On the Act of Falling: The Role of Physical Movement within Dante’s *Inferno*

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Dante the Pilgrim’s journey can be viewed from many lenses, whether theological, political, or historical. Still, the innate physicality of the Pilgrim’s journey truly informs our understanding of the nine circles of Hell. Thus, Dante the Poet utilizes physical movement to represent the condition of the inner spirit—with the temporal loss of spiritual strength instanced by the motion of “falling.” Through simple, yet clearly dissociating metaphors, Dante describes the sudden weaknesses which lead to the Pilgrim’s failing control over his own body. Dante utilizes these metaphors to create distance between the physical body and the shame of spiritual faltering, thereby presenting falling as the act of a substitute. However, Dante approaches the movement of “climbing” directly, through first- and second-person, fully emphasizing the individual physical and spiritual challenge involved. This begs the question: how does Dante use physical movement to represent spiritual development? Through his metaphors and usage of perspective, Dante ultimately asserts that personal choice is necessary for religious epiphany—requiring “climbing” to involve the individual in spiritual and physical exertion, while “falling” strips the individual of choice, leading him or her to commit an undesirable yet inescapable act.

The Pilgrim’s tenacity of spirit wavers during his initially challenging passage into Hell, leading to his very first fall. After the Pilgrim enters Hell by way of Charon’s ferry, his nervousness leads him to be frightened by an earthquake that strikes fear into his heart:

> A whirlwind burst out of the tear-drenched earth,  
> a wind that crackled with a bloodred light,  
> a light that overcame all of my senses;  
> and like a man whom sleep has seized, I fell. (III. 133-136)
The ghastly scenery of Hell is suddenly marred by a “whirlwind” which “bursts out,” upsetting the balance of nature and surprising the nervous Pilgrim, who reacts to a threatening change with fear. Dante’s repeated “w—” sound for “whirlwind” and “wind” creates a haunting sensation, full of air which permeates the original resolve in the Pilgrim’s breath and cuts off the strength of his will. For that reason, the “memory / of terror” causes him to lose control of his physical body (III. 131-132). The “light” is symbolic of spiritual understanding and believing always in God, and since the Pilgrim briefly wavers about traversing the dangerous path before him, he is unable to stand the brilliance of truth within the light. Revealingly, Dante describes the first fall, abrupt and overpowering, using the metaphor “like a man whom sleep has seized.” He utilizes a metaphor to distance the Pilgrim from the actual movement of falling, thereby clouding the shame of relinquishing control after physically weakening. By decreasing attention on the Pilgrim’s lack of faith, Dante represents losing conviction in God as shameful. Indeed, the Pilgrim’s fall is truly personal, representing the physical manifestation of the spiritual hesitation within his mind. Illustrated by “sleep has seized [him],” the Pilgrim’s fear and terror replace his necessitated faith, rendering him unconscious with sleep, since he is unable to control his body and mind any longer. Dante appears to avoid this disgraceful act by relaying it as another’s experience, thereby truly emphasizing the danger of doubt.

Later, the Pilgrim’s resolve wavers after he succumbs to lust when speaking to Francesca, since she reminds him of his love Beatrice. Though it appears to the reader that Dante’s portrayal of the sinful Francesca is sympathetic, as her voice is shown to be humanized, he is very much aware of Francesca’s adultery with her husband’s brother. Dante’s decision to portray her in this manner seems to decrease the shame of his (and the Pilgrim’s) fallacy—to fall in love with a married woman. Indeed, his portrayal of the Pilgrim’s ambivalence towards Francesca’s weak
character, as opposed to the disgust expected of a Christian, necessitates the Pilgrim’s fall. Since Dante uses erotic diction for her story, the Pilgrim is seduced by her lustful message:

> And while one spirit said these words to me,  
> the other wept, so that—because of pity—  
> I fainted, as if I had met my death.  
> And then I fell as a dead body falls.” (V.139-142)

The spirits of Francesca and Paolo are described by Dante as “while one spirit…the other,” as they act in perfect sync. Notably, Dante interrupts the lyrical stanza with em dashes to clarify that his compassionate reaction was “—because of pity—” for them. In reality, her story also recalls *his* unfulfilled longing for the already-married Beatrice, which he concertedly hides through a syntactical pretense of mere sympathy. Dante’s hypocritically lax stance on adulterous love results from his own lust, and indeed, it is *this* lapse that causes the Pilgrim’s sudden uncertainty. Despite Dante’s ambiguous depiction of sin because of personal reasons, he recognizes the error of lust, so the Pilgrim *must* fall. In that moment, the Pilgrim is spiritually weakened when drawn in by fantasy, and he faints. As before, Dante diverts attention from fainting and falling by comparisons of “as if I had met my death” and “as a dead body falls.” Though the Pilgrim is aware of fainting, Dante’s parallel of “I fainted…then I fell” depicts the fall as the natural and only possible result of moral fault. Consequently, he reiterates the fact that even transient spiritual fault rapidly deprives the mind and body of control. Dante’s preoccupation with foreboding images of darkness, such as “death” and “sleep,” suggests that continued religious doubt leads to an eternal rest within Hell. Since his metaphor of sleep precedes the metaphor of death, Dante describes the Pilgrim’s increasingly precarious situation of continuously capitulating to sinfulness.

Still, as the Pilgrim progresses through the circles of Hell, he becomes aware of the need to actively seek spiritual understanding, which is described by physically and metaphorically
climbing to enlightenment. In the third ring of Circle VIII, the Pilgrim verbally abuses Constantine for establishing the practice of monetary profit through the church. Earlier, Dante described lust ambivalently; now, he furthers the Pilgrim’s relationship with God by depicting active denouncement of sin as needed. The Pilgrim cannot merely observe sin—he must decry it loudly. This spiritual development to hatred of sin pleases Virgil, whose “satisfied / expression” reveals that the Pilgrim is ready to be taken to further enlightenment (XIX. 122-123):

> And then he gathered me in both his arms and, when he had me fast against his chest where he climbed down before, climbed upwards now; nor did he tire of clasping me until he brought me to the summit of the arch that crosses from the fourth to the fifth rampart. (XIX. 124-129)

Virgil’s embrace “fast against his chest” is a reminder of the Pilgrim’s physical human body, which is also part of his spiritual relationship with God. Within the chambers of the chest, the heart beats loudly. Therefore, Dante’s description convinces us of the physical nature of spirituality, as we are constantly reminded of God’s existence through our own heartbeat. This also illustrates the Pilgrim’s evolving relationship with spirituality, as he can now better understand its innate existence. Dante explains how Virgil “climbed down before, climbed upwards now” to show the Pilgrim needed to descend into Hell before understanding the path of climbing upwards to epiphany. The act of Virgil climbing allows the Pilgrim to access higher spirituality, but it is intrinsically dual in nature. It does not decide the Pilgrim’s fate—only he can decide whether to proceed towards greater understanding, as illustrated by “the summit of the arch.” Notably, the Pilgrim does not personally climb here, but is carried and supported by Virgil. In this stage of his development, he has shown that he is ready for further understanding, but he is still not self-sufficient. However, being carried by Virgil is far more active than falling, as nowhere does Dante employ metaphor. Instead, he actively describes Virgil’s climbing with
In Virgil’s stern words is a clear message: The Pilgrim cannot allow his physical weakness to interrupt his spiritual journey. His physicality is tied intrinsically with his spirituality by means of his humanity; thus, he must learn to control and resist those doubts and “the body’s heaviness.” Dante uses the motif of “breath” to represent strength of will, as it tapers off and returns with resounding strength. Each breath the Pilgrim takes represents the effort of finding spiritual understanding, as he learns not to allow physical condition to influence his will. The consonance of “longer ladder” accentuates the never-ending path of spiritual connection with God, which must always be sought and “be climbed.” Virgil’s direct second-person address of “you” for the Pilgrim elucidates the personal nature of the decision to revive his spirit and climb further. However, it can also be viewed as an inherent command for the reader, who must “profit” from the lesson of active spirituality. Dante no longer uses metaphor to write of his actions; the path of climbing is far more difficult because it requires individual willpower. The countless lessons of sin that the Pilgrim has learned through his journey must lead to a more eager search for spirituality as “profit from [his lessons]”; through Dante’s usage of semicolon
between instructions, he parallels the countless responsibilities inherited with religious understanding. It is noteworthy that the Pilgrim allows Virgil to teach him, as it represents the passing on of spiritual insight from one man to another, just as Virgil passes on the torch of literary brilliance to Dante. Indeed, Dante explains that religious understanding must be shared, and that one must be responsible for guiding others.

Thus, Dante the Poet illustrates the necessity of active search for spirituality through his parallel of the physical effort of climbing up and the unchecked descent of falling down. Chronologically, during his journey, Dante the Pilgrim progresses from his physical and spiritual weaknesses and tendency to fall, to slowly—first with support from Virgil, and later, alone—climb towards higher spiritual understanding. Climbing, in itself, is already far more active and demanding; yet, Dante decisively uses language to emphasize that the resolve to climb is just as essential. At the end of his journey, which he reaches through climbing to Purgatory, the Pilgrim finds the ultimate epiphany: “It was from there / that we emerged, to see—once more—the stars” (XXXIV. 138-139). At the end, Dante utilizes the first person “we” to show the Pilgrim can finally move of his own volition, after lessons of spiritual faith from Virgil and the journey through Hell. Though Virgil still surpasses the Pilgrim in experience, the Pilgrim has nonetheless reached an invaluable conclusion: purpose and will are intertwined on the path to spiritual knowledge. Those “stars” are the wondrous understanding of God and his works which the Pilgrim finally perceives, even before his mentor Virgil can. As the Pilgrim climbs and fulfills his spiritual path and bond with God, he ultimately finds the beauty of God's creation—only awaiting his arrival.
Works Cited