

Exercise 9

LEAR

No, no, no, no. Come's let's away to prison;  
we two alone will sing like birds i'the cage.  
When thou dost ask me blessing I'll kneel down  
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too—  
Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out—  
And take upon's the mystery of things  
As if we were God's spies.

(5.3.8–17)

*Ten movement pieces for ten lines of Lear:*

1. Two dancers inhabit a space large enough only for themselves as if a third dancer were present.
2. The dancer laughs silently for as long as possible without taking a breath. The piece ends immediately before the breath.
3. Without cessation of movement, the dancer does not have a body for the duration of the piece.
4. Two dancers take turns attempting but not succeeding to swallow. This is called asking forgiveness.
5. The dancer gossips for ten minutes. There is, as in all of these pieces except otherwise noted, no speaking, facial expression, or pantomime.
6. Two dancers, who are not singers, stand back to back and sing wordlessly and at the same time until each has had to breathe ten times. The dancers start and stop at the same time.
7. An exercise in kneeling down. The dancer distinguishes kneeling from kneeling down. The dance stops when the distinction is clear.
8. There are not two dancers, but there are two of God's spies.
9. For twenty-four hours, two dancers remain inside an unfurnished cage (5x5). They are free within these confines (speaking, facial expression, and pantomime are permitted).

10. The theater is crowded. The dancer clasps the hands of each member of the audience.

### Commentary

These movement exercises are not meant to be flippant: they should be taken seriously but lightly (a pair of words usually, though not definitionally, antithetical). I was thinking of Judson dance choreography (exploration of isolated movements); of Tehching Hsieh's performance art (confinement and extremity); and above all of La Monte Young's *Piano Pieces for David Tudor* (e.g., No. 3: "most of them / were very old grasshoppers") and *Compositions 1960* (e.g., No. 10: "Draw a straight line and follow it"; No. 5, fittingly, has a butterfly dictate the parameters).

This speech of Lear's, addressed to Cordelia, is a fantasia on complex uses of language and modes of communication. Beginning in speechless negation, it runs through a variety of speech acts—song, propitiation, apology, prayer, narration/recitation, jest, gossip—before wandering, as if by accident, into an extra-verbal realm governed by haptic contact ("take upon's the mystery of things") and revelation-as-espionage. Lear's language throughout the play is frequently at or beyond the point of breakage, fired in the crucibles of senility, madness, family betrayal, reduced to "base life" (2.2.404, half-foreshadowing Agamben). The old king is the embodiment of "late style," but at least in the interval between reconciliation with Cordelia and her death, he achieves something like a late late style. Tenderness, intermittently but distinctively one of Lear's key emotional registers, bests rage to become preeminent. The scale of life returns to human activity: man is once more the measure of man. Knowledge of holy mysteries comes not from storms and heaths but from petty court intrigue.

Mark Johnson suggests that language and other forms of sophisticated symbolization exist on a gradient with the body's movement through the world. Since Lear's seamless, tempered doubly-late style in this speech appears to reside so comfortably in the linguistic sphere, I was curious where the kinetic might be found. In their harshness my prescribed movements probably undo Lear's fluidity or softness. But his speech is an imagined escape from conditions of violence: imprisonment, restriction of movement, engenders it. Equally, there is a possibility that the repetition of brutal movement can acquire an ease bordering on gentleness. My intention is that these movement pieces bring out something of the reciprocal relationships between gentleness and violence, between courtly language and stark movement.