

The Inferno

Inferno Canto I:1-60 The Dark Wood and the Hill



In *the middle* [p. 582] of the journey of our life, I came to myself, in a dark wood, where the direct way was lost. It is a hard thing to speak of, how wild, harsh and impenetrable that wood was, so that thinking of it recreates the fear. It is scarcely less bitter than death: but, in order to tell of the good that I found there, I must tell of the other things I saw there.

The Divine Comedy

I cannot rightly say how I entered it. I was so full of sleep, at that point where I abandoned the true way. But when I reached the foot of a hill, where the valley, that had pierced my heart with fear, came to an end, I looked up and *saw its shoulders brightened* [p. 582] with the rays of that sun that leads men rightly on every road. Then the fear, that had settled in the lake of my heart, through the night that I had spent so miserably, became a little calmer. And as a man, who, with panting breath, has escaped from the deep sea to the shore, turns back towards the perilous waters and stares, so my mind, still fugitive, turned back to see that pass again, that no living person ever left.

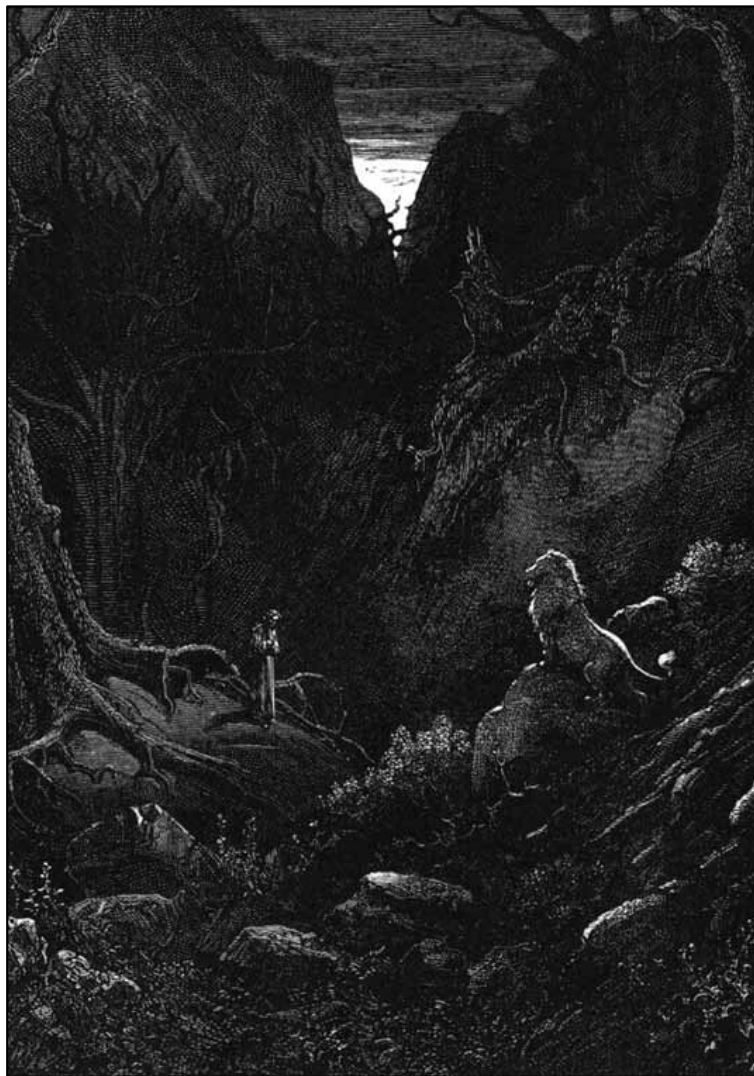


After I had rested my tired body a while, I made my way again over empty ground, always bearing upwards to the right. And, behold, almost at the start of the slope, a light swift *leopard* [p. 584] with spotted coat. It would not turn from before my face, and so obstructed my path, that I often turned, in order to return.

The time was at the beginning of the morning, and the sun was mounting up with all those stars, that were with him when Divine Love first moved all delightful things, so that the hour of day, and the sweet season, gave me fair hopes of that creature with the bright pelt. But not so fair that

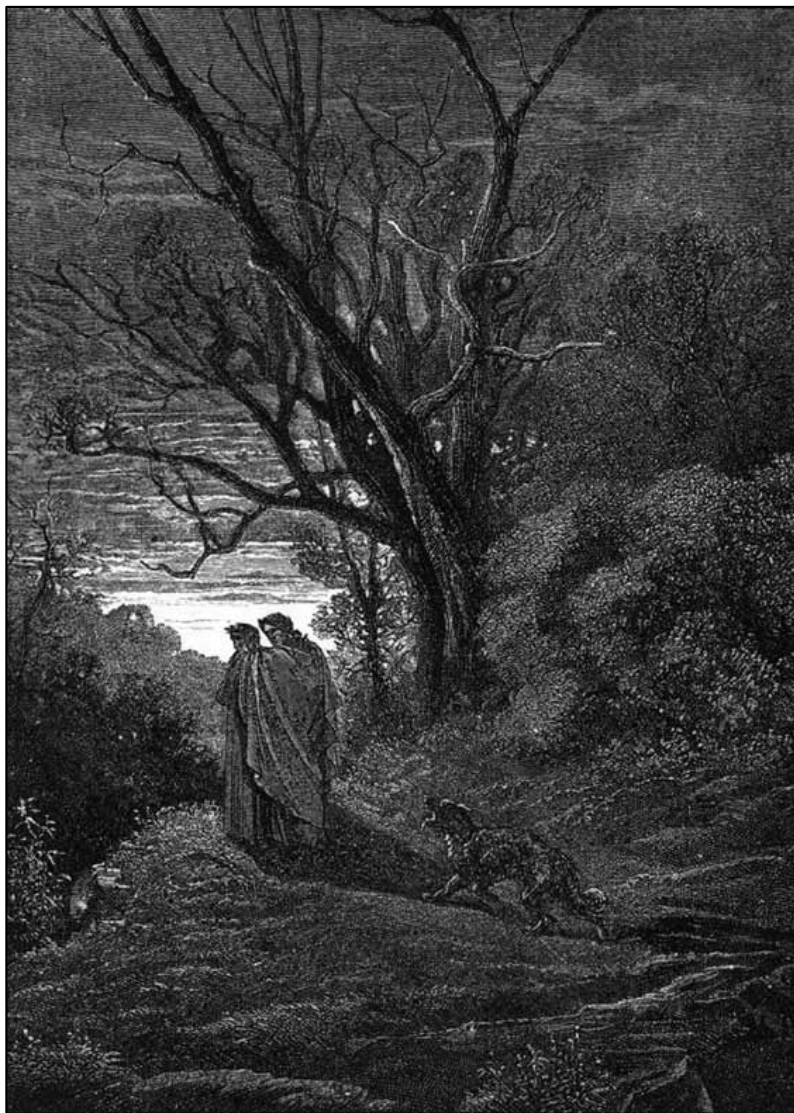
The Inferno

I could avoid fear at the sight of a *lion* [p. 584], that appeared, and seemed to come at me, with raised head and rabid hunger, so that it seemed the air itself was afraid; and a *she-wolf* [p. 584] that looked full of craving in its leanness, and, before now, has made many men live in sadness. She brought me such heaviness of fear, from the aspect of her face, that I lost all hope of ascending. And as one who is eager for gain, weeps, and is afflicted in his thoughts, if the moment arrives when he loses, so that creature, without rest, made me like him: and coming at me, little by little, drove me back to where the sun is silent.



Inferno Canto I:61-99 Dante meets Virgil

While I was returning to the depths, one appeared, in front of my eyes, who seemed hoarse from long silence. When I saw him, in the great emptiness, I cried out to him 'Have pity on me, *whoever you are* ^[p. 572], whether a man, in truth, or a shadow!' He answered me: 'Not a man: but a man I once was, and my parents were Lombards, and both of them, by their native place, Mantuans.'



The Inferno

I was born sub Julio though late, and lived in Rome, under the good *Augustus* [p. 424], in the age of false, deceitful gods. I was a poet, and sang of *Aeneas* [p. 406], that virtuous son of *Anchises* [p. 415], who came from Troy when proud Ilium was burned. But you, why do you turn back towards such pain? Why do you not climb the delightful mountain, that is the origin and cause of all joy?’

I answered him, with a humble expression: ‘Are you then that *Virgil* [p. 572], and that fountain, that pours out so great a river of speech? O, glory and light to other poets, may that long study, and the great love, that made me scan your work, be worth something now. You are my master, and my author: you alone are the one from whom I learnt the high style that has brought me honour. See the creature that I turned back from: O, sage, famous in wisdom, save me from her, she that makes my veins and my pulse tremble.’

When he saw me weeping, he answered: ‘You must go another road, if you wish to escape this savage place. This creature, that distresses you, allows no man to cross her path, but obstructs him, to destroy him, and she has so vicious and perverse a nature, that she never sates her greedy appetite, and after food is hungrier than before.’

Inferno Canto I:100-111 The salvation of Italy

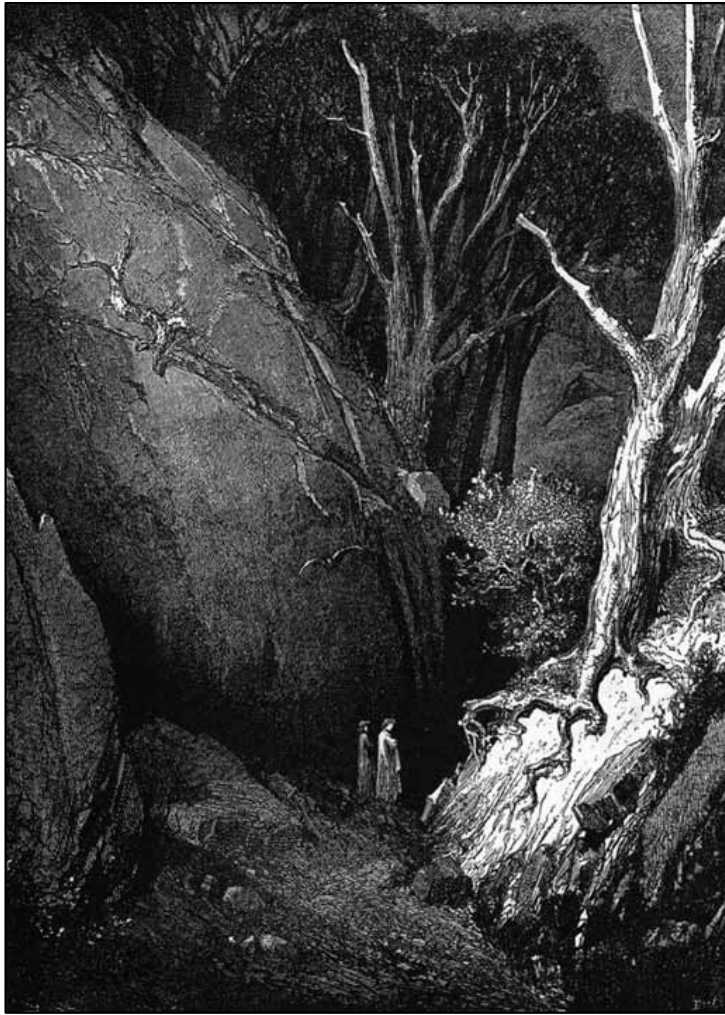
‘Many are the creatures she mates with, and there will be many more, until the *Greyhound* [p. 584] comes who will make her die in pain. He will not feed himself on land or wealth, but on wisdom, love and virtue, and his birthplace will lie between *Feltro* [p. 584] and Feltro. He will be the salvation of that lower Italy for which virgin *Camilla* [p. 440] died of wounds, and *Euryalus* [p. 471], *Turnus* [p. 567], and *Nisus* [p. 527]. He will chase the she-wolf through every city, until he has returned her to Hell, from which envy first loosed her.’

Inferno Canto I:112-136 Virgil will be his guide through Hell

‘It is best, as I think and understand, for you to follow me, and I will be your guide, and lead you from here through an eternal space where you will

The Divine Comedy

hear the desperate shouts, will see the ancient spirits in pain, so that each one cries out for a second death: and then you will see others at peace in the flames, because they hope to come, whenever it may be, among the blessed. Then if you desire to climb to them, there will be a *spirit* [p. 426], fitter than I am, to guide you, and I will leave you with her, when we part, since the Lord, who rules above, does not wish me to enter his city, because I was rebellious to his law.



He is lord everywhere, but there he rules, and there is his city, and his high throne: O, happy is he, whom he chooses to go there!

And I to him: 'Poet, I beg you, by the God, you did not acknowledge, lead me where you said, so that I might escape this evil or worse, and see

The Inferno

the Gate of *St. Peter* [p. 534], and those whom you make out to be so saddened.'

Then he moved: and I moved on behind him.

Inferno Canto II:1-42 Dante's doubts as to his fitness for the journey



The day was going [p. 583], and the dusky air was freeing the creatures of the earth, from their labours, and I, one, alone, prepared myself to endure the inner war, of the journey and its pity, that the mind, without error, shall recall.