended by these words to be fixed to the thirty - fifth year of the poet's age, A.D. 1300. In this Convito, human life is compared to an arch or bow, the highest point of which is, in those well framed by nature, at their thirty - fifth year.]

How first I enter'd it I scarce can say,
Such sleepy dulness in that instant weigh'd
My senses down, when the true path I left;
But when a mountain's foot I reach'd, where closed
The valley that had pierced my heart with dread,
I look'd aloft, and saw his shoulders broad
Already vested with that planet's beam,[2]
Who leads all wanderers safe through every way.

[2: "That planet's beam." The sun.]

Then was a little respite to the fear,
That in my heart's recesses deep had lain
All of that night, so pitifully past:
And as a man, with difficult short breath,
Forespent with toiling, 'scaped from sea to shore,
Turns to the perilous wide waste, and stands

A gaze; e'en so my spirit, that yet fail'd,
Struggling with terror, turn'd to view the straits
That none hath passed and lived. My weary frame
After short pause recomforted, again
I journey'd on over that lonely steep,
The hinder foot^[3] still firmer. Scarce the ascent
Began, when, lo! a panther,^[4] nimble, light,
And cover'd with a speckled skin, appear'd;
Nor, when it saw me, vanish'd; rather strove
To check my onward going; that oft - times,
With purpose to retrace my steps, I turn'd.

[3: "The hinder foot." In ascending a hill the weight of the body rests on the hinder foot.]

[4: "A panther." Pleasure or luxury.]

The hour was morning's prime, and on his way
Aloft the sun ascended with those stars,^[5]
That with him rose when Love Divine first moved
Those its fair works: so that with joyous hope
All things conspired to fill me, the gay skin
Of that swift animal, the matin dawn,
And the sweet season. Soon that joy was chased.
And by new dread succeeded, when in view
A lion came, 'gainst me as it appear'd,
With his head held aloft and hunger - mad,
That e'en the air was fear - struck. A she - wolf
Was at his heels, who in her leanness seem'd
Full of all wants, and many a land hath made
Disconsolate ere now. She with such fear
O'erwhelm'd me, at the sight of her appall'd,
That of the height all hope I lost. As one,
Who, with his gain elated, sees the time
When all unawares is gone, he inwardly
Mourns with heart - griping anguish; such was I,
Haunted by that fell beast, never at peace,
Who coming o'er against me, by degrees
Impell'd me where the sun in silence rests.

[5: "With those stars." The sun was in Aries, in which sign he supposes it to have begun its course at the creation.]

While to the lower space with backward step
I fell, my ken discern'd the form of one
Whose voice seem'd faint through long disuse of speech.
When him in that great desert I espied,

"Have mercy on me," cried I out aloud,
"Spirit! or living man! whate'er thou be."

He answered: "Now not man, man once I was,
And born of Lombard parents, Mantuans both
By country, when the power of Julius yet
Was scarcely firm. At Rome my life was past,
Beneath the mild Augustus, in the time
Of fabled deities and false. A bard
Was I, and made Anchises' upright son
The subject of my song, who came from Troy,
When the flames prey'd on Ilium's haughty towers.
But thou, say wherefore to such perils past
Return'st thou? wherefore not this pleasant mount
Ascendest, cause and source of all delight?"

"And art thou then that Virgil, that well - spring,
From which such copious floods of eloquence
Have issued?" I with front abash'd replied.
"Glory and light of all the tuneful train!
May it avail me, that I long with zeal
Have sought thy volume, and with love immense
Have conn'd it o'er. My master thou, and guide!
Thou he from whom alone I have derived
That style, which for its beauty into fame
Exalts me. See the beast, from whom I fled.
O save me from her, thou illustrious sage!
For every vein and pulse throughout my frame
She hath made tremble." He, soon as he saw
That I was weeping, answer'd, "Thou must needs
Another way pursue, if thou wouldst 'scape
From out that savage wilderness. This beast,
At whom thou criest, her way will suffer none
To pass, and no less hinderance makes than death:
So bad and so accursed in her kind,
That never sated is her ravenous will,
Still after food more craving than before.
To many an animal in wedlock vile
She fastens, and shall yet to many more,
Until that greyhound^[6] come, who shall destroy

[6: This passage has been commonly understood as a eulogium on the liberal spirit of his Veronese patron, Can Grande della Scala.]

Her with sharp pain. He will not life support

By earth nor its base metals, but by love,
Wisdom, and virtue; and his land shall be
The land 'twixt either Feltro.[7] In his might
Shall safety to Italia's plains arise,
For whose fair realm, Camilla, virgin pure,
Nisus, Euryalus, and Turnus fell.
He, with incessant chase, through every town
Shall worry, until he to hell at length
Restore her, thence by envy first let loose.
I, for thy profit pondering, now devise
That thou mayst follow me; and I, thy guide,
Will lead thee hence through an eternal space,
Where thou shalt hear despairing shrieks, and see
Spirits of old tormented, who invoke
A second death;[8] and those next view, who dwell
Content in fire,[9] for that they hope to come,
Whene'er the time may be, among the blest,
Into whose regions if thou then desire
To ascend, a spirit worthier[10] than I
Must lead thee, in whose charge, when I depart,
Thou shalt be left; for that Almighty King,
Who reigns above, a rebel to His law
Adjudges me; and therefore hath decreed
That, to His city, none through me should come.
He in all parts hath sway; there rules, there holds
His citadel and throne. O happy those,
Whom there He chuses!" I to him in few:
"Bard! by that God, whom thou didst not adore,
I do beseech thee (that this ill and worse
I may escape) to lead me where thou said'st,
That I Saint Peter's gate[11] may view, and those
Who, as thou tell'st, are in such dismal plight."
Onward he moved, I close his steps pursued.

[7: Verona, the country of Can della Scala, is situated between Feltro, a city in the Marca Trivigiana, and Monte Feltro, a city in the territory of Urbino.]

[8: "A second death." "And in these days men shall seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them." Rev. ix. 6.]

[9: The spirits in Purgatory.]

[10: "A spirit worthier." Beatrice, who conducts the Poet through Paradise.]

[11: The gate of Purgatory, which the Poet feigns to be guarded by an angel placed there by St. Peter.]

