

Excerpts from *Inferno*
 from *The Divine Comedy*
 by Dante Alighieri
 Translated by Mark Musa

“The subject of this work must first be considered according to the letter, then be considered allegorically. The subject of the whole work, then, taken in the literal sense alone, is simply “The state of souls after death, “for the movement of the whole work hinges on this. If the work be taken allegorically, the subject is “Man—as, according to his merits or demerits in the exercise of his free will, he is subject to reward or punishment by Justice...

-Dante’s Letter to Can Grande

Canto 1: The Dark Forest

HALFWAY through his life, DANTE THE PILGRIM wakes to find himself lost in a dark wood. Terrified at being alone in so dismal a valley, he wanders until he comes to a hill bathed in sunlight, and his fear begins to leave him. But when he starts to climb the hill, his path is blocked by three fierce beasts: first a LEOPARD, then a LION, and finally a SHE-WOLF. They fill him with fear and drive him back down to the sunless wood. At that moment the figure of a man appears before him; it is the shade of VIRGIL, and the Pilgrim begs for help. Virgil tells him that he cannot overcome the beasts which obstruct his path; they must remain until a “GREYHOUND” comes who will drive them back to Hell. Rather by another path will the Pilgrim reach the sunlight, and Virgil promises to guide him on that path through Hell and Purgatory, after which another spirit, more fit than Virgil, will lead him to Paradise. The Pilgrim begs Virgil to lead on, and the Guide starts ahead. The Pilgrim follows.

Midway along the journey of our life ¹ I woke to find myself in a dark wood, for I had wandered off from the straight path.	3
How hard it is to tell what it was like, this wood of wilderness, savage and stubborn (the thought of it brings back all my old fears),	6
a bitter place! Death could scarce be bitterer. But if I would show the good that came of it I must talk about things other than the good. ²	9

¹ **Midway along the journey of our life:** In the Middle Ages life was often thought of as a journey, a pilgrimage, the goal of which was God and Heaven; and in the first line of *The Divine Comedy* Dante establishes the central motif of his poem— it is the story of man’s pilgrimage to God. That we are meant to think in terms not just of the Pilgrim but of Everyman is indicated by the phrase “the journey of our life” (our journey through sin to repentance and redemption).

The imaginary date of the poem’s beginning is the night before Good Friday in 1300, the year of the papal jubilee proclaimed by Boniface VIII. Born in 1265, Dante was thirty- five years old, which is one half of man’s Biblical life span of seventy years.

² The reader must be careful from the beginning to distinguish between the two uses of the first person singular in *The Divine Comedy*: one designating Dante

How I entered there I cannot truly say, I had become so sleepy at the moment when I first strayed, leaving the path of truth;	12	The hour was early in the morning then, the sun was climbing up with those same stars that had accompanied it on the world's first day,	39
but when I found myself at the foot of a hill, at the edge of the wood's beginning, down in the valley, where I first felt my heart plunged deep in fear,	15	the day Divine Love set their beauty turning; so the hour and sweet season of creation encouraged me to think I could get past	42
I raised my head and saw the hilltop shawled in morning rays of light sent from the planet ³ that leads men straight ahead on every road.	18	that gaudy beast, wild in its spotted pelt, but then good hope gave way and fear returned when the figure of a lion loomed up before me,	45
And then only did terror start subsiding in my heart's lake, which rose to heights of fear that night I spent in deepest desperation.	21	and he was coming straight toward me, it seemed, with head raised high, and furious with hunger— the air around him seemed to fear his presence.	48
Just as a swimmer, still with panting breath, now safe upon the shore, out of the deep, might turn for one last look at the dangerous waters,	24	And now a she-wolf came, that in her leanness seemed racked with every kind of greediness (how many people she has brought to grief!).	51
so I, although my mind was turned to flee, turned round to gaze once more upon the pass that never let a living soul escape.	27	This last beast brought my spirit down so low with fear that seized me at the sight of her, I lost all hope of going up the hill.	54
I rested my tired body there awhile and then began to climb the barren slope (I dragged my stronger foot and limped along).	30	As a man who, rejoicing in his gains, suddenly seeing his gain turn into loss, will grieve as he compares his then and now,	57
Beyond the point the slope begins to rise sprang up a leopard, trim and very swift! It was covered by a pelt of many spots.	33	so she made me do, that relentless beast; coming toward me, slowly, step by step, she forced me back to where the sun is mute.	60
And, everywhere I looked, the beast was there blocking my way, so time and time again I was about to turn and go back down.	36	While I was rushing down to that low place, my eyes made out a figure coming toward me of one grown faint, perhaps from too much silence.	63
<hr/> <p>the Pilgrim, and the other Dante the Poet. The first is a character in a story invented by the second. The events are represented as having taken place in the past; the writing of the poem and the memories of these events are represented as taking place in the poet's present. We find references to both past and present, and to both pilgrim and poet, in line 10: "How I entered there I cannot truly say."</p> <p>³ planet: the sun, which was thought to be a planet in Ancient Greece.</p>		And when I saw him standing in this wasteland, "Have pity on my soul," I cried to him, "whichever you are, shade or living man!"	66
		"No longer living man, though once I was," he said, "and my parents were from Lombardy, both of them were Mantuans by birth.	69

I was born, though somewhat late, *sub Julio*⁴,
and lived in Rome when good Augustus reigned,
when still the false and lying gods were worshipped. 72

I was a poet and sang of that just man,
son of Anchises⁵, who sailed off from Troy
after the burning of proud Ilium. 75

But why retreat to so much misery?
Why not climb up this blissful mountain here,
the beginning and the source of all man's joy?" 78

"Are you then Virgil, are you then that fount
from which pours forth so rich a stream of words?"
I said to him, bowing my head modestly. 81

"O light and honor of the other poets,
may my long years of study, and that deep love
that made me search your verses, help me now! 84

You are my teacher, the first of all my authors,
and you alone the one from whom I took
the noble style that was to bring me honor. 87

You see the beast that forced me to retreat;
save me from her, I beg you, famous sage,
she makes me tremble, the blood throbs in my veins."90

"But you must journey down another road,"
he answered, when he saw me lost in tears,
"if ever you hope to leave this wilderness; 93

this beast, the one you cry about in fear,
allows no soul to succeed along her path,
she blocks his way and puts an end to him. 96

She is by nature so perverse and vicious,
her craving belly is never satisfied,
still hungering for food the more she eats. 99

⁴ *sub Julio*: in the reign of Julius Caesar

⁵ **Son of Anchises**: Aeneas, hero of the *Aeneid*; according to legend he was the founder of Rome

She mates with many creatures, and will go on
mating with more until the greyhound comes
and tracks her down to make her die in anguish. 102

He will not feed on either land or money:
his wisdom, love, and virtue shall sustain him;
he will be born between Feltro and Feltro⁶. 105

He comes to save that fallen Italy
for which the maid Camilla gave her life
and Turnus, Nisus, Euryalus⁷ died of wounds. 108

And he will hunt for her through every city
until he drives her back to Hell once more,
whence Envy first unleashed her on mankind. 111

And so, I think it best you follow me
for your own good, and I shall be your guide
and lead you out through an eternal place 114

where you will hear desperate cries, and see
tormented shades, some old as Hell itself,
and know what second death⁸ is, from their screams.

And later you will see those who rejoice
while they are burning, for they have hope of coming,
whenever it may be, to join the blessed— 120

to whom, if you too wish to make the climb,
a spirit, worthier than I, must take you;
I shall go back, leaving you in her care, 123

because that Emperor dwelling on high
will not let me lead any to His city,
since I in life rebelled against His law. 126

⁶ **Feltro and Feltro**: Can Grande della Scala (1290-1329) was an Italian leader born in Verona, which is situated between Feltre and Montefeltro.

⁷ **Camilla...Turnus...Nisus...Euryalus**: When Aeneas led the Trojans into Italy, these figures were killed in a war between the Trojans and the Latins.

⁸ **second death**: damnation

Everywhere He reigns, and there He rules;
 there is His city, there is His high throne.
 Oh, happy the one He makes His citizen!" 129

And I to him: "Poet, I beg of you,
 in the name of God, that God you never knew,
 save me from this evil place and worse, 132

lead me there to the place you spoke about
 that I may see the gate Saint Peter guards
 and those whose anguish you have told me of." 135

Then he moved on, and I moved close behind him.

Canto 3: Hell's Gate/the Neutrals

As THE TWO POETS enter the vestibule that leads to Hell itself, Dante sees the inscription above the gate, and he hears the screams of anguish from the damned souls. Rejected by God and not accepted by the powers of Hell, the first group of souls are "nowhere," because of their cowardly refusal to make a choice in life. Their punishment is to follow a banner at a furious pace forever, and to be tormented by flies and hornets. The Pilgrim recognizes several of these shades but mentions none by name. Next they come to the River Acheron, where they are greeted by the infernal boatman, CHARON. Among those doomed souls who are to be ferried across the river, Charon sees the living man and challenges him, but Virgil lets it be known that his companion must pass. Then across the landscape rushes a howling wind, which blasts the Pilgrim out of his senses, and he falls to the ground.

I AM THE WAY INTO THE DOLEFUL CITY,
 I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL GRIEF,
 I AM THE WAY TO A FORSAKEN RACE.⁹ 3

⁹ **DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE ...HIGHEST WISDOM...PRIMAL LOVE:**
 These three attributes represent, respectively, the triune God: the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. Thus, the gate of Hell was created by the Trinity moved by Justice.

JUSTICE IT WAS THAT MOVED MY GREAT CREATOR;
 DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE CREATED ME,
 AND HIGHEST WISDOM JOINED WITH PRIMAL LOVE.

BEFORE ME NOTHING BUT ETERNAL THINGS
 WERE MADE, AND I SHALL LAST ETERNALLY.
 ABANDON EVERY HOPE, ALL YOU WHO ENTER.¹⁰

I saw these words spelled out in somber colors
 inscribed along the ledge above a gate;
 "Master," I said, "these words I see are cruel." 12
 He answered me, speaking with experience:
 "Now here you must leave all distrust behind;
 let all your cowardice die on this spot. 15

We are at the place where earlier I said
 you could expect to see the suffering race
 of souls who lost the good of intellect." 18

Placing his hand on mine, smiling at me
 in such a way that I was reassured,
 he led me in, into those mysteries. 21

Here sighs and cries and shrieks of lamentation
 echoed throughout the starless air of Hell;
 at first these sounds resounding made me weep: 24

tongues confused, a language strained in anguish
 with cadences of anger, shrill outcries
 and raucous groans that joined with sounds of hands, 27

raising a whirling storm that turns itself
 forever through that air of endless black,
 like grains of sand swirling when a whirlwind blows. 30

And I, in the midst of all this circling horror,
 began, "Teacher, what are these sounds I hear?
 What souls are these so overwhelmed by grief?" 33

¹⁰ *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'entrate.*

And he to me: "This wretched state of being is the fate of those sad souls who lived a life but lived it with no blame and with no praise.	36	At once I understood, and I was sure this was that sect of evil souls who were hateful to God and to His enemies.	63
They are mixed with that repulsive choir of angels neither faithful nor unfaithful to their God, who undecided stood but for themselves.	39	These wretches, who had never truly lived, went naked, and were stung and stung again by the hornets and the wasps that circled them	66
Heaven, to keep its beauty, cast them but even Hell itself would not receive them, for fear the damned might glory over them."	42	and made their faces run with blood in streaks; their blood, mixed with their tears, dripped to their feet, and disgusting maggots collected in the pus.	69
And I, "Master, what torments do they suffer that force them to lament so bitterly?" He answered: "I will tell you in few words:	45	And when I looked beyond this crowd I saw a throng upon the shore of a wide river, which made me ask, "Master, I would like to know:	72
these wretches have no hope of truly dying, and this blind life they lead is so abject it makes them envy every other fate.	48	who are these people, and what law is this that makes those souls so eager for the crossing— as I can see, even in this dim light?"	75
The world will not record their having been there; Heaven's mercy and its justice turn from them. Let's not discuss them; look and pass them by."	51	And he: "All this will be made plain to you as soon as we shall come to stop awhile upon the sorrowful shore of Acheron," ¹³	78
And so I looked and saw a kind of banner ¹¹ rushing ahead, whirling with aimless speed as though it would not ever take a stand;	54	And I, with eyes cast down in shame, for fear that I perhaps had spoken out of turn, said nothing more until we reached the river.	81
behind it an interminable train of souls pressed on, so many that I wondered how death could have undone so great a number.	57	And suddenly, coming toward us in a boat, a man of years ¹⁴ whose ancient hair was white shouted at us, "Woe to you, perverted souls!	84
When I had recognized a few of them, I saw the shade of the one who must have been the coward who had made the great refusal. ¹²	60		

¹¹ **I looked and saw a kind of banner:** In this canto the *contrapasso* opposes the sin of neutrality, or inactivity: the souls who in their early lives had no banner, no leader to follow, now run forever after one.

¹² **the coward who had made the great refusal:** The difficulty of identifying this figure has plagued critics and commentators for over seven hundred years. Most Critics say that it is Pope Celestine V, who renounced the papacy in 1294,

five months after having been elected. Fearing his own soul would be corrupted by worldliness, he abdicated in favor of Pope Boniface VIII, who became a political enemy of Dante's and represented the worst sort of evil secularization of the Church.

This shade might also be Pontius Pilate, who refused to pass sentence on Christ, so Pilate's neutral attitude at the trial of Christ resulted in the crucifixion of Christ.

¹³ **Acheron:** in Greek mythology, the river of woe in the underworld; dead souls were ferried across the river to Hades.

¹⁴ **a man of years:** Charon; in Greek mythology, the ferryman who carried the dead to Hades.

Give up all hope of ever seeing Heaven: I come to lead you to the other shore, into eternal darkness, ice, and fire.	87	so did the evil seed of Adam's Fall drop from that shore to the boat, one at a time, at the signal, like the falcon to its lure.	117
And you, the living soul, you over there, get away from all these people who are dead." But when he saw I did not move aside,	90	Away they go across the darkened waters, and before they reach the other side to land, a new throng starts collecting on this side.	120
he said, "Another way, by other ports, not here, shall you pass to reach the other shore; a lighter skiff than this must carry you." ¹⁵	93	"My son," the gentle master said to me, "all those who perish in the wrath of God assemble here from all parts of the earth;	123
And my guide, "Charon, this is no time for anger! It is so willed, there where the power is for what is willed; that's all you need to know."	96	they want to cross the river, they are eager; it is Divine Justice that spurs them on, turning the fear they have into desire. ¹⁶	126
These words brought silence to the woolly cheeks of the ancient steersman of the livid marsh, whose eyes were set in glowing wheels of fire.	99	A good soul never comes to make this crossing, so, if Charon grumbles at the sight of you, you see now what his words are really saying."	129
But all those souls there, naked, in despair, changed color and their teeth began to chatter at the sound of his announcement of their doom.	102	He finished speaking, and the grim terrain shook violently; and the fright it gave me even now in recollection makes me sweat.	132
They were cursing God, cursing their own parents, the human race, the time, the place, the seed of their beginning, and their day of birth.	105	Out of the tear—drenched land a wind arose which blasted forth into a reddish light, knocking my senses out of me completely,	135
Then all together, weeping bitterly, they packed themselves along the wicked shore waits for every man who fears not God.	108	and I fell as one falls tired into sleep.	
The devil, Charon, with eyes of glowing coals, summons them all together with a signal, and with an oar he strikes the laggard sinner.	111		
As in autumn when the leaves begin to fall, one after the other (until the branch is witness to the spoils spread on the ground),	114		

¹⁵ **Another way, by other ports...carry you.:** Charon, whose boat bears only the souls of the damned, recognizes the Pilgrim as a living man and refuses him passage.

¹⁶ **They want to cross the river...desire:** It is perhaps part of the punishment that the souls of the damned are eager for their punishment to begin; those who were so willing to sin on earth are in Hell damned with a willingness to go to their just retribution.