

Margaret Cameron

What Gulliver Walks Here? ¹



I will repeat myself. I will not be consistent. I will work with the principles of *nearness and proximity* bending towards a returning sense. I will blur, half shut my eyes to listen. Words are stepping stones in the dark, in a landscape where desire makes light and need is a beacon. This land is floating, a mind, a venue, a place where something can occur. I do not know what I want to say but try to speak, reaching for words made of air, words that are inadequate, approximate, close but not close enough. I try to tell, to describe, to inscribe, to transcribe thought and sensation to word, to give thought body with vowels of flesh and consonants of bone.

More than twenty years ago, French philosopher Luce Iri-garay, argued in her book *This Sex Which is Not One* that there

1. Jonathon Swift, *Gulliver's Travels, Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*, London, Benj. Motte, 1726 (Teerink AA edition in collection of The Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley). Gulliver is a traveller who gets washed ashore in Lilliput. The Lilliputians were small people (Swift's implication is that they were small-minded). They pinned him down and traversed him like he was a country. He was a giant.

Margaret Cameron
Photo: Ross Bird

is no symbolic² for woman within language and called for a new feminine syntax. She conjured the immense cultural transformation that needs to take place in order to achieve this. "I am trying to go back through the masculine imaginary, to interpret the way it has reduced us to silence, to muteness or mimicry, and I am attempting, from that starting-point and at the same time, to (re) discover a possible space for the feminine imaginary" (ibid. p.164). I did not read this until 1996 and I clasped it to my heart, raised it and held it as a flag. Of a woman speaking Irigaray says:

She steps ever so slightly aside from herself with a murmur, an exclamation, a whisper, a sentence left unfinished ... When she returns, it is to set off again from elsewhere. From another point of pleasure, or of pain. One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an "other meaning" always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them. For if "she" says something, it is not, it is already no longer, identical with what she means. What she says is never identical with what she means. What she says is never identical with anything, moreover; rather, it is contiguous. It touches (upon).

(ibid. p. 29)

Her words release my tongue. I wonder what I might hear in the gaps, gasps and sighs. In the same year in Berlin, the voice teacher Ida Kellarova took my tongue in her hands and massaged it like any other muscle while I punched through pain and begged with tears for her to stop. The next day my lost voice struggled back with compassion, a spreading grown up tree-like thing with bark. I understood that need causes voice

and that the body must find the necessary strength to deliver this need in sound. In a singing lesson a year later with Linda Wise (The Roy Hart Theatre, France) all the fence-posts of my "civilised" voice were unpinned. I tried, after the class, to say what a wonderful session it had been. What came out was something between a howl, a sneeze and a cheer. It took another hour for me to restore the pins, to tack this voice down, return it to its paddock and to sense. It was thrilling.

I like to think that art makes invisible things visible and that the imagination is an auditorium. Its ceiling is a night sky held up by thought. If this ceiling descends I am depressed, literally. Space is made and held open by perception. It is possible to have a large space (with no stage) and a stage (with no space). *What if thinking is the ability to endure ambiguity?* This thought is so helpful. It is a jack, upping the roof of my mind. It stops me panicking, keeps me going when meanings get thick and when they snap to nothing. It makes space. Thought comforts in a way that nothing else can. It has strength. It holds me because it holds the ceiling from my head. Sometimes I read books as one holds a friend's hand. I walk behind writers stepping as they would step, walking in their shoes, trying to feel my feet as theirs. They become windows to look into and out of, creating views and interiors.

*It is more difficult to tell than to invent.
Inventing is easy...*

Hélène Cixous

The more exactly *we tell* the more space we illumine, the more visible things become. A telling that has *fidelity* - that comes from its *origin* - is original. In performance we write

2. Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* 1988, Routledge, London, p. 37, describes "the symbolic [as] the junction of body, psyche, and language where the descriptive fields of psycho-analysis and linguistics (or semiotics) meet..."

and hold shape, containers for space. It is a perceptual holding. Working with American choreographer, dancer and writer Deborah Hay is a radical process in understanding perceptual practice. After a performance she said to me in a broad American accent "Margaret... don't... leak!!" This wonderful direction baffled and entranced me. Years later I say to myself... *Margaret... don't leak!* It helps me to continue to hold... to hold the container I am describing... to simultaneously *be* and *hold* - to behold.

*We are not what we are,
but marked by a region that is seen
only because we mark what we know
and see then what we know not that makes us.*
Knowledge and Melancholy

Recently my son had an accident and, on the roof of the car, he experienced a "very small" space, but in it, he said he had time to make a choice. He was talking of the space between perception and action. According to Feldenkrais if this space can be exactly articulated there is a fraction of a second to re-route, to change and go somewhere you do not usually go. He was not hurt but my car was and he made an assessment: he felt quite calm but he thought I would be less angry if he... (so he did) went into shock. A different response, describing more exactly its source, its origin (calmness for instance) would have been confronting but also original. Perhaps he invented his distress to appease me and to defend himself rather than tell his experience exactly.

But how exactly can we *tell* when our poor words are fossils, colonised artefacts of what they once were or could be? Like the home of lost things could words, if we listen, sound of an absence as the shell remembers its sea? *Listen* in the *silent* moment; these words are anagrams (*listen* and *silent*).
What a feminine syntax might be is not simple

or easy to state... That syntax might also be heard, if we don't plug our ears with meaning...

Luce Irigaray

What if we let words advance in faith into an unknown, footfalls in the dark in a continuous now with only a prayer for ground? Words are shapes that respond to need, containers that hold what we give; they carry need. Sometimes they are hard to hold. They insist on courage because they need presence - the speakers' hand in the air beneath them as they float, entering and exiting with breath. They can be congruent, say what they do and do what they say? *Be* and *hold*. Yes *behold* is a *poignant* word, and *poignant* is to the point. Forgive me I speak only in English.

In 2003 I stand in the wings of my own work - an image I have dreamt. The piece is called *Knowledge and Melancholy*. On the wall of the theatre is this drawing by Alison Kelly:

In my coat, my father's daughter, I listen to my own voice.



*She began in a simpler place,
kicking concrete on the way to school
Now her head is fallen,*

*her eyes are blind and her body split
in this Gethsemane,
she speaks to no one.*

*She is unsimple,
knitted with tension.
Her skeleton is hurting
locked in this cupboard of pressed flowers.
Her skeleton is twisting away,
from everything that is light
already dead, it wants more death.*

*Who has put her here?
Where is her mother?
Who could be her lover?
She smells of nothing.
She has no power in this secreted place.
Who would not have eyes like hers?
She sees nothing, nothing, from those holes*

I say what I will do and do it.

*An actress enters the stage - as if it were the
deck of a sinking ship - to the soundtrack of
Raging Bull (Cavalleria Rusticana by
Mascagni). She is fighting invisibles. In an
effort against gravity, lurching and reeling,
more from fatigue than from alcohol she crosses
a long diagonal to a simple table with chair.*

I enter the act with loyalty and disinterest³ -
like the like ends of a magnet these words
that cannot be put together make my stage,
a perceptual trick to cause space.

*Look at the sky... it is so high today...
I will try the opposite
Look at the floor... it is so high today...
That made a bit of... space!*
Knowledge and Melancholy

This what if inverts the sky and it becomes a

stage, an inland space, a sea where meaning
can float as a cork on an ocean.

The weekend before coming to the Festival
where I am to perform (Magdalena Australia,
Brisbane, Australia. April 2003) my (new)
car had a flat tyre. I could have changed it
myself but because I belong to a Roadside
Assistance Club and had paid for *Extra-Care*
(the pun is useful) I preferred to wait for
help. Sitting at the steering wheel I began
the rehearsal I had been avoiding (to
re-hear) my work. It begins:

*The elephant said to the mouse:
"You're very small".
The mouse said to the elephant:
"I have been sick".
Do not expect me to be cheerful.
I am... fighting for my life.
There are no words
to describe loss of this dimension.
Even the mouse carries a great sorrow,
though his small voice
would never pretend it was the elephant's pain.
And could the elephant,
in his bigness, imagine how
a tiny pain could burden
an uncomplaining creature?
He imagines lowliness is a lack.
He sees the mouse as improbably small
and remarks on the essential
and elemental bearing
of a small creature.
Something a refined mind would understand
is not a topic of conversation.
The heroism of certain small individuals
should never be languaged by voyeurs.
The elephant has no right of passage here.
The mouse - perfectly bounded -
describes "his why":
the simple beauty of a modest point of view:*

3. Reference to the work of Deborah Hay, American choreographer, dancer and writer, *My Body the Buddhist*, 1998, Wesleyan University Press.

I miss love, I miss love.

Knowledge and Melancholy

I continued the text to the end; tears were falling. What happened? It felt as if I heard the work for the first time. Why? It was unusual that I was getting ready to perform to an audience of women. Was this the reason? Had I really heard the work for the first time because I imagined a kind of listening (or holding) that I had not previously imagined? If so who had been my internal audience till now? I was not even aware that I had an internalised audience.

Oh Elephant! What Gulliver captures space and silence making me deaf? Who is the landscape? The space is not empty; an empty space is created. I am my first witness I say over and over to myself. How could it be that, for the most part, I cannot hear myself in my own work? I stumble on my words, shocked, surprised, heart-broken by loss and at the same time showered with gifts of return. When I do hear myself it is across a great expanse of time. The words return as homes, the places where I curled in need, with desire, the places where I held myself. I listen to the absence to hear.

I will throw a pebble into the same question over and over to advance, return, break off, begin again from elsewhere, *touch upon*... "If only your ears were not so formless, so clogged with meaning(s) that they are closed to what does not in some way echo the already heard." (Irigaray 1985, p.113)

And again... "We must learn to float as words do, without roots." (Anaïs Nin) I love this phrase, have held it, dog-eared, in my pocket, sought it out again and again, turned it like a stone. At nineteen I stole (book by book) all of Anaïs Nin's diaries from a bookshop I used as a library since I returned them one by one after I had read them. She made me see words as kites. I like that the phrase is imperative, that I am included in it. I am

with Anaïs. She bosses me like a sister. I have no idea what it really means and so it allows me to return.

Tell me what books, what exact words have given you courage. These words remind us that it is all right to care, to be rapturous, to swirl, to grieve meaning. I read for courage, hold to the shiny bits, hard and indestructible like precious stones that survive doubt, wells that remain fresh.

To be without the slightest subject for a book [insert performance for book], the slightest idea for a book, is to find yourself, once again, before a book...

Marguerite Duras

When Marguerite Duras (*I whisper*) speaks, the page listens. "One does not find solitude," she says, "one creates it." Silence is also created. Her words step on quiet paper, untouched as a nape, tender place that longest remembers its birth. It waits, hears her prints, her pen, her breath... but rather than pin (me) down she blows on the nape of meaning until it floats.

To myself...

When the flicker of an unknown hope, that shivers, your need unfurls, bend toward its search, a magnetic advance across the dunes, against the drying wind of all that is known.

Speak, [touch upon] something indelible, inscribed with breath, printed in the eye of the mind, a place where silence collects, where words hover until pinned in air, where meaning rushes to its outline, where nothing is known, where there is congruence. Speak, [touch upon] something literal, a dormant thing encased in memory, a shape spoken, a thought so silent,

*so made of nothing
that it roars with absence.*

I might hear something that I have not actually said if I accept that content is not within narrative but within syntax. Articulation inscribes in space a continuously shifting syntax, that briefly holds meaning and can be observed not owned, not pinned.

*Words must need to be broken into parts
and parts of parts
to gain again their ability to speak.
They are poor bones,
easily preyed upon
by every narrative invention...*

Knowledge and Melancholy

Oh Mouse! From another point of view, Gulliver is a balloon of meanings, a floating continent and Mouse (who has been sick) insists on knowing, on pinning things down.

*And poor Gulliver says:
When I lay down
your voice entered
with fingers
that turned kidney, liver and lung
you made me shiver
as if I were a cadaver
pinned alive
so bloodless were you
you needed my body
for your adventures
you traversed me with words.*

Endure the ambiguity... Words are tools. They do things. In the dark they advance, making shape that holds thought that holds the roof of the auditorium. We can make shape. When I make a performance I must have something *to do*. Shape is possible. Meaning is best left floating. Shape is best inscribed with exactness - *tell it exactly and don't leak!*

If we do not *tell*, things lose visibility. We can adapt to absence and lose need itself, the need, for instance, to feel deeply. Feeling carves out rivers that bring tears to a dead interior, especially one numb with privilege. We must tell with an eagle's eye. Tell beauty. Tell grief. Tell horror day and night. I dig at my need, deepening its hunger, fearing I will lose the space to see and sense as the ceiling of thinking descends. I must work. I must grieve what I don't understand because loss passed unnoticed steals incrementally. I become stupid as, bit-by-bit, meaning withers and never grieving [not telling], never suffering [not telling] until I bear no resemblance to a human being, until I have no humanity, until I have grown so big in my shrunken mind that I am unable to see another point of view.

*I remember the print
a tiny exotic on white sand
the translucent crab, the track of its claw
a sliver of weed at ebb point in sucking sand
the imprint of an absent thing
as a sigh marks its loss... oh!*

In a dictionary of old meanings, "exquisite" is described as "minute query" - a little question - (a Lilliputian?). We must unpin our knowing, break it into parts and parts of parts, ask minute questions to let meaning float... that I may read what I do not know in that viscosity of being before word and language. The answers are not active. The questions undo, dig at the monolith of my knowledge. Archimedes stood on his chair thinking his thinking on and on and on... never stopping to "know".

*Of words born of need:
in parts and in parts of parts,
at one and the same time, a priori and after,
embedded within the ancient, erotic
curve of the symbolic, of the imaginary,
of that which forms us, deep beneath the covers*

*our work enunciates thought.
we become shape but we are followers of air...*

I hear something across the skin-thin water,
the mineral smell of hot weed, the daub,
daub, daub, of land... Poomph!



Margaret Cameron Photo: Ross Bird

More exactly I edge the words from under cover, pull a pin. My stomach hollows out, I mean *in*. I run for cover, peer out a bit to see if anyone saw *it*, or woke *it* or felt *it*. The monolith is big. The earth will move.

Bibliography

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MARGARET CAMERON (Australia) is a writer, performer and pedagogue. Her work is situated somewhere between performance art and theatre and has been produced in Australia, Austria, Germany and the USA. Her texts include: *Things Calypso Wanted to Say!*, *The Mind's a Marvellous Thing*, *Knowledge and Melancholy* and *Bang! A Critical Fiction!* In 1998 she received the Gloria Dawn and Gloria Payten Travelling Fellowship and the Eva Czajor Memorial Award for Female Directors.