

# Via

48 Dante Variations

I had started this piece by accident. Stumbling upon Dante's shadeless souls on my way to other books. Perhaps following a lead, in the dark of dark, in the woods of woods, in the sense of panic of the opening canto: 1-2-3 1-2-3 1-2-3 1-2-3 lines, and the three menace him. The panther the lion the wolf. The one at the crossroads. The one who needs. The one who terrifies. Then the one who calls, yet remains hidden. A poet or a hound. A perfect plot in the passing of time. Lost yet already walking.

Ever since the Rev. Cary's translation of 1805, translating Dante into English has become something of a cultural industry. Some 200 translations in less than two hundred years. Faced with this seemingly unstoppable activity, I decided to collate the opening lines of the *Inferno* translations as archived by the British Library up until May 2000. Exactly 700 years after the date fixed by Dante for the start of the Comedy's journey. By the time I closed the project, two new translations had reached the shelves. In all, 47 versions were gathered - once the two editions archived as missing, the one archived as under restoration and the multiple unaltered editions by the same translators had been disregarded. A fortuitous number that promised a musical structure to the list of entries and helped determine the alphabetical logic of the list's shifting cadences. In the summer 2000, a reading of the variations was made with Ciarán. Using calculations set up via his software, he unearthed an added line, an imperceptible grain, my voice's fractals, and we let it run, hardly audible, underneath the structure of the reading voice, inextricably tied to it, yet escaping it, releasing from it a surprising beauty, magnified shrapnels of interior sound. The 48th variation.

The sonic text was first presented at *tEXt02* festival (Exeter, 2002) on invitation from Simon Persighetti.

During this entire process, some two years in all, it was as if the many systematic acts of counting and collating were carrying with them a motive interior as much as exterior to the work being generated. The minutia of writing, of copying out, of shadowing the translators' voicing of the medieval text, favoured an eery intimacy as much as a welcome distance. My task was mostly and rather simply, or so it seemed at first, to copy each first tercet as it appeared in each published version of the *Inferno*. To copy it accurately. Surprisingly, more than once, I had to go back to the books to double-check and amend an entry, a publication date, a spelling. Checking each line, each variation, once, twice. Increasingly, the project was about keeping count and making sure. That what I was copying was what was there. Not to inadvertently change what had been printed. To reproduce each translative gesture. To add my voice to this chorus, to this recitation, only by way of this task. Making copy explicitly as an act of copy. Understanding translation in its erratic seriality. There are ways of acknowledging influence and models, by ingestion, by assimilation, by one's total absorption in the material. To come to an understanding of it by standing in it, by becoming it. Very gradually, this transforms a shoe into a foot, extends copyism into writing, and perhaps writing into being. This whole copying business was turning out to be a hands-down affair. This was an illuminating, if disturbing, development.

In the summer 2003, I copied out a 48th translation in English of Dante's tercet for a first printed version of the text. It appeared in CHAIN's "Translucination" issue (Fall 2003) under the joint editorship of Juliana Spahr, Jena Osman and Thalia Field. This late addition broke the rule of the task, its chronological cut-off point. I subsequently removed it.

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita  
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura  
che la diritta via era smarrita

*The Divine Comedy* - Pt. 1 Inferno - Canto I - (1-3)

1. Along the journey of our life half way  
I found myself again in a dark wood  
wherein the straight road no longer lay  
(Dale, 1996)
2. At the midpoint in the journey of our life  
I found myself astray in a dark wood  
For the straight path had vanished.  
(Creagh and Hollander, 1989)
3. HALF over the wayfaring of our life,  
Since missed the right way, through a night-dark wood  
Struggling, I found myself.  
(Musgrave, 1893)
4. 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.  
(Sisson, 1980)
5. Halfway along the journey of our life  
I woke in wonder in a sunless wood  
For I had wandered from the narrow way  
(Zappulla, 1998)
6. HALFWAY on our life's journey, in a wood,  
From the right path I found myself astray.  
(Heaney, 1993)
7. Halfway through our trek in life  
I found myself in this dark wood,  
miles away from the right road.  
(Ellis, 1994)
8. Half-way upon the journey of our life,  
I found myself within a gloomy wood,  
By reason that the path direct was lost.  
(Pollock, 1854)

9. HALF-WAY upon the journey of our life  
I roused to find myself within a forest  
In darkness, for the straight way had been lost.  
(Johnson, 1915)
10. In middle of the journey of our days  
I found that I was in a darksome wood  
the right road lost and vanished in the maze  
(Sibbald, 1884)
11. In midway of the journey of our life  
I found myself within a darkling wood,  
Because the rightful pathway had been lost.  
(Rossetti, 1865)
12. In our life's journey at its midway stage  
I found myself within a wood obscure  
Where the right path which guided me was lost  
(Johnston, 1867)
13. In the middle of the journey  
of our life  
I came to myself  
In a dark forest  
The straightforward way  
Misplaced.  
(Schwerner, 2000)
14. In the middle of the journey of our life I came to  
myself in a dark wood, for the straight road was lost  
(Durling, 1996)
15. In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself  
within a dark wood where the straight road was lost.  
(Sinclair, 1939)
16. In the middle of the journey of our life  
I found myself astray in a dark wood  
where the straight road had been lost sight of.  
(Heaney, 1993)
17. IN the middle of the journey of our life, I found myself in a  
dark wood; for the straight way was lost.  
(John A Carlyle, 1844)
18. In the mid-journey of our mortal life,  
I wandered far into a darksome wood,  
Where the true road no longer might be seen.  
(Chaplin, 1913)

19. In the midtime of life I found myself  
Within a dusky wood; my way was lost.  
(Shaw, 1914)
20. In the midway of this our mortal life,  
I found me in a gloomy wood, astray,  
Gone from the path direct:  
(Cary, 1805)
21. Just halfway through this journey of our life  
I reawoke to find myself inside  
a dark wood, way off-course, the right road lost  
(Phillips, 1983)
22. Midway along the highroad of our days,  
I found myself within a shadowy wood,  
Where the straight path was lost in tangled ways.  
(Wheeler, 1911)
23. Midway along the journey of our life  
I woke to find myself in some dark woods,  
for I had wandered off from the straight path.  
(Musa, 1971)
24. Midway along the span of our life's road  
I woke to a dark wood unfathomable  
Where not a vestige of the right way shewed.  
(Foster, 1961)
25. Midway in our life's journey I went astray  
from the straight road & woke to find myself  
alone in a dark wood  
(Ciardi, 1996)
26. Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a  
dark wood, for the straight road was lost.  
(Singleton, 1970)
27. MIDWAY life's journey I was made aware  
That I had strayed into a dark forest,  
And the right path appeared not anywhere.  
(Binyon, 1933)
28. Midway on our life's journey, I found myself  
In dark woods, the right road lost.  
(Pinsky, 1994)
29. Midway on the journey of our life I found myself within  
a darksome wood, for the right way was lost.  
(Sullivan, 1893)

30. 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  
(Anderson, 1921)
31. 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  
(Sayers, 1949)
32. MIDWAY upon the course of this our life  
I found myself within a gloom-dark wood,  
For I had wandered from the path direct.  
(Bodey, 1938)
33. MIDWAY upon the journey of my days  
I found myself within a wood so drear,  
That the direct path nowhere met my gaze.  
(Brooksbank, 1854)
34. MIDWAY upon the journey of our life,  
I found me in a forest dark and deep,  
For I the path direct had failed to keep.  
(Wilstach, 1888)
35. Midway upon the journey of our life,  
I found myself within a forest dark,  
For the right road was lost.  
(Vincent, 1904)
36. MIDWAY upon the journey of our life  
I found myself within a forest dark,  
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.  
(Longfellow, 1867)
37. Midway upon the journey of our life  
I found that I had strayed into a wood  
So dark the right road was completely lost.  
(MacKenzie, 1979)
38. MIDWAY upon the journey of our life  
I woke to find me astray in a dark wood,  
Confused by ways with the straight way at strife  
(Bickersteth, 1955)
39. Midway upon the pathway of life  
I found myself within a darksome wood  
wherein the proper road was lost to view.  
(Edwardes, 1915)

40. MIDWAY upon the road of our life I found myself within  
a dark wood, for the right way had been missed.  
(Norton, 1891)
41. On traveling one half of our life's way,  
I found myself in darkened forests when  
I lost the straight and narrow path to stray.  
(Arndt, 1994)
42. Upon the journey of my life midway,  
I found myself within a darkling wood,  
Where from the straight path I had gone astray  
(Minchin, 1885)
43. UPON the journey of our life half way,  
I found myself within a gloomy wood,  
For I had missed the oath and gone astray.  
(Pike, 1881)
44. Upon the journey of our life midway  
I came unto myself in a dark wood,  
For from the straight path I had gone astray.  
(Fletcher, 1931)
45. Upon the journey of our life midway,  
I found myself within a darksome wood,  
As from the right path I had gone astray.  
(Cayley, 1851)
46. When half-way through the journey of our life  
I found that I was in a gloomy wood,  
because the path which led aright was lost.  
(Langdon, 1918)
47. 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.  
(Mandelbaum, 1980)