

# A fall into the self

## *Cair em si*

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### Abstract

This paper aims to bring together artistic, linguistic and experiential dimensions of falling, culminating in the idea that some falls do not take us away from ourselves but rather lead us back into ourselves. Although fall and ascension are treated as related movements, the actual centre of gravity of this paper is falling. This is a universal subject and yet surprisingly under-theorised. We will move between painting, literature, religion, philosophy, everyday language, popular music and dance, but without reducing them to a single disciplinary framework. These diverse materials all point toward a paradoxical movement whereby one reaches oneself through descent. The self is not achieved solely through mastery, transcendence or elevation, but rather, above all, through a process of grounding, vulnerability and return. Thus we develop a meditation on gravity, descent, embodiment and self-knowledge that culminates in the rich Portuguese expression “cair em si” (“to come to one’s senses”, literally “to fall into oneself”).  
fall | everyday language | love | dance | grounding

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### Keywords

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### Resumo

Este artigo pretende reunir as dimensões artísticas, linguísticas e experienciais da queda, culminando na ideia de que algumas quedas não nos afastam de nós próprios, mas antes nos reconduzem a nós próprios. Embora a queda e a ascensão sejam tratadas como movimentos relacionados, o verdadeiro foco deste artigo é a queda. Este é um tema universal e, surpreendentemente, pouco teorizado. Transitaremos entre a pintura, a literatura, a religião, a filosofia, a linguagem quotidiana, a música popular e a dança, sem, no entanto, as reduzirmos a um único quadro disciplinar. Estes diversos materiais apontam para um movimento paradoxal pelo qual se chega a si mesmo através da descida. O eu não é alcançado apenas através do domínio, da transcendência ou da elevação, mas antes, sobretudo, por um processo de ancoragem, vulnerabilidade e retorno. Assim, desenvolvemos uma meditação sobre a gravidade, a descida, a corporalidade e o autoconhecimento que culmina na rica expressão portuguesa “cair em si”.  
queda | linguagem comum | amor | dança | enraizamento

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### Palavras-chave

The call for the current issue of RCL included this idea: ‘Cadere’, a word that has the same origin as ‘cadence’ and embodies the idea of falling. We can fall into, or out of, a particular type of attention, curiosity, or passion.” I embraced this suggestion since few concepts appear so frequently across religious narratives, artistic representations, bodily practices, linguistic expressions and affective experiences, and yet the notion of falling has rarely been treated as a conceptual category in its own right. Thus I will start with matters related to *fall*, not in a moral sense, nor in a strictly spiritual way, but rather as a physical or psychophysical phenomenon which, by its gravity, affects common sense, common language and all of the arts. This will hopefully become clear throughout the text, which might later approach the complexity and ambiguity involved.

1. One of the mysteries of the Christian faith is that God himself, or rather God’s son, can also fall (as depicted in many paintings of Christ falling while carrying the cross) and eventually die. A falling Jesus, a dying son of God! Lucifer, the perfect angel, fought against this idea of a vulnerable divinity, which was precisely what caused his spectacular and irreversible fall, depicted here by Brueghel.



Image 1

Pieter Brueghel the Elder, *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*, 1562



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Image 2  
Rosso Fiorentino,  
*Descent from the Cross*, 1521



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Image 3  
Bernardino Butinone,  
*The descent from the cross*, c.1485

Our attention to falling cannot be separated from our need for ascension. In the visual arts, there is a long tradition of depicting the descent from the cross: paintings that invariably show how much effort and muscle it takes to ascend (usually on ladders) and how this ascent is only justified by the need to bring the crucified body down.

When winged figures appear in the picture, it is because they are angels trying to support the dead body of Christ. The look on their faces, as seen in El Greco or Sargent, shows how impossible it is to counteract the fall, even when it is God himself who is falling.



Image 4

John Singer Sargent (1856-1925),  
*The Descent from the Cross*,  
after El Greco, nd



Image 5

Alessandro Allori, *The Descent from the Cross*, 1560

An exceptional 1560 painting by Alessandro Allori multiplies the tensions between going up and coming down in what is depicted as a solely human condition — this time, two angels just watch from above.

No wonder the arts work on the simultaneity of these descending and ascending movements. If we think of nature, we come to understand that they are not counter-movements, but rather the very condition of living beings. When speaking of *grounding*, both martial arts and psychology have often offered the image of a tree, which can spread high into the air as long as its roots grow deep down into the earth.

The great Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro kept writing in 1931 about his *paracaídas*, his parachutes, and he invented the need for a *parasubidas*, or a *para-riser*. In his words:

“Ah, mi paracaídas, la única rosa perfumada de la atmósfera, la rosa de la Muerte (...) Mago, he ahí tu paracaídas que una palabra tuya puede convertir en un parasubidas maravilloso como el relámpago que quisiera cegar al creador.”<sup>1</sup>

This rare idea reappears some thirty years later in a text by the North American poet Barbara Guest called “Parachutes, my love, could carry us higher”:

“Parachutes, my love, could carry us higher.  
I just said I didn’t know  
And now you are holding me  
In your arms,  
How kind.”

Here again, descent and ascent are related and love, as we will discuss later, is the *locus* (both *amoenus* and *horribilis*) or the laboratory where we most experience this connection.

2. The dangers of flying too high are classically addressed in the myth of Icarus: his father, Daedalus, gives Icarus a pair of wings made of feathers, pieces of clothing and leather, all carefully bound together with beeswax, since flying is a movement already haunted by the possibility of falling.



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Image 6  
Anthony van Dyck, *Daedalus and Icarus*, 1625

1 “Ah, my parachute, the only fragrant rose in the atmosphere, the rose of Death (...) Magician, behold your parachute that a word from you can transform into a marvellous para-riser like the lightning that would blind the creator.” Huidobro, 1993, p. 15. My translation.

Daedalus instructs Icarus not to fly too low for the sea's moisture can affect the wings, nor too high for the sun's heat can melt the wax. But the boy is unable to resist the temptation to fly very high and so the wax melts, he falls and he drowns.



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Image 7  
17th-century relief, *The Fall of Icarus*, Musée  
Antoine Vivenel.

3. As we think about how falling and ascending are related, we start noticing how the physical dimension is connected to other aspects of falling. In order to show and understand this connection, the best path is to turn to the language we use in everyday life. It is full of expressions that constitute *mathesis*, a profound wisdom of the body and of relations long before philosophical and scientific studies, a prosaic attention to the somatic to which we have not given due consideration. And at the same time it is the knowledge of how the somatic is both the root and the screen of the whole being (something particularly relevant at a time when a culture of ‘incorporeality’ or ‘immaterialization’ is being imposed). Alas, for decades, the social sciences were based on the assumption that they had to break away from common sense and dismantle it. In epistemological terms, we will follow the opposite path as elaborated in the “Oxford Philosophy” by authors such as Austin, Ryle and Strawson and especially in the *Philosophical Investigations* of Wittgenstein’s second phase, that is, in a search to respond to everyday language instead of rejecting it. Thus, we will also search for wisdom in common Portuguese expressions about falling as well as in the lyrics of popular songs that teach us how and why we fall in love.

Many Portuguese expressions that use the word “cair” or “fall” extend the physical fall to other connotations. When there is not an idiomatic equivalent in English, we will first give in parentheses a literal translation.

Most of the expressions qualify the fall as a *disgrace*, something bad or negative:

cair em desgraça — to fall into disgrace  
 cair em desespero — to fall into despair  
 cair doente — to fall ill  
 cair de fome — to drop from hunger  
 a cair de sono — to be falling asleep  
 cair na lama — to fall into the mud  
 cair aos pés — to fall down at someone’s feet

We may wonder whether the fall is due to the person’s excessive pride and defiance against higher powers, *hubris*, as seen in Icarus; or due to *hamartia* (a flaw that brings about the downfall of the hero in a tragedy), as in these two examples:

Cair em pecado — to fall into sin  
 Cair em tentação — to fall into temptation (and “let us not fall into temptation”...)

But we find many more expressions where the fall is due to some kind of *entrapment*:

Cair na ratoeira, cair na esparrela — to fall into a trap  
 Cair como um patinho (to fall like a little duck) — to naively fall for something/  
 be tricked in a naive way  
 Cair no anzol (to fall on the hook) — to take the bait  
 Não caias nessa! — Don’t fall for that!

Yet, we sometimes refer to a fall as a random event:

Caiu-lhe em sorte — It fell to him/her by chance  
 A Páscoa caiu em Abril — Easter fell in April this year

Maybe it is not *hubris* nor *hamartia* nor a trap, but the general *swerve* of the universe as conceived by Lucretius, the idea of which has been developed by Marx, Louis Althusser and Thomas Nail (2022) — a movement with no cause, or, as Deleuze (1979) puts it, a continuous variation, a perpetual oscillation: “the variation must itself never cease to vary.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> “Il faut que la variation ne cesse pas elle-même de varier”. Deleuze, 1979, p. 126. My translation.

Yet one can find a few expressions where the fall has a *positive* aura. (They are rare, but they do exist.):

A blusa cai bem com a saia (The blouse falls well with the skirt) — The blouse goes well with the skirt

Ela tem queda para a dança, ou para a matemática (She has a fall for dance or maths) — She has a gift for dance, or maths

Cair em graça (to fall in grace) — to win someone's favour

Cair no goto (to fall into the glottis) — to please

Cair no santo (to fall under the saint) — to fall under the power of the spirit

As for the *rhythms* (the cadences of *cadere*), sometimes they are abrupt, as in:

Cair à água — to fall into the water

Cair como uma bomba — to fall like a bombshell

Cair do céu aos trambolhões (to fall from the sky with a noisy crash) — to appear from nowhere unexpectedly

But sometimes it is a gradual fall, as in “as conversas caíam” — the conversations faded away. Numerous examples of a gradual fall come from nature:

Cair da tarde, das folhas, das flores, dos frutos — nightfall, falling leaves, flowers, fruits

Queda de cabelo, queda da crosta de uma ferida — hair falling out; the scab falling off a wound

Cair de maduro — to fall when ripe

Cair de podre — to fall when rotten; to fall to pieces

Decay is also gradual and can apply both to humans and non-humans.

In politics, the decay can be gradual, as in the Fall of the Roman Empire, or of Constantinople; but some falls can surprise us by the speed at which they happen, as we are currently observing in the United States. In Portugal, the demise of over 40 years of fascism was accelerated by a very physical and sudden fall — when the dictator Salazar fell off his chair and fell into a coma. True enough, we always feel we are living in a *durftige Zeit*, that is, in demanding times, as Holderlin wrote in one of his famous poems, or as Marlene Dietrich sang: “Such trying times, such trying times, Why do we live in such exasperating times?” Be it recurrent or not, the present feeling of political and ecological collapse, disorientation and precarity makes it all the more relevant to think about falling, not merely as a metaphor of failure, but as a condition for adaptation, transformation and renewed forms of attention.

3. In many languages, the movement of love is described as a fall. In English, “Fall in love”, in French, “Tomber amoureux”, in Portuguese, “Caidinho por alguém”. It is not just a metaphor often associated with love: it is the very concept of love, structured in the language and inscribed as a fall in the definition of love.

Another area of popular culture, songs, might provide some clues to further develop the materials we have presented in this essay.

Elvis Presley<sup>3</sup> sings of love as if it were a law of nature, of gravity, like an apple falling: “Like a river flows / Surely to the sea / Darling, so it goes / Some things are meant to be”.

Maybe, if it were not a sudden fall, we would not go looking for it: “Wise men say / Only fools rush in / But I can’t help falling in love with you”.

Marlene Dietrich<sup>4</sup> sung about the same feeling of irresistible movement: “Falling in love again, never wanted to / What am I to do / I can’t help it”.

The key seems to be that falling in love also makes you *bond* with someone: “Take my hand / Take my whole life, too / For I can’t help falling in love with you”<sup>5</sup>.

Falling in love implies the recognition and acceptance of one’s own vulnerability through which I discover the other and myself, painful as the process might be: “Fall for me, I wanna know you feel how I feel for you, love”<sup>6</sup>.

The risks are enormous: “I’ll never give my all again

‘Cause I’m sick of falling down

When I open up and give my trust

They find a way to break it down

Tear me up inside, and you break me down.”<sup>7</sup>

Yet songs teach us that even if you “never wanted to”, you will eventually fall in love again. The most surprising thing is that songs often explicitly declare that we all survive the turmoil. As Edgar says at the beginning of the fourth act of *King Lear*, “The worst is not / So long as we can say / This is the worst.” If everybody is singing about this falling in love, it probably means they have survived this general condition, and “that’s that”:

3 Song *Can’t Help Falling in Love*, 1961.

4 In Josef von Sternberg’s 1930 film *The Blue Angel*, first, then in concerts all her life.

5 Elvis Presley, song *Can’t Help Falling in Love*, 1961.

6 Trevor Daniel, song *Falling*, 2020.

7 Ibidem. That is why a wise Japanese proverb recommends: “Eat before falling in love”...

“You’re the drug that I’m addicted to, and I want you so bad  
 Guess I’m stuck with you, and that’s that (...)  
 When it all falls down, when it all falls down  
 I’ll be fine  
 I’ll be fine  
 You’re the drug that I’m addicted to  
 And I want you so bad, but I’ll be fine”.<sup>8</sup>

There is something to be gained from this shipwreck and so you had better continue.

“Take this sinking boat and point it home  
 We’ve still got time  
 Raise your hopeful voice, you had a choice  
 You’ve made it now  
 Falling slowly, sing your melody  
 I’ll sing it loud”.<sup>9</sup>

4. Dance is perhaps the art form that has paid most attention to falling, at least since the ascending movements of ballet gave way to William Forsythe’s *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated*, and then a growing “Dialogue with gravity”, on which Ushio Amagatsu based his dance. The famous film on contact improvisation, narrated by Steve Paxton, is called *Fall after Newton*. Dancer Jo Ann Endicott (1999, 36) recalls how confusing it was when, after years of ballet classes where she was trained to go up, Pina Bausch asked her to go down.

Dance is probably the only discipline (apart from martial arts) where students receive lessons on how to fall so that they learn not to injure themselves while falling. Dance teaches falling not merely as accident or failure but as technique, knowledge and embodied intelligence — something particularly relevant in our trying times. And dancers learn how to think of going up while they are going down, as singers have to do when descending to lower notes.<sup>10</sup>

Following on from that, it could be interesting to conceive a choreographic piece around some of the expressions we find in everyday language, such as:

andar aos caídos (walking as if falling) — to live like the fallen /  
 like a down and out  
 andar muito caído (walking in a very fallen way) — to stumble over your own feet  
 cair aos pedaços — to fall to pieces

<sup>8</sup> Alan Walker, song *All Falls Down*, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová, song *Falling Slowly*, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Portuguese poet Luiza Neto Jorge (1966) has a famous poem around the idea that “O poema ensina a cair”, ie, “The poem teaches how to fall”.

não ter onde cair morto (to have nowhere to fall down dead) — to have no place  
to lie down and die

caiu-lhe a alma aos pés (the soul fell down to his feet) — his/her heart sank  
cair nas mãos de alguém — to fall into the hands of someone

In 2014-15, Portuguese choreographer Victor Hugo Pontes created the piece *FALL*. As he explains:

When a body falls, it is visible, undeniable. We can discuss the forces that propel it to fall, but we cannot doubt the downward movement. The other fall can be transparent, require moral judgment, get lost in a failure of interpretation. In *FALL*, it will be more immediate to observe the physical fall than the other fall — one is concrete and earthly, the other is metaphorical and insubstantial — although no boundary line has been drawn. First, because we all ‘fall in love’ just as we ‘fall to the floor’, or ‘fall to the ground’ at the end of life in the same way that the leaves of the trees ‘fall to the ground’ in Autumn, which in [American] English is called ‘Fall’. What is spoken of in this show is the act, deliberate or not, of falling. It starts from a movement, not a concept. We all fall, whether because we stumble, because we were pushed, because we lost our strength or consciousness, because we fell in love, because we succumbed to temptation, because we did evil, because we died. *FALL* lives here, in this diffuse intersection between what makes us fall and condemns us, and what makes us fall, but redeems us.

— Victor Hugo Pontes, <https://www.nomeproprio.pt/projetos/fall/>



Image 8

*FALL*, by Victor Hugo Pontes, photo by José Caldeira

5. These terms, “condemn” and “redeem”, are still too morally charged. Maybe we first have to put aside altogether the theological connotations of fall, so ingrained in Western culture (and remember that Christ is not diminished by the fact of his falling and dying), and then start to realise that falling is a part of life. We all know people who have been through a terrible maelstrom and, instead of passing away, have come back older but wiser. In literature, from the Bible to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) or Edgar Allan Poe’s *A Descent into the Maelström* (1841), there are numerous stories of shipwreck, survival and revelation through the nightmare of falling.

It is not just a question of being stoic and laughing as you fall<sup>11</sup>, nor of considering how it is worth approaching the heights and the sun briefly even if it makes you dive for ever<sup>12</sup>. Icarus’ father, Daedalus, was the architect of the labyrinth in Crete and they lived there until they were accused of revealing its secret to Theseus: they were imprisoned and that was when they started to build wings. If we embrace the fact that the human condition is to be imprisoned in a labyrinth, we might start looking upwards and using ladders and bounding together feathers with leather. Japanese artist Yukio Mishima, “eager to know where” lay his allegiance (earth or heaven), wrote in the poem *Icarus*:

Do I, then, belong to the heavens?  
 Why, if not so, should the heavens  
 Fix me thus with their ceaseless blue stare?  
 Luring me on, and my mind, higher  
 Ever higher, up into the sky,  
 Drawing me ceaselessly up  
 To heights too far, far above the human?  
 (...)  
 That nature might bring home to me  
 That to fall, not to fly, is in the order of things.

Even as you look down you see upwards — like the stars reflected in the ocean or in a well. As Fernando Pessoa/ Bernardo Soares writes in *Livro do Desassossego* (1982, 131):

11 “Here is what they don’t tell you: Icarus laughed as he fell. Threw his head back and yelled into the winds, arms spread wide, teeth bared to the world. (There is a bitter triumph in crashing when you should be soaring.)” Untitled poem by Fiona (often known by her pen name *weareallboats*.)

12 “Never regret thy fall, O Icarus of the fearless flight, For the greatest tragedy of them all, Is never to feel the burning light.”

These lines are usually attributed to Oscar Wilde, even though they cannot be found in his complete works.

“Minha atenção bóia entre dois mundos e vê cegamente a profundidade de um mar e a profundidade de um céu; e estas profundezas interpenetram-se, misturam-se, e eu não sei onde estou nem o que sonho. (...)”

Que grande posse mental vai desde o poço das emoções profundas até às altas estrelas que se refletem nele, e, assim, em certo modo, ali estão.”<sup>13</sup>

Again, like trees, the two movements are connected: grounding is a condition of growing and ascending. But we can go further and conceive of flying to the Earth. After being introduced in Maranhão (Brazil) to the “four-eyed fish” (very attentive and aware indeed), the Portuguese Jesuit and writer Padre António Vieira wrote in a 1654 sermon: “Porque há asas para subir e asas para descer. As asas para subir são muito perigosas, as asas para descer muito seguras”.<sup>14</sup> In some Buddhist traditions, our suffering stems from desperately trying to hold onto fixed points, and true freedom comes when you accept the condition of falling. When you let go of rigid definitions, identities and limits, when you realise there is nothing to cling to, there is nothing to crash into either. Then you might stop fighting the experience of falling and embrace the wonders of flying downwards (using your “wings for descending”).

The bad news is that we are falling through the air,  
there is nothing to hold on to,  
not even a parachute.

The good news is that there is no ground.

— Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche<sup>15</sup>

Maybe the last decisive thing is *where* you fall. We can imagine a drop of water falling into the ocean and feeling, with acceptance or anguish, that its identity will be forever dissolved. You might fall into oblivion or into a vice or into a trap or into someone else’s landscape. But you can also fall into your own being and roots. The combination of the two movements, grounding and ascending, corresponding to self and superior self, is what allows you to “Cair em si”, literally “to fall into yourself” or “to fall inside

<sup>13</sup> “My attention floats between two worlds and blindly sees the depth of a sea and the depth of a sky; and these depths interpenetrate, mix, and I do not know where I am or what I dream. (...) What great mental possession goes from the well of deep emotions to the high stars that are reflected in it, and thus, in a certain way, are there.”

<sup>14</sup> “There are wings to ascend and wings to descend. The wings for ascending are very dangerous, the wings for descending are very safe.” [https://bibliotecacatolica.com.br/blog/devocao/padre-antonio-vieira-sermao-de-santo-antonio/?srsltid=AfmBOoriPFC\\_3ni31vcO8Q5LFE2PE7sMixHCunDze\\_wH98qYEioy7vW1](https://bibliotecacatolica.com.br/blog/devocao/padre-antonio-vieira-sermao-de-santo-antonio/?srsltid=AfmBOoriPFC_3ni31vcO8Q5LFE2PE7sMixHCunDze_wH98qYEioy7vW1).

<sup>15</sup> These sentences are not included in the Collected Works of the Tibetan Buddhist master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939-1987). They were probably said during a dharma talk and have been transmitted in the oral tradition.

yourself”, an amazing Portuguese expression which has multiple meanings: to understand yourself, realise your mistake, come to your senses; to be aware, stop being abstracted or distracted, stop having dreams, daydreams, illusions; to remember what you have forgotten; to regain calm. *Cair em si* is no trap nor random event nor swerve: it is usually a long process, deliberated or brought about by time and circumstances (although it can also occur suddenly, like St Paul’s enlightenment when he fell off his horse). Perhaps falling into the Other contributes to the greatest of all goals, to fall into yourself, to be grounded — which is the opposite of living outside of yourself, “fora de si”.

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