

Chapter 3 in Flaskas, C., McCarthy, I. & Sheehan, J (Eds.) (2007) *Hope and Despair in Narrative and Family Therapy: Reflections on Adversity, Forgiveness and Reconciliation*. Hove/NY: Brunner Routledge pp 36 - 48

### **The Dialectical Structure of Hope and Despair: A Fifth Province Approach**

**Nollaig Byrne and Imelda McCarthy**

“Hope consists in asserting that there is at the heart of being, beyond all data, beyond all inventories and all calculations a mysterious principle which is in connivance with me” (Marcel, 1995, p.28)

#### **Introduction**

From the Antique period, through to the age “of conversion” and into Medieval times the figures of Justice and Injustice, Truth and Falsehood, Love and Hatred, Hope and Despair have been visually elaborated as opposing personifications. They form pairs in the Virtue-Vice cycle in which struggle and overcoming posit a type of religious attitude. The figures of Hope and Despair are both related to the future, one redeemed, one doomed, an after-life of either heaven or hell (Barash, 1999). However, at the heart of this struggle is the maintenance of an unbounded hope with the expectancy of an eternal life.

From the trajectory of Western Enlightenment, progressive secularization and the Marxist ideal, the dream world of human possibility is represented as the substitute for a religious type afterlife but has retained a similar oppositional structure of struggle and overcoming. In this trajectory the question of oppression-emancipation as a dialectical opposition is still driven by a politics of hope but now oriented to the secular variant of utopia and the universal human good.

In the contemporary understanding a “privatisation of hope” arrives on the agenda replacing the profound hopefulness which had animated the 20<sup>th</sup> century socialist vision. This is the Fukuyama (1992) conception of a society without opposition, no longer requiring large theoretical schemata of emancipation. Rather it is populated by an infinity of individual hopes and partial social projects (Anderson, 1992).. While this speaks to the modern heterogeneity of being and a politics of gradualism it fails to account for the engagement with the world revealing hope in the bleakest situations, or its opposite, the wish for death in the withdrawal of despair.

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### **Hope and Despair: From the Classical-Christian to the Secular Imaginations**

In the Christian imagination of the Middle Ages the allegorical figure of Despair (Desperatio) was transferred to the historical Judas, represented by Judas hanging from a tree, and sometimes juxtaposed with the crucified Jesus, the Christian figure of Hope (Barash, 1999). While church iconography continued to include the pairing of virtues and vices in classical allegorical personifications, the articulation of virtues, those divine and those developed through human effort were no longer cast as oppositions. However Despair continued as the contrasting figure denoting absence of Hope.

The tradition of secular hope initiated by the Enlightenment is a reevaluation of human capacities to discern, to will, to judge, to imagine, and to hope. The three questions founding Kant's critique of reason are, "What can I know? What should I do?, For what can I hope? (Kant, 1961, p.645). Here the religious impulse is now directed to interests of the world with a privileged rationality as the backbone for moral development. In this tradition the object of hope is humanity itself with more self-knowledge, more freedom and more material progress. However the intention here is to articulate human freedom while maintaining the place of religious belief or a spiritual orientation to the world.

Communism, the "New Faith" in a utopian world shifted the geography and timescale of transcendent hope to a world created by man's efforts. The hoped for transcendent perfection of a classless society with no division of labour and control of nature through technology promised to fulfil man's deepest yearning for a good life. "Once he has grasped himself and established what is his, without expropriation and alienation in real democracy, there arises in the world something which shines into the childhood of all in which no one has yet been: homeland (Bloch, 1986, 1375-76).

Despair is the appropriate marker for the collapse of the greatest secular hope of our time, the utopian socialist vision laid waste by the crimes carried out in its name (Milosz, 2001). From this wasteland or politics without opposition, the "social hopes" of Rorty and Fukuyama, commentators from the Left and Right respectively,

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exemplify optimism as the emotional fluency of subjects in liberal democratic societies; polities that guarantee the well-being of individuals under conditions of liberty and freedom – the realization of “the democratic ideal”. Here the future is foreclosed requiring only optimism and a deflection of imagining how things might be otherwise, thus rendering Hope of salvation, be it political or religious, both obsolete and archaic. This society has been achieved through man’s efforts and optimism and only requires for its sustenance a trust in progress and growth. In this depiction hope and the social relation it evokes is suppressed and optimism is unbounded (Lasch, 1991). Rorty counters this unboundedness with a moderated optimism and a place for “small experimental ways” to replace grand projects. (Rorty, 1998, p.228).

In our present understanding we borrow vestiges from religious and secular traditions to account for occasions of hope and despair. Yet it is from the great failures of modern times, particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that we draw on to moderate and guide our response. It is the events of evil and suffering in our time nearing apocalyptic proportions, the holocaust, the gulags, wars and genocide, famines and natural catastrophes that creates the ground for embracing despair, for persevering in the face of tragedy and hoping for hope. These crisis situations highlight basic trust, the social relation and community as the place of hope. It is the ground where the possibility of the social relation is revealed as the place of hope. “I hope in thee for us” (Marcel, 1962). Likewise Camus, when referring to writing “The Plague”, said, ”If there is one fact that these last five years have brought out, it is the extreme solidarity of men with one another (Camus, 1968, p.346).

### **The Fifth Province<sup>1</sup>**

The Fifth Province is a therapeutic approach that provides a systemic analysis from a dialectical vantage point. In a fifth province application the movement of hope and despair is held in dramatic tension. They are not oppositions to be overcome, a hierarchy to be reversed or an unfolding synthesis. Rather they are discursive identities with an immeasurable hiatus, which seek reconciliation with each other, not evaluation. It is this oscillating condition of hiatus and reconciliation that positions the

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endurance of hope and the closure of despair as a conjoined future perspective. Creating the circumstances for therapeutic hope thus requires an acknowledgement of, and an understanding of clients' horizon of meaning together with the moral, political and more personal sources which animate it.

From a fifth province point of view what we attempt to do is to co-create a therapeutic space – in mind, conversation and relationship – that invites ambivalence and resists the impulse toward categorical impositions.<sup>2</sup>

### **Clinical Vignette: An Archetype of Despair**

A Child Protection team sought a consultation with us, the authors, for Patrick and Anne, a couple in their late twenties with five children, aged between 9 years and 3 months. Two months prior to the sessions outlined below, Anne had tried to smother her youngest child, Michael by placing a pillow over his face while he slept. He was rushed to the accident and emergency department of a children's hospital and was detained. At the hospital, the medical staff assumed that he had experienced an apnoeic episode, "a case of near cot death". Later Anne, in a distraught state attended her GP and disclosed to him what she had done. He immediately advised her to inform her husband and the hospital, and also made a report to Child Protection Services. On discharge from the hospital he was placed in foster care while a risk assessment was carried out. Initially, Patrick was reluctant to co-operate with social services saying that he "wanted to forget the event, put things right and have Michael home." The Child Protection team had concerns about Patrick's under-response to such a grave event and his apparent unwillingness to cooperate in a parental and risk assessment. Anne was referred for psychiatric evaluation, received a diagnosis of post-natal depression and was prescribed medication.

The event, the mother's attempt to kill her infant is the crisis threatening both the dispersal of the family and the disintegration of parental roles. However, this significance is marginalized by the professional attempt to establish risk and by the parents' own attempt to exit emotionally from the scene of despair. Using

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“questioning at the extremes” (Colgan, 1991) the catastrophic scene is addressed within an ‘as if’ future frame. This frame was prompted by Anne’s ‘as if’ assumptions that her baby was the cause of her problems.

The participants in the excerpted interview reproduced below include the parents, Anne and Patrick, the social worker team, Tom and Mary, and the fifth province team comprised of the authors.

### **“If he wasn’t there.” Despair as the Unwanted Child**

Imelda: (To Anne) So when you became aware of the eviction threat, and you made the decision to kill Michael, what was in your mind at that time? Was it to get Patrick’s attention, to solve the housing problem or to call attention to yourself? Like, who or what was most on your mind?

Patrick: I wouldn't say she consciously made the decision to kill Michael.

Imelda: You had some sort of a plan of killing the baby, is that right?

Anne: No, I had said to myself, if he wasn't there. I didn't actually plan to get rid of him but I had focused it on him. You see Patrick and I had had a row and he had said that he was my responsibility, so I think I felt that if he wasn't there I wouldn't be having all these problems and the particular reason that morning I was saying to myself, if Michael wasn't there none of this would happen but it wasn't a conscious thing, you know, "I'll kill him", it was more the fact that if I hadn't had him, if he wasn't there...

*The event has drawn stark attention to the infant’s unwanted status. In this short sequence two other movements are brought forth by the couple. Patrick’s answering for Anne was a protective (if minimizing) move while Anne invites a speculative view of the past through her words, “if Michael wasn’t there, none of this would happen”.*

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*Noting this, the interviewer takes the thread of a speculative past and juxtaposes it with a speculative future .*

### **The Fantasy of Revenge**

Imelda: If you had succeeded in killing Michael how do you think Patrick would have reacted?

Anne: It is difficult to say. At that particular time I think it would have finished us (looks at husband) totally and completely.

Imelda: Would he have killed you?

Anne: I don't know. I couldn't answer that myself. You would have to ask him.

Imelda: (to Patrick) What is your belief about it?

Patrick: I would sooner not think about it. I would like to put it behind us. It's gone.

Imelda: What is your worst fear about what you might have done?

Patrick: Kill her. I have a temper. A bad temper but I never take it out on Anne or the kids.

*While having the form of an evasive reply, it is also likely that Patrick's fantasy of revenge was sufficiently present to make it threatening. His statement, "It's gone", points to an experience of desperation overcome and a hope to be held. However, knowing that this kind of hope living in the space of denial would alarm the social workers, the field of reflection was expanded and social services were now included in the 'as if' scenario. The juxtaposing of past and future, reality and imagination, desperation and hope intensifies the dilemma of denial and acknowledgement. Knowing from past experiences that the denial or minimisation of serious child*

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*welfare issues fuels professional fears it was important to reflect on the parents' perceptions of professional concern at this juncture.*

### **Loss, Despair and the Emergence of Hope**

Imelda: Could I ask you what do you think the Health Board (State Services) would have done?

Anne: If Michael had died? Well I suppose they would have taken the others. I don't really know.

Imelda: And how would that have been. If they had come in to protect the other children, would that have left you on your own without Patrick or do you think Patrick would have moved back to be with you or would he have kept away?

Anne: I think possibly he would have stayed away.

Imelda: Do you agree with that Patrick?

Patrick: No! If they had moved in to take the kids? If the worst had come to the worst and Michael had died, I would have told Anne to go back to her mother and I would have kept the kids. I would have organized somebody, my mother or somebody in the family to look after the kids while I was at work. There is no way that I would have let the family go.

Imelda: OK you would have asked Anne to leave, but you would have kept the kids.

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Patrick: If the worst had come to the worst I would have kept the children together and told Anne to go back to her mother's maybe for a couple of years or 5 or 6 years or however long it would take.

Imelda: And would you have kept contact with Anne?

Patrick: Ah yeah. I can't say I would not have kept contact

Imelda: And would you let her see the kids?

Patrick: Yeah. You never can take a mother away from children.

*Anne as the perpetrator is the melancholy figure in the tragedy that has squandered her hopes. Patrick's "No!" is a refusal or resistance to this and allows him to hope in the transcendent values he places on family and motherhood. "You never can take a mother away from her children." Whilst he would protect the family unit he would never the less maintain Anne's status as mother. Once again working at the extremes of the 'as if' situation, the expanded field was re-membered as a vantage point for father's self-review. In this expanded field, glimpses now emerge of parental responsibility for the future care and protection of Michael. It is the beginning of a co-created space in which the voices of parental responsibility can begin to sound.*

### **An Acknowledgement Story**

Imelda: And how do you think the Health Board would have responded? How do you think the Health Board would have viewed you as "Dad"? Do you think they would have supported you in that? What is your view?

Patrick: Well talking to the senior social worker I don't think they would have. Because they believe there is a problem with me as well. It is true I was blind for two years and did not see what was going on. I know where I went wrong for the last couple of years. I have looked at

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myself and the way things were between us for the last twelve months or two years. I mean it is two years of my life I want to forget.

Imelda: And in wanting to forget, because in some ways coming to a place like this is about remembering, how would that be?

Patrick: Well, it is very hard, especially if there are some things that you just don't want to remember, that you want to put out of your mind and say it is gone. It is really very difficult.

Imelda: Anne, how do you think it would be for Patrick, who really wants to put this behind him, forget about it and move on and to rebuild your lives together, to come to a place like this where we are asking you to remember quite painful, quite difficult things?

Anne: Well, I think it would be very hard because Patrick doesn't like to talk about things concerning us, outside the family. I think that is difficult and like that too, it is difficult to talk about the things maybe you don't really want to talk about.

Imelda: Do you think he could do it?

Anne: Ah yeah.

Imelda: Do you think he will do it?

Anne: Yeah

Patrick: Yeah

Imelda: Will he do it more for himself, for you or for the children?

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*Patrick continues his engendering of hope for Anne. He can begin to acknowledge his own failures as husband and father. "It is true I was blind for two years and did not see what was going on." In these words he is attempting to create the solidarity and bonding in their relationship from which hope might emerge. This is a first step in paternal re-instatement. The hope that Michael could come home becomes the redemptive possibility for a fractured family as Patrick engages with the reality of Anne's despair.*

### **Truth As Grounds For Hope: Motherhood re-imagined.**

Patrick: The first point is that no one would have known about it only for Anne had said it. The hospital wasn't aware. It was a case of a near cot death and they weren't aware of the situation until a week later when Anne told them.

Imelda: OK. But here you have a very serious act that, Anne did while depressed and then she told the GP about it. But say the courts were not willing to take the risk of returning a small child at that point...

Patrick: It is possible, yeah.

Imelda: OK. How is that going to be for you two as parents?

Anne: em ...I would be very upset, of course, but even knowing that there was a possibility they would not send him home I still think that we would be prepared to fight it because I think he is ready to come home. I am most certainly ready for him, so even though we know that there would be a chance we would fail, we would still go ahead.

Patrick: We would know we would have done something, instead of just letting it go.

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Imelda: And would you be doing that more for yourself or for Michael in the future, so that he could say, well, his parents had fought for him they had not abandoned him?

Anne: No, for all of us.

Patrick: We would be doing it for all of us. For Michael and for all of the children, for Anne and myself, because I think the sooner the better that we can get ourselves back together, the better.

Anne: As long as Michael is with his foster mother ... em ... I cannot put it behind me and start to go on. It is constant...

Patrick: We don't want to sweep it under the carpet.

Anne: I am not going to sweep it under the carpet and pretend it didn't happen but I can't go ahead with the rest of my life until I have Michael home and have the family together. I think when I do have him home then, I can go ahead. I have learned a lot from what happened. Even if they do let her come home and Tom and Mary still feel there is a need for us to come we would still be prepared, even if he did come home. We wouldn't say that we would not have to do any more, we would still be prepared, and if there was anything else we had to do. I mean we would still go ahead and do it.

Imelda: Do you think Patrick would agree with that?

Anne: Yeah. (Both look at each other)

Patrick: Not just for the Health Board...

Anne: It would be for us as well.

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Patrick: From our point of view as well we would do it.

Anne: em ... I mean when I went to see my own doctor (GP) at the time and I told him what happened. He said he would have to notify the Health Board and I did not want that and he said, Well, the way it is Anne, there is no point in something like this happening and you not learning from it" and I still feel that and for the two of us, as people and for the family ... If there was anything else we could do that would maybe improve our life, our marriage, because I mean we don't want to turn around, maybe in a year or two years and everything to fall to pieces. So, you know, if Mary and Tom said, "Well, ok, he can come home but we still think you should attend wherever," So, even if the outcome came in our favour I would still go on the recommendations that the Health Board had. I mean we want Michael back.

*Anne disclosed her secret without coercion one week after the event. Without intending it to be so, much as her attempt to kill the baby had not been intended, the disclosure exceeded the bounds of a confessional narrative to become a redemptive act. It opened the way, not yet for hope but for self-recognition and the recognition due to her from others. Working at the extremes of their situation, the father's commitment to his children's safety and to his family emerges ever more strongly. A new and stronger configuration of parenthood emerges as the conversation continues.*

#### **“Whatever it would take”: Hope as Perseverance**

Imelda: Ok and this is the worst scenario I am painting so, you did not win your fight for your son, what would you think would be a likely way you would handle that, because these are the questions that the people in the court will be asking.

Anne: Yeah ... em. Well it is hard to say, we would do whatever it would take.

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Patrick: The first time I was here I said I would move heaven and earth to get him back. We just want him back.

Anne: If we lost the court case and we had to do further therapy we would do it. We would do whatever it takes to get him home....

Imelda: (to Anne) OK, let me ask you something. Patrick is saying he will move heaven and earth to have Michael back and that if he thought he was going to lose Michael that he would keep the children as a family unit. That was one of the things he mentioned the last day. (Anne nods)

Anne: That was only if we thought we were going to lose Michael permanently.

Patrick: That is the worst thing.

Imelda: Yeah, that is what we are looking at. Patrick was saying he would let you go in order to keep the family together.

Anne: If I thought myself that Michael was going to be placed in care permanently, that we would never get him back and there was a possibility that his foster mother would get custody of him, I would sooner he was with Patrick and the other children, his family, than he being placed in care.

Imelda: So you would make that sacrifice. It would not be only Patrick who was saying "to have this family unit together, for the kids... we'll have to provide a safe place." You would also be part of that.

Anne: I would be more prepared, I think, myself to know he was safe with him and his brothers and sisters than he was in care forever.

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*Patrick and Anne do not know what lies ahead of them. He "will move heaven and earth" as a sign of his perseverance. Anne will do whatever is required including sacrificing her place in the family to secure Michael's membership there. This is the recovery of hope for Michael that did not accompany his birth. Here is the rebirth of a jointly committed parenthood. The more they are questioned at the extremes of their own dilemmas and solutions, the stronger they emerge. At this juncture it can be asked if this emergent strength can continue to hold even if despair and self deception are re-entered as future possibilities?*

### **Self-Deception and Despair**

Imelda: If all was going badly how much do you think it would take for you to retract your statement?

Anne: To say that I didn't do it?

Imelda: Yeah.

Anne: Yeah, ... em .. . I don't think I could retract it now, eh ... actually, I thought of that myself, you know, just saying, "forget about it I didn't do it, it was all a ploy". No, I don't think I could retract it.

Imelda: So you don't think that even Patrick might be able to persuade you to do that.

Anne: No, I don't think so.

Patrick: I wouldn't attempt to.

Imelda: You wouldn't attempt to.

Anne: No, it would have been all a waste then

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Patrick: It would only put the dilemma off for another 3 or 4 years.

Anne: It would have been all a complete waste, me after facing up to what I did, for me to turn around and say, "all right I didn't do it", I think it would be total ... after all I went through in the past 4 or 5 months and that I put everyone else through, not only Patrick but my family too. No, it would mean then that was a total waste.

*Anne has been tempted to retract her disclosure, "actually I thought of that myself." However, a commitment to the truth for the event and for all that they have suffered since is juxtaposed with self-deception as a wasted life, a marker for despair. In giving this its full significance the possibility for a more comprehensive meaning is secured.*

**A place of shared understanding and responsibility: A Fifth Province is co-created.**

Anne: em ... well, I suppose if the worst came to the worst and it was really that bad I probably would, yeah, because it was all my fault in the first place ... eh.

Patrick: No it wasn't

Anne: Most of it was.

Patrick: No. (Shakes his head)

Anne: I mean if I had been more honest with Patrick and turned round and said, "I can't cope, I can't do this" instead of thinking that I could do everything and then, I actually did do it, you know. Yeah, I would be more prepared if I felt that it would mean that Michael was safe and at home with his family.

Imelda: OK in terms of Patrick's blindness. How sighted is he now at the moment?

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Anne: (smiles & laughs) Well, he is better, we are getting there slowly.

Imelda: How is he showing that to you? How are you seeing he is less blind to you?

Anne: Because I think that he is listening more, he is not just being fobbed off (conned) liked previously. I could just fob him off and say, "Everything is OK. I am doing this, that and the other" you know. He would just take my word for what it was. I think more he is listening to what I am saying and as regards the bills, I show him I pay so he knows exactly where he stands on that. He sits down more and he talks better. Like before, if we were talking he would have one ear on the TV and one ear on what I was saying (laughs) whereas I think now he listens to what I say and he doesn't take things at face value that everything is all right. He doesn't just leave it at that. He is more prepared to persevere and say, "are you sure?" and "what is this?"

*Patrick contextualises the event by acknowledging the part he has played. Anne does not diminish her part, "and then I actually did do it, you know." Patrick's positioning in the unfolding events has been to persevere and in this way he has retained hope. It is this term that Anne uses to describe his renewed efforts to listen to her and perhaps to understand her. "He is more prepared to persevere and say, "are you sure"? They have come into their own ground and reached the "first circle of themselves" again (Hederman 1985: 113).*

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this interview we have presented Hope and Despair in dialectical interplay. Anne and Patrick, as parents under State surveillance persevered with us in a dialectical enquiry that brought forth a redeemed future from events of failure. Through an 'as if' dis-positioning at the extremes of this dialectic, a space was co-created with them and witnessed by their professional helpers in which the realities of child protection and family integrity were constantly juxtaposed. Questions at the

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extreme were employed in the opening out of what was already implicitly known. These questions presupposed a trust in the dialectical mediation of contradictions, in this case hope and despair, to produce conversational realities and relationship forms unforeseen at the outset.

As the interview progressed, the couple courageously encountered the possibilities of an extreme past (filicide) and future (family dispersal). At each extreme a new facet of emergent responsibility was glimpsed. Old failures were faced and in each facing stronger parents emerged.

Hope and despair are the immanent companions of what is tragic and free in the human condition, a transcendence overcoming what is fated and determined. The juxtaposition of hope and despair resonates with situations of crisis or catastrophe common in our understanding and yet not amenable to objective consideration. It may be a manner of reflection on some individual experience, one's own or some other or a collective response in a shared event. It speaks to a bleak situation where more is called for than contrasting cognitive-affective appraisals of optimism or pessimism adequate for action-inaction in problem solving. The latter fits within an established horizon of expectation and meaning and where favourable or unfavourable outcomes reflect human effort, good or bad fortune. Outside or beyond this orientation to the future, to expectancy, hope and despair is a moral meditation on the question of whether life is worth living and is a manifestation of human freedom: "this spiritual freedom which cannot be taken away that makes life meaningful and purposeful (Frankl, 1962, p.66).

This moral meditation on hope and despair by Patrick and Anne is an acknowledgement of their failures, of what they have endured and what they can hope for. With these hopes a new social relationship emerged that conferred meaningfulness and connection on their previously unwanted child. On the ground of shared understanding and responsibility the way forward for Michael to come home was forged.

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### Footnotes

1. A fifth province dialectic is one in which there is a co-creation with conversational partners of a 'reality' which allows clients and therapists to 'go on' in situations of apparent contradiction.
- 2 Writing in this vein about the fifth province in 1985 Hederman reaffirms that the notion of a fifth province does not have a fixed physical or geographical location. Rather it is a "place beyond or behind the reach of our normal scientific consciousness". As he sees it, it is also a centre or space beyond the psychology of the single individual (the Ego) - a space which gives access to the transcendent. (Hederman, 1985, 111)

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