Reading *The Divine Comedy from a Psychosynthesis Perspective* — Catherine Ann Lombard and Kees den Biesen

On Aging — Shamai Currim

Psychosynthesis and Chronic Psychiatric Patients — Michael Follman

Thinking It Through — Yon Walls

Rebooting the Conflict Brain — Walter Polt

World Awakening — Thomas Yeomans

The Dance of Life — Abigail DeSoto

Book Reviews: *Transpersonal Development*
by Richard Schaub and Bonney Gulino Shaub

*Engaging Life: Living Well With Chronic Illness* by Dorothy Firman

In Memoriam: Richard Grossman

Book Announcements:

*The Dance of We: The Mindful Use of Love and Power in Human Systems*
by Mark Horowitz

*Finding Grace* by Anne R. Davidson

*I, Yeshua, Awakener*, by Lars Ginstedt

AAP’s 2015 International Conference in Montréal — and Invitation for Proposals

Contents on Page 2
Roberto Assagioli invites us to read Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, which he describes as “a wonderful picture of a complete psychosynthesis” (2000, p. 186). Together with Dante, we can descend through the circles of Hell, climb the steep slopes of Purgatory and speed through the spheres of the heavens, to finally reach Paradise and its all-encompassing synthesis. As we identify with Dante throughout his journey, Assagioli also suggests that we learn to carefully read the *Divine Comedy* in the light of its meaning and symbolism. He continues to state that this exercise of reading and reflection can be used as a group exercise. Our busy lives may leave us little time to reflect as individuals or with a group on such a monumental work. However, we hope to encourage you in a small way to begin. In this essay, we introduce you to the first two Cantos of *Inferno* or Hell, which Assagioli believed represented the human soul at the start of its spiritual journey.

While Assagioli’s archives clearly indicate that he studied the *Divine Comedy* in great detail, his published reflections are precious and few. The *Divine Comedy* can, however, be viewed in alignment with Assagioli’s vision of the human psyche, better known as the “egg diagram” (Figure 1). Assagioli says that Dante’s pilgrimage through Hell is a symbol of his analytical exploration of the lower unconscious (1 in Figure 1). Dante’s ascent up the mountain of Purgatory indicates the process of purification and “the gradual raising of the level of consciousness (4) through the use of active techniques” (2000, p. 187). And finally his visit to Paradise depicts the various stages of the superconscious (3) up to the final vision of the Self (6) in which Love and Will are synthesized.

---

1. Lower unconscious
2. Middle unconscious
3. Higher unconscious or superconscious
4. Field of consciousness
5. Conscious self or “I”
6. Self
7. Collective unconscious

Note: Dotted lines indicate permeable boundaries.

Figure 1. Assagioli’s (2000, p. 15) model of the structure of the psyche.

*(Continued on page 6)*
The Divine Comedy starts with:

   Midway through the journey of our life
   I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
   for the straight path had gone lost.
   (Hell, Canto I:1-3)

Dante begins by stating he is “midway through the journey of our life.” His explicit use of the word “our” and not “my” indicates a universal journey that we all embark upon. This universal journey, however, is always personal, as expressed by Dante in his second line: “I woke to find myself in a dark wood.” Dante then confesses that “the straight path had gone lost” which he later refers to as “the true path.”

From a psychosynthesis perspective, one could say that Dante’s first line represents the collective unconscious (7) journey, the second the “I” (5), and the third points to the I-Self connection that has gone lost (shown as a dotted line connecting them in Figure 1). From a psychosynthesis point of view, our life’s journey is to reestablish this I-Self connection; in other words, to seek, reconnect, and synthesize the consciousness and will of the “I” with the consciousness and will of the Self. Like most of us during our lives, Dante discovers that he is far from having a direct connection to the Self. Instead he is standing in a dark wood which he further describes as savage, fearful, and bitter—almost as bitter as Death itself. Assagioli (1993, p. 156) believes that the wild forest represents “that acute suffering and inner darkness which usually precedes the awakening of the soul.”

Further on, Dante soon finds himself at the “edge of the wood’s beginning,” an image which invokes a numinous transitional threshold. He then looks up and sees a mountain with its top “shawled in the morning rays of light.” This light immediately calms the fear held in the “lake of his heart.” Assagioli (ibid.) describes this decisive moment as when the soul is awakened. One could also say that the mountain top represents Dante’s vision of the Self, and the morning light is pure consciousness and will descending to touch and awaken his “I.” This awakening occurs during his darkest hour and allows him to glimpse the joyful bliss that synthesis promises.

Naturally, Dante desires to receive more of this light and immediately begins to climb towards it. But this straightforward approach is not the journey he is meant to take, because a wild beast immediately blocks his way. This beast turns out to be a leopard, soon followed by a lion and then a she-wolf, which ultimately forces Dante to give up his quick ascent up the mountain. Assagioli (p. 157) states that the leopard symbolizes the “attractions and temptations of the senses,” while the lion is spiritual pride and the she-wolf “the very essence of separateness, of selfishness.” Assagioli’s interpretation corresponds with contemporary critics who see these animals as symbolizing three specific sins: lust, pride, and avarice. More recent research has shown
that these beasts are best thought of as types of sins, which map onto Dante’s three divisions of Hell. The she-wolf is the image of weakness of self-indulgence, the fierce lion of the willful sins of violence, and the leopard of the sins that involve conscious fraud and betrayal. These three animals are symbolic manifestations of will and love energy run amok, creating havoc in our lives. Such energies typically appear as subpersonalities over whom we have yet to gain conscious awareness and control. In his seminal essay, *Self-realization and Psychological Disturbances*, Assagioli discusses how once the soul is awakened, the personal ego also “re-awakens and asserts itself with renewed force” (2000, p. 43). He writes:

> Sometimes it even happens that lower propensities and drives, hitherto lying dormant in the unconscious, are vitalized by the inrush of higher energy or stirred into a fury of opposition by the consecration of the awakening man.

Hence, the beasts can also be viewed as symbolic of this fury of unconscious lower energy awakened by the hilltop light of higher energy. Without doubt, they are opposed to and challenge Dante’s journey upward towards this light.

The moment the wolf forces Dante “back to where the sun is mute,” he sees a figure and cries out for pity. After experiencing the light, Dante is forced back to his dark wood, but now he is suffering so acutely that he cries out for help. And just as he realizes he needs help, help appears. As Assagioli so beautifully reminds us:

> Help from above is always at hand; it is never denied. We ourselves are the only obstacles that make that help seem distant (1993, p. 158).

The figure turns out to be Virgil, the great Roman poet born in 70 B.C., whom Dante had studied with deep love for many years.

> You are my teacher, the first of all my authors,
> And you alone the one from whom I took
> The noble style that was to bring me honor.

*(Hell, Canto 1: 84-87)*

In these few lines, we can clearly see that Virgil is a teacher who bestows honor. He is, in fact, the poet’s poet. Most critics believe that Virgil is the symbolic personification of Reason; Dorothy Sayers (1949) writes that Virgil is the image of Human Wisdom. For Assagioli, Virgil symbolizes “spiritual discrimination” which is essential for guiding the personality along the right path.

In psychosynthesis terms, Virgil acts as the ideal guide, teaching Dante to be in relationship with his authentic “I.” Assagioli encourages us to extensively explore the vast regions of our unconscious through various psychosynthesis methods. He further states that this search for our personality is more easily accomplished with the help of another. A key to understanding Virgil is his relationship to Dante. Throughout their journey together, Virgil empathically mirrors Dante, offering him tools and insights for achieving discernment. As Assagioli (2000, p. 187) states, “Virgil leads Dante on his pilgrimage, helping him, encouraging him, explaining to him the various phases of the [psychosynthesis] process.” Through this intense relationship, Virgil not only gives Dante a sense of being but also a connection to another, which is an outer expression of Dante’s own “internal unifying center” as expressed through his I-Self connection (Firman and Gila, 2002).
Dante is “lost in tears” when Virgil explains:

But you must journey down another road.

... if ever you hope to leave this wilderness.
... And so, I think it best you follow me
For your own good, and I shall be your guide
And lead you out through an eternal place
where you will hear desperate cries, and see
tormented shades, some old as Hell itself,
...

And later you will see those who rejoice
while they are burning, for they have hope of coming,
whenever it may be, to join the blessed—

to whom, if you too wish to make the climb,
a spirit, worthier than I, must take you;
I shall go back, leaving you in her care.

(Hell, Canto I: 91, 93, 112-116, 118-123)

In these lines, Virgil offers his help and briefly outlines the entire journey, explaining that a female spirit, more worthy than himself, will accompany Dante for the final climb “to join the blessed.” It is clear that Dante cannot take the direct path up the mountain to the light of the Self, but first must make a pilgrimage through Hell, which represents his lower unconscious in order to understand it and bring it under control. Next he must climb the mountain of Purgatory and pass through the fires of purification in order to redeem and transform his lower nature. Only then will he be able to once more continue his climb towards the light and join the blessed in Paradise. As Jungian psychologist Helen Luke writes, the journey of individualization must be a fully conscious choice down to the center of the darkness of the soul and then beyond to the realization and acceptance of individual responsibility in Purgatory before there is the inner space to experience the intuitions of bliss. She states:

We cannot bypass the experience of Hell; and still less can we evade the long struggle of Purgatory, through which we come to maturity in love (1995, p. xvii).

Coming to maturity in love is the ultimate bliss found on the mountaintop of Paradise. But who is this female spirit that Virgil says is worthier than he? We will meet her in Canto II, but perhaps it is best to introduce her here. Beatrice was born in Florence and was Dante’s childhood friend and neighbor. A muse for his early poetry, she died when only 24. As one of the greater images in the Divine Comedy, Beatrice represents a personal friend of Dante’s as well as the transpersonal aspect of Divine Wisdom. We might ask why Beatrice did not accompany Dante the entire way; why did he need Virgil at all? As Assagioli states:

Divine wisdom is not revealed to Dante directly: in his impure, unregenerate state, man is unable to directly contemplate the supreme truth. Thus Beatrice

(Continued on page 9)
sends Virgil to arouse and inspire the power of awareness already present in ordinary man.

Virgil, symbolic of Human Wisdom, cannot journey past the Earthly Paradise in Purgatory and into Paradise. From a psychosynthesis point of view, Virgil can only guide Dante towards *personal psychosynthesis*.

Assimilating and integrating superconscious energies requires Beatrice to guide him towards *spiritual psychosynthesis*. In other words, until Dante has harmonized and coordinated his conscious and unconscious material into an authentic personal “I,” he cannot be guided by Beatrice towards his transpersonal Self, by way of his Divine Wisdom.

At the end of Canto I, Dante begs Virgil to save him from the evil wood, and together they begin moving forward, with Dante close behind Virgil. But no sooner do they start, when, at the beginning of Canto II, Dante wavers. He wonders if he can trust himself to journey this arduous road. Assagioli acknowledges that the effort to expand the personal consciousness into that of the Self is a “tremendous undertaking . . . a magnificent endeavor, but certainly a long and arduous one, and not everybody is ready for it” (2000, p. 21). Dante suddenly has all kinds of excuses. He claims he is not worthy, claims it would be an act of folly. “But why am I to go? Who allows me?” he cries, declaring that he is neither Aeneas nor Saint Paul, two previous travelers to Hell and Paradise respectively. Dante clearly illustrates our reluctance to begin the tough, long road of psychosynthesis. Right at the start, the Saboteur subpersonality appears to repress the beginner’s initial act of will.

But Virgil, whose discernment is clear, prevails by identifying the cowardice in Dante’s soul:

```
Your soul is burdened with that cowardice
which often weighs so heavily on man,
it turns him from a noble enterprise
like a frightened beast that shies at its own shadow.
```

(Hell, Canto II: 45-48)

Dante feels afraid and projects this fear onto the journey. Virgil, however, clearly understands that Dante is really frightened of his own shadow, his unexplored unconscious. In order to free him from this fear, Virgil explains why he has come to Dante’s aid. Beatrice, his generous childhood friend in Heaven, has urged Virgil to help Dante on his journey. The initiative, however, first came from the grace of the Virgin Mary, who traditionally signifies mercy and compassion in Christian thought. She turned to St. Lucy, whose name means “light,” who then went to Beatrice, who was moved by her love for Dante to send Virgil. When Dante hears that “three such gracious ladies, who are blessed . . . in Heaven’s court” have come to his aid, his fear is released. Assagioli states that the three women, Mary, Lucy, and Beatrice symbolize divine Grace, Light (or Illumination), and Wisdom respectively. These transpersonal qualities from our superconscious are always available for our spiritual development. But, as Assagioli (1993, p. 159) asserts, to attain such qualities for our lifetime requires us to follow that “long difficult path of purification and expiation across the kingdoms of [our] lower nature.”

At the end of Canto II, Dante’s fear is banished, and he says to Virgil:
Let us start, for both our wills, joined now, are one.  
You are my guide, you are my lord and teacher.”  
These were my words to him and, when he moved,  
I entered on that deep and rugged road.  
(Hell, Canto II: 139-142)

Canto II shows us the synthesis of love and will and the power that it can extend over our lives. Beatrice’s love activates the will of Virgil, and together love and will synthesize into a power that can dispel Dante’s fear and reactivate his spiritual growth. This symbolic synthesis of love and will occurs in complex multi-layered relationships—Beatrice to Virgil, Virgil to Dante, Dante to Beatrice. Through such life-affirming relationships, both personal and universal, we can find the mirroring that we so much need to ignite our courage, redeem our wounds, resurrect our authentic selves, and commit to our true life paths.

Much later in Purgatory, before Dante enters the Earthly Paradise, Virgil as guide and companion gives way to Beatrice. Virgil’s final counsel is:

Expect no longer words or signs from me.
Now is your will upright, wholesome, and free,
And not to heed its pleasure would be wrong:
I crown and miter you lord of yourself!  
(Hell, Canto II: 139-142)

At the beginning of their journey, Dante joins his will to Virgil’s and accepts Virgil as his lord. But at the end, their wills are completely decoupled when Virgil acknowledges that Dante’s is “upright, wholesome, and free,” and crowns him lord over himself. In psychosynthesis terms, Dante has become the director of his synthesized subpersonalities and has redeemed their transpersonal qualities. Able to decouple harmful images or complexes and control and utilize their freed energies, he can now follow his desires without danger. The beasts that first blocked his way have been integrated and synthesized. As he leaves Virgil and joins Beatrice, Dante’s journey continues through the ten successive Heavens towards Divine Light, Love, and Joy.

We hope this brief introduction has offered a perspective on how, in Assagioli’s words, the Divine Comedy can be “a wonderful description and guide for the inner life and for spiritual development.” To study Dante’s work is a lifetime endeavor just as our journey through psychosynthesis, but together they complement and reflect each other. ☑

References
Assagioli, Roberto (2002). The Act of Will.  
London: The Psychosynthesis & Education Trust.
Amherst, Massachusetts: The Synthesis Center, Inc.
(Continued on page 11)
(Continued from page 10)


### About the Authors

**Catherine Ann Lombard, M.A.** has been counseling clients since 2008. She is an artist and published writer, including numerous articles on psychosynthesis. **Dr. Kees den Biesen** is an independent scholar in literature, philosophy and religion, specialized in the poetry and theology of Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 300-373) and Dante Alighieri (1265-1321). He lectures about literature, personal growth and religion at Dutch universities and leads several Dante reading groups. Catherine and Kees have been married 14 years and are now offering meditative, small-scale Dante trips in Tuscany and elsewhere in Italy. You can follow Catherine’s blog and contact them at [www.LoveandWill.com](http://www.LoveandWill.com)

---

Dante shows his Comedy to Florence and points out the three stages of the journey to which he invites his readers (painted by Domenico di Michelino in 1465, the second centenary of Dante’s birth):