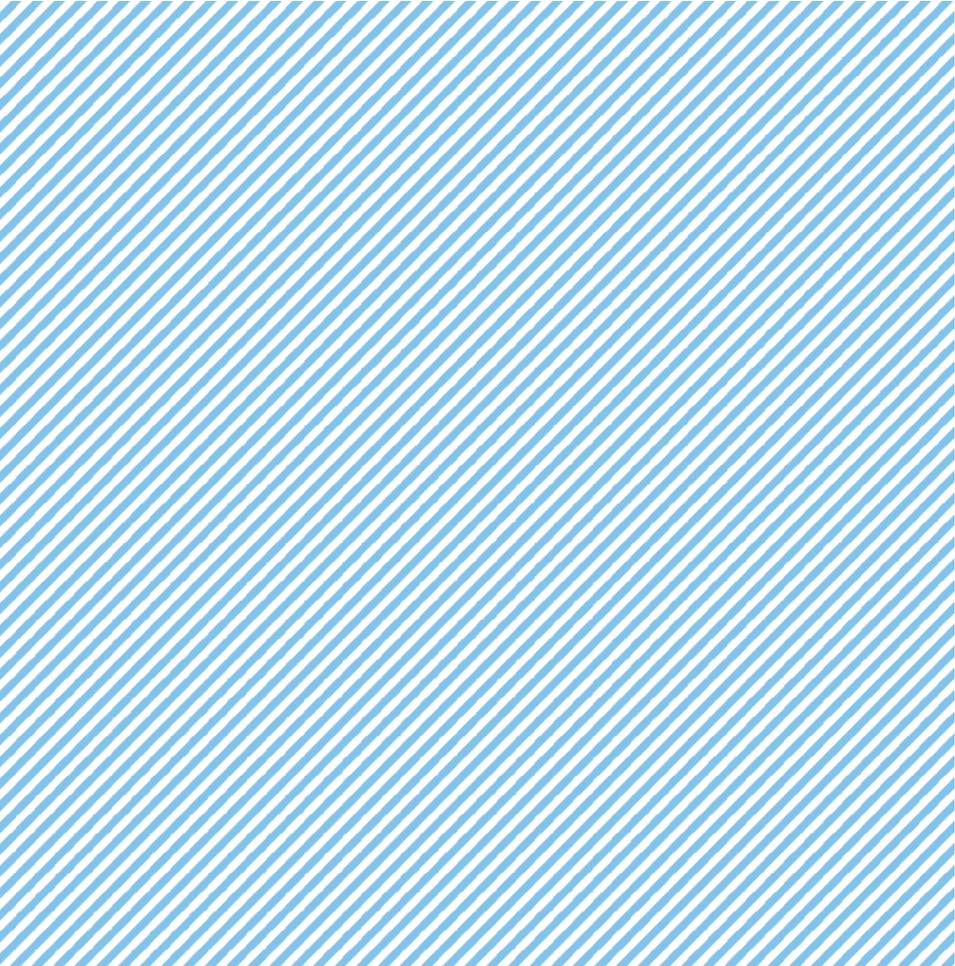


Digressions on Falling: Departing from the work of Henri Michaux



Not knowing what to fear more: touching the bottom or not touching the bottom. If I blank in touch down, then it must be a big fall. In any touch whatsoever the blank evokes a fall too. What is more, falling is the most lawful thing there is, yet it feels unnatural and unforeseen and is experienced as a voiding of law.

Falling has a physiology. Across languages, falling also has a dictionary-worth of words to its name—some of them untranslatable—relating to its different stages and variations: *cadere*, *deciduous*, *case*, *trip*, *drop*, *Ernstfall*, *Zufall*, *befall*, *Einfall*, and so on. Yet is there a logic to falling? A time, a metaphysics, an ethics, an aesthetics? I guess one can only use hyperboles to account for falling, or perhaps this is a place where hyperboles are more appropriate, a rhetorical form of extravagance meeting the extravagance in the experience and form of spatiality proper to falling.

Can one control a fall, and if so, how much so? Is there a skill or technique to a fall? Getting better at falling—like, falling better? *Not* falling and the control over the body that involves are familiar, but to what extent can falling itself be reclaimed from its ordinary accompaniment by convulsive urgency, in theoretical realization, perhaps, of the cartoon character's brief, unconcerned habitation of the falling interval?

Falling is a logic

Let's say, the concept of a falling, a universality in falling, or the essence of falling, as the source, limit and culmination of individual fallings, is a prominent insufficiency of language. For falling to enter a logic and knowing, if it falls into these categories, is to introduce—in its own falling way—distortions and insensible ripples to this form of capture by the universal. Falling can only be a labored and endangered universality, a labored institution. The singular falls into the type, and the type is cracked a little. The tumble of singularities can be addressed by simply stating that there is no one fall, even if everything were to fall. Falling demands the incontrovertible primacy of the "case" over whatever would tend to absorb it, knowing that the *casus*, the chance, is a fall. Falling is a laboring of logic at the hands of the most irrecusable history, its tumbling examples always outliers, always falling short and unequal.

The type of falling corresponds to the fact that one thinks one understands what's meant by a fall, and the crack is what this proposition invites in the sense of a vertigo of exemplarity.



Antony Gormley, DOMAIN XI (FREEFALL), 2000
6 mm square section mild steel bar. 165 x 160 x 80 cm
© The artist. Reproduced with permission.

Falling is a poetic physiology

Everything falls, yet when I fall a particular and dedicated system is engaged in my physiology: the vestibular system that is the “unappreciated” factor of balance, the privileged task “organ” where the sense of a loss of balance is constituted. According to a *New York Times* article by Natalie Angier, a specialist named Dr. Merfeld describes this “organ” by saying, “It’s almost the absence of something rather than the presence.”¹ So, falling would be a sensitive absence, or a lacunary organ being disturbed. Other commentators point out how the vestibular system plays an active role both in self–other distinctions and in self–other connections through empathy. The physiology of the vestibular system is an absence that ensures a singular point of view and the capacity of that point of view to open up to others, whereas its disturbance is the disturbance of the absence that ensures a singular point of view and its normal openings to the others, causing possible breaches of integrity through collocations and misattributions. The capacity of expropriation is affected, without this meaning a being led back to identity.

A horizontal falling sense that is responsible for empathy gets skewed. Some research, we are told, “showed that vestibular self–motion perception (measured on a whole–body motion platform imposing passive motions to the body) was influenced by the observation of videos showing passive whole–body motion of a body,” putting into play the loop between seeing and this elusive sense of interior balance.² Moreover, “this effect was correlated with scores of empathy: subjects that were the most empathic were more influenced by the observation of another body being moved passively.”³ An immediate take away seems to be, “if too empathic, don’t look at anyone or anything dangerously leaning.” The report sums up an ordinary experience of other–sensitive vertigo, not identical with but not entirely unrelated to the warning Ludwig Wittgenstein makes against “playing with the depths of another,” turning it into a much more everyday and literal risk than one realizes.

In disturbance, then, a falling of one’s own is undergone as the falling of others—or alternatively, another’s fall is undergone as one’s own fall, ultimately raising the question whether one’s self really falls at all when one falls. Falling is a natural equivalent for the sentiments of a poet like John Clare, as when he writes “strange scenes mere shadows are to me, / Vague impersonifying things” (“A Flitting”). A useful term exists for this situation of confusion, instanced in falling and vertigo in the place of an other: “syncretic sociability,” adopted by Maurice Merleau–Ponty from the psychologist Henri Wallon. Merleau–Ponty writes, “Syncretism here is the indistinction between me and the

other, a confusion at the core of a situation that is common to us both."⁴ After Wallon's example, which associated this experience of space with a specific developmental stage for the child, Merleau-Ponty illustrated it by describing situations in which "any attitude taken toward the child immediately provokes in him the complementary attitude"⁵ while nevertheless allowing for late adult breakouts of the same, which is the case that interests me here.

A syncretic sociability is a vestibular sociality, a potential community of falling, and vice versa, a community of falling (not always one of gravity, mind you) can only be a form of syncretic sociability: "However, one must not look too much to the top of the pines being blown by strong wind. For if one begins to imagine oneself seated on their apex, in such a balancing act, one could, and even more naturally than if one were to find oneself on a swing (or in an elevator)...due to the strange and superb movement up there, feel oneself carried away."⁶

One thing vestibular sociality implies is simply the possibility of separating a fall from subtending molar, corporeal movement as such, highlighting the possibility that one can feel the fall without (falling) the fall. This in itself is a physiological consequence to the extent that "vestibular sensors function without external references (besides Earth's gravity), i.e., without allocentric or egocentric references, in contrast with the visual and somatosensory coding of motion," amounting to "an absolute body motion" distinct from the relativity of external references.⁷ In other words, physiology presents the possibility of an absolute motion that can be activated without a measure of displacement with regard to external references, illustrating in action what some would call an "intensive" relation. At this juncture, other visceral derangements have also been discussed by writers whose interest in physiology was not professional, but no less penetrating for that, because there must be such a thing as a vestibular imaginary after all, if one takes the word of the anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan, attesting to how variations of the muscular sensibility can bring about "an imaginary universe from which weight and balance have been banished."⁸ As will be seen in more depth in the following, this imaginary has a sui generis proponent in Henri Michaux: "When I eat little, I sense falls in myself [*je sens en moi des chutes*]. Just now, that bottle which was falling, I believed at first that it was me. It wasn't me. I never break. I go through the floor without resistance at the speed of a stone. Soon enough I hit a layer of gneiss or some bone from the Pleistocene, and very solidly, I remain there."⁹ Michaux falls, then, without falling, at the spontaneous prompting of objects, as in the pines above and the bottle here. And he falls through time when he falls.

Falling is a time

What are the privileged forms of temporality open to negotiation under falling? Michaux's vestibular imagination already sets the stakes quite high, claiming that, as much as time can sediment and take the form of earthly material strata, one can fall all the way to other geological ages, the relationship and radical nonsimultaneity thereby established becoming possible only through a form of falling.

Thus, falling is somehow poised to mediate the most discontinuous —since one only falls from a continuity— and the most continuous forms of temporal scansion, along with the different scales involved. The great logical problem of the continuity of discontinuity that engrosses dialecticians is present in nonpropositional form in a fall.

Looking closer, among all the other aspects of this scansion, one of the most interesting is that falling should be the experience of an imminence, or a being-toward-the-impact. A speculative falling, minutely scaled, can apply as much to dancing and walking as the real falls one is used to never being used to. This vertigo of the next step, spread and distributed across the dancer's body was described with a certain fascination by Paul Valéry: "She filches from nature impossible attitudes, even under the very eye of Time! [...] She is divine in the Unstable, offers it as a gift to our regard! [...] We never see her but about to fall."¹⁰ The excited response of the speakers in this dialogue certainly preserves some of the anxieties and rushes of the purported childhood experience of syncretism and introduces a temporal dimension to it closely following the skill exercised in the art of gratuitous prolongation of movements.

The editors of Valéry's notebooks inform their readers that Valéry suffered from vertigo¹¹ and thus became sensitized to this dimension of experience, which is about the twists and torsions of ordinary dimensions, as in the geometrical sense of hyperbolic space, a space curving away from itself. More specifically, in notes of a directly introspective and phenomenological bent, Valéry drew attention to the experience of space in falling and used it to give the sense of space in general a physiological basis in the pylorus, the opening between the stomach and the small intestine, indicating again the way falling becomes the activity of an absence of sorts: "Who would suspect that the stomach and the pylorus are foundations of space? That the relative stillness and overall movements of things are linked to the sensitivity of these organs?"¹² Thus, when Valéry's dancer keeps returning from the brink of falling, she becomes the medium of a vertigo-prone sensibility perceptually linked to this spectacle. In other words, the "sense of liberation"¹³ which may attend spectacles of acrobatics and dance may



Antony Gormley, *STILL FALLING*, 1983
Portland stone. 203 x 50 x 15 cm
Permanent installation, Tout Quarry Sculpture Park, Dorset, England
© The artist. Reproduced with permission.

also be tinged with a sense of a phobic imminence. The indirect distortions in the experience of time for the speakers in Valéry's dialogue are certainly not only intellectual or dependent on a disinterested gaze at the play of forms, but they also have an almost clinical tenor.

The next locus to visit in this examination of falling and time is an extension of a topos of non-simultaneity, a concern that already appeared in Michaux's strange episode of travel through rock layers. This time the main interlocutor is the philosopher and literary critic Maurice Blanchot, who was trying to read signs of the relevance of Surrealism in a time that seemed to deny the very relevance of those signs. In fact, falling has a strong resonance for Surrealism's attempts to alter the relations between desire, dreams, and the real. As Jed Rasula also noted, André Breton's vivid understanding of the depths and strata of dreams regularly emerged in the form of a plea for a dimensional shift or expansion that included falling. In the manifestoes Breton declares "I prefer to fall," anticipating Gaston Bachelard's insightful formulation that "the fall, even before any moral metaphor intervenes, is a constant psychic reality."¹⁴

In his appraisal of Surrealism, Blanchot also drew attention to the centrality of the figure of falling in bringing the marvelous into the ordinary, revisiting Breton's use of an old model of chance attributed to the philosopher and mathematician Antoine Augustine Cournot, in which chance consists of two independent lines of causality intersecting in a given point, a good illustration of that being getting struck by a falling flower pot before one has the opportunity to experience any exquisite vestibular sociality. Blanchot wants to offer another reading of this famous illustration and model, at once undermining and recouping it: "The encounter: what comes without advent, what approaches face on, and nonetheless always by surprise, what requires waiting, and what waiting awaits but does not attain."¹⁵ His intervention aims to disrupt the implicit assumption of the destined arrival at a unitary and shared space and time, which would be the condition of the encounter, be it with an object of desire or an instigator of cheap, accidental dying:

At the point of juncture—a unique point—what comes into relation remains without relation, and the unity that thus comes to the fore is but the surprising manifestation (a manifestation by surprise) of the ununifiable, the simultaneity of what cannot be together; from which we have to conclude, even should this ruin logic, that where the junction takes place it is disjunction that reigns over unitary structure and causes it to shatter.¹⁶

In other words, the junction presents neither the finality of the object of encounter for one's powers and readiness to

meet it—since one was not ready and there was no anterior promise—nor merely mechanically intersecting causal lines—since there is the experience of the ununifiable and an impossible communication. The junction is not an exhaustion of the possibilities of this moment by the past, but the future opening in the convergence between the participants momentarily falling beside or behind themselves.

Falling also involves variations in tempo, accelerations and dilations, of course. People who fall from a great height reportedly experience time in dilation, getting a sense of endlessness in the space of a few metric seconds. Take Chuck Berry, a skydiver, who had a non-voluntary free-falling experience due to a parachute failing to open, a situation discussed by Claudia Hammond in her aptly titled book *Time Warped*. Not unrelated to the physiological underpinnings of falling, this effect might have something to do with “the pulses getting faster,” and thus “time getting slower,” Hammond argues, in the process suggesting a peripheral remedy to the possibility that there may be no separate locus or dedicated organ for timekeeping in human physiology other than a dispersed assembly of proxies—meaning, not an internal clock, but a vestibular sense that works like a dangerous diversion of a nonexistent one.¹⁷

Finally, to return to the context of literature, there is at least one writer who manages to combine a falling behind oneself and a falling time dilation (cf. Hammond about Berry) across two different sketches with around forty years of writerly activity separating them. It is no accident that he is the author responsible for the salvo of vestibular imaginary above. Henri Michaux never stopped thinking about falling.

In 1927, Michaux wrote a short, and self-contained fragment about a character named Benson, who “threw himself from the 62nd floor of Kree Kastel in Broadway”: “Only his body falls. He, Benson, draws back, remains in mid-air opposite the fifty-ninth floor or between the fifty-ninth and sixtieth, and watches the body which descends, descends, completes its descent and lands in pieces. Then slowly, Benson (the soul of Benson) begins to descend, sees his body up close and that it is no longer habitable; he begins to watch the crowd with an air of embarrassment [...]”¹⁸ The delay from fear that separates the soul from the body, which crashes in rag doll style, while the soul floats in an out-of-body experience, taking in the details on the ground and worrying over the inconvenience its body creates, makes for a characteristic instance of Michaux’s early dark humor. Yet that there is something more to it is brought home in another fragment, this time borne out by an instance in his “Meidosems” in *Life in the Folds* [*La Vie dans les plis*] (1951). Meidosems are Michaux’s imaginary species of protoplasmic drifters. They have a built-

in incapacity to be separated from their bodies, and, since they are also Michaux's experimental test case for a sensory economy that foregrounds balance, it is no surprise that they fall, gracefully, in one of the sections of the text devoted to their adventures: "Falling for the sake of falling, they prefer to fall quietly, slightly adrift. No they aren't worried, descending calmly, calmly, arms and legs fully extended. No second thoughts. Why worry yet? They've still got a few more seconds before the crash."¹⁹

Michaux returns to the subject of falling in 1971, with his book *Tent Posts [Poteaux d'Angles]*:

From high in the sky a man is falling. His speed is accelerating, speed for which he has no brake whatsoever.

The time he has left dribbles away in silence.

Falling now, nothing but falling.

The ground below begins to lose remoteness, showing irregularities, shadows in places—what definitely implies a coming together, a fearsome coming together [*rapprochement*]....

The relative comfort of high altitudes has disappeared.

Coming events begin entering the sphere of the present.

[...]

The ground—oh, how much in a hurry the ground suddenly is—to meet a man, just one, since there isn't another in the air right now, at least not in sight. No one shoots at him any more. No need. None at all. Private S. closes his eyes. He's seen enough for now. In a way, Private S. has been falling for years.²⁰

Certainly, apart from the minute description of the moments toward impact, bespeaking an extraordinary willingness and ability in the imaginary scanning and inhabitation of a falling perspective, the enigmatic close is what seals the uniqueness of this late fragment. But equally noteworthy is that everything seems to be happening simultaneously to the telling, since only in the end is the present tense abandoned, which makes the writing itself take on something of the vertiginous experience and its irreversibility.

That Private S. has been falling for years, seems to tend toward an erasure of the difference between the fearsome urgency of a literal falling and a drawn out metaphorical falling, yet it also underlines a repetition, continuity and structure embedded in the literal falling that calls its self-contained, securely instantaneous quality—pain and fear are brief—into question. The drawn out time of the literal fall, stretched by the details of the observation taken in dilation, spills and communicates with day-to-day living at large.

A certain familiarity with an abyssal loss of control rather more extensive than the purview of this episode emerges thanks to the experience of the fall—an experience that is itself a stand-in for other forms of falling beside oneself, or “experience without experience,” from Montaigne to Rousseau.²¹

One can live for years lives in a certain detached and aimless way, but apparently one can keep falling, too. Words Blanchot and Derrida made much of, like “abeyance” and “instance,” which combine the fleeting and the incessant might be appropriate to the paradoxical temporality the fragment brings out of the fall. Thus, there is another rapprochement at stake that is about not only the rapidly converging features of a landscape rushing toward the falling man, but also the convergence that brings together an abeyant and literally suspended time, a question of irreversibility, and finally the implicit accelerations and dilations of a modified physiological scanning, all making for a compendium of falling temporality.

For a writer who warned—in the same book, *Tent Posts*—against looking for a writer’s real tendencies in the words he uses instead of in the more instructive omissions —“Look instead for the words the author avoided”²²—the mediation of the discontinuous and the continuous falling established here also corresponds to another rapprochement, this time inside his writing career. It can easily be argued that what Michaux was looking for in the fall was nothing other than that desire for kinship with the “infinite” that came to be an identifying marker of his work, especially around the experience of contemplation— aided by drugs or not, an experience itself typified by distortions involving dilation. What Marcus Boon writes in relation to Aleister Crowley applies here too: “Consciousness appeared to expand because of the time and space needed to process this excess of perception.”²³ Yet, by the same token, falling can also be repositioned as one of the privileged forms taken by Michaux’s infinite.

The question of contemplation and the infinite, segues into another one. The time of falling, strictly speaking, is the subject of the foregoing. Yet there is certainly a pre-fall and a post-fall that carry out the real mediation between continuity and discontinuity. As Gilles Deleuze once wrote, “the daily attitude is what puts the before and after into the body, time into the body, the body as a revealer of the deadline.”²⁴ In talking about falling, is one talking about a movement that cancels this internal temporal spanning by sheer force of gravity, thereby tripping “falling” into mere succession? Is there no way to reconcile “the daily attitude” with insights from falling? To think through these questions, it is worth looking into how the before and/or after

are insinuated into the body astride a fall. And when talking specifically about a prefall, it is hard not to think about a panorama or a panoramic vision, unless one is falling through a tube or an elevator shaft— and that only if the elevator shaft is not in a dream.

In this respect, it is possible that the sensory and conceptual scrambles engendered by a falling interval cannot be grasped adequately without a thought of panorama that would mark the pre-fall. Although one would not want to say falling is just an excuse for the merely visual experience of a panorama, a more expansive sense of falling needs to consider the possible share of a previously absorbed panorama, its order, stillness, distance and even a certain serenity to be lost, in the overall constitution of falling time. Mere falling and its urgent lack-of-distance-despite-a-covering-of-a-distance, its blustery immediacy, only finds a place in a network of relationships and experiences that go through that moment of engrossment *before*, to reach the composite time—defined by a superimposition of non-simultaneity, staying suspended behind oneself, and dilation in irreversibility— of the fall proper (but how proper?) only later.

At this juncture, it may be appropriate to turn to Roland Barthes, who once suggested the following equation: “panorama: contraction of time down to its erasure: one minute of panorama = powerful meditation on a detailed time → transposition or exchange between space and time.”²⁵ Thus, one necessarily falls from a relatively univalent phase and form of temporality determined by panoramic contraction and commerce with space into another temporality determined by a composition of different rhythms, another adjustment between time and space, a domination by dilation and acute polyrhythmia. Moreover, these times are in mutual envelopment, the panorama being necessarily vertiginous and dilatory all the same, just like falling inevitably extends the serenity of the time *before* on a certain, elusive level.

Strategy from... where exactly?

This leads to an interesting twist regarding the spatial determinations of falling, a twist concerned with falling as the swirling and dissolution of the stable “horizons” of the panorama.

In an article that discusses falling from a more artistic perspective, Hito Steyerl writes, “Our traditional sense of orientation—and, with it, modern concepts of time and space—are based on a stable line: the horizon line. Its stability hinges on the stability of an observer, who is thought to be located on a ground of sorts [...] a ground that can be imagined as stable.”²⁶ Here, the function of paying attention

to the undoing of this traditional sense, as Steyerl invites, is not to evoke a trite pathos of groundlessness, although the rhetoric necessary for this pathos is sometimes hard to avoid. I take this tack only with the hope to advance or further stray in thinking about falling. Let us note that Steyerl's story of the undoing of linear perspective, as well as of the stable line of horizon through various innovations in media makes some familiar stops (from J. M. Turner to aerial surveillance, to cinema and other "heterogeneous, curved, and collaged perspectives" across the board) to lead to a more subjective sense of free fall: "Time is out of joint and we no longer know whether we are objects or subjects as we spiral down in an imperceptible free fall."²⁷ This observation by Steyerl, emerging as it does from a consideration of asymmetries of social power, gets charged with further implications when it meets a more condensed counterpart in what Michel Foucault offered: "Horizon is a pictorial, but also a strategic notion."²⁸

To take bearings then: 1) Horizon was. 2) It is no longer. 3) Horizon was strategic when it existed. 4) Therefore we are confronted with a void of strategy that is at the same time a free fall.

I am not sure if Foucault had this in mind, but strategy, in military and logistic parlance corresponds to an excessive but necessary foresight, exhaustive precautionary measures, the making of provisions against contingencies, and dispensation relative to advanced techniques to guarantee these outcomes, such as state of the art tracking equipment, radars, and long distance everything, creating redundancies—for example, using 300 planes where 200 would be enough for an attack on the enemy... Strategy is all of these. Formulated in terms of its strategic status, falling evokes a distinction made by Alexander Kluge.²⁹ Kluge considers strategy described in this way as a "strategy from above"; in contrast, the strategy from below corresponds to a more bottom-up organization, with modest scales, little foresight and few advance opportunities to plan anything; somewhat lucky, with limited resources depending on individual ingenuity: like soliciting help, using informal channels, drawing on reserve strengths for second wind, being unsquashably resilient or like the Taoist's crooked tree, unfit to cut.

The problem here, however, is not exactly a strategy from below but, rather, a falling strategy, not an oblique strategy but, instead, a headlong cadent. What would it be? Pray to the ground not to take you or pray to the sky not to give you up? Take heart from the thought that what you are falling from is nothing to miss anyway (a lousy strategy, I agree). Lose consciousness. Make a phone call (there is Jason Statham in the film *Crank*). It is not that counterintuitive, really; as long

as there are situations where it is better to fall than to stay upright, the act of falling can be a strategy (if one listens to Adam Phillips, who said “there are situations in which it is more dangerous to keep your balance than to lose it”³⁰), although, admittedly, it may be trickier to find a strategy from within the time of falling.

Even here, it is possible to consult people with some experience. I do not think “expert” is ever the right word here. But one of these people with a certain experience is the remarkable skydiver Felix Baumgartner, who fulfilled in real life some of Michaux’s strangest dreams and made a cosmically surreal adventure of falling from space back to Earth, risking his life for a cause the greatness of which is obvious—his enterprise and success is world historical—but which is hard to define.

As is well known, in the short video released of his breathtaking tumble to earth, Baumgartner falls into a “violent spin” that takes way too long for a man falling from space, and we hear him say: “seems like I have to pass out,” and perhaps, for a second there, he does pass out while falling. A stretch of nothing with too much atmospheric resistance or instability otherwise is “put in perspective,” and a decision of resignation that is at the same time the only wise thing to do, comes to Baumgartner’s aid. I think this counts as a strategy.

A metaphysics

Writer Charles Juliet made a book out of his talks with Samuel Beckett.³¹ In that, he brings up at a certain point how Beckett’s vision and writing have a quality that embraces a “global view of the whole.”³² Very perceptively, Juliet talks about a look and grasp that impossibly combines an immersion into the concretion of the most insignificant details with a fixation of the gaze on the star Sirius. Juliet then reports Beckett’s response to his observation in the following way:

“Yes,” he says, nodding... “You must be here,” he says, pointing towards the table, “and also,” pointing his index finger upward, “millions of light-years away. All at the same time...”

A long silence.

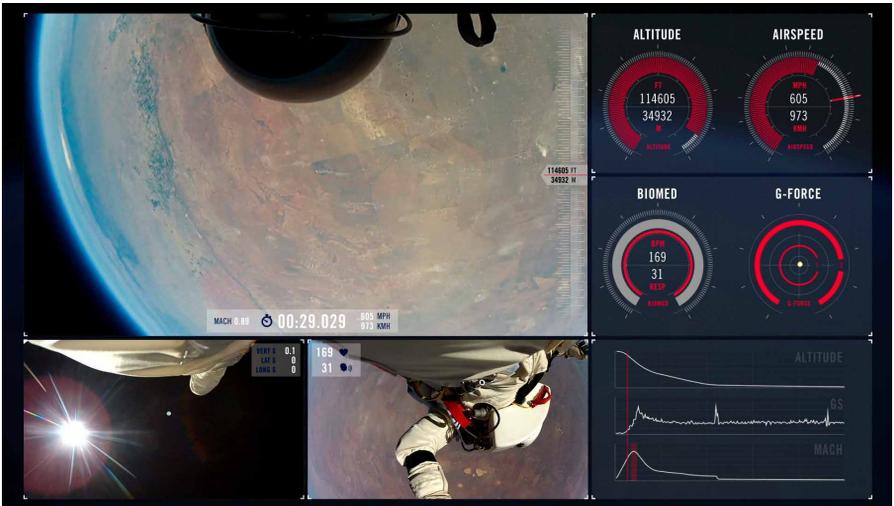
“The fall of a leaf and the fall of Satan: it’s all the same.”

He laughs heartily; his whole face laughs:

“Wonderful, isn’t it? The same thing.”

Long silence.³³

Totality in the mode and conjugation of a fall is not that strange, perhaps, since, in a more directly materialist



Split screen still showing multiple perspectives of Felix Baumgartner's freefall on October 14, 2012 as he nears the sound barrier, as well as G-force orientation, speed, altitude, and heart rate data. Photo: Red Bull Stratos / Red Bull Content Pool. Reproduced with permission.

vein the Epicureans also had a similar vision with the rain of atoms, the swerves of which account for everything. Yet there is something that escapes that materialism in this relation to totality instanced in Beckett's words: A cognizance of difference at its most acute, the devil and the leaf, divine judgment and the immanence of deciduous trees, and a unity—let's not say monism, given its associations with a leveling ontology—on the level of that which does not have a generality, a unity on the level of falling. Falling is like being, except it is falling, and falling happens to everything divine and small in the same way, because everything falls.

"Everything falls, says the Master of Ho. Everything falls, already you wander in the ruins of tomorrow [...] Everything hardens, says the Master of Ho, everything hardens and returns to the skull." Michaux's poem "Sphinx" from which these lines originate, is part of a short but fascinating series of poems with the same speaker, the Master of Ho, an immemorial, sage persona and a prophetic voice of a Blakean grandeur used by Michaux to embrace visions of totality very similar to what Juliet attributed to Beckett. Among all the questions the poem generates on its own (e.g., who is this Sphinx Michaux evokes, writing, "the man who talks to you is Sphinx. The man who you were, the father that you had, was Sphinx. And then, what did you understand of the Sphinx who made you submit?"), I expediently latch onto the easiest: the hardening and returning to the skull, and the polarized parallel it constitutes with a fall. Both are changes undergone, rather than actively pursued on some level, and, as borne out Michaux's other writings too, falling may converge with hardening through a certain use of time: "already in the ruins of tomorrow," one only inhabits what is falling and crumbling, and in a time-lapse sufficiently long, everything is disintegrating.

But perhaps what deviates from Beckett's baffling equanimity in the previous example regarding the differences of scale, is Michaux's concern with freedom and submission. As if not falling could be the matter of a certain resistance or better, integrity... and this not in a simple sense of course: "He who does not dissolve the one who comes to him, a Sphinx, grows there and it is from this Sphinx that one dies." Here as well it is all very immanent, one falls and dies from what comes to one, and what comes to one is oneself (the man who you were was Sphinx) among the other parts of that long history, including fathers. Although it may look like a freedom from falling, it is not that or freedom from what decomposes in the way of falling that is sought; rather, the emphasis is on a gesture not carried out in relation to what could not but fall anyway: "The incomplete gesture, the faltering of the heart, the remark that strikes the ear is him, it is he himself, not understood, who will wound you and who, in time, will obstruct

you, endlessly, with hard rocks." Endlessly obstructing hard rocks, a further variation on the skull, have their origin in an innocuous failure to respond, the repercussions of which have the inexorability of a fall.

A becoming worthy of the falls and the heartleaps that beset one is only possible when one finds a readiness to dissolve one's calcifications, and this is constitutively a reverse falling, the exigency of keeping a corrosive curiosity a bit like grace, a very worldly grace without any room for the anesthesia of automatism.

Falling an ethics

Earlier, I referred to a syncretic sociability and its possibilities of incontinent, "impersonifying" and prodigious empathy. And there is no reason why one should not inquire into the possibility of an ethics that takes account of falling and its sense, its "organ" that is simultaneously like the absence of an ordinary organ. In one of his endlessly surprising and generous essays, Diderot wrote, "I have never doubted the great influence of our senses and organs on our metaphysics and morals," and he wondered, "how imperfect, to say the least, would our morality seem to a being who had one more sense than we do."³⁴ Yet, as it turns out, we are beings who have one more sense than we ordinarily believe we have, which, in this case is the vestibular: "Aristotle famously counted five human sensory modalities: vision, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. Since then, his list has been expanded to include such potentially novel modalities as proprioception (our sense of the relative location of our limbs) and the vestibular sense (the sense of one's orientation with respect to gravity)."³⁵

The perceptual-relational tack of syncretic sociability is not the only one to take around this question, and given an understanding of ethics as a dimension of practice, training (*paideia*), and learning, it is not impossible to make of virtue a certain flexible skill as philosopher and scientist Francisco Varela and others have already insisted. But is not a skill for falling a falling skill?

On this score, Peter Sloterdijk, the patron saint of hyperbole, who drew attention to faltering skill as a deprivational revelation of the training basis of ethics, represents a potentially instructive case, especially given the central way falling figures in the reflections contained in his book *You Must Change Your Life* (2013). In fact, the scope of Sloterdijk's vision of Western *paideia* is nothing less than ontological: "Existence as such is an acrobatic achievement, and no one can say with certainty what training provides the necessary skills to master this discipline."³⁶ From this perspective, the long history of spiritual practices, the positive cultivation of

habits and the negative restraint of passions in various forms of saintliness and virtue are understood as the products of an imaginary “pull from above.”³⁷ Add to this Sloterdijk’s illuminating readings of figures such as the psychologist Ludwig Binswanger, in whose work artistic achievements of subjectivation are conceptualized in relation to a precarious verticality: “the dramas of intellectual and artistic self-realization are mostly located in the dimension of depth and height.”³⁸

Falling then enters the scene when the footing gained as a result of long-term potentiations of practice is confronted with instability and totters from its strange attraction position to another and lowlier basin of attraction of mediocrity: “It is only upon advancing into the unmastered and unsecured that the problem of a fall arises – whether the protagonist undertakes something at their own risk for which they lack the technique, or attempts something new that they cannot have mastered by virtue of its untried nature” – and again, “Only if non-ability or non-consideration of the boundary conditions for ability interferes, as with the flight of Icarus, does a fall become likely.”³⁹

While Sloterdijk is right in his own exaggerating fashion, his account needs to be complemented with a clearer acknowledgment of how an ability is generated out of and maintained against its impossibility. Abilities are nothing without their limits and their constitutive finitude. In speculating on the scenario of “an aphasic in whom emerges the act of speech in language, an acephalous being in whom emerges the act of thinking in thought,”⁴⁰ Gilles Deleuze insightfully formulated this type of finitude, or a falling in standing. After all, sometimes falling and the very absence of skill—maybe a skill for an absence of skill, a skill for moving on the edge without acrobatic mastery—is precisely what is needed to stumble across other values.

Ultimately, as something that could be taken as a simple mechanical happenstance, falling can also be an occasion for reflection on age-old questions like the relations among chance, necessity and finality. Without the grand metaphors of historical downfalls and declines, falling is already too much of a “living modality” to brook logical indifference, demanding a proliferation of equivocal tenses and personae.

If it can be built, it can be toppled, and it is already collapsing. Being in the fall does not necessarily mean being pinned to the immediate; rather, it means inhabiting a transitively blustery situation shot through with transindividual differences, differences of scale (meteors fall too), and even more metaphysical transfers between daily continuities and ruptures.

Perhaps on some level, falling shores up human exception, by highlighting the deprivation of sophisticated capacities of balance and communication. Yet, falling also, surely, flattens any exception, thanks to its particular challenges to exemplarity. It at least points to a narrow window where abilities and set responses are in suspension and abeyance, offering scattered glimpses of shared experience on the fly, against a broken horizon.

Review

By Ben Bascom

The beginning and end of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* are framed by the Icarian iconography of falling. It starts with young Alison balancing on her father's feet as he extends his legs and raises her into the air—a game they called “Airplane”—before she topples on the floor, and it concludes with an image of Alison leaping from a diving board into the waiting arms of her father. “In our particular reenactment of this mythic relationship,” Bechdel writes, “it was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky.”⁴¹ *Fun Home* has been read as Bechdel's coming to terms with the meaning of her father's queer sexuality, a revelation made to her when she came out as a lesbian during college, just a few months shy of him jumping in front of a moving truck.

“Can one control a fall,” Berkay Ustun asks, querying if “there [is] a skill or technique to a fall?” before digressing deeper into falling by following a series of philosophical questions. Ustun concludes with an homage to Peter Sloterdijk, who he calls “the patron saint of hyperbole” (which, in my assessment, is a generous if sloppy kiss to the messiness of metaphor) and who in his own aside—“as with the flight of Icarus”—makes the point that a fall is a *fall* because of its relation to that unstable category we call ability. Every self-help and motivational poster I have ever seen suddenly flashes before my mind's eye with its at once earnest and asinine statement about how success is not about never falling but is rather about always getting back up each time you fall. What special skill does it take to fail at falling or to fall at failing?

Metaphors are best when they are messy. Bechdel concludes her graphic novel with a mismatched transposition of stories, where one is uncertain about which person is Icarus—she or her father—and hence who, in the end, falls: “But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt.”⁴² Bechdel creates a queer disruption to the Icarus myth, one that signals a change from convention even as it charts out new narratives. That recasting of Icarian figures comes to a strange clarity on the penultimate page: “What if Icarus hadn't hurtled into the sea? What if he'd inherited his father's inventive bent?”⁴³ In other words, falling is both the breaking of convention and its affirmation, and Bechdel delivers a superbly failed mixed metaphor, disorienting in its spatial confusion as daughter becomes father who becomes son.

“Moments of disorientation are vital,” Sara Ahmed writes in her book that queers phenomenology.⁴⁴ “Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling, and it can shatter

one's sense of confidence in the ground or one's belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life feel livable."⁴⁵ Let's keep falling and failing and seeing what new, queer depths we might plummet. "If it can be built, it can be toppled," Ustun reminds, "and it is already collapsing." Collapse away, I say.

-
- 1 Natalie Angier, "A Look at the Vestibular System, Keeping Us in Balance," *The New York Times* (Oct 27, 2008).
-
- 2 Diane Deroualle and Christophe Lopez, "Toward a Vestibular Contribution to Social Cognition," *Frontiers in Integrative Neuroscience* 8, Article 16: 2.
-
- 3 Ibid.
-
- 4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others," *The Merleau-Ponty Reader* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 149.
-
- 5 Ibid., 170.
-
- 6 Henri Michaux, "Conseil au sujet des pins," from *Épreuves, Exorcismes* [Trials and Exorcisms], trans. Louis Landes Levi, *Toward Totality II (Vers La Completude)* (Green River, VT: Longhouse, 2006), accessed online at Longhousepoetry.com (April 17, 2017).
-
- 7 Deroualle and Lopez, 1.
-
- 8 André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, trans. Anna Bostock Berger (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 286.
-
- 9 Henri Michaux, "Chutes," in *Œuvres-Complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris, France: Gallimard, 2004), 86.
-
- 10 Paul Valéry, "Dance and the Soul," in *Dialogues*, trans. William McCausland Stewart (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 58.
-
- 11 Paul Valéry, *Cahiers=Notebooks*, vol. 3 (New York, NY, and Frankfurt am Main, Germany: P. Lang, 2001), 592.
-
- 12 Ibid., 267.
-
- 13 Leroi-Gourhan, 286.
-
- 14 Jed Rasula, *Modernism and Poetic Inspiration: The Shadow Mouth* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 163, 194.
-
- 15 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 2003), 414.
-
- 16 Ibid., 415.
-
- 17 Claudia Hammond, *Time Warped: Unlocking the Mysteries of Time Perception* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Canongate Books, 2012). Kindle edition.
-
- 18 Michaux, *Œuvres-Complètes*, vol. 1, 84
-
- 19 Henri Michaux, *Meidosems: Poems and Lithographs by Henri Michaux*, trans. Elizabeth R. Jackson (Santa Cruz, CA: Moving Parts Press, 1992), 57.
-
- 20 Henri Michaux, *Tent Posts*, trans. Lynn Hoggard (Copenhagen, Denmark: Green Integer, 1997), 103.
-
- 21 On this, Laurent Jenny's *L'expérience de la chute: de Montaigne à Michaux* (Paris, France: Presses universitaires de France, 1997) and Phillipe-Lacoue Labarthe's *Ending and Unending Agony: On Maurice Blanchot*, trans. Hannes Opelz (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016) are both helpful.
-
- 22 Michaux, *Tent Posts*, 155.
-
- 23 Marcus Boon, *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 147.
-
- 24 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 189.
-
- 25 Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, trans. Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 163-164
-
- 26 Hito Steyerl, "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective," *e-flux Journal* 24 (April 2011): 3.
-
- 27 Ibid., 8.
-
- 28 Michel Foucault, "Questions of Geography," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York, NY: The Harvester Press, 1980), 68.
-
- 29 Alexander Kluge, *The Air Raid on Halberstadt on 8 April 1945*, trans. Martin Chalmers (Chicago, IL: Seagull Books, 2014).

-
- 30 Adam Phillips, *On Balance* (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010), xiv.
-
- 31 Charles Juliet, *Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram van Velde* (Champaign, IL, and London, England: Dalkey Archive Press, 2009).
-
- 32 *Ibid.*, 38.
-
- 33 *Ibid.*
-
- 34 Diderot, "Letter on the Blind," quoted in Kate E. Tunstall, *Blindness and Enlightenment: An Essay* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2011), 180.
-
- 35 Fiona MacPherson, *The Senses: Classic and Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 224.
-
- 36 Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*, trans. Wieland Hoban (London, England: Polity Press, 2013), 63.
-
- 37 *Ibid.*, 64.
-
- 38 *Ibid.*, 175.
-
- 39 *Ibid.*, 176.
-
- 40 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), 165.
-
- 41 Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 4.
-
- 42 *Ibid.*, 232.
-
- 43 *Ibid.*, 231.
-
- 44 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
-
- 45 *Ibid.*, 157.

Biographies

Berkay Ustun is an academic from Turkey and a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Comparative Literature at Binghamton University (SUNY), where his work has been supported by a Fulbright Grant. At Binghamton, he has also worked as an instructor in the Department of Comparative Literature teaching courses on world literature, science fiction, and the problem of spatial orientation in its relevance to literature and aesthetics. Ustun is currently completing his dissertation, titled "Apprenticeships in Tender Abstraction," which focuses on the relation between subjectivation and formal experimentation in the works of the writers Henri Michaux, Paul Valéry, and William S. Burroughs. In that project, Ustun argues that various modes of processual aesthetic or semiotic production can transfigure the ordinary interplays between abstraction and concretion as well as habit and cognition, resulting in new equilibriums between human capacities. His general interests extend to a broader area including speculative philosophy and "nonpropositional" thought, critical theory, the question of metaphysical experience, and the underexplored implications and uses of various types of nonnarrative forms (diagrams, cognitive mapping, and gestalt patterns).

Ben Bascom is a teacher and scholar of early and nineteenth-century American literature and queer studies. His scholarship uses *queer* as a critical heuristic and political mode that interrogates the intersections of power and desire, subjection and identity, to rethink the narratives that stabilize our understandings of early national U.S. literatures. He received his Ph.D. in English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and is currently an Assistant Professor of English at Ball State University, where he teaches literature and gender studies courses. His publications have appeared in *Early American Literature*, *Papers on Language & Literature*, and *Common-Place: The Journal of Early American Life*. He is at work on a book-length study that offers an alternative account of republican belonging in the early national United States through focusing on failed books and the masculine conventions used to buttress desires for cultural significance.