

# Twelve River RIPPLES

## Favourite Poem



### *Dante's Divine Comedy*

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita  
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,  
ché la diritta via era smarrita.*

*Ahi quanto a dir era è cosa dura  
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte  
che nel pensier rinova la paura!*

*Tant' è amara che poco è più morte;  
ma per trattar del ben ch'i' v'ho trovai,  
dirò de l'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte.*

*Io non so ben ridir com' i' v'intraí  
tant' era pien di sonno a quell punto  
che la verace via abbandonai.*

*Ma poi ch'i' fui al piè d'un colle giunto,  
là dove terminava quella valle  
che m'avea di paura il cor compunto,*

*guardai in alto e vidi le sue spalle  
vestite già de' raggi del pianeta  
che mena dritto altrui per ogni calle.*

*Allor fu la paura un poco queta,  
che nell' ago del cor m'era durata  
là note ch'i' passai con tanta pieta.*

*E come quei che con lena affanata,  
uscito fuor del pelago a la riva,  
sí volge a l'acqua perigliosa e guata,  
così l'animo mio, ch'ancor fuggiva,  
sí volse a retro a rimirar lo passo  
che non lasciò già mai persona viva.*

At the midway of the path through life, I found  
Myself lost in a wood so dark, the way  
Ahead blotted out. The keening sound  
I still make shows how hard it is to say  
How harsh and bitter the place felt to me  
Merely to think of it renews my fear  
So badly that death only a degree  
Could possibly be worse. As you shall hear,  
It led to good things too, eventually,  
But there and then I saw no sign of those,  
And can't say even now how I had come  
To be there, stunned and following my nose  
Away from the straight path. And then, still numb  
From pressure on the heart, still in a daze,  
I stumbled on the threshold of a hill  
Where trees no longer grew. Lifting my gaze,  
I saw its shoulders edged with overspill  
From our sure guide, the sun, whose soothing rays  
At least a little melted what that night  
Of dread had done to harden my heart's lake  
And like someone who crawls, half dead with fright,  
Out of the sea, and breathes, and turns to take  
A long look at the water, so my soul,  
Still thinking of escape from the dark wood  
I had escaped, looked back to see it whole,  
The force field no one ever has withstood  
And stayed alive.

## Favourite Poem cont.

As a gesture to the seven hundredth anniversary of the death of Dante Alighieri on 14 September 2021, these are the opening lines from 'Canto 1' of Dante's *Inferno (Hell)*; the first book of the trilogy that makes up his *Divine Comedy*.

Dante was exiled from his native Florence in 1301 at the age of 36. It was in exile that he wrote the *Divine Comedy*, and if a full life span was three score years and ten then the opening lines of *Hell* attest to him commencing his journey into hell at roughly the same age. 'Canto 1' of the *Inferno* acts as an introduction to Dante's journey through the nine levels of hell, guided by the poet Virgil. The introduction begins with the metaphor of Dante being *lost in a wood so dark, the way / Ahead blotted out*. It is not difficult to imagine that someone in exile may feel this way and appreciate that seven hundred years make no difference to the human response to being unable to return to your homeland.

Just as many English speakers may learn Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 18' or the *To be or not to be* speech from *Hamlet*, so most Italians can recite the opening lines from the *Inferno*. These are

presented in both the original Tuscan Italian (to be found at Project Gutenberg <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/997/997-h/997-h.htm#canto01>) as used by Dante and a recent translation by Clive James (Picador Poetry, 2013). Dante did for the Italian language what Chaucer did for English: he opted to write in the vernacular of the time and not in Latin. Clive James has attempted the same in his twenty-first century translation. The *Divine Comedy* was not translated into English until 1802 – possibly because of the influence of the Catholic Church on Dante's writings. However, since then it has been translated many times; sometimes in terza rima and other times in prose. Because many Italian words end in a vowel, it makes terza rima easier to use in Italian than in English. Clive James opted for rhyming quatrains.

Finally – for fun and the beauty of the sound, here is a link to Roberto Benigni reciting 'Canto 1' from *Inferno* in Italian:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIPuo9oYTew>.

The subtitles in English give another translation – this time in terza rima.

*Fran Reader*