

King Lear (III. 2. 1-9)

Lear

Blow winds and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world!
Crack nature's moulds, an germens spill at once,
That make ingrateful man!

Choreography (No Lines)

The stage is empty. Footsteps can be heard. Lights turn on. The storm is dancing in the middle, facing away from the audience. Its head is kept down. Its movements are simple. While nodding its head, the storm limb stretches out one limb a time, as if jerking away from the torso. The actions are large. The order of the limbs forms a cycle. For example, we might have the following: LL RA LL RA RL LA RL LA.¹ The sound of its feet is unusually loud. Maybe it is even wearing tap shoes.

Lear peers from the left side of the stage, his head sticking out. He squints his eyes at the storm and takes five or six steps. He walks triumphantly, but he stumbles over a box and falls. He gets up as if nothing has happened and dusts his knees. He takes a few more steps and stands waiting to be admired, hands on his waist. His eyes are closed, his face beaming. All the while, the storm is jerking.

Lear opens his eyes as if awakened violently and stares at the storm and towards the audience. He repeats this gesture, mouth gaping. He eventually snarls and begins to stomp his foot on the ground. The storm keeps dancing. He stomps louder and turns his head between the storm and his stomping feet.

Lear walks angrily towards the storm. his arms swinging in front of him. He sticks his face as close to the dancing storm as possible. He retains his stance for a few seconds.

Lear steps away and begins to observe the storm as it dances. He slowly begins to mimic the gestures one by one: left arm-right leg-right arm-right leg. But his movements are clumsy. And Lear struggles to keep-up. Eventually, Lear stomps and throws his arms up in frustration.

He raises his head and opens his eyes widely. He looks like he has an idea. Lear runs to the box and sets it up behind the storm. Lear gets on the box, using it as a pedestal and moves behind the storm. He hovers his hand around its shoulders. Lear then move his arms around the storm's limbs as if he were a puppeteer. Lear grins.

For about thirty seconds, Lear's movement matches that of the storm's. But the storm changes its routine to, say, RL RA RA RL LA LL LL LA. One of the storm's jerking arms slaps Lear's hovering hand away.

Lear is frustrated again, but he moves again according to the storm's movements. The same process repeats. The storm slaps him away, and Lear adapts. The time it takes Lear to adapt, however, gets shorter and shorter. Lear's surprise can soon only be seen on his face.

The storm slaps him away one last time and turns around. It is the Fool. The scene proceeds.

¹ Left Leg: Left Leg, RL: Right Leg, RA: Right Arm, LA: Left Arm

The storm hangs over a significant part of the play, and characters are speaking in various relations to it—against it, in spite of it, to it, about it, and through it. In the selected scene, I think Lear is adapting many of those modes. Lear tries to master the storm by representing its sonic effects as language but struggles to be heard over it. I imagine him shouting. The two grate against each other to affect an interpersonal conflict. All the while, the storm retains its status as a pervasive natural phenomenon that hypostatizes Lear's anger over the entire realm.

My primary interest in choreographing the scene was to recreate Lear's struggle with the storm on physical terms. The storm is a sound verging on noise that Lear tries to reign in with language. An appropriate counterpart then would be something between spasm and movement. It would distract us from seeing Lear, and he would have to work with and against it to elevate the situation to dance. To that end, I cast the storm as a character in the dance. The storm is to be Lear's rival, one that would vie for our attention and, at times, even blind us to Lear's presence on stage. Attention blindness is to be the analog of being deafened by a storm.

But an application of Mark Johnson's arguments in "Meaning Is More Than Words and Deeper Than Concepts" would have to avoid an exclusively allegorical projection from language to movement. It would have to reimagine the fundamental terms of the scene somatically. This is my excuse and justification for not having movements that correspond specifically, say, to "Rage" or "oak." Instead, the dance tries its best to explicitly display Lear's relationship with the storm that is more latent in text. As it happens, the storm's movements are more or less replaceable with others. It matters less what each of the storm's movement is than that Lear is reacting against them; this is true in the text as well, but the specifics of the choreography are not inevitable decisions, given the aesthetic circumstances of the project, but my inadequacies.

The dance starts out with the storm on stage. Lear appears in the corner, but he has difficulty working with the storm. Even if Lear dances alone, the storm will distract us from him. Feeling threatened, Lear tries to harmonize by mimicking the storm but to little avail. Jerks are difficult to imitate. Even the storm does not fully control where its hands and feet end up. Lear then moves not against or like the storm but around it. Lear grafts his performance around its movements to create the illusion that he is producing the storm, molding it to his will. Now, Lear and the storm seem like they are moving together, codependent on each other for their movements. The storm joins a performance, dancing with Lear. But the harmony is precarious. The storm can change its routine. Lear has to constantly adapt his movements around it, and the occasional mishaps are inevitable. Each time, the performance may fall apart. The codependency between the two is reminiscent of the one between Lear and the Fool.

“More than words” seems expansive, building on existing knowledge but ultimately undisruptive if not benign, but “deeper than concepts” aspires towards a more fundamental reorientation of meaning, one available only through a consideration of the somatic. Johnson gives credit to language, but the binaries, the concepts, in his putative account of disembodied philosophy are described to be shackles to be cast-off, mere limitations. And important distinctions such as self/other (the other mind) go unmentioned, which may be why it remains vague to me what Johnson means by “meaning.” Thinking through the scene as dance excavates a latent relationship in language by explicitly embodying the tension between the physical elements of meaning (sound) and its detractions (noise). It is also easier to see various modes of Lear’s struggle: to be with and against something at the same time. Perhaps that is what it means to use sound for language or meaning. The shift was illuminating—certainly more than words—but I am not sure I reached “deeper than concepts” or what that would mean or entail.