



Psyche's Cinderella: in appreciation of Roberto Assagioli

Keith Hackwood
shares his appreciation
for the life and work of
Roberto Assagioli

'And we came forth to contemplate the stars'
Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto xxxiv ¹

A little over 40 years ago, on 23 August 1974, Roberto Assagioli, doctor, scholar, esotericist and originator of psychosynthesis, died at his summer home in Capolona, Tuscany, aged 86. It is interesting at this 40th anniversary of his passing, which could all too easily pass unnoticed, to reflect upon the life and works and indeed the legacy

of a remarkable man of his time and a significant, though often undervalued, pioneer of transpersonal, or perhaps more properly, *spiritual* psychology.

Since June 2012 I have been researching Assagioli's life and work, have visited his home and archive in Florence, Italy a number of times and have had the great good fortune to be able to pore over his library and papers. Together with a friend and colleague, Mark Jones, I am shaping this research material into a book, the aim of which is to place Assagioli and his work, especially psychosynthesis, in proper context. It is our assertion that psychosynthesis represents the first coherent, self-consistent spiritual (or transpersonal) psychology in a Western form. Yet its entry into the world was prolonged, even delayed, from its foundations in Assagioli's doctoral thesis, circa 1910, to publication as *Psychosynthesis: a manual of principles & techniques*, in 1965² – a 55-year publishing hiatus. And this from a man who held publishing his work to be the highest priority and service he could offer to the world!

Roberto Assagioli is, in some ways, the forgotten man of psychology, his story little known and his ideas little pondered. It is true that certain themes of his work have entered more mainstream discourse, but usually without reference to their originator, as a sort of unacknowledged borrowing or outright theft (examples being aspects of the will, considerations of subpersonalities and methods of working with them, and concepts such as that of the higher unconscious). This anniversary appreciation is a first step towards redress.

Roberto Assagioli was born Roberto Marco Grego in the Venice ghetto on 27 February 1888 at 11.59am. His father, Leone, died when Roberto was just two years old. The infant Roberto also nearly died from an unspecified disease, but the attentions of Dr Emanuele Assagioli Todesco during his period of hospitalisation saved his life. His mother, Elena Kaula, then married Dr Assagioli, and it is in this infant adoption that the first major turn in Roberto's

life occurs; he gains a new identity, a new father and a new name. Here, at the very outset of his life, we have an early double wounding (his own near death and the actual death of his biological father) and a recasting of the context of his life, now as the son of a well-to-do doctor.

Roberto Assagioli's life flourished from this period; the comfortable home infused with the traditions of medicine and science stemming from his stepfather, coupled with his mother's deep interest in theosophy and the vivid current of Italian cultural and political life at this time, inhabiting the newly unified national identity, all went to support the precocious natural talents of the young man. With a great appetite for learning and a tremendous facility with language – by age 18 Roberto could speak eight languages – in many ways the world was his oyster.

By 1904 he had moved to Florence, which, with only the interruptions brought about by two world wars, was to be his home for the rest of his life. He studied medicine with great success, wrote articles for radical magazines, and featured prominently within the scene of young and pioneering intellectuals in that most luminous city. Travel and further research broadened the young Roberto in areas as diverse as Indian philosophy and

mediumship, and it is around this time (1906/7) that he studied the emerging works of one Sigmund Freud. Soon after, Assagioli spent time studying at the Burghölzli clinic near Zurich, with Eugen Bleuler and Carl Jung. A letter of the time, from Jung to Freud, shows us something of the impact of this meeting. Jung writes: 'A very pleasant and perhaps valuable acquaintance, our first Italian, a Dr Assagioli from the psychiatric clinic in Florence. Prof Tanzi assigned him our work for a dissertation. The young man is very intelligent, seems to be extremely knowledgeable and is an enthusiastic follower, who is entering the new territory with the proper brio. He wants to visit us next spring.'³

In stark contrast to the fervid openings of the early psychoanalytic scene, in 1908 he studied at the Munich clinic of Emile Kraepelin, the founder of psychiatry and the methodical categorisation of psychopathology, and a pioneer of understanding the role of genetics in disease.

So we can see a young man full of energy and ambition, eager to explore the cutting edge of his (by now) chosen field, that of the emergent science of psychology.

Assagioli metabolises the two poles of formative psychological ground, psychoanalysis (after Freud's method) and the systematic classification of mental disease, leading to psychiatry, through Kraepelin. Almost

immediately he also begins to publish his own ideas and develop his own theories, seeing through the inherent limitations of even the most progressive methods of his time.

By 1910, still aged just 22, as part of his critique of psychoanalysis, he refers for the first time to his foundational idea, that of psychosynthesis. In some ways, these few years immediately prior to the Great War as Assagioli completed his formal studies and fully entered the world, giving papers at conferences, publishing articles and research, and even founding his own bi-monthly psychological journal, *Psiche*, (which, for example, first translated elements of Freud's writings into Italian), represent the high point of his professional life. Clearly he is accomplished, even brilliant, a precociously bright and capable scholar, confident enough to see beyond the great figures of his field, even as he studied with them, and ambitious to take psychology further and in a more holistic direction. But the path was not to be so straightforward.

During the Great War, which for the young nation of Italy became a marked tragedy, a traumatic rupture in collective identity, Assagioli served as an army medic, becoming vice-director of the Ancona Neurological Centre and working directly with the effects of battle-shock and what we might frame today as PTSD. Post war, he returned to Florence and set up practice as a psychotherapist, founding a theosophical group, and in 1925 he married Nella Ciapetti, becoming a father a year later when his son Ilario was born. Although the following years can be seen as successful, with a number of travels and meetings with important figures (Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, for example), it was a period of inwardness in relation to the development of psychosynthesis. Of course, more darkly, these years also saw the rise to power of Mussolini and the evolution of fascism as the defining political force of the day.

Assagioli met many international figures through his participation at the Eranos summer schools in Ascona (started in 1933 and still ongoing) but the greatest of these for him was his meeting with the esoteric writer and theosophist Alice Bailey.

In time the repressions wrought by fascism led to Assagioli's imprisonment (summer 1940) and the closure of his centres (officially for being pacifist organisations), much of his library was destroyed, papers burnt, property destroyed. The years of the Second World War represent a tremendously hard time. As a prominent Jewish figure, his safety was at constant risk, and he was forced into hiding with his family, often in remote mountainous areas, living a marginal existence especially during the Nazi occupation from 1943. Happily, he survived and rebuilt his practice, but the cost of those times on the run were made brutally apparent in 1951 by the untimely death of his son Ilario, aged 28, from tuberculosis of the bones, a devastating experience, especially for Assagioli's wife.

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From the late 1950s and early 1960s psychosynthesis institutes were founded around the world, in New York, Paris, Buenos Aires, London, Montreal and, of course, across Italy. Assagioli was also involved in numerous other projects and organisations, from the Group for Creative Meditation to the World Union for Progressive Judaism. He also wrote and published astrological material under the pseudonym *The Considerator*, fulfilling a lifelong therapeutic engagement with astrological forms. He counted among his friends, correspondents and colleagues such luminaries as educationalist Maria Montessori, psychologists and thinkers from Freud and Jung to Herman Keyserling, Martin Buber, Abraham Maslow and Viktor Frankl; spiritual teachers such as the Sufi master Inayat Khan, Zen teacher D T Suzuki and Buddhist Lama Govinda, among many others. One such peer was the great astrologer, composer and painter Dane Rudhyar, who founded transpersonal astrology. He wrote, perceptively, of Assagioli the man and his method: ‘Dr Assagioli’s psychosynthesis is an answer to the chaos — but also the universalisation of interests and strivings — which our generation has created. The multiplicity of energies and stresses, and the complexity of a global openness, are facts which must be met. Assagioli has had to meet them in his own person. And the solution has come out of the confrontation.’⁴

He continues: ‘The way... to a healing of the “fundamental inferiority of man,” to “peace, harmony and power” is four-fold. The four stages on the path are defined by Assagioli as:

1. A complete knowledge of one’s personality
2. Control of its various elements

3. Realisation of one’s true self, or at least the creation of a unifying centre
4. Psychosynthesis: the formation or reconstruction of the personality around the new centre.’⁴

Roberto Assagioli, when considered from a psychological point of view, holds the distinction of having participated in and contributed to two of the major developments within psychology in the 20th century. Firstly, he was an active part of the first wave of psychoanalysis from 1907 until the Great War, personally engaged with Freud and Jung and the Zurich Freud Society; secondly, through psychosynthesis and his work with Maslow and others, he participated in the emergence of humanistic and, indeed, transpersonal psychology in the 1960s.

Psychosynthesis (or bio-psychosynthesis, as it was first conceived) was for Assagioli a description and systematising of what he perceived as a natural process. He writes that psychosynthesis proceeds: ‘...by not giving any undue importance to any one technique... by the steady cultivation and use of the synthetic spirit, by the constant endeavour to keep the entire picture in view, to relate always the part to the whole and last, by emphasising in theory and in practice the central, decisive importance of the human factor, of the living interpersonal relation between the therapist and the patient.’²

There is no space here to explore the legacy of psychosynthesis, with its notable successes in terms of global reach and diversity, and its near invisibility in relation to the mainstream of therapy and psychology. No space either to reflect on Assagioli as the founder, neither the near saint he is sometimes made out to be,

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nor the failed writer he could be represented as, but rather as a figure more impressively human and fraught, convincingly dedicated and deep. We can but note that, in the words of a eulogy from his remembrance service, ‘he was very early’, ahead of his time – anticipating the world of anxieties and tensions we are so well acquainted with today, and offering a series of maps and guides toward healing and making whole the individual, the collective and the transpersonal experience.

That his aspirations remained directed at the highest in humanity can be seen in many of the so-called *Assagiolini*, the many ‘notes to self’ penned by Assagioli, often on scraps of paper, or prescription pads, usually in English or Italian, much in the manner of how one might use a Post-it (note) today. Among this trove of material many unpublished gems turn up – for example this one, found on my last visit to Florence: ‘Speak of the fascinating and intriguing “mystery of the Self” and of the inner adventure of its probing’ (RA, handwritten note to self).

In another he writes to himself, with humour, that psychology is like Dante’s vision in the *Divine Comedy*; psychoanalysis represents hell, the lowest realm of our being, Jung’s work seems, at best, to open up a limbo or collective ground, but psychosynthesis alone dares to conceive of heaven.

It seems to me that this willingness to embrace the ‘mystery of the Self’, theoretically and in practice, most distinguishes Assagioli as a truly synthetic (in the sense of someone who relates parts together as a whole) figure well worthy of our attention, bringing as he did the materialist medical science of his era into fruitful and dynamic dialogue with the perennial wisdom of the ages

and traditions, and all this in a non-dogmatic, radically open way. We have much to be grateful for in the work that is his legacy.

Biography

Keith Hackwood is a psychosynthesis therapist, supervisor and mindfulness teacher. He lives and works in Newport, South Wales and is currently writing a book about Roberto Assagioli. www.keithhackwood.com



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