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Child Psychosynthesis and Child Psychotherapy —Martin Kolev

Reconnecting the Personal Self with the Higher Self — Journeying with Dante — Catherine Ann Lombard and Kees den Biesen

The Vulnerability Model and Psychosynthesis — Richard Schaub

The Risk of Living Deeply — Dorothy Firman

Poetry by Bonney Kuniholm and Shamai Currim

A Review of The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible

The Farther Reaches of Life Coaching

A Week Without Judgment

The AAP 2015 International Conference, August 5-9, in Montréal

And more . . .

Reconnecting the Personal Self with the Higher Self: Journeying with Dante – Part I: Facing Our Shadows

Catherine Ann Lombard and Kees den Biesen

Roberto Assagioli invites us to read Dante's *Divine Comedy* and reflect on its various symbols in order to evoke the spiritual Self as we journey towards spiritual psychosynthesis (2000, p. 179). In this essay, we would like to explore from a psychosynthesis perspective how the poem illustrates the two fundamental concepts which define the central functions of both the Self and 'I'; namely, consciousness and will.

Our life's journey is to seek, reconnect, and synthesize the consciousness and will of the Self with the consciousness and will of the 'I'—in other words, to synthesize the transpersonal and the personal. In the *Divine Comedy*, the aim of Dante's long journey is precisely this reconnection. In this essay, we analyze his journey through *Inferno* in order to discover how, from a psychosynthesis perspective, his 'I'-Self connection is being realigned so that he might ultimately reach his full human potential at all levels—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. The first step on this journey is facing our shadows, poetically illustrated by Dante as his descent into Hell.

In an earlier essay (2014), we described how Dante's will faltered even before starting on his pilgrimage with Virgil as his guide. Dante first proffers excuses for not following him into Hell and then soon afterwards grinds to a halt, freezing in front of its Gate. Virgil's exhortations to "leave behind all fearful hesitation", however, prevail upon Dante, "and with a joyous expression ... he led me into the hidden things" (*Inferno* III.14, 20-21). While Dante does not enter with the same expression of joy as Virgil, he does manage to initialize the synthesis of his consciousness and will by choosing to enter Hell. At this point, Dante willingly and consciously accepts the road along which he will discover the tragic, and at times terrifying, manifestations of the disconnected 'I'-Self both in himself and others.

Inside the Gate of Hell

Once passing through the Gate, Dante and Virgil first arrive in something like an antechamber where the Futile frantically run after a whirling banner while tormented by stinging wasps and hornets. Dante is horrified by their cries and shrieks and amazed at their great number. He even recognizes a few, but Virgil urges him to "not discuss them, but look and pass them by" (*Inferno* III.51). Guilty of refusing to commit *any* act of will, these wretched and lamenting souls never truly lived and have no hope of truly dying. They are:

... "the sad souls of those
who lived a life without blame and without praise.
Heaven cast them out, so as not to diminish its beauty,
while even deep Hell will not receive them
for they would make the guilty feel proud of themselves."
(*Inferno* III.35, 40-42).

(Continued on [page 16](#))

(Continued from [page 15](#))



The futile running after a banner, within the background Charon crossing the Acheron; colored drawing by William Blake (1757-1827)

As pointed out by Di Marco (2014), these souls are without *any* consciousness or will, unwilling to assume any responsibility in their daily encounters. Consequently, they are doomed to blindly race after whatever flag is flying before them. They turn their backs on consciousness and will, and are, therefore, “despised by [Heaven’s] mercy and justice” (*Inferno* III.50). Having never made any choice of any kind, the naked souls are perpetually driven and urged on, “stung and stung again by the hornets and wasps that were there” (*Inferno* III.65-66).

Upper *Inferno*: Circles of Intemperance

But this is just what awaits the outcasts of Hell! As cited in our last essay (2015, pp. 18-19), the poet Dante has divided Hell into three main sections, analogous respectively to the she-wolf, lion and leopard that blocked his upward road to the sun-lit hilltop in *Inferno* I. The upper part of Hell harbors those people who have abandoned themselves to a lack of self-restraint. They are the lustful, gluttonous, greedy or prodigal, and the angry—lost through their intemperance and irresponsibility, having unconsciously surrendered their will to sex, food, money, and wrath. They have entered a vicious circle—their weak will helps them to indulge their desires and their self-indulgence helps them to further abandon their discernment and will power. They did not *consciously* choose to be indulgent, but rather half-consciously drifted there.

We are all familiar with the fine line between desire and lust, enjoyment and greed, anger and sarcastic cruelty, and—like Dante the traveler—are easily tempted to sympathize with these universal human weaknesses. Rather than sympathize, we should—again, like Dante—recognize when we have grown weak at some point in our lives, falling half-consciously into some type of addiction.

Middle and Lower *Inferno*: Circles of Violence and Fraud

While the shadow souls in the upper part of Hell have not consciously chosen to do evil, they are there because they have not consciously *refused* evil. They are only half-conscious and weak of will. The middle and lower parts of Hell, however, are for those who have *consciously chosen* to commit acts of violence and fraud respectively. In other words, the souls condemned for violence and fraud have consciousness and will, but they have only used their personal ‘I’ to direct their attention and action toward darker and negative goals leading them to endless suffering. As Helen Luke (1995, p. 19) writes, lower Hell “is where sin is not weakness indulged, but perverted choice.” In psychosynthesis terms, these souls have consciously used their



Overview of Hell by Sandro Botticelli (ca. 1445-1510)

(Continued on [page 17](#))

(Continued from [page 16](#))

will to completely disconnect themselves from the Higher Self and, in turn, shriveled their 'I' into a forgotten remnant of their authentic selves.

The Different Thresholds into Upper, Middle, and Lower *Inferno*

The distinctions between the upper and two lower divisions of Hell are clearly marked by the thresholds leading into them. Entering upper Hell and its first circle of Limbo is fairly straightforward. Dante and Virgil are carried by boat across the river Acheron by Charon, the boatman of classical mythology who transports the souls of the dead into Hades. At first Dante, being alive, is refused passage, but Virgil lets it be known that Dante must pass: "This is willed there, where all can be done/ whatever may be willed..." (*Inferno* III.95-96). Immediately, Dante's passage is gained, for Virgil has enough power to articulate the Transpersonal Will that plays a continual and essential part of their journey.

Entry into the lower parts of Hell, however, is much more difficult. Once again, Virgil and Dante must receive boat passage, this time across the marsh of the Styx where the wrathful are mired in the bog, forever tearing and mangling each other. Among them, Dante sees Filippo Argenti, a fellow Florentine who had a very violent temper. Instead of the empathy that he showed various souls whom he encountered in the circles of intemperance, Dante says:

... "You just weep and wail,
stuck in this place, you damned soul,
for I recognize you, though you are all filthy" (*Inferno* VIII.37-39).



Virgil pushes Filippo Argenti
back into the swamp;
painting by the Flemish painter
Jan van der Staet aka Stadanus
(1523-1605)

As Argenti reaches for the boat, Virgil pushes him back into the swamp, and then puts his arms around Dante's neck and kisses him saying, "Indignant soul, blessed is she who was pregnant with you!" (*Inferno* VIII.43-45).

While this seemingly harsh judgment on both Dante's and Virgil's part might seem heartless and even shocking to us as 21st century readers, it is, in fact, essential. Before we can come face-to-face with the dark side of reality and look upon evil itself, we must be able to have spiritual discrimination, which Assagioli (1993, p. 158) describes as the ability "to recognize the right way to go." He also writes that spiritual psychosynthesis requires the need for obedience to "great moral principles of a universal nature... Far from restricting us, it is the only way in which we can truly become free" (p. 160-1). For Dante to accept the emerging powers of his spiritual psychosynthesis, he must be able to look upon evil, recognize it, and push it away. To enter safely into the deeper parts of Hell, Dante must use his consciousness and will to *choose against* evil. There is no other way to enter the lower echelons of the personal or collective Hell. In this respect, we disagree with Schaub and Schaub's (2003, pp. 49-50) interpretation that Dante and Virgil are unable to resist the seductive and contagious power of rage, only to become half-consciously caught up in its negative energy and, consequently, act cruelly towards Argenti.

(Continued on [page 18](#))

(Continued from [page 17](#))

But this scenario is only the preparation for their entrance into middle Hell. Unlike their former entrance into upper Hell, Virgil's sanctioned declaration that their way has been determined by the will of God (i.e. the Higher Self) is not enough when confronted by the great iron battlements of the City of Dis (i.e. the City of Satan) and hundreds of fierce demons on guard. Again Dante is refused entry for being a living man and becomes terrified at the thought that Virgil might leave him. Virgil reassures him, but turns pale and downcast once he realizes that his will alone is powerless to move the gatekeepers. To make matters worse, three Furies—images symbolic of haunting remorse—appear and threaten to uncover Medusa's Head. Virgil quickly orders Dante to cover his eyes with his hands and further protects his prodigy by placing his own hands over Dante's. If a living man catches even the smallest glimpse of the Medusa, he will forever turn to stone—petrified by the destructive forces of evil. All they can do is wait for divine help.

Soon a messenger from Heaven arrives and the Furies and Medusa vanish. The angel touches the gate with a wand and cries:

“O you, driven from Heaven, despicable brood ...
why do you resist and fight that Will
that is never stopped from reaching its end
and many times has increased your suffering?”
(*Inferno* IX.91, 94-96)



Through the gate of Dis;
manuscript illustration by Priamo della Quercia (ca. 1400 – 1467)

The will the angel refers to is the will of God, or the Higher Self. Virgil and Dante are then finally unopposed to enter into the lower regions of Hell. Luke (1995, p. 23) explains that this threshold is a gate that “can only be passed by those who have come to the kind of faith and humility which brought the angel to Dante's aid.” In psychosynthesis terms, before we can move more deeply through our own spiritual psychosynthesis, we must fully understand how dependent our will is on the will of the Self. One of the most difficult spiritual challenges is to discern how much depends on our will alone to act, and how much and when we need to patiently wait for the moment when the will of the ‘I’ and Self are aligned before we can act.

The Threshold into Lower *Inferno* and the circle of Fraud

After traveling through the middle Hell, the domain of the lion and of various kinds of violence, they reach the third section of Hell, that of the leopard and sins of fraud, which is further divided into two parts: simple fraud and betrayal. The threshold into lower Hell consists of a tremendous waterfall pouring down a huge cliff. This time, no passage exists by boat or on foot. Instead, Virgil orders Dante to give him the rope girdle he is wearing around his waist, and throws it over the rim of the pit as a kind of signal. In answer, the swift-flying Geryon, mentioned in our last article (2015, p. 19), appears to carry them down into Hell's deepest pits.

(Continued on [page 19](#))

(Continued from [page 18](#))

There are many interpretations of Dante's rope girdle, but it seems as if Virgil successfully uses it to defraud his way into the circles of fraud! Also interesting to note is that Dante will not gird himself again until reaching Purgatory where, before his ascent, he is instructed to do so with a reed. Again we turn to Luke (1993, p. 31-34), who suggests that the girdle, which is similar to those worn by Franciscans, is symbolic of the pilgrim's conscious resolutions to not choose evil. Sooner or later, we all need to integrate and synthesize our good resolutions—those universal moral principals that Assagioli writes about—to the point where they no longer direct our actions but they simply *are* within us. Only when Dante can consciously and willfully toss his girdle into the pit (with the help of Virgil) is he ready to squarely face the true nature of deception.

The Threshold into the Circle of Betrayal

The last and final threshold within *Inferno* is that which leads down to the sea of ice at the very bottom of Hell. This time, Dante and Virgil encounter three Giants standing waist deep in a well. Besides offering some comic relief to the reader after the sickening circles of simple fraud and before the horrors of the pit of treachery, Nimrod, Ephialtes, and Antaeus are monsters symbolic of mass emotion: mass thinking, mass violence, and brainless vanity, respectively. We are all too familiar with the power and destructiveness of primitive mass actions which these monsters represent, and how such actions thoroughly betray our true collective human nature, one that is in touch with and guided by the Self.



The giants;
drawing by Sandro Botticelli (ca. 1445-1510)

Virgil knows that they need the help of the Giants to lift them down to the bottom of the well and continue their journey. Knowing that mindless mass thinking is impenetrable to reason, Virgil sidesteps around Nimrod, explaining to Dante:

“Let's leave him standing here and waste no words.
For to him every language is as his own
is for others: understandable to no one.”
(*Inferno* XXXI.79-81).

Ephialtes is equally unapproachable. Furiously raging yet bound in great chains, he is actually inept and powerless, a symbol of mass violence's inability to touch the essential integrity of an individual soul. Instead they turn to Antaeus, who is very vain. Virgil cleverly applies a little flattery and promises him that Dante will write about his fame once he returns to earth: “He can make you famous in the world, for he is alive and expects to still live a long life” (*Inferno* XXXI.127-128). Upon hearing this irresistible proposal, the Giant hurries to pluck Virgil up, who in turn grabs a hold of Dante, and the two are carefully put down to the “bottom that swallows Lucifer with Judas” (*Inferno* XXXI.142-143).

What might we say about this act of flattery on Virgil's part? From a psychosynthesis perspective, one could equate it to when we use our skillful will to transform and sublimate our basic instincts and drives, such as aggressive and sexual energies, for spiritual purposes. Assagioli (2000, p. 64) writes about using our skillful will to transmute vanity and pride into a higher quality such as inner dignity. Along the journey of spiritual psychosynthesis, we can cleverly and *consciously* learn to use our own vanities to invoke higher qualities, such

(Continued on [page 20](#))

(Continued from [page 19](#))

as endurance, discipline, and faith. By transmuting our vanity and other lower instincts, we generate the energy needed to overcome the gigantic barriers we meet along the way. This use of transmutation and sublimation is very subtle, and is an art requiring great inner balance as we walk along the knife edge of both the negative and positive aspects of our instincts. Assagioli (1993, p. 210-211) warns us about pseudo-sublimation, the point where we are fooling ourselves into believing that our basic instincts have been transformed but, in fact, we are only masquerading as if they had. Pseudo-sublimation is unconscious self-deception; hence, the importance of learning this skill before gazing upon the people who have committed the worst kind of deception, namely betrayal.

Meeting Satan: The Final Vision of Our Shadows

The bottom of the pit of Hell is a silent and immobile ice-sea, in which different categories of betrayers are stuck—their whole inner being perpetually frozen in cruel egotism. Dante here witnesses the final state of sin, the ice-cold antithesis of love which is caused by winds that blow from the center of the sea. He also ultimately sees the epitome of evil, “the creature that once was so beautiful” but rebelled against God and became “the emperor of the realm of sorrow” (*Inferno* XXXIV.18, 28). This creature is Satan, a huge demon whose hips are stuck in the ice at the very center of the earth. His one head has three faces, one red, one yellow and one black, which symbolize raging impotence, utter ignorance, and hateful envy. Satan vents his empty frustration by weeping from six eyes and by beating six huge wings, which cause the icy winds that freeze all life. In Satan, Dante recognizes the perversion of creative power, truth, and love: he is the anti-type of the triune God of Power, Wisdom, and Love.

One careful look is all that is needed: “It is time to leave now,” Virgil tersely remarks, “for we have seen everything” (*Inferno* XXXIV.68-69). We have only to become fully aware of the nature of this root of full evil potential within us and then be gone, fixing our sight once again upwards towards the light of truth, the star of the Self and its potential within us. Assagioli (e.g. 2000, p. 89) has often stated that in psychosynthesis “we do not aim at a thorough, complete exhaustive exploration of the unconscious... We do not make a systematic offensive against it.” In other words, we deal with only what is necessary and avoid peering “pedantically into every little corner of the unconscious, dusting it free from every last bit of ...impurity.”

Virgil and Dante grab Satan’s hairy hide and climb down into a large cave in the other half of the globe, from which they ascend to the surface of the southern hemisphere “to see once more the stars” (*Inferno* XXXIV.139). They are reborn, and it is Easter morning.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have discussed how the consciousness and will of the ‘I’ and Self are reflected in the three major divisions of Hell in the *Divine Comedy*. In Purgatory and Paradise, consciousness and will are equally essential and prominent but assume a different nature. While the souls in Purgatory are conscious of their failings, unlike their counterparts in Hell, they are not consumed by or fixated on them: their consciousness and will is directed at purification, something that Assagioli has written extensively about (e.g. 1993, pp. 155-63).

(Continued on [page 21](#))



Satan, the Evil One, at the deepest point of Hell, mosaic by Coppo di Marcovaldo (ca. 1225 – ca. 1276) in the Baptistry of Florence

(Continued from [page 20](#))

After the necessary purification we may—this time, with Dante and Beatrice—embark upon the final, but everlasting stage of the journey through Paradise: the exploration of how it feels to live an entirely conscious life, guided by a free will and experiencing an ever deepening sense of joy. These two stages of Dante’s journey will be the topic of our next articles, Parts II and III.

We hope that this brief introduction to the fundamental psychosynthesis concepts of consciousness and will as portrayed in the *Divine Comedy* has whetted your appetite to start reading this unique work of Western literature. Reflection upon the rich symbolic images in every line of the poem can become a beautiful exercise of spiritual psychosynthesis. Along the way, you can deepen and expand your own consciousness and will by viewing Dante as an ideal model and calling upon him as an external unifying center to help you rebuild a new personality (Assagioli, 2000, pp. 22-23). Based on our own experience of reading and reflecting upon the *Divine Comedy*, alone and with groups, we agree with Roberto Assagioli that Dante, as both its great poet and humble pilgrim, can become an inspiration and spiritual friend along the long and arduous road of spiritual psychosynthesis. ■

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