

John Schulz
Week 10 Exercise: *King Lear*

Original (4.1.16-26):

Gloucester:

Away, get thee away; good friend, be gone.
Thy comforts can do me no good at all,
Thee they may hurt.

Old Man:

Alack sir, you cannot see your way.

Gloucester:

I have no way, and therefore want no eyes:
I stumbled when I saw. Full oft 'tis seen
Our means secure us and our mere defects
Prove our commodities. O dear son Edgar,
The food of thy abused father's wrath,
Might I but live to see thee in my touch,
I'd say I had eyes again.

Choreography:

1. Gloucester, our dancer, should stumble backwards to come to a seated position on the floor with his arms at his side and his legs fully extended.
2. Gloucester should draw his knees up to his chest slowly.
3. Gloucester should wrap his arms around his drawn up knees in an embrace.
4. Gloucester should lower his head.
5. Gloucester should hold this position for about 10 seconds (or long enough to signify a marked pause).
6. Gloucester should slowly release his embrace and remove his arms from around his knees to let them fall back to his sides.
7. Gloucester should then slowly let his legs revert to their extended position.
8. Gloucester should, finally, slowly raise his head.

Commentary:

My initial interest in the original passage from 4.1.16-26 derives from the way in which meaning shifts from a literal to a more figurative and moral dimension. Gloucester turns away the Old Man who offers him help for pragmatic reasons, were this man seen with him (a condemned man) he could come to some harm. Equally pragmatic, the Old Man protests that Gloucester cannot see having been recently blinded. It is here, however, that Gloucester moves the crisis of his blindness beyond the simple question of direction—the question here being how can you progress if you cannot see the way? For him, the “way” forward is an illusory impasse, “I have no way,” he says, “having stumbled when I saw” (4.1.20-21). Now the literal merges with the metaphorical, Gloucester muses on the irony that with the world in plain sight for him he still falsely judged his son Edgar because of the way matters, aided and abetted of course by his other son Edmund, appeared to him. Thus, a new question implicitly arises: what good is sight to guide us if it itself blinds us to the truth? It is this implicit question, I think, that gives such power to Gloucester’s concluding lines, which in one respect return to a certain pragmatism; without his eyes Gloucester must perceive by touch. The other far more powerful sense of these lines, though, is that Gloucester realizes that by touching Edgar he can once again name his “dear son” and therefore “say” he has sight. Visual perception ultimately gives itself over to embodied perception and this latter mode of experience has a better, and indeed deeper, claim to knowledge and truth.

Gloucester’s turn to an embodied approach to the world resembles Mark Johnson’s interest in the idea of a human “body schema,” which he introduces in his book *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (2007). Johnson theorizes, following the work of Shaun Gallagher, that “it is our body schema that hides from our view, even while it is what makes possible our perception, bodily movement, and kinesthetic sensibility” (4.) Our “body schema” is essentially the physical machinery working throughout our body that makes seemingly external experience possible and perceivable to us. Crucially, Johnson explains, “it is only when a breakdown occurs in our body schema, such as through traumatic bodily injury...that we even become aware that we have a body schema” (4). It hardly bears saying that Gloucester’s sudden and violent loss of sight seems to initiate just such a coming-into-awareness of his own body schema. In his desire to know his son through touch and speak his recognition, he cannily acknowledges the importance of the body in constructing meaning and knowing; “seeing” his son rightly does not occur by way of Edgar’s image coming to him from outside, but by feeling his presence in the sensation of him and feeling that recognition declare itself as the sensation synesthetically travels from touch to sound via vocalization.

In my choreography I have aimed to capture Gloucester’s realization of his own “body schema,” to use Johnson’s convenient terminology. I play off Gloucester’s

use of the word “stumble” used to describe his errant judgment of Edgar in order to have him “stumble,” as I invoke the word in my choreography, back into his body. I want to emphasize the way Gloucester comes to know experience anew through embodied feeling and so I have him withdraw his legs from an extended position into his chest, wrap his arms around his knees, and bow his head toward his knees so as to feel each of these disparate parts of his body in union with each other. This is all paced slowly and sequentially so as to draw attention to the body’s “schema,” its reliance on each part in its manufacturing of meaning. When Gloucester reverses this process of bodily retraction, he does so in the same slow and sequential manner so that when he does finally raise his head again as if to see it is implied that this renewed sense of “sight” is contingent on all the bodily motions that have preceded it.

In the movement it charts my choreography is relatively simple. And yet, I hope for it to speak to the more complex way in which Gloucester meditates on perception and its embodied nature. Further, I hope for it to speak to the poignant appeals of an embodied approach to experience in *King Lear* at large. These are appeals that may play no small part in the negotiation of tragedy in the play. As with Gloucester’s security in his “means” that spur on his miscalculation of Edgar, it is not for nothing that the inimical “ways” chosen by Regan and Goneril are externally guided by a map of Lear’s Kingdom whose promised lands structure their love of their father. Nor is it for nothing that Cordelia’s refusal to lavish her father with praise, a refusal to love him for what he can give to her in land, derives from a belief that love and duty must dwell within one’s body: “I cannot,” she says, “heave my heart into my mouth” (1.191-92).