HOPE VERSUS HOPELESSNESS IN THE
PSYCHOANALYTIC SITUATION AND
DANTE'S DIVINE COMEDY

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The True God transforms violence into suffering.
The False God transforms suffering into violence.
— Simone Weil

Introduction

In what follows, I will discuss the issue of hope in the psychoanalytic situation and also its opposite, hopelessness, against the backdrop of some archetypal imagery from the most “hopeless” place of all—Hell, as it is envisioned in the first book of Dante’s Divine Comedy, the Inferno. In this approach, hope is seen as being intimately connected with a process that Winnicott called “indwelling” and Christianity calls incarnation, i.e., the descent of the spirit into the body. Dante’s poem suggests that there is a “force” in the psyche that opposes

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indwelling and that cannot tolerate incarnational processes—a force that drives the spirit out of the body and generates hopelessness. This inner “force” constitutes a formidable archetypal defense, and I would like to show how this defense is pictured archetypically in Dante’s medieval poem, and how it operates personally in the psychotherapy of a patient I will call Helen. Much of my understanding of healing in psychoanalysis is informed by Marion Woodman’s work, which highlights how the human body—especially the female body—often suffers under tyrannical abuse by the mind’s perfectionism and violent oppression. In this paper I try to unmask the tyrant—the “false God” who perpetually transforms suffering into violence—and to show in a clinical case, how He slowly gives over his power and his prisoners to relationship.

In Dante’s fourteenth-century poem, both the pilgrim and his guide, Virgil, begin their journey at the Gate of Hell, where they read the chilling inscription: “Through me the road to the city of desolation, ... Abandon all hope, Ye who enter here.” As the poets enter the precincts of Hell, they soon realize that hope must be abandoned here because the suffering in Hell is eternal suffering—it goes on and on without relief—without hope of comfort or of liberation or release. This “eternal pain” was, for Dante, the worst imaginable punishment for a sinful life on earth. It seems that the human imagination cannot comprehend anything quite so terrible as suffering that goes on and on forever without hope. This kind of suffering is very familiar to us in the clinical situation with those patients who must defend themselves from the unbearable experience of early trauma. Their suffering never “completes” itself. It goes on and on “eternally.” Why is this?

Freud and Jung called this kind of repetitive suffering “neurotic suffering,” as distinguished from the authentic suffering necessary for individuation. Around this distinction most of our understanding of psychopathology revolves. It turns out that neurotic suffering never ends because it is kept alive by an inner factor, and, among other things, this inner factor will not let a normal affect-cycle complete itself. Everything stays suspended and repetitive. Both Freud and Jung were impressed with this fact. Freud said, “[T]here is no doubt that there is something in these people that sets itself against their recovery.” And Jung—describing his patient Sabina Spielrein—talked about a “morbid” fragment of personality or complex in her psyche, “the

inclinations, judgments, and resolutions of which move only in the direction of the will to be ill.” This perverse second personality, Jung said, “devours what is left of the normal ego and forces it into the role of a secondary (oppressed) complex.”

Dante’s fourteenth-century poem gives us a remarkable image of this “perverse second personality.” Here is the “god” who turns suffering into violence and in the process, creates an inner hell of hopelessness. Dante’s name for this diabolical entity, ruling Hell from the ninth circle or Pit, is not Satan or Lucifer, as we might expect, but “Dis,” from the Latin, meaning to divide, split in two or negate (“Dite” in Italian).

Hopelessness and ‘Dis’

If we look at the structure of Dante’s poem we find that the work is divided into three parts, corresponding to three realms of the “afterlife.” Each part is a stage in the journey Dante must make. He must make this journey because he is depressed. The poem’s first lines state: “Midway through 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.” And for his “midlife” depression, an encounter with the
“underworld” of Hell is apparently the necessary prescription—a kind
of homeopathic remedy. Dante has lost hope, and in order to recover
hope, he has to abandon hope as he knows it. This is Dante’s paradox—
one that has relevance to the clinical situation as well. Actually it
might be more accurate to say that in order to recover hope, Dante
must “enter the area of abandoned hope”—but he must do this
voluntarily and consciously—with his guide, Virgil, as a witness. It
would do Dante no good if he simply fell into the pit of Hell. One
part of him has to be conscious of what he’s doing ... to witness it.
This part is represented by the shade of Virgil.

In the first third of the poem, Dante must descend into the Inferno
through a series of stages, starting with Limbo, the outermost layer,
and proceeding through nine levels down into the very center of the
Earth, in order to encounter the image of absolute evil. Here is the
dread seat of the ghastly “Dis” (see illustration)—a kind of netherworld
trinity—a three-headed, bat-winged monster, living at the point of
densest gravity and severest cold in Hades, devouring a sinner in each
of his slathering mouths and freezing the Cocytus with the icy wind
from his bat-like wings. I think Dante’s poetic insight that the darkest
force of evil we can imagine is equivalent to the life-negating, dis-
integrating energies of the “under” world helps us relate the poem’s
medieval Christian imagery to the clinical situation, where we are very
familiar with “Dis” as, for example, dis-sociation, dis-memberment,
dis-integration, dis-illusionment, dis-avowal, dis-hearten, dis-grace,
dis-courage, dis-ease—even dis-aster, which means losing one’s connection
to the stars, to one’s god-given destiny and hence, to hope.

The three-headed cannibal known as “Dis” is well known to
psychoanalysis, but he has a controversial pedigree. Freud thought of
him as a personification of the death instinct, as did Melanie Klein.
Bion spoke of a malevolent destructive force in the psyche that reverses
Alpha function and disintegrates everything back into “Beta” bits.
Jung spoke of the archetypal shadow, and Ronald Fairbairn of an
“Internal Saboteur” perpetually attacking a vulnerable “libidinal ego,”
thus filling the inner world with “bad objects.” Sandra Edelman has
recently shown how the archetypal affect of shame always follows attacks
by this dark daimonic entity in the unconscious.

My own musings about this source of evil in the human psyche have
been informed by these theorists, but with the important proviso
that Dis embodies an archetypal defense whose energies were
originally part of the Self’s wholeness, and therefore his “intention”
or “telos” is equivocal, trickster-like, and hard to categorize as pure
evil. As we know from mythology, Dis is a fallen Angel—Lucifer
himself, the light-bearer. He is also the “agent provocateur” of
consciousness in the Garden of Eden, so he can’t be all bad. Although
he is quintessentially the great nihilist, the splitter, the attacker of
every coniunctio in the interest of disiunctio, he is also the source of
disenchantment and dis-cermony, dis-tinctions and the capacity to
dis-tance and dis-identify. To honor this ambivalence, I have called
him a Protector/Persecutor, the instigator in the unconscious of a
“self-care system” assuring the person’s survival at the expense of true-
self living. He is the “god” who turns suffering into violence when
suffering has been too much for the child. Dis can keep a person alive
out of sheer will-power, and I have seen this happen. Some of
my patients felt—as children—that they owed their very lives to the
chastizing, tyrannical voice of Dis, and they are not wrong, although
the life “he” gave them is not the true life they seek. What these
patients experience, and what I have been forced to acknowledge
with them, is how dissociative processes provide a “daimonic” or archetypal
container where human mediation has broken down. Nobody but Jung
really understood this, although he neglected terribly the interpersonal and developmental processes through which human
mediation comes about.

Failed mediation between the inner and outer worlds is, by
definition, traumatic because the raw impact of unformulated, un-
symbolized experience hits the child’s psyche like a bolt of lightning
hits the electrical panel of a house. Without a human transformer for
this high-voltage archetypal affect, all the circuits can be blown.
Kohut calls this experience “disintegration anxiety,” which, he says,
constitutes a mortal threat to the very core of personality—threatening
what I have called the “imperishable personal spirit,” or human soul,
with destruction. This must be avoided at all costs, and so Dis arrives
on the scene to prevent the overwhelming impact of affect from being
experienced. In other words, trauma doesn’t split the psyche; Dis splits
the psyche and he does this to save the life of the trauma victim. Dis-
integration saves the soul from destruction, even though in the process our suffering is turned into violence.

So Dis is the dark angel made necessary by our incapacity to process all our experience. In his defensive function, he dismembers experience—chops it to pieces and then makes sure that the pieces do not link up again. In the process, he destroys hope—or it might be better to say that he cannot tolerate hope; he is too “realistic.” Hope is connected to wholeness and he, after all, is “Dis.” Wholeness is anathema to him, so he keeps the parts “dis”-integrated. Affect in the body is severed from its corresponding image in the mind and thereby an unbearably painful meaning is obliterated. An innocent remainder of a pre-traumatic self is split off and regresses (with Dis’s help) into an autistic enclave—a kind of limbo of lost souls in the psyche. Amnesia barriers are erected to make sure this lost innocence does not remember what happened to it. Meanwhile, a “progressed” part of the personality grows up too fast, becomes self-sufficient, and goes on living in the outer world in a secret pact with the Fallen Angel himself. Part of this “pact” is that the now-lost innocence, encapsulated and split off, will be forgotten. This innocent remnant is not without hope—the hope of the prisoner for parole or release—but as the years drag on, this wisful hope and longing rapidly turns into hopelessness and despair. And Dis rarely commutes the sentences of his imprisoned innocents. When Dis takes over, the flame of hope slowly goes out.

So Dis is the “engine” of hopelessness in the deep unconscious, at least as medieval artists have imagined him—“Emperor of the Sorrowful Realm.” In order to recover hope, the Pilgrim with his guide must descend into the pit to encounter this creature—then they have to climb down the great hairy body of Dis, right down to his groin area. At this point, miraculously the whole armature of the poem turns 180 degrees. Their direction is reversed. Down becomes up. Instead of climbing down, Dante and Virgil find themselves climbing up the hair legs of the beast to emerge at the base of the seven-story mountain of Purgatory in the southern hemisphere. Here they see the stars again for the first time, and hope that was lost in the Inferno, is rekindled.

Suffering and Refusal

Of the three realms Dante must negotiate, both the Inferno and the Paradiso are outside time and space—eternal—so the suffering in Hell is eternal just as the joy and bliss of Paradise are eternal. Only the Purgatorio—an intermediate realm—is in time. It is here, between Heaven and Hell, that the sinners are slowly “working off” their sins through acts of repentance and contrition. They are moving towards the eternal and therefore they are not without hope. They have escaped the endless suffering in the prison-house of Dis. Their violence towards themselves has been turned into suffering and they are suffering towards something … towards a hopeful end.

Thus, Hell and Purgatory define two kinds of suffering in the poem, and in Dante’s vision, the central act of human consciousness that differentiates the meaningful suffering of Purgatory from the endless, eternal suffering of Hell, is an act of repentance. The sinners in Purgatory have repented. The sinners in Hell have refused to repent—refused to acknowledge their own brokenness, their own humanity. For this reason, their torment is eternal and real hope has been lost to them. So refusal is central to the phenomenology of the hopeless space we are exploring. Dis himself is the great refuser, as we will see in a moment. He once had a chance to be God’s light-bearer on earth, but he refused to follow God’s plan to create man in His own image. This was a humiliation of his splendor that he could not countenance. He refused the incarnation—and so, often, do we.

Neville Symington reminds us that this refusal is a choice. Symington says there is one major choice that defines whether our lives will be hope-filled and satisfying or not—whether we choose what he calls “the Lifegiver.” We have this choice before us, he says, at every moment of our lives. He does not say what the Lifegiver is—it remains a mystical idea—but he says it comes into being only when we choose it. If we refuse the Lifegiver—if we refuse the suffering that is allotted to us as the struggle to realize our true selves, then we will choose the God who turns suffering into violence—we will choose Dis, and his narcissistic pathology will follow.

I will say more about this in a moment. But first a few words about hopelessness in the clinical situation—to help us understand how a pact with this Devil gets signed in an individual’s life.

Hope and Transitional Space

When a patient walks into our office seeking psychotherapy, we can be fairly sure that he or she is in psychic pain, and that
associated with this pain is a sense of hopelessness. This hopelessness—and hence the lost hope of the person’s life—is located in the realm of a person’s “becoming,” which has been foreclosed. When I say “realm of a person’s becoming” I am using Martin Buber’s language to describe the intermediate realm we all know so well from Winnicott’s contributions to the early development of the infant and child psyche. Hope seems to reside in a successful negotiation of this “potential space,” or transitional space.

One of the reasons Hope seems to reside in this space is that in the “becoming” of potential space—in the actualization of personal potential that occurs between the baby and the mother—in this space, something more appears to be going on than what Winnicott described as the paradoxical meeting of the baby’s hallucinated need for the breast with the mother’s actual breast. All true depth psychologies have a vision of what this something more might be. Jung’s vision was that something transpersonal was happening in this space. An inner foundation of individual wholeness (the Self) was slowly precipitating itself into being as an individual ego. To put it in mystical and religious terms, we might say that God is becoming man in transitional space. Something pre-existent in the field of omnipotence is being transmuted into the human personality. In the “realm of a person’s becoming,” a splinter of the Godhead is entering time-and-space reality and taking on flesh and becoming a human soul. This is a hopeful idea. It suggests that the human personality has a transpersonal origin and essence. Omnipotence is not just something to be purged away. Omnipotence contains a “seed” of the future and has an “intention” with respect to the core or essence of personality. It has an implicate order, if you will, that Winnicott did not consider.

Yet even Winnicott cannot resist becoming mystical when he discusses that “coming into being” that happens or fails to happen in transitional space. As the mother continually introduces and reintroduces the baby’s mind and body, Winnicott says, something mysterious comes to “indwell” in the body, and as Winnicott describes it, we would be hard-pressed not to think of this “something” as the human soul. Indwelling leads to “personalization,” which again Winnicott does not define, but it has to do with feeling real and becoming a person. So hope has centrally to do with something ineffable—mind, psyche, spirit—taking up residence in the body and this, symbolically speaking, has always been known as the incarnation of the spirit in matter.

What happens then, we might ask, when the potential space for this incarnational process is not provided ... when the space of human becoming is foreclosed? Winnicott speaks of a “reversal” of maturational processes. Instead of indwelling, the soul cannot make it across the threshold from omnipotence to the reality principle. Instead of personalization, de-personalization results ... instead of integration, dis-integration, instead of indwelling, dis-embodiment ... the soul leaves the body and becomes a “ghost.” Dis-integration, dis-embodiment, de-personalization. We see from the prefixes of these words who has moved in to foreclose the potential space of a child’s becoming—none other than old Dis himself.

The Case of Helen

Consider the following situation. A little girl named Helen, aged 4, (later my patient) is brimming with excitement and hope as the family prepares to move into their first real home, where she has been promised her own room and a real backyard with sandbox and swing set. The family is gathered outside on a beautiful spring day, greeting the neighbors and getting acquainted as the moving van unloads its cargo. In a creative act of inspiration, little Helen picks a bouquet of flowers and enthusiastically hands them to her mother in celebration of this moment.

I would invite the reader to pause here and contemplate what is at stake in this moment ... a little girl reaching out for her mother with a handful of flowers in total exuberance. It is a moment of enthusiasm. The root of that word is “en-theos”—God or Spirit filling the person. Here is a moment saturated with what Buber calls the “microcosmic richness of the possible”—hope in potentia. We might say that something of this child’s unique, God-given personal spirit was reaching across a threshold here in a desire to incarnate. This incarnation did not happen.

The mother looked down at the flowers—then quickly at the neighbor’s yard and then anxiously scolded her daughter: “No, No, Helen! What’s the matter with you! How could you! You picked those flowers from Mrs. Smith’s garden. Now you go and apologize to her.” Dragging the little girl by the arm, she forced this apology out of her
and simultaneously broke her heart, destroying the hope implicit in this creative act, foreclosing the transitional space in which Helen's personhood was coming into being.

Now occasional derailments like this in an otherwise affirming childhood atmosphere are not going to matter at all that much—they will not destroy hope, because such injuries can be repaired through empathy and understanding. But with my patient Helen, this kind of shaming by the narcissistic mother was typical. The word “love” was never spoken in her family, she told me, and Helen never remembers being touched, whereas everyone touched the family dog. Instead of love there was ridicule, and at the dinner table and as the father regularly became drunk, somebody always got humiliated or shamed. She was the “stupid” or “ugly” one because she asked dumb questions and because she had an overbite and looked like a “beaver” they said. Then, after dinner, the father continued drinking, and as he became more violent, would regularly take off his belt and strap little Helen on her bare bottom. If she protested, he would slap her in the face.

After one of these humiliations, Helen remembered the experience of suddenly watching herself from another place in the room. This separation between her “watcher” and the frightened little-girl-self being hit and humiliated happened automatically at first. But as the violence increased, little Helen actually began to seek out these states of dissociation because they made her feel strangely less anxious and more calm. She found that with a certain concentration in front of the mirror, she could bring them about. She would stare at herself until she began to feel unreal, until gradually the person looking and the image in the mirror were like two different people. Here we can begin to feel the icy winds of Dis slowly insinuating themselves into Helen’s life. She began to dissociate—to “watch” herself. In her “watcher” mode, she felt invulnerable—liberated from the fragile crybaby self who couldn’t stop sobbing, and she began to harden herself against the mother’s shaming and the father’s beatings. Ironically, this was the first moment of her “self-consciousness”—her “dis-crimination” of an observing self-state from the undifferentiated oneness of childhood experience. Unfortunately, this self-division occurred for defensive purposes only, and it was too early for her emerging wholeness to be broken. Helen’s God-given spirit was slowly leaving her body.

Meanwhile, in the outside world, Helen had become a behavior problem. She refused to participate with the family in activities. She refused to eat. She ran away from home. She picked fights with other kids at school. It wasn’t long before she developed an eating disorder and started wishing that she were a boy. First she started binging and purging—later she became anorexic. In college she reverted to bulimia. She hated her fat body because of its needs and its imperfections, and she hated the little crybaby girl who lived in that body. By the time she arrived in my therapy office in her late 30s she had become a very self-sufficient, successful professional woman on the outside, a journalist and scholar, proud of her accomplishments and all the famous people she knew. But inwardly, she was in despair, and the “voice” of this despair was a relentless, chastizing voice that said, “No, no, Helen! What’s the matter with you!” This voice made sure that underneath all her outward success, lay a deep sense of her inadequacy as a person. The secret world of her binging and vomiting was the “proof” of her failure and her worthlessness.

It was as though Helen grew into a life held together by one giant refusal. One part of her felt loathsome, fat, and undesirable, but she could not admit to these humiliating feelings. She could never let herself “fall” into this brokenness. There was too much shame in it and she was too proud. Instead, she would hold herself “above” her shameful self. She refused to be broken. She refused to be humiliated ever again. One part of her was perpetually hungry and full of longing—another part hated this weak, whiny child-self. She felt weak and needy—she felt nothing. She gave in to hunger and binged—she purged this awful weakness, vomiting until she spat blood. She needed; she did not need.

In therapy, she was equally ambivalent. One part of her had a positive transference to me as a nurturing father—the child hiding within herself, we might say—while one part sat back and vigilantly scanned me, prepared to point out my foibles, my inadequacies as an analyst, my “irresponsible vacation schedule,” grudgingly acknowledging on occasion that I had a point. In my countertransference, I had a sense of what it might have been like around Helen’s family’s dinner table. I began to feel stupid and inadequate—like I had buck teeth and couldn’t say anything right.
One day I raised my patients' fees, including Helen's. Although she insisted during the session that she had no particular reaction to this (everything was "fine"—just send her the bill, she "didn't even want to think about it"), an hour later she called me in an agitated state and cancelled her next appointment. She was furious and wanted nothing more to do with therapy and its crass "business arrangements." "Fuck you!" she screamed into the phone and hung up. I did not call her back. Later that week I received a letter in the mail full of profuse apologies for her anger on the telephone and self-recriminations about her bad temper. When I next met her in the waiting room, she asked sheepishly if I was "all right." She confessed how overwhelmed she had been by rage and anger and talked of the panic she felt at having "ruined" the relationship. Then she mentioned a dream she had the night of her "explosion" on the telephone.

In the dream, she and an unknown man are on some sort of mission. They wander their way through a thick dark woods and come eventually upon a deep cave with two stone pillars at its entrance. Just inside, on the edge of the enveloping darkness, huddled near one of the pillars, hides a little girl, tattered and dirty, like one of the "wild children" discovered in France. The dream ends as the patient wakes in fear. Helen had an instinctive sense that this dream was important. There was something haunting to her about this "wild child"—something fearful, yet compelling and attractive. She associated the unknown man in the dream to me and she thought her fear in the dream on encountering the wild girl was like her fear when all the wild anger had leaped out of her.

**Interpretation**

Here is a moment Ronald Fairbairn would have described as a terrifying “release of bad objects” from the unconscious—something some patients dread more than anything else. Helen had never risked this amount of rage with me before. She had "Dissed" me in no uncertain terms. Yet, when old Dis was liberated from the unconscious, so was this abandoned child-self, as if the rage connected to dissociation had to be unlocked from the inner world and directed outward in an actual object-relationship before we could "see" this lost child hidden in its cave. As our work proceeded over the ensuing months, there were many other dreams in which this abandoned child appeared, and much "dissing" energy that flooded into our relationship.

These lost, innocent children in Helen's psyche were encapsulated in a part of her inner world that was inaccessible to her prideful ego, with its intolerance of vulnerability. They were somehow kept alive like hydroponic plants, feeding on the ambrosia of Helen's fantasies of liberation—hope that grew dimmer every day as Helen's life became more and more dominated by self-hatred. Finally she forgot about them altogether. They disappeared into an autistic enclave. We will see such an autistic enclave in Dante's vision of Hell. It is called Limbo and, aptly enough, it is also the place that holds Hell's innocent children.

**Dante's Descent into Limbo**

After Dante and his guide pass through the Gate of Hell and the Vestibule of Hell, they are ferried across the Acheron by Charon to the edge of the actual Pit of Hell. At the uppermost level inside a special walled area, they find themselves in the first circle, Limbo (from *limbus*, meaning "border" or "edge").

Limbo, to the medieval Christian imagination, was the realm of "stuck" souls, eternally suspended in an altered state, undead, but also unalive, guilty only of having lived and died before Christ's coming. The souls caught there did not merit the extreme torments of Hell's deep flames (the "pain of sense"); yet, on the other hand, they had inherited Adam's original sin and, without the benefit of the sacrament of baptism, they were obliged to suffer too, though for them was reserved a lesser pain—"pain of loss," loss of the beatific vision and of any possibility of redemption—only eternal hopelessness and alienation from God. Hence, Limbo contains only the righteous who lived before Christ—righteous pagan men and women, as well as innocent, unbaptized infants, lost children—all locked up in a kind of crypt, far away from Di's red-hot torments.

As the outermost layer of Hell, Limbo is forever separated from life by gates that are eternally locked and bolted. Dante asks Virgil, his guide, whether these locked gates have ever been penetrated—have these innocents ever gotten help? Virgil's reply: only once—by a man who came in great light and glory. Virgil is, of course, referring to none other than Jesus Christ, who is said to have descended into Hell.
following his death on the Cross. The event was known as the “harrowing of Hell”; Christ descended into Hell, penetrated the crypt, broke the gates, wrestled for three days with Dis himself, vanquished him, and freed the prisoners in Limbo. It is in keeping with Dante’s paradox that Jesus descended into the realm of hopelessness at his moment of greatest hopelessness.

Jung had some interesting things to say about this moment in Christ’s life. In some extemporaneous remarks he made to the Analytical Psychology Club in New York in 1937, he said:

The utter failure came at the crucifixion, in the tragic words “My God, My God, why has Thou forsaken me?” If you want to understand the full tragedy of those words you must realize that they meant that Christ saw that his whole life, sincerely devoted to the truth according to his best conviction, had really been a terrific illusion. He had lived his life absolutely devotedly to its full and had made his honest experiment, but on the cross his mission deserted him ....

Jung goes on to explain that because Jesus was faithful to this process of disillusionment, surrendering his ego (“not my will but Thine be done”), letting go even to the point of bodily death, he found his way to a larger life and a larger story beyond his previous understanding. This larger story and larger life was the new life imaged as the resurrection—the resurrection of the body.

In addition to its theological significance, the resurrection represents, quintessentially, the restoration of hope. Now all the realms of the cosmos, Hell, Heaven, and the in-between world where we live, have been connected through the agency of the God-man. Body, mind, and Spirit are linked again and hope returns. The space of becoming is restored. We might think of this story of divine “intercession” by Christ, descending and ascending, as a restoration of the psyche’s “transcendent function”—a restoration of that potential wholeness and symbolic capacity previously foreclosed by Dis. These are moments that bring hope.

Helen in Limbo

Helen also began to have such experiences of linking on a small scale. One in particular occurred in a session soon after her angry outburst and the dream of the lost child. She had just suffered a searing rejection by a hoped-for boyfriend and sat in the session complaining about a knot of tension in her stomach. She was afraid her childhood ulcer was coming back. I asked her to close her eyes and concentrate on this pain in her body, even intensifying it, to see what it might reveal to her. She had trouble with this, but eventually relaxed enough to focus on her stomach pain, and after a brief time suddenly “saw” her “little girl,” arms extended outward, her mouth distorted in a silent scream for mother. This image brought an enormous upwelling of sadness. Helen burst into tears and sobbed uncontrollably for several minutes. This was highly unusual for her. She usually hated her “crybaby self,” the “mewling, whining, puking thing,” as she called her. But now she was at a different place in her process. She felt overwhelming sadness, and yet in her surrender to these affects, there was great compassion for the lost little girl in herself. Neville Symington would say that Helen made a choice in her tearful surrender. She stopped refusing and chose the Lifegiver.

In the psychoanalytic process, this is always a noteworthy moment. When Dis relaxes his guard and the child comes back, the lost wholeness comes back with it, and the realm of becoming is opened once again. Hence, the child in Limbo carries the lost hope for renewed life, and in its abandonment and return represents the “divine child,” that mysterious carrier of hope in the psyche that Jung described as the “urge in every being ... to realize itself,” being an “incarnation of the inability to do otherwise.”

Descent into Nether Hell

After leaving Limbo, as Dante and his guide descend the downward spiraling path towards the pit, the poets encounter a series of increasingly horrifying apparitions that fill them with dread and growing anxiety. Finally, they approach circle nine—the level of deepest evil—and are chilled by a freezing wind, caused by the bat-like wings of Dis himself. As they stumble over the bodies of the damned, frozen into grotesque agoniies underfoot, through the icy fog, they get their first glimpse of the Evil One. Dante writes:

And when we had come so far that it seemed right to my dear master, he should let me see
that creature fairest once of the sons of light,
He moved himself from before me …
And said, “Behold now Dis!”

How cold I grew, [says Dante] how faint with fearfulness
Ask me not, Reader; I shall not waste breath
Telling what words are powerless to express;
This was not life, and yet it was not death …

Dante’s description captures exactly the death-in-life hopelessness of the sorrowful inner world over which Dis rules—“this was not life, and yet it was not death.”

Archetypal Background of Dis

In the quote from Canto 34 (above) Dante describes Dis as that “creature, fairest once of the sons of light.” This is a reference to Dis’s origin as Lucifer, the light-bearer who, by some accounts, was originally God’s most resplendent angel, but who fell from heaven before the creation of Adam. The story, based upon Apocryphal literature from the first and second centuries, tells of how Lucifer, God’s greatest angel and the bearer of light, discovered that God was planning to create man in his own image. This shocked and disturbed Lucifer because it meant that God’s attention was being diverted from Lucifer’s splendor and magnificence. Even worse, Lucifer saw that God was planning to come down into the world and be incarnated as a man—a man with a fleshly, hairy body—almost an animal. This so outraged him, so offended his identification with the perfection of the Godhead, that he refused to surrender his pride and resolved to rebel against the humiliating plan to incarnate. Together with a group of other rebel angels, he was cast out of heaven and fell farther and farther down towards that ever-receding twilight where Being borders upon Nothing. There, he created for himself a netherworld and put himself in the service of negation rather than creation and so became the great nihilist, Dis.

This genealogy of Dis as the fallen Lucifer helps us to understand what the great refusal at the core of “eternal suffering” is about: it is a refusal of the incarnation. In other words, it is a refusal of embodiment, of what Winnicott calls “indwelling.” I find this a telling archetypal “explanation” of why old Dis so ruthlessly attacks the links between affect in the body and imagery in the mind as he continually dismembers experience. He was born in a rebellion against the spirit’s longing for the body—and so he tries to keep the spirit from embodying wherever he can. He does this because he believes that such embodiment will constitute an annihilation—of himself!

Having left his spiritual home with the Godhead to become a terrorist, he stands at the edge of an ever greater hopelessness—an “unthinkable” terror—the black hole of meaninglessness and nullity, the total annihilation of the human spirit. As an archetypal defense, he throws himself into this hole, to plug it. He is the “something” in the gap of nothingness—the last visible bastion of defense against the soul’s total annihilation and humiliation. He gives archetypal anxiety a face, turns suffering into violence, and keeps the fragmentation-prone ego in prideful being—ever vigilant, driven to survive, refusing to be broken in a world full of shame and humiliation.

Summary and Conclusions

So in our exploration of Hell, both clinically and archetypally, we have witnessed differing images of hope and hopelessness associated with two different kinds of suffering. There is first the kind of suffering we might call neurotic suffering, which goes on forever, following a repetition compulsion of misery, and which always follows the refusal of another kind of suffering—the suffering necessary to become real. We saw this in Lucifer, when his pride and perfectionism overcame his love for God and he refused to bow to an incarnate deity. We saw it also in Helen, as the space between her incarnating soul and the world was repeatedly foreclosed and she began to dissociate from a suffering that was unbearably traumatic. In this dissociation was a refusal—a refusal by Dis, the fallen angel—a refusal to love because love would lead to humiliation. The dissociation initially saved her life. But once this bridge was crossed in Helen’s inner life, hope was lost because the “space” of creation, symbolization, and embodiment was foreclosed. The same was true for Lucifer. By refusing the creative descent of God into limited, flawed humanity, through love, he inherited a world of a lost hope, where only the shadows of lost love can exist—trapped as the specters of innocent children imprisoned in a Limbo of the undead, where an illusory hope is kept alive through wistful longing. Hoping against hope, we might say. Hoping with only a slim chance of
"realization." Realistic Hope is restored to the lost souls in this autistic enclave only when the God-man—the representative of God's love on earth—re-enacts Lucifer's fall into Hades, but voluntarily, by surrendering to human limitation, to the body, and to death, because of his faith in a larger story. In so doing, he breaks the gates of Hell and liberates the lost souls, twice-born into life again. Here is the God—the counterpart to Dis—who transforms the violence of dissociation into a suffering that can be borne—who holds the opposites, and restores hope.

Dante follows a similar path in his recovery of hope—first down into the pit of disillusionment and hopelessness, but voluntarily and with a witness—then up again, after his encounter with Dis, into the light, where he can begin the climb through Purgatory into Paradise. Like Dante, Helen followed the path of descent into Hell and ascent into wholeness. Plunged into her own living Hell by the repeated foreclosures on her efforts to become herself, she divided into two—one part innocent but weighed down by her feelings of loathsome-ness and defilement, hiding in a Limbo of lost hope, embedded in her disowned body—another part ruthlessly alive but inflated with pride and full of hatred for her embodied self. Finally, she let herself fall apart, and this is when she came together—when her lost original wholeness came back with her little girl, and with it the lost hope of her life.

In Helen's process, just as in Dante's image of Hell and Limbo, until the innocent parts of the self—encapsulated and lost—enter the space of becoming and join in the drama of self-realization, hope cannot be born, because the core of personality—the acorn, the soul-child—is kept out of the suffering necessary for humanization. As Helen Luke reminds us in her insightful essay on suffering, only when the innocent part of us begins to suffer can we find our way to the new life and hope that the Christian myth envisions as the resurrection.25

All in all, whether hope can be recovered in an individual's life depends on an unexpected degree on human mediation, loving containment, secure attachment, and loving attention to affects-in-the-body. Unless we are loved out of our divinity into our embodied humanity, divinity (operating as archetypal defense) will make our future descent into the body difficult, if not impossible. Winnicott would say that the infant's true-self gesture must be staged repeatedly "within the orbit of omnipotence" in order for omnipotence gradually to be given up. Another way of saying this is that only love can make us whole because only love is willing to risk the loss of perfection implied in each act of incarnation. Love mediates the gap between omnipotence and reality, between "spirit" and "matter." And for those who have had to survive without this mediation, the descent into the body will be resisted at every turn. For some, this resistance will be daimonic.

But the struggle matters profoundly, and as Jung has taught us, one of the places this great struggle is joined in the modern period is in the psychoanalytic transference. Here is one of the places where the foreclosed space of personal becoming will be opened again—or not.

I would like to end with a kind of gnostic reading of the spirit's descent as we have followed it so far. The process of "becoming the self you were intended to be" (Jung's definition of individuation) involves the materialization of something spiritual. Some seed of true selfhood needs to make a perilous journey through very dangerous territory from the world of Eternity to the world of Time, from Spirit to Matter, from Divine to Human in order to become a human soul. Along the way, it will face many trials and suffer great disillusionment, and it may never be able to make a full commitment to this hopeful journey if its suffering into reality is too great. It may even find itself split in two by a daimonic force it never reckoned with, part of it becoming cloistered in an autistic enclave without hope. Sometimes—not always—it will be able to return from this dissociated state and enter into life once again. And if, through all the brokenness of the human condition, it finds enough of those sunny days when life seems possible, enough of those "empathic self-objects," secure objects of attachment, and "optimal frustrations" that make love worth the sacrifice of omnipotence, if it makes it to these shores with some of its original divinity intact and not as a false self—then it will have "arrived home from where it started, recognizing it for the first time."26 This gives us reason to hope.

NOTES

1. A slide-illustrated version of this paper was given at the Barcelona Congress of the IAAP in August, 2004. It appears here in a form modified for print.
3. In order to disguise the material and protect confidentiality, this case is a composite description of my work with more than one person.
7. Dante, 71.
23. Dante, 285 (emphasis added).