

Canto 1

The Dark Forest

In the middle of the journey of our life
I found myself again in a dark forest,
for I had lost the pathway straight and right.

- 4 Ah how hard it is to describe, this forest
savage and rough and overwhelming, for
to think of it renews my fear before it!
- 7 It is so bitter, death is little more;
but to discuss the good I found, I'll say
the other things I witnessed there before.
- 10 How I got there, I cannot rightly say,
I was so full of sleep at that point still
at which I had abandoned the true way.
- 13 But where that valley ended which had filled
my heart with fear, I came upon a slope;
and standing at the bottom of that hill,
- 16 I looked on high, and saw its shoulders clothed
already in that planet's rays of light
that yet leads others straight on every road.
- 19 My fear was calmed a little at the sight,
though the lake within my heart endured the dread
while I'd passed with such pity through the night.
- 22 And as a man, who with exhausted breath
emerges from the deep onto the shore,
turns to the dangerous waters he has left,

- 25 so, as it fled away, my mind once more
turned back to look again upon the pass
that no one living ever left before.
- 28 I paused my weary body to relax,
then took the way along the desert slope,
the firm foot always lower on the path.
- 31 And behold, just where the hill begins to slope,
a leopard light and lithe and very fast,
and covered over with a spotted coat;
- 34 she did not leave before my face, but had
my journey so impeded as I climbed,
that most times I was turned and driven back.
- 37 The beginning of the morning was the time,
and the sun was mounting upwards with those stars
that had been with it when the Love divine
- 40 had first moved those beautiful things afar;
so that, despite the beast with the dappled coat,
the hour of time and the sweet season are
- 43 occasion nonetheless to have good hope;
but not so much that I was not afraid
when there appeared a lion on the slope.
- 46 Against me he appeared to make his way,
with his head high and with furious hunger,
so that the air itself appeared to quake.
- 49 And then a wolf, who seemed to be encumbered
with every craving, looking lean and light,
and she's made wretched lives for many others—

- 52 with the fear that issued from her very sight,
she put upon me such a heavy strain
that I lost hope of getting to the height.
- 55 And as is he who willfully makes gains,
and the time comes that causes him to lose,
who weeps in all his thoughts and grieves with pain;
- 58 so then that peaceless beast had made me too,
who, moving towards me, little by little came
to drive me back to where the sun is mute.
- 61 And then before my eyes a figure came,
as I was falling to a lower place,
who through a long silence seemed dim and faint.
- 64 When I saw him in the great deserted waste,
“*Miserere* me,” I cried through the expanse,
“whatever you may be, a man or shade!”
- 67 He said: “No man, yet once I was a man,
and both my parents were Lombards, and they
were Mantuan by their native fatherland.
- 70 I was born *sub Julio*, though it was late,
and lived in Rome under good Augustus’ reign
in the time when the false and lying gods were praised.
- 73 I was a poet, and it was I who sang
of Anchises’ righteous son, who came from Troy
after proud Ilium went up in flames.
- 76 But why do you turn back, just to rejoin
such trouble? why not climb the lovely mountain
which is the source and cause of every joy?”

- 79 “Then are you that same Virgil and that fountain
who spills out speech in such a fluent brook?”
I answered him with shame upon my brow, then.
- 82 “O light and honor of the poets, look—
may the long study and the great love garner
your favor, which have made me search your book.
- 85 You are my master and you are my author;
you are alone the one from whom I take
the beautiful style that has brought me honor.
- 88 You see the beast for which I turn away;
help me to get beyond her, famous sage,
for she has made my veins and pulses quake.”
- 91 “There is another path that you must take,”
he answered when he saw me shedding tears,
“if you want to survive this savage place;
- 94 for this beast, for which you’ve cried out in tears,
allows no man to pass across her path,
but so impedes him that it kills him here;
- 97 and has a nature so wicked and bad,
that she can never glut her greedy will,
but has more hunger after the repast.
- 100 She weds with many creatures, and she still
shall breed with more, until the greyhound first
arrives, who painfully will have her killed.
- 103 He shall not feed on pewter nor on earth,
but on wisdom, love and virtue, and soon
between felt and felt will be his nation’s birth.

- 106 For that low Italy he'll be a boon
for which the virgin Camilla is deceased,
and Euryalus, Turnus and Nisus died of wounds.
- 109 Through every city will he hunt the beast,
until he sends her back to the Inferno,
where she, by primal envy, was released.
- 112 It's best if you, as I think and discern, will
now follow me, and I will be your guide,
and I will bring you through a place eternal,
- 115 where you will hear the hopeless desperate cries,
and you will see the ancient spirits suffer,
who all scream out for second deaths to die;
- 118 and you'll see those who are content to suffer
in fire, because they hope that they will reach,
whenever it may be, those blessed others.
- 121 If you'll then want to climb as high as these,
there is a soul much worthier than I:
I'll leave you with her, when I take my leave;
- 124 because that Emperor who reigns on high,
since I rebelled against His law, declares
that in His city, through me, none arrive.
- 127 From there He rules, and governs everywhere;
there is His city, and there the high seat:
oh happy, those He chooses to be there!"
- 130 And I to him: "Poet, I ask you please—
by that same God whom you had never known,
so, from this evil and worse, I may flee—

133 to lead me to the place of which you spoke,
that I might see the gateway of Saint Peter
and those whom you make out to be so low.”

136 Then he moved on, and I kept after the leader.