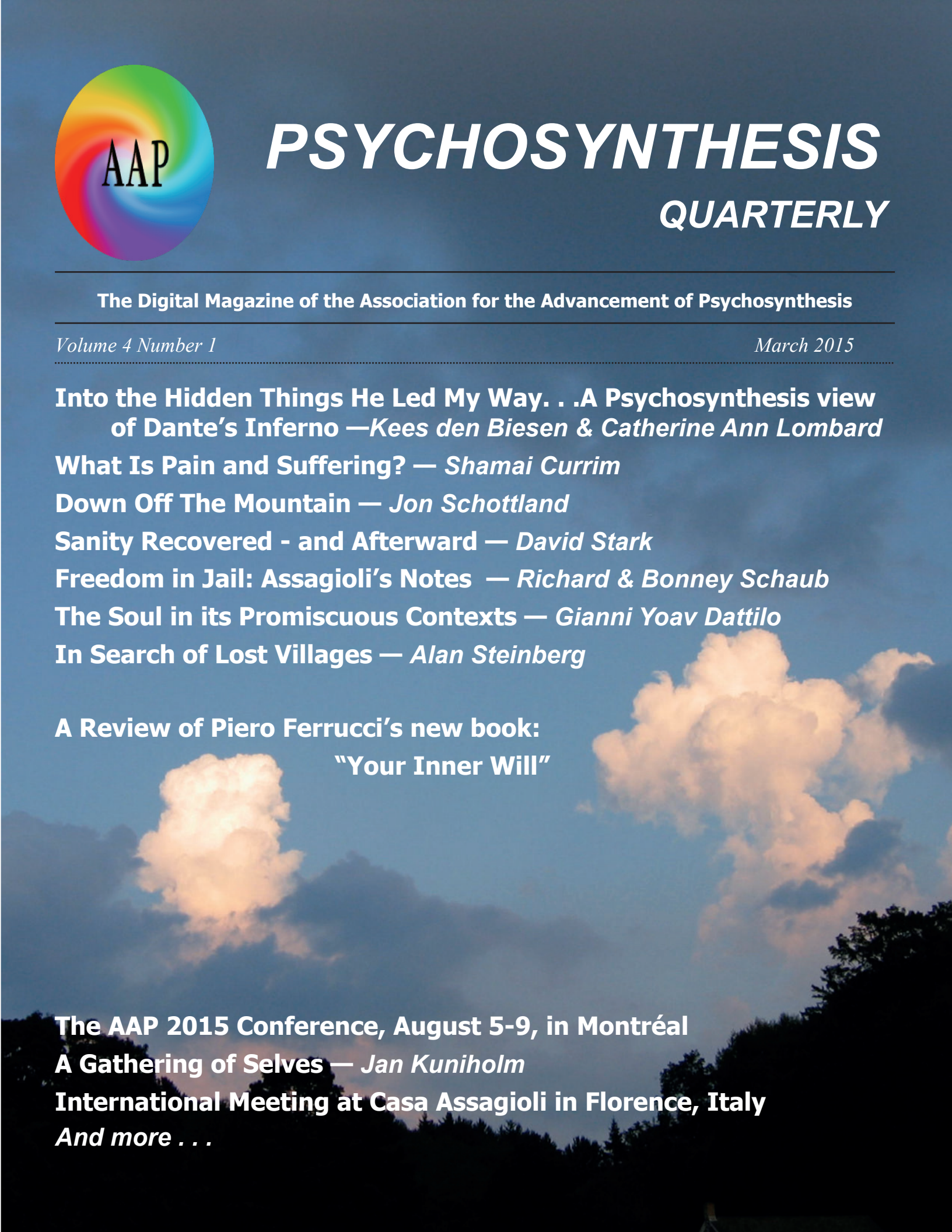

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"Into the hidden things he led my way"
A Psychosynthesis View of Dante's Inferno

Kees den Biesen and Catherine Ann Lombard

A dog biting a blind beggar: illustration from a 1461 AD manuscript of the Masnavi

Throughout the ages, the art of storytelling has produced great works of imagination, like Vyasa's *Mahabharata,* Homer's *Iliad,* Virgil's *Aeneid,* and the collection of mythological stories in *Genesis* 1-11. Works like these endeavored to give meaningful and helpful interpretations of the drama of life and human desire for salvation. These mostly anonymous poets created symbolic worldviews of such literary and religious power that they exercised a long-lasting formative influence on entire societies. Many people were thus able to take advantage of the deep connections that exist between art, literature, and the processes of human growth. Some works, like the *Bhagavad Gita* and Rumi's *Masnavi,* continue to exercise their poetic and spiritual influence far beyond the countries and cultures of their origin.

Famous Greek tragedies dealing with, for example, the Oedipus cycle of stories are still being performed today, not only because of their poetic beauty or *poesis* on the productive plane, or because of the audience's enjoyment or *aesthesis* on the receptive plane, but also in view of the change or *katharsis* provoked in the audience on the communicative plane. This particular use of the ritual, ethical and medical term *katharsis,* 'purification', stems from Aristotle's *Poetics,* in which it serves as a metaphor that describes the effects of tragedy on the audience. By arousing fear vicariously in a controlled situation, the tragedy allows the spectators to identify themselves with the protagonists, and thus externalize their own anxieties and "purge" them. Joseph Campbell connects this to "an earlier ritual *katharsis* … which was the function of the festival and mystery play of the dismembered bull-god, Dionysos" and which "cleansed" the community from its sins and failings.[1] Such catharsis corresponds to Assagioli's psychological laws II and X.[2]

When Robert Assagioli recommends the reading of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy,* he consciously places his scientific work as psychologist and researcher in this larger context of literature, art and culture. Assagioli considered "the central symbolic meaning" of this epic poem of 14,233 verses as "a wonderful picture of a complete psychosynthesis."[3] The words 'symbolic meaning' and 'picture' clearly relate to the analogical kind of language used by the poet in order to endow the literal sense of his story with deeper meaning. Only analogical language is, in fact, capable of creating stories that, simple and straightforward as some may seem, always remain open to new interpretation and

Mosaic depicting theatrical masks of Tragedy and Comedy, 2nd century AD, found in Rome

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actualization. The relationship between real life and a story with its various symbols is based on analogy, which is "an important psychological link or connection between outer and inner realities."[4]

Accordingly, after a summary of Krishna's exhortations to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Assagioli points out that the battle on the field of Kurukshetra can be "interpreted in a deeper, symbolic way." The story has "an inner and altogether spiritual meaning, in the sense that the battlefield is the human soul while the enemies stand for different parts of the person itself." Assagioli then explicitly refers to Dante's considerations about polysemic language: "In all great symbolic and spiritual poems, like the *Divine Comedy* and *Faust,* different interpretations do not exclude each other, each being true on its own level. With regard to the *Divine Comedy,* Dante explicitly says so in his philosophical work *Convivio* [The Banquet]. The *Comedy* has a variety of meanings on different levels, each of which is true."[5]

Manuscript illustration (18th century?)
of the Battle of Kurukshetra

Dante studying in exile, fresco painted in Orvieto
around 1500 by Luca Signorelli

This understanding of the *Divine Comedy* and of the great works of literature in general has deep roots in Assagioli's experience of life. Because of his pacifism, he was arrested by the Fascist regime and kept prisoner in Rome for the hot month of August in 1940. Luisa Lunelli, a friend of Roberto Assagioli and his wife Nella Ciapetti, remembers: "A few months after his release, I saw Roberto again and of course asked him about that month of August in the Regina Coeli prison. Well... he seemed to have forgotten all about it! He reflected for a moment and then obligingly replied: 'Yes, it was not comfortable, there were drawbacks, but it was an interesting and useful time' ... He emphasized the importance of having had hours and days available for a re-reading of the *Divine Comedy* and [Dante's] minor works. The in-depth knowledge of the Poet and of the perfect symbols with which [Dante] expressed his experience had given [Roberto] excellent material for the exercises of spiritual psychosynthesis."[6]

Thus, for Assagioli, reading the *Divine Comedy* was intimately linked to the function of 'exercise', that is, the conscious use of the cathartic power of symbols constructed by imagination, reflection and interpretation. 'Exercises' or 'methods' that use symbols for achieving psychosynthesis include visualizations, inner dialogues, role models and, of course, dream-work. It is no surprise then to come across a note like this in the archives of the Florentine *Istituto di Psicosintesi:*

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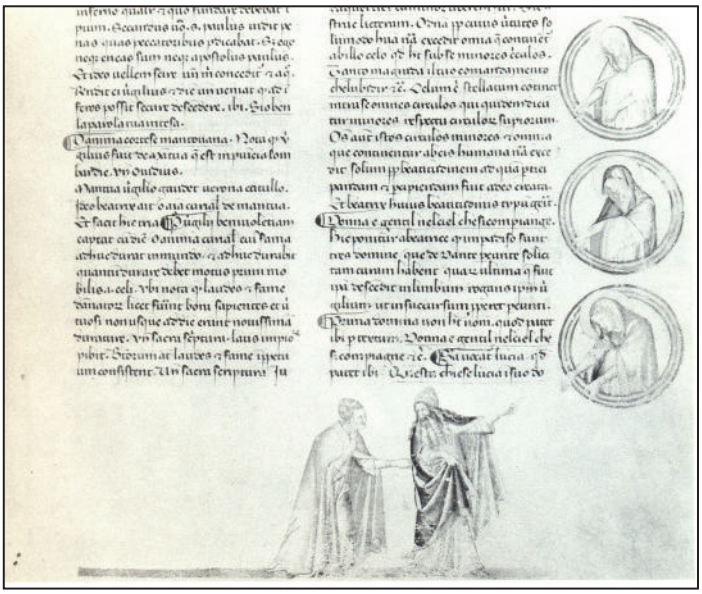
> *spiritual dante-esque exercises: freedom of interpretation – these are universal symbols – this does not relate to what the ordinary consciousness of Dante consciously may have wished to say – superconscious inspiration – Dante nevertheless was one of the most conscious artists: he made conscious use of symbolism and of multiple meanings that do not exclude each another.*
>
> —(note taken by authors).

For Dante, it was not only the journey described in the *Divine Comedy* that constituted an exercise. The whole writing process itself was an exercise, just as it is an exercise to read and reread the poem. Moreover, our own journeys through life are exercises that profit from writing our autobiographies as *Divine Comedies.* All of this constitutes a fascinating process of experience, observation, reflection and expression. Dante pours his life into his writing, which we read and integrate into our own lives, while pouring our reading and living into our own writing just as Dante did! Living, reading, writing and then again living constitute one single exercise.

In an earlier article,[7] we introduced the readers of *Psychosynthesis Quarterly* to the first two Cantos of *Inferno,* in which Dante describes the impossibility of bypassing one's lower unconsciousness in order to reach for the light of the Self. Stuck in the Dark Wood of alienation from his true Self, he is awakened by a vision of a higher reality—yet as soon as he reaches for its light, a triple fury of unconscious negativity is unleashed and blocks his road. The classical poet Virgil then appears, inviting Dante to a patient exploration of the vast regions of the human unconscious. Ready to take the first escape route offered to him, Dante nevertheless remains motionless. Seeing his protégée gripped by "cowardice" (*Inferno* II.45), Virgil explains that he was sent by Beatrice who, through the mediation of St. Lucy, was called upon by the Virgin Mary to come to the aid of her devotee. Reassured by Virgil's words, Dante follows his guide "along the deep and savage road" (II.142).



Venetian manuscript from ca. 1345; Virgil points to Beatrice, Lucy and Mary, "the three blessed Ladies in Heaven"

In the present article, we would like to follow Dante's first steps on that road and offer the readers some glimpses of the journey through the increasing darkness of Hell. Encouraged as he may be, Dante's first steps immediately grind to a halt in front of the Gate of Hell, whose frightening inscription freezes his movements:

Through me one goes in to the woeful city;
through me one goes in to eternal woe;
through me one goes among the lost people.
Justice moved my lofty Maker:
divine Power made me,
supreme Wisdom, and primal Love.
Before me no things were created
if not eternal, and eternal I last.
Leave behind all hope, you who enter.
(*Inferno* III.1-9)

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Instead of leaving behind "all hope," as Hell invites its new inmates, Virgil simply exhorts Dante to "leave behind all fear" and also, alluding to his initial bout of faint-heartedness, "all cowardice" (III.14-15). It will take Dante a great many steps before he comes to fully understand that "the lofty Maker" or triune Creator of the world—the Father who is Power, the Son who is Wisdom, and the Spirit who is Love—created the very possibility of Hell by creating the possibility of angelic and human free will. At this early stage, Virgil limits his explanation to this famous statement: "We have come to the place where I have told you / that you will see the woeful people / who have lost the good of the intellect" (III.16-18).

The woes of Hell are about the loss of truth, which Dante, adapting an expression coined by Aristotle, describes as "the good of the intellect." Prefigured by the early morning light that shone upon a high hilltop in the first Canto of *Inferno*, the deepest truth of reality is like a light from above, aptly described by Assagioli as the shining Star of the Self. For Dante, the discovery of and surrender to the truth of this Higher Self is the only true goal of human life. As an heir to some two thousand years of classical and philosophical thought, he believed this Self to be the divine Maker of the world. And as an heir to some fifteen hundred years of Jewish-Christian thought, he believed that our relationship to this Creator is based on analogy, as we are "created to the likeness and image of God" (Genesis 1:23).

Hell is nothing but the absence of this likeness and image, the collapse of the analogical relationship between the human and the divine, the disconnection of the I and the Self. It is, by consequence, the receptacle of all the distorted images present in real life. Yet, however terrible and frightening all of this may be, the acknowledgement of Hell is the first step on a journey that leads from woe to joy. Whereas "tragedy starts with an admirable and quiet beginning, but ends with a foul and horrible outcome, comedy begins with some adverse conditions and leads to a happy end."[8] This explains the seeming contradiction that Dante wrote a 'Comedy' that actually starts in 'Hell'. In order to discover our authentic likeness with the Self, we first have to investigate all the images of distortion we encounter in our everyday life. And precisely this is the reason why Virgil "with a joyous expression (!) … led my way into the hidden things" (*Inferno* III.20-21). Confident of the happy outcome of their journey from woe to joy, Virgil's and Dante's first step is a joyous one.

Venetian manuscript from ca. 1345; the stygian owl above the gate is a symbol of imminent death and derives its name from the Styx, the great river of Hell

Although at the moment he could not have known, Dante had already seen images of "the hidden things" of Hell in the three animals he encountered in *Inferno* I. On the slope below the sun-clad hilltop a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf block his upward road. The latter animal, scrawny to the extreme, "seemed laden with every craving" (I.49-50) and is an image of the distortions of human desire that are found in the upper part of Hell.

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There Dante meets people that abandon themselves to a lack of self-restraint (*incontinenza*) that reveals itself in irresponsible sexual lust (Canto V), intemperate consumption of food or drink (Canto VI), obsessive squandering or hoarding (Canto VII) and excessive anger or inner rage (Canto VIII).

The second animal, a lion "with head raised high and crazed by hunger" (I.47), is a symbolic image of the 'beastly' violence (*bestialità*) that Dante explores in the middle part of Hell. Whereas the different forms of self-indulgence are seen to be weaknesses, not permissible but easily understood and empathized with, acts of violence are quite shocking because of the consciousness and ferocious intensity with which they are committed. Dante here distinguishes between violence against one's fellow human beings or their property (Canto XII), violence against oneself or one's own property (Canto XIII), and violence against God or the order of God's creation (Cantos XIV-XVII).

The third animal of Canto I is a leopard, "light-footed and very swift" and "covered with a speckled fur" (I.32-33). This image of camouflage and disguise is complemented by one of the most powerful symbols of *Inferno,* the swift-flying monster Geryon, "that foul image of fraud" (XVII.7). Geryon has "the face of an honest man," but his serpent-like body is covered by a hide "painted with knots and circlets" (i.e. with snares and misleading maneuvers) and ends in a deadly "venomous fork" (XVII.10-27). Geryon carries Virgil and Dante down to the lowest part of Hell, the reign of the leopard, in which they are confronted with the many ways in which people mislead and betray each other (respectively Cantos XVIII-XXX and XXXII-XXXIV).

Dante and Virgil on Geryon's back, colored drawing by William Blake (ca. 1824-1827)

Interestingly, Dante bases this three-partite division of Hell on a combination of Aristotle's and Cicero's views on reprehensible ethical behavior. While the first distinguishes between uncontrolled passions (intemperance), perverted desires (bestiality) and misuse of the intellect (vice), the latter explains that behavior harmful to our fellow humans takes on the form of either violence or fraud. Dante adopts Aristotle's definition of intemperance, identifies Aristotle's concept of bestiality with Cicero's violence, and equates Aristotle's vice with Cicero's fraud. Yet Dante expresses all of this by means of a wide-sweeping symbolic representation in which the three principal images—the she-wolf, the lion and the leopard—each contain many other images by means of which "the hidden things" of unconscious human life are explored and understood.

Philosophical analysis is, of course, important in itself. But an exploration and understanding of human behavior that endeavors to be truly freeing has to reach beyond ethical considerations and touch the inner lives of people. Dante's intention in writing the *Divine Comedy* was "to free those living in this life from a state of misery and lead them to a state of happiness"[9] through the polysemic language and symbolism of a work of poetry. The real objects of the *Divine Comedy* are life's own energies that drive and motivate people to lead the lives they are leading. These energies are essentially good and only waiting to be consciously freed from misunderstanding and abuse, thankfully embraced and then directed towards higher goals. It is during the ascent of the mountain of Purgatory that these "hidden things" are consciously redeemed and become the very passions that are indispensable for the ascent to Paradise. ◙

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(Continued from page 19) All images are taken from commons.wikemedia.org and belong to the public domain

Notes:

[1] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Bollingen Series XVIII, 2nd edition, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968, p. 26.

[2] Roberto Assagioli, *The Act of Will. A Guide to Self-Actualisation and Self-Realisation,* London: The Psychosynthesis & Education Trust, 2002, pp. 52-53 and 61-65.

[3] Roberto Assagioli, *Psychosynthesis. A Collection of Basic Writings,* Amherst, Massachusetts: The Synthesis Center, Inc., 2000, p. 186.

[4] Ibid., pp. 157-158.

[5] Roberto Assagioli, *Psicosintesi: armonia della vita,* edizione riveduta e aggiornata, Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1971, p. 50.

[6] Paola Giovetti, *Roberto Assagioli. La vita e l'opera del fondatore della Psicosintesi,* Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1995, pp. 53-54.

[7] Catherine Ann Lombard and Kees den Biesen, 'Reading the *Divine Comedy* from a Psychosynthesis Perspective: The Beginning of a Spiritual Journey', in *Psychosynthesis Quarterly* 3:2 (2014), 5-11. In the present article, all translations from Dante's works are our own.

[8] Dante, *Letter XI to Cangrande della Scala* § 29.

[9] Ibid. § 39.

About the Authors

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 Ann Lombard, M.A. has been counseling clients since 2008. She is an artist and published writer, including numerous articles on psychosynthesis. You can follow Catherine's blog at LoveAndWill.com. Catherine and Kees have been married fifteen years and offer meditative, small-scale Dante trips from a psychosynthesis perspective in Italy. You can learn more about their next trip in October to Florence and surroundings at PoeticPlaces.org.