

Dante: 25 English Translations Compared

Using the first nine lines of *Inferno*

The original Italian

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
ché la diritta vie era smarrita.
Ab quanto a dir qual 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'io vi trovai,
diro dell'arte cose ch'i' v'ho scorte.*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightfoward pathway had been lost.

Ah me! How hard a thing it is to say
What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,
Which in the very thought renews the fear.

So bitter is it, death is little more;
But of the good to treat, which there I found,
Speak will I of the other things I saw there.

Anthony Esolen

Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself in a dark wilderness,
for I had wandered from the straight and true.
How hard a thing it is to tell about,
that wilderness so savage, dense, and harsh,
even to think of it renews my fear!
It is so bitter, death is hardly more--
but to reveal the good that came to me,
I shall relate the other things I saw.

Charles Singleton

Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost. Ah, how hard it is to tell what that wood was, wild, rugged, harsh; the very thought of it renews the fear! It is so bitter that death is hardly more so. But, to treat of the good that I found in it, I will tell of the other things I saw there.

John Sinclair

In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost. Ah, how hard a thing it is to tell of that wood, savage and harsh and dense, the thought of which renews my fear! So bitter is it that death is hardly more. But to give account of the good which I found there I will tell of the other things I noted there.

Robin Kirkpatrick

At one point midway on our path of life,
I came around and found myself now searching
through a dark wood, the right way blurred and lost.
How hard it is to say what that wood was,
a wilderness, savage, brute, harsh and wild.
Only to think of it renews my fear!
So bitter, that thought, that death is hardly worse.
But since my theme will be the good I found there,
I mean to speak of other things I saw.

Robert Durling

In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost.
Ah, how hard a thing it is to say what that wood was, so savage and harsh and strong that the thought of it renews my fear!
It is so bitter that death is little more so! But to treat of the good that I found there, I will tell of the other things I saw.

Dorothy L. Sayers

Midway this way of life we're bound upon,
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

Ay me! how hard to speak of it--that rude
And rough and stubborn forest! the mere breath
Of memory stirs the old fear in the blood;

It is so bitter, it goes nigh to death;
Yet there I gained such good that, to convey
The tale, I'll write what else I found therewith.

Allen Mandelbaum

When I had journeyed half of our life's way,
I found myself within a shadowed forest,
for I had lost the path that does not stray.

Ah, it is hard to speak of what it was,
that savage forest, dense and difficult,
which even in recall renews my fear;
so bitter--death is hardly more severe!
But to retell the good discovered there,
I'll also tell the other things I saw.

C.H. Sisson

(I could not find the exact format of these verses online)

Half way along the road we have to go,
I found myself obscured in a great forest,
Bewildered, and I knew I had lost the way.
It is hard to say just what the forest was like,
How wild and rough it was, how overpowering;
Even to remember it makes me afraid.
So bitter it is, death itself is hardly more so;
Yet there was good there, and to make it clear
I will speak of other things that I perceived.

Robert Pinsky

Midway on our life's journey, I found myself
In dark woods, the right road lost. To tell
About those woods is hard--so tangled and rough

And savage that thinking of it now, I feel
the old fear stirring: death is hardly more bitter.
And yet, to treat the good I found there as well

I'll tell what I saw,...

Ciaran Carson

Halfway through the story of my life
I came to in a gloomy wood, because
I'd wandered off the path, away from the light.

It's hard to put words to what that wood was;
I shudder even now to think of it,
so wild and rough and tortured were its ways;

And death might well be its confederate
in bitterness; yet all the good I owe
to it, and what else I saw there, I'll relate.

Tom Simone

In the middle of the journey of our life
I found myself in a dark wood,
where the straight path was lost.

Oh, it is a hard thing to tell what it was,
that wood was so savage and harsh and strong
that my fear renews even at the thought of it!

It is so bitter, that death is scarcely worse;
but to tell of the good that I discovered,
I will speak of the other things that I found there.

Clive James

At the mid-point of the path through life, I found
Myself lost in a wood so dark, the way
Ahead was blotted out. The keening sound
I still make shows how hard it is to say
How harsh and bitter that place felt to me—
Merely to think of it renews the fear—
So bad that death by only a degree
Could possibly be worse. As you shall hear,
It led to good things too, eventually,...

Mark Musa

Midway along the journey of our life
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
for I had wandered off from the straight path.

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),

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.

Stanley Lombardo

Midway through the journey of our life
 I found myself within a dark wood,
 for the straight way had now been lost.
 Ah, how hard it is to describe that wood,
 a wilderness so gnarled and rough
 the very thought of it brings back my fear.
 Death itself is hardly more bitter;
 but to tell of the good that I found there
 I will speak of the other things I saw.

J.G. Nicholls

(I could only find the first six lines to this one online, and could not find the exact format of its verse)

Halfway along our journey to life's end
 I found myself astray in a dark wood,
 Since the right way was nowhere to be found.

How hard a thing it is to express the horror
 Of that wild wood, so difficult, so dense!
 Even to think of it renews my terror.

Michael Palma

Midway through the journey of our life, I found
 myself in a dark wood, for I had strayed
 from the straight pathway to this tangled ground.
 How hard it is to tell of, overlaid
 with harsh and savage growth, so wild and raw
 the thought of it still makes me feel afraid.
 Death scarce could be more bitter. But to draw
 the lessons of the good that came my way,
 I will describe the other things I saw.

Robert and Jean Hollander

Midway in the journey of our life
 I came to myself in a dark wood,
 for the straight way was lost.

 Ah, how hard it is to tell
 the nature of that wood, savage, dense and harsh—
 the very thought of it renews my fear!

It is so bitter death is hardly more so.
 But to set forth the good I found
 I will recount the other things I saw.

Charles Norton

Midway upon the road of our life I found myself within
 a dark wood, for the right way had been missed. Ah!
 How hard a thing it is to tell what this wild and rough
 and dense wood was, which in thought renews the fear!
 So bitter it is that death is little more. But in order to
 treat of the good that there I found, I will tell of the
 other things that I have seen there.

John A. Carlyle

In the middle of the journey of our life, I found myself
 in a dark wood; for the straight way was lost. Ah! How
 hard a thing it is to tell what a wild, and rough, and
 stubborn wood this was, which in my thought renews
 the fear: so bitter is it, that scarcely more is death. But
 to treat of the good that I there found, I will relate the
 other things that I discerned.

Mary Jo Bang

Stopped mid-motion in the middle
 Of what we call our life, I looked up and saw no sky—
 Only a dense cage of leaf, tree, and twig. I was lost.

It's difficult to describe a forest:
 Savage, arduous, extreme in its extremity. I think
 And the facts come back, then the fear comes back.

Death, I believe, can only be slightly more bitter.
 I can't address the good I found there
 Until I describe in detail what else I saw.

Melville Best Anderson

Midway the path of life that men pursue
 I found me in a darkling wood astray.
 For the direct way had been lost to view.
 Ah me, how hard a thing it is to say
 What was this thorny wildwood intricate
 Whose memory renews the first dismay!
 Scarcely in death is bitterness more great:
 But as concerns the good discovered there
 The other things I saw will I relate.

A.S. Kline

In the middle 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.

John Ciardi

Midway in our life's journey, I went astray
from the straight road and woke to find myself
along in a dark wood. How shall I say

what wood that was! I never saw so drear
so rank, so arduous a wilderness!
Its very memory gives a shape to fear.

Death could scarce be more bitter than that place!
But since it came to good, I will recount
all that I found revealed there by God's grace.

Elio Zappulla

Halfway along this journey of our life,
I woke in wonder in a sunless wood,
For I had wandered from the narrow way.

Oh how can I give voice to what it was,
That wild, that savage, and that stubborn wood.
The very thought of it renews my fears,
For death itself can hardly be more harsh
Than is the memory of that monstrous place!
But let me sing of other things I saw,
For evil, in the end, gave rise to good.