

CANTO I

The drama opens on the night of Holy Thursday, April 7, of the great year of jubilee, 1300. In his thirty-fifth year Dante finds himself lost in a dark forest of personal ignorance and sin, of absent political leadership, and of ecclesiastical corruption, the memory of which evokes a fear as bitter as death (1–9). He draws near to a mountain of wisdom and virtue, whose summit is bathed by rays flowing from the sun of divine illumination and righteous choice. Comforted by the possibility of escape, he gathers his strength in order to begin the ascent of moral purification (10–30). He is suddenly confronted, however, by a leopard of lust (or incontinence) that halts him and forces him to turn back repeatedly (31–36). Once again, he is consoled and encouraged by the sun rising in the springtime constellation of Aries, the time of the creation of the world, the birth of Christ, and the resurrection (37–43). But Dante is immediately frightened anew by a lion of pride (or violence) (44–48) and then by a she-wolf of avarice (or fraud) that drives him back, hopeless, into the darkness (49–60). At this impasse, Virgil, a figure of right reason, acquired virtue, natural philosophy, and poetic wisdom, appears to the terrified Dante (61–78). Learning his identity, the disciple bursts into homage of his mentor and quickly implores his aid (79–90). Virgil replies that the she-wolf will not let him or any others pass (91–99) but prophesies the advent of a godlike redeemer for his native land who will slay her and thrust her back into Hell (100–111). Since Virgil cannot guide Dante up the mountain of virtue directly, he offers to take him on another journey that will lead first through the recognition of sin in Hell, and then through repentance and reformation in Purgatory. In the earthly happiness of the Garden of Eden, he will finally entrust Dante to Beatrice, the symbol of revelation, grace, and theology, to be lifted up through the celestial spheres of Paradise (112–129). Dante eagerly accepts, and the odyssey commences (130–136).

¹ About the midpoint of our lifelong way^[2]

I found myself in wooded darkness when
I lost the straight and narrow path to stray.

⁴ How hard to tell what it was like back then— That savage wood, that rough
and rugged lair;
The very thought brings back my fear again!

⁷ How bitter! Death is scarcely more to bear.
To treat, though, what I found there of the good,
I'll tell of other things I spotted there.

10 I can't say how I entered in that wood For at that point I was so full of sleep
That I forsook where my true path had stood.

13 And when I reached the bottom of a steep,[\[3\]](#)
Just where the boundary of that valley showed
Which first had pierced my heart with fear so deep,

16 I peered on high and saw its shoulders glowed, Already dressed in rays the
planet cast[\[4\]](#)
That steers men straight on each and every road.

19 At that my fear was calmed a bit at last, Which in the lake within my heart
had stayed
The night that was so piteously passed.

22 And just as one who, breathing hard, has made His way out from the sea up
to the shore
And turned to see those risky waves displayed,

25 Just so my spirit, fleeing evermore, Turned back to see again the pass I'd
quit,
Which never let one go alive before.

28 I let my weary body rest a bit,
Then on the desert slope took up my stride,[\[5\]](#)
But kept the foot that's firm below on it.[\[6\]](#)

31 And look! Not far from where the mountainside Begins, there was a leopard
swift and light,
And it was covered with a spotted hide.

34 But it refused to disappear from sight, Impeding me upon that road of mine,
So that I often had to turn in flight.

37 It was the time the morning starts to shine; The sun was mounting with the
stars on high
That had attended it when Love Divine

40 First moved those things of beauty through the sky.
The time of day and gentle season were^[7]
Sufficient cause to have good hope that I

43 Might yet escape that beast with speckled fur.
But even so, it put me in such dread
When next a lion there appeared to stir;

46 It seemed to charge against me with its head Held high and with such rabid
appetite
That through the air, it seemed, a tremor spread.

49 And then a she-wolf came upon the site; In all her leanness every lust
seemed pent— She'd made so many live a wretched plight.

52 She brought on me such heaviness, which went With terror at the sight of her
just had,
I lost all hope of making my ascent.

55 And just as one whose winnings make him glad, When it is time to lose what
he has won,
In all his thoughts bemoans it and is sad,

58 So by that restless beast was I undone.
And bit by bit, still coming ever near,
She drove me back where silent is the sun.^[8]

61 While I was falling to a lower tier, One suddenly appearing there was spied,
Who seemed, from lengthy silence, hard to hear.

64 I saw him on that massive waste and cried: "Have mercy on me, whether
what I view
Be shade or truly man!" And he replied:

67 "Though man no more, I was a man like you.
My parents issued from the Lombard state,
And both were Mantuans by city too.^[9]

70 And I was born *sub Julio*, though late;[\[10\]](#)
At Rome, with good Augustus, I sojourned
In times when false and lying gods held weight.

73 I was a poet, and my singing turned Around Anchises' righteous son, who
went[\[11\]](#)
From Troy when haughty Ilium was burned.[\[12\]](#)

76 But why do you return to discontent?
Why do you not ascend the blissful mount,
The source and cause from which all joy is sent?"

79 "And are you then that Virgil, you that fount[\[13\]](#)
Which pours so broad a stream of speech to hear?"
With shameful brow, I answered his account.

82 "O honor of all poets, light so clear!
May lengthy zeal and love of great degree
Which made me search your volume serve me here.

85 You are my master and my author, he From whom alone that comely style I
took
Which since has brought such honor unto me.

88 But there's the beast that made me turn, just look, O famous Sage, and help
me flee her face— Because of her my veins and pulses shook."

91 "There is another path that you must trace,"
He answered when he saw the tears I shed,
"If you desire to leave this savage place.

94 This beast, on whose account you cry instead Will let no others cross her
way at will,
But so impedes them as to strike them dead.

97 Hers is a nature so malign and ill That she will never sate her lustful greed,
And after food has greater hunger still.

100 Though many brutes have joined with her to breed, There will be more until
there comes that Hound^[14]

Who'll make her die in pain. He will not feed

103 On either land or pelf but will abound In wisdom, love, and strength; his
birth will be

Between one Feltro and the other's ground.^[15]

106 And he will save that humble Italy Where Nisus and Eurýalus were slain,
With chaste Camille and Turnus, brutally.^[16]

109 Pursuing her through every town's terrain, At last he will have thrust her
back to Hell,

From which old envy first would give her rein.

112 And therefore, thinking what would serve you well, I judge that you should
follow me as Guide

Through those eternal places where there dwell

115 Despairing shades to hear their shrieks outcried And see the pain of ancient
souls expressed

As each bewails the second death he's died.

118 And you will also witness those who rest Content in fire because they hope
to end,

Whenever that may be, among the blest.

121 And if to such as those you would ascend, A soul will guide you, worthier
than I,^[17]

With whom I'll leave you at my parting, friend.

124 Thus wills the Emperor who reigns on high,^[18]

For I rebelled against his law in vain

And to His city now may not draw nigh.

127 His rule is everywhere and there his reign, His city too is there, his lofty
seat;

Oh, blest the one he chooses for his train!"

Oh, best the one he chooses for his train:

130 I said to him: “If I may now entreat You, Poet, by the God you did not know
That I may flee this ill and worse defeat,

133 Lead me to where you said a while ago That I may see St. Peter’s gate and
find[\[19\]](#)
All those whom you make out as grieving so.”

136 He then moved forth, and I came on behind.