'CLIFFS OF FALL':
RELIGION, POETRY AND MENTAL ILLNESS

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O, Mind, Mind has Mountains, Cliffs of Fall
Frightful, Sheer, No Man Fathomed.[1]

Gerard Manley Hopkins, poet and priest was, possibly, no stranger to the experience of depression. The fragment of poetry, with which I began, certainly draws us into his dramatic rendering of the landscape of the mind – mountainous, difficult to negotiate, idiosyncratic: a terrain that is never fully explored, a terrain that never fully yields its secrets, either to self or others.

But, one of the major keys to the mind, in the human experience, is language. The acquisition of language, in all its complexity of vocabulary and structure in the small child, is a constant source of wonder, not only to those close to the child, but also to the culture and community at large. Conversely, any impediment to the development of language acquisition is a cause for deep concern. But the wondrous presence, or mourned absence, of language is not confined to childhood. In the evocatively named assault on the brain called 'stroke', the high levels of frustration experienced when language may be present, but altered in ways which either impede the reception of messages *to* the brain or the expression of messages *from* the brain, can be the most salient and enduring memory of rehabilitation for those involved with this condition. Similarly, in the bleak harvest of acquired brain injury – acquired following the all-too-frequent motor vehicle accidents on the roads, or some other accident in work or recreation, language can be absent altogether or present but fragmented. In Hopkins words, these are, indeed, all 'Cliffs of Fall'.

But overt, or covert, injury to the brain leading to alteration in

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[1] Gerard Manley Hopkins, '[No Worst, There Is None. Pitched Past Pitch of Grief]', *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3ʳᵈ edn (New York: Norton & Co., 1983), p.858.

language, and its expression in speech, is, to some extent, understandable – still in the 'not-too-strange' category. However, when one encounters the alteration both to thought content *and* to thought process, in combination with altered ways of how we *perceive* ourselves, how we perceive others, and, also, the world around us: such alterations of thought and of perception which occur in major mental illness are, indeed, in the 'strange-to-very strange' category: in Hopkins' words not only 'Cliffs of Fall' but, also, often 'Frightful, Sheer, No Man Fathomed.'

In the sense that language is a major key to the mind, it is also a key to 'Religion, poetry and mental illness'. While language is not the only commonality shared by these three dimensions of human experience, I propose, this evening, to use it to explore, and to expose, some of the threads which weave these three dimensions together. What I propose is garnered from my own experience in interaction with many people, and from the several different disciplines which have hosted me over the years: I trust it will be of interest and, for this paper, I claim nothing beyond that.

Before going further, let me offer some points of clarification which situate me, *vis à vis,* the dimensions alluded to in the title of this lecture. First, while aware of, and honouring, the rich writings and experiences of many religious traditions, the Judeo-Christian tradition is the one where I belong: it is my pathway to the Divine. Thus, it is the religious tradition upon which I shall draw during this lecture. Second, as a mental health professional, and as someone who both teaches and researches in the area, all of my activities have a sub-text – that is, to reduce the stigma which, regretfully, is still an anachronistic shadow accompanying the diagnosis and experiences of mental illness. I have a deeply rooted belief that mental health and mental illness are part of the same dynamic continuum, and not two parallel pathways: all of us experience some degree of mental distress – that is, all of us have the capability to move along that continuum at any time in our lives. Some of my students are not always persuaded to such a perspective, but those who are so persuaded, report a different (often deeper) experience of their own professional practice. Certainly, like everything else in our human makeup, genetics do play a part in some forms of mental disorder but that is so for

many other health states and, as is daily revealed, for most aspects of our lives.

One final point of clarification: in selecting to focus on poetry in this context, I am not intimating that the many biographical and autobiographical accounts of mental illness now available – as well as some fictional accounts – do not offer a rich source of engaging the experience of mental illness and, for those who are interested, I would recommend the following: Janet Frame's *An Angel at My Table*[2] which she wrote with Laura Jones; William Styron's *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness*[3] and Anne Deveson's account of her family's experience of schizophrenia when her son, Jonathan, received that diagnosis; Anne's story bears the evocative title of: *Tell Me I'm Here.*[4]

However, I chose poetry for several reasons, not least because I have found that poetry speaks to people at all stages along the mental health-mental illness continuum.

Why this is so, is somewhat of a mystery; but the American poet, Richard Wilbur, offers some thoughts on poetry, which I believe, are relevant within this context and I quote:

> What poetry does with ideas is to redeem them from abstraction and submerge them in sensibility; it *embodies* them in persons and things and surrounds them with a weather of feeling; it thereby tests the ability of any ideas to consort with human nature in its contemporary condition. Is it possible, for example to speak intelligibly of angels in the modern world? Will the psyche of the modern reader consent to be called a soul?[5]

So much for Wilbur and back to Hopkins' 'Mind, mind has mountains' and, particularly, to language and the mind. When engaging the sheer pleasure of preparing this lecture, I was struck

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[2] Janet Frame & Laura Jones, *Angel at My Table* (Sydney: Pandora, 1990).

[3] William Styron, *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (New York: Random House, 1990).

[4] Richard Wilbur, *Responses* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p.126.

[5] Richard Wilbur, *Responses* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p.126.

by the codification of language and its effects on the dynamism of human experience. The two examples that captured my attention were the codification of the language of religion and the codification of the diagnostic language of mental illness. Codification of the language of religion is an ancient practice and this slide of the *New Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible* will be a familiar sight to an audience such as this. However, what I suspect is far less familiar is this next slide which is a slide of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* 4th edition,[6] known to those who use it frequently as 'DSM-IV'.

Whatever the necessary advantages of codification of language are, and there are many, there are also losses. One of the major losses is that of the personal story: this loss can be a source of what I have called 'psychic pain' in the secular sense but which could also be called 'soul pain' in the spiritual or religious sense.

I propose that poetry can 'break the code' by juxtaposing potent fragments from each of the codes and intertwining them to offer space wherein the reader (or the 'read-to') may find fragments of their own personal story. Poetry by 'breaking the code' thus provides solace for what I have called psychic, or soul, pain.

Psychic pain, or soul pain, is a pain which none of us is spared. It is the pain we experience when the spirit is stressed or wounded. Given that, depending upon one's perspective, either the body contains the spirit or the spirit contains the body, there are few instances of psychic or soul pain without some bodily manifestation: psychic pain is an embodied experience. It is salutary to trace several of the gospel accounts where Jesus encountered a person in deep psychic or soul pain. Whatever interpretation may be placed on the manifestation of what may have been epilepsy or may have been major mental illness, or may have been something else, the response of Jesus was always the same: compassion, healing and freedom. Distancing from anyone in pain, particularly, psychic, or soul, pain, was not a part of the story recorded about Jesus in the Gospels. Clearly, Jesus was finely attuned to whispers of 'Sighs too deep for tears'.

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[6] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th edn (Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Codification of language of religion in the accumulated spiritual storyline of a community has many reasons and as many roots; thus, much has been written about the codification of language in both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures.

While very much less has been written about the codification of the diagnostic criteria for mental disorders, such as in *DSM-IV*, the debate about the utility, development and ethics of such codification is an animated, contemporary one in mental health circles.

One of the tenets of this debate that is shared by both codifications is about what was included and what was excluded. Kevin Hart, who has an abiding interest in the framing of language, reminds us that when we 'frame the language' we capture something of importance, something that can be shared: whether it is accepted or rejected.[7] The trap can be that what is framed may be thought of as the 'whole' whereas it is simply a captured, or framed, fragment. Further, in his book *Befriending the Text,* Michael Trainor points out that:

> The gospels invite the reader to experience [this] Jesus through the eyes of four different communities of believers distanced from us in time and culture, but united to us in our search for Jesus within the struggles of life we daily encounter.[8]

Thus, just in the gospels, alone, we do not have one frame but four different frames.

In contrast, in the case of *DSM-IV*, and its ground-breaking predecessor, *DSM-III*, published in 1980, there was a conscious and marked reduction of multiple frames of diagnostic approaches to just this one – the *DSM*. What was achieved in these editions of the *DSM*, in this codification, was remarkable. After years of preparation, after years of working towards consensus across professions and across different groups of

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[7] Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).
[8] Michael Trainor, *Befriending the Text* (Melbourne: Harper Collins, 1991) p.76.

theorists about mental illness, major questions raised by the contemporary community of mental health professionals were answered (at least to a degree). Questions such as: 'How do we agree on what criteria are *essential* to attract a diagnosis of Schizophrenia?' Or, 'If I travelled from London to New York, Vienna, or Sydney telling you of my melancholia, would I receive the same diagnosis in each place?' And, importantly, would I receive the same treatment?

But, why do we place such emphasis on diagnosis in mental illness? Receiving a diagnosis for any illness or disorder in one's health status is an historical marker: often receiving a diagnosis can be a relief – a point of clarity in a previously confusing terrain; however, just as often, receiving a diagnosis can be a difficult, life-changing event. In some of my own doctoral research with families who had a member diagnosed with schizophrenia I explored, with a significant family member, their experience of what I called *pre and post diagnostic time*. Part of this exploration was to assist in reclaiming the family member's identity as a person and *not* as a diagnosis. However, one of the essential aspects of any diagnosis is that, without one, a person cannot receive treatment for the disorder. It will not surprise anyone here, just drawing on your own experience, that any diagnosis, can be a complicated, and shifting, process. This holds true, very much, in reaching a diagnosis of major mental illness – the codification as set out in *DSM IV* does not replace the health professional's careful listening to the person's story of their experience, skilled observation, and close involvement of family.

However, when codifications do exclude the personal story, they also exclude the personal experience: an experience of promise as well as pain. In major mental illness, the psychic or soul pain, that I mentioned earlier, is not confined just to the person in a family who is diagnosed with mental illness but is also felt deeply, and pervasively, by those bonded by blood, or contract, to the person. Let me just proffer the following example of symptoms being brought to life in the human flesh of poetry. On the one hand, the 'Characteristic Symptoms' for a diagnosis of schizophrenia in *DSM-IV* are as follows: One must have 'Two (or more) of the following, each present for a significant portion of time during a 1-month period.

- Delusions
- Hallucinations
- Disorganized speech (e.g. frequent derailment of incoherence)
- Grossly disorganized or catatonic behaviour
- Negative symptoms: that is, affective flattening, alogia, or avolition (*DSM-IV*, p. 285)'.

But, on the other hand, symptoms are always embodied – as is psychic, or soul, pain. Anne Deveson's daughter, Georgia, wrote of her psychic pain when she was fifteen years old and her beloved brother, Jonathan, was eighteen. Jonathan was diagnosed with schizophrenia. The poem is not directly about Jonathan but about how one's way of life may never be the same, again, in post-diagnostic time – the poem is entitled simply, 'Martin'. Anne Deveson included the poem in her book *Tell Me Who I Am* (pp.58-59) and prefaced it with the following, and I quote, 'Georgia said, "One of the saddest things is when you come to accept it all as normal", and then she wrote a poem about one of them. She was fifteen.' Georgia's poem is as follows:

> I smelt him before I saw him,
> Stale sweat and smoke
> Invading every crevice and corner of the house,
> And I cringed
> Because I knew he was another one:
> Eighteen or nineteen, no home,
> No job, no future, and so much time
> In which to do so little.
> He would be around for a month, maybe more,
> At any time, the knock on the door
> Will make our stomachs sink just slightly
> As we get up and show him in.
> Or, more often, make excuses,
> Jonathan's out, he's sleeping, I'm sorry,
> Come back soon,
> Carefully arranged smile and the door slams shut.
>
> But it's too late,
> He's filtered through the house anyway,

Just little reminders here and there;
A smell, a cigarette butt, a few words,
And no matter how hard we try
We can't wipe out his existence,
Because he's a person,
And when he gradually fades into oblivion
There will be another to take his place;
And another.....

Georgia's poem places human flesh around the codified diagnostic criteria of schizophrenia: her psychic pain is palpable and her loss of what was 'normal' reaches out to the reader as both recent and raw.

Let me just pause there, for a minute. I began with the broad notion that language is the pervasive connecting link between 'Religion, Poetry and Mental Illness'. In presenting two major codifications of language: that of the Judaeo-Christian religion and that of major mental illness from a, mainly, Western perspective, I proposed that what can be lost, in the process of codification, is the personal story – which is, always, a story of both pain and of promise. I presented Georgia Blain's poem as a first step in capturing the symptoms of major mental illness in living, breathing flesh. But I now propose that there is genre of poetry that can be a conduit for retrieving personal stories despite codification of language.

My belief is that this genre of poetry combines, overtly, the language of religion and the language of psychic pain; and, thus, breaks the codification to permit the personal story to emerge. This genre is not just about religion and not just about poetry but addresses, also, the sense of seeking for the deep self and yearning for the Divine Other. This yearning is a part of a universal sense of loss, an existential loneliness which seeks for wholeness: Dante, of course, was a master of this genre.

Judith Wright once likened the poet to a self-acting kaleidoscope arranging, and rearranging, bright scraps of meaning into different shapes and patterns. The two poems I have chosen tonight which I believe can, and do, 'break the code' of both the official Judeo-Christian scriptural story and of the contemporary

codification of mental distress and mental illness present not, simply, 'bright scraps of meaning', to which Judith Wright referred, but dark scraps of meaning as well. The poets take these bright and dark 'scraps of meaning' and intertwine them in such a way that the reader enters a new landscape from the old: perhaps, one could say, enters a 'decoded world'.

The first poem, with the title 'Covenant 3' is by one of Australia's distinguished poets, Peter Steele. Steele ranges over a wide canvas; this is a relatively short poem from his collection *Marching on Paradise*.[9]

Covenant 3

After the long blockades, the fallen statues, after the lost
Memorials to pledges sworn and broken,
After the lingering visions, lifted in waves and torn to rags
On the flat, salt and lethal beach of the heart,
After the eye is darkened, the mouth is robbed of any song
And stays like a cave hollowed in the head,
After the stream of life has broadened out to a plain of death,
A voice is heard singing in the desert.

Father, I did not think to find you, tramping across the sand,
Bringing a word when all the world could say
Was bitter wisdom, stilling the lilt of the blood with a rumour of bleeding.
Father, I watch the light of your countenance
Hold steady in the blur of the storm, the choke and check of grains,
Commanding not consuming, all it touches:
O watch for a lean form, limping out of the waste of the world,
And guide me to the waters of your promise.

Then I shall praise you as my blinded eyes, healed in your darkness,

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[9] Peter Steele, 'Covenant 3', *Marching on Paradise* (Sydney: Longman Cheshire, 1984) p.5

Grow live again within, seeing their dreams
Take flesh beneath your finger, the splintered *branch
break into bud,*
The blocked fountain pluming up to heaven,
And the bones of many, dead on their feet, quicken at your
gift.
Father, tall one, lead us by night and by day,
Our mouths sweetened with praise, our steps out of the
habit of stumbling,
Our bodies captivated into dance.

Colette Rayment, in her comprehensive and scholarly analytic
commentary on the writings of Peter Steele, argues persuasively
that 'Radiance' is a central pattern in Steele's work. Radiance,
Rayment states, includes 'rays, radiations, shafts and visionary
perception.'[10] In 'Covenant 3', my sense is that Steele breaks the
codification of both the language of religion and, also, that of
diagnosis and offers shafts of illumination using the language of
both.

The title of Steele's poem, 'Covenant 3', immediately signals the
language of religion in the word 'Covenant' while '3' signals,
among other things, that the poem has two predecessors in the
collection and, also, that the poem builds, in rhythm and grace,
over three stanzas. Each stanza sets out a mini-landscape of
mosaics, each complete in itself but connecting with the
following stanza by the last line; the poem also takes a definite
turn on the last line of the first and second stanzas. The first
stanza is a mosaic of mental distress, a mosaic of psychic and soul
pain. This stanza is laced with words which are familiar in the
vocabulary of religion and of mental distress; the following are
some examples: 'long blockades', 'fallen statues', 'lost/
Memorials', 'pledges sworn and broken', 'lingering visions'
which are 'torn to rags on the flat, salt and lethal beach of the
heart', 'cave', 'stream of life' and 'plain of death'. With salutes
to, among others, Dante, Auden and Yeats, Steele is
uncompromising in setting out the reality of the psychic, or soul,
pain: a pain which is not an ethereal experience, but an embodied
one. Steele is just as uncompromising in proffering solace for that

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[10] Colette Rayment, *The Shapes of Glory: The Writings of Peter Steele,*
(Melbourne: Spectrum, 2000) p.8.

pain. The poem turns on the last line of the first stanza with the first raying of light in the clear note of hope: 'A voice is heard singing in the desert' to the second stanza – a mosaic of possibility of both light and darkness for Steele has a deep respect for both aspects of the human experience.

At the beginning of the second stanza, the divine is recognized as present and called by the Jesus-name for God: 'Father' who is 'Bringing a word' against the residue of pain: the world's 'bitter wisdom, stilling the lilt of the blood with a rumour of bleeding'. The second stanza holds fast against the pain while the palliation of pain begins, and takes firm hold in the last line with the request: 'And guide me to the waters of your promise'.

The third stanza is a mosaic of light, radiating with the miraculous: of pain relieved, of light overcoming darkness, and of healing and restoration: 'healed in your darkness', 'grow live again within', 'dreams' which 'Take flesh beneath your finger, the splintered branch break into bud,/ The blocked fountain pluming up to heaven,/ And the bones of many, dead on their feet, quicken at our gift'. Finally, the pain is solaced with 'Our bodies captivated into dance'.

The second poem is by the American poet Richard Wilbur, to whom I referred earlier in this lecture. Wilbur and Steele have much in common as poets, not least that they both enjoy writing about poetry and art as well as using the language of religion as conduit for their poetry and as a means of sustaining the human condition. While there are many commentaries on Wilbur's poetry, what I have found attractive, over the years, is his ability to weave together the spiritual and the secular. The lines that follow are from 'Advice to a Prophet':[11]

> If you told us so, that the white-tailed deer will slip
> Into perfect shade, grown perfectly shy,
> The lark avoid the reaches of our eye,
> The jack-pine lose its knuckled grip

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[11] Richard Wilbur, 'Advice to a Prophet', *New and Collected Poems* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), pp 182-183.

On the cold ledge, and every torrent burn
As Xanthus once, its gliding trout
Stunned in a twinkling. What should we be without
The dolphin's arc, the dove's return,

These things in which we have seen ourselves and spoken?
Ask us, prophet, how we shall call
Our natures forth when that live tongue is all
Dispelled, that glass obscured or broken

In which we have said the rose of our love and the clean
Horse of our courage, in which beheld
The singing locust of the soul unshelled,
And all we mean or wish to mean.

Ask us, ask us whether with the worldless rose
Our hearts shall come demanding
Whether there shall be lofty or long standing
When the bronze annals of the oak-tree close.

Like 'Covenant 3', 'Advice to a Prophet' clearly signals, in its title, the company it intends to keep: that of the language of religion. But, in contrast to 'Covenant 3', where the covenant was between an individual voice and the divine as Father, the collective voice of this nine stanza poem sets out to do the unusual: to give, rather than take advice, from a prophet. The tone is largely imperative – as is appropriate for the giver of advice (even to a prophet) but moves from the negative imperatives of pain in the beginning stanzas through a desire for belief, which leads to the central question of the poem, and then to a yearning for personal identity and the integrity of fullness of life – 'And all we mean or wish to mean'. Through all these moves, Wilbur stitches together spiritual and secular images – both contemporary and classical – with the skill of a plastic surgeon. For example, in the second stanza, Wilbur's 'our slow unreckoning hearts will be left behind' mirrors, almost exactly, the 'hardening of hearts' referred to in several places in the Hebrew scripture but, particularly, in Psalm 94: 'Harden not your hearts, as at Meribah….when your fathers put me to the test/ When they tried me though they saw my work'.

The first stanza sets the scene of the mental distress – the secular city and the 'mad-eyed' prophet 'begging us/ In God's name to have self pity'. The second, third and fourth begin with an imperative: stanza two and three start with a negative, an almost belligerent, defensive, connotation: 'Spare us all word of the weapons'; 'Nor shall you scare us with talk of the death of the race'. While, the next stanza, stanza four, sees the first hint of a movement from pain to the desire for change and begins with a wistful, yearning note: 'Speak of the world's own change'.

Stanza four ends with the desire for belief: 'We could believe,/ If you told us so' and stanzas six and seven move to what I believe is the central question of the poem – the finely poised balance of becoming all we are able to be, of being authoritative about our own experience, of tapping the healing within us: 'What should we be without/ The dolphin's arc, the dove's return,/ These things in which we have seen ourselves and spoken?'

'The dolphin's arc' and 'The dove's return' are such finely wrought images of beauty and hope and both are ancient. The authoritative note of healing pervades the imperatives of the last stanzas: 'Ask us prophet, how we shall call/ Our natures forth'; 'Ask us, ask us whether with the worldless rose our hearts will come'.

The attraction of both poems is not simply the language but also the superficial and deep rhythms which pulsate through the poems – much as our blood pulsates through our brain – literally giving us 'food for thought'. For poetry to be a panacea for psychic or soul pain, I believe the poems must be read aloud. When this is done, it is my contention that, just as rhyme supports rhythm, and rhythm supports language, the timbre of the human voice supporting both language and rhythm is the kernel of the solace which poetry proffers to psychic or soul pain.

To conclude, I have chosen a short poem by Oodgeroo of the tribe Noonuccal. Of her many fine and challenging poems Oodgeroo Noonuccal, in this poem called 'Dawn Wail for the Dead' whispers, from the Dreamtime, 'Sighs too deep for tears'. She presents the bright and dark pieces that, intertwined, reflect the

palliation of loss of the dead by maintaining a balance: a balance between the dark and light, between the known and the unknown, between 'other-time' and 'now', between the Eucharist of 're-membering' and being 're-membered' and the alienation of 'forgetting' or 'being forgotten'.

> Dawn Wail for the Dead
> Dim light of daybreak now
> Faintly over the sleeping camp.
> First thing every dawn
> Remember the dead, cry for them.
> Softly at first her wail begins.
> One by one as they wake and hear
> Join in the cry, and the whole camp
> Wails for the dead, the poor dead
> Gone from here to the Dark Place:
> They are remembered.
> Then it is over, life now,
> Fires lit, laughter now,
> And a new day calling.[12]

Indeed, *a new day calling.*

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[12] Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal , 'Dawn Wail for the Dead', *Oxford Book of Australian Women's Verse,* Ed: S.Lever (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.104.