

Standing by the Mountain

David Capps

Volume 36, Number 1, 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1075876ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075876ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Athabasca University Press

ISSN

1705-9429 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Capps, D. (2020). Standing by the Mountain. *The Trumpeter*, 36(1), 2–18.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1075876ar>

Article abstract

A lyric essay investigating the phenomenology of modesty in the face of a mountain.

Copyright (c) David Capps, 2020



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Standing by the Mountain

David Capps

As I see it, modesty is of little value if it is not a natural consequence of much deeper feelings and, even more important in our special context, a consequence of a way of understanding ourselves as part of nature in a wide sense of the term. This way is such that the smaller we come to feel ourselves compared with the mountain, the nearer we come to participating in its greatness. I do not know why this is so.¹

—Arne Naess

1.

Standing by the mountain, the desire to feel small again connects us (*again* connects us: meaning we have experienced this before, together, also that each of us, individually, is not irreconcilably different from our former selves); it is not to feel as a child, protected, with so much to take for granted, but to feel as if in the womb, an existence before *individuating into*, becoming a whole *with difference*.

Of course, we do feel small in relation to the mountain.

The mountain itself rests on the gradually moving tectonic plates, and the earth itself rotates along its axis; who can speak of the galaxy's own frame of motion, but this much is clear: the desire for wholeness *without difference* exists against this background as a desire to come into being in spite of flux.

Chuang Tzu says in the Inner Chapters, "There is a beginning. And there is a not-yet-beginning-to-be-a-beginning. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-be-a-not-yet-beginning-to-be-a-beginning."² I feel this way sometimes when at the foot of the mountain, realizing there is no sharp cut-off between the mountain and the valley. Nor is there a sharp cut-off between my experience of the mountain "now" and my experience of the mountain "then."

¹ Arne Naess, "Modesty and the Conquest of Mountains," *The Ecology of Wisdom*, eds. Alan Drengson and Bill Devall (Counterpoint Press, 2008), 67.

² Chuang Tzu, "All Things Being Equal," *The Essential Chuang Tzu*, eds. Sam Hamill and J.P. Seaton (Shambhala, 1999), 13.



Image: Zhong Li, *Scholar Looking at a Waterfall*, ca.1480-1500, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/44703>.

Flux sometimes surfaces even from within the mountain we are not: jittery streams trickle from the sheer rockface, sparkling in sunlight, trailing their own particular clarity down onto pebbles of quartz and striped jasper, which look always smarter, sharper, being wet. We don't know the source, and hesitate to climb and find it (ticks abound), so we fall back on these obsessions, analogues to the source: *time as a river* in which our images, distorted, reflect ever onward.

We learn as children: the wind does that, causes irregularities on the water's smooth surface, and later that the reflectance properties of light, its hue and saturation, the mechanism of our own cones, accounts for our perceptions. In our advanced studies we learn such facts as "time is linear," "each thing is identical to itself and not another." We find the desire for wholeness *without difference*, inasmuch as it is a desire to exist outside of time, fades, is replaced by something more concrete, more easily satisfied.

Are such positions true? Are they complete? Quiescent, I sometimes find myself calling out to a former self, one just as filled with possibility of longing for the eternal as I am emptied of its actuality. A mountain appears then as The Mountain, the I appears impersonal, tales – folklore of mountains, take on a significance that does not fade with history.

In “The troll who wonders how old he is” the Norwegian artist Theodor Kittelsen draws an aged being whose form both conforms to and extends the hillside; there he forms his own mountain, even while remaining identifiable to us as other, as a troll: we see his holey boots, his gnarled hands, his side knife.³ At rest, he seems almost to be dozing on his knoll, remembering how there were once many more of his kind, much as a mountain can be lost in the immensity of its years, the inexact duration represented in the fine tree-like hairs raised from his shaggy mane, beyond which a pale sun is setting.



Image: Theodor Kittelsen, *Trollet som grunner på hvor gammelt det er* (*The Troll Who Wonders How Old He Is*), 1911, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trollet_som_grunner_p%C3%A5_hvor_gammelt_det_er.jpg.

Kittelsen’s use of enormity of proportion and contiguity between human and non-human landscapes convey immense duration, the lastingness of the mountain against which we are reminded of our finitude, yet other Scandinavian folklore conceives of the mountain as a groundedness, a hold over our sanity.

The Scandinavian term “Bjergtaget” (Bergtagen), now translated as “bewitched,” once meant “being taken by the mountain.” In 17th-century Sweden it was common for priests to offer this

³ Theodor Kittelsen, *Trollet som grunner på hvor gammelt det er*, 1911, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trollet_som_grunner_p%C3%A5_hvor_gammelt_det_er.jpg.

as a reason for a disappearance or for someone's temporary amnesia.⁴ We would admit that when a person has amnesia there is a clear sense in which they are "elsewhere," having lost part of their identity; the Swedish church thought that it then belonged to someone else – a troll in the mountain, that it might be retrieved by the clanging of loud bells, said to sicken trolls, and if you had just the right timing (wait until just after the troll says "get out" or he's liable to spear you).

It may sound absurd, fanciful; note, though, that this did offer a hope against hope for those suffering from amnesia or those whose loved one had disappeared, and it indicates a grasp of the idea that there are some forces completely unknown to us which nonetheless directly impact our mental lives. Mountains have many facets.

The somewhat terrifying facet where an amnesiac can be "elsewhere" – kept by the mountain – contrasts with a more positive sense of removal from the human realm, its corruption, inanity, wars and civil unrest, perhaps the peaceful silences it offers counterpoised to the sounds of nature. As Li Po mused:

On the Mountain: Question and Answer⁵

You ask me:

Why do I live
on this green mountain?

I smile

No answer

My heart serene
On flowing water
peachblow
quietly going
far away
another earth

⁴ John Botofte, "Taken by the Trolls," Troll Blog, Troll Moon, January 24, 2010, <http://users.skynet.be/fa023784/trollmoon/TrollBlog/files/ae5697ff30643b5501f4ee58e58efc91-20.html>.

⁵ Li Po, "On the Mountain: Question and Answer," *Anthology of Chinese Poetry*, ed. Cyril Birch (Grove Press, 1965), 225.

This is another sky
No likeness
to that human world below



Image: Shen Zhou, *Poet on a Mountaintop*, ca. 1427-1509, album leaf, ink on paper, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Poet_on_a_Mountaintop.jpg.

If we focus on the “argument” of the poem, Li Po suggests viewing the mountain as a world unto itself: “another earth / This is another sky.” Far from the problem of the duplication of worlds Naess points out results from defining nature in terms of primary qualities,⁶ Li Po’s natural world appears as an alternative. It is one which offers more completion than the human realm, at least judging by Li Po’s resulting emotional state: “My heart serene.”

From the point of view of deep ecology, but also Tang Dynasty poetry in which “mountains and water” were very much viewed as all one piece (“landscape”), we should resist reifying “human” and “non-human” realms. When it is necessary, only then with the caveat that they represent an abstraction as opposed to an underlying process-reality. But is it experientially possible, when nature presents itself as a setting against which humans interact (as in the increasingly frequent Corona outing)? When the right to silence and the right to expression conflict? Should the human feet keep rambling down the mountain listening to dub-step, poisoning the serene heart?

⁶ Naess, “The World of Concrete Contents,” *The Ecology of Wisdom*, 75.

It may depend on whether we view the mountain as “a public space.” Or it may not. We close our ears to the rain-facets, where spirits trapped fall through the sky, careen down the cliffside in pools, and shattering their prisons on the soil, germinate at the base of the mountain. May we not close our ears to human voices?

2.

I don't know what a mountain is. A strip-miner could offer one definition, a geologist could offer another, a painter could offer yet another. One is tempted, perhaps, to say that if a mountain has any definition at all, the definition is relative to one's interests.

The geologist is interested in the mineral content of the mountain, and the sorts of rock formations present, the strip miner is interested in its coal, the painter (such as Cézanne working over Mt. St. Victoire) may be interested in the geometric solids latent in the mountain.

For the metaphysician perhaps a mountain is a kind of substance, a la John Locke:

So that if any one will examine himself concerning his Notion of pure substance in general, he will find he has no other Idea of it at all, but only a Supposition of he knows not what support of such Qualities, which are capable of producing simple Ideas in us.... The Idea then we have, to which we give the general name Substance, being nothing but the supposed, but unknown support of those Qualities, we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist ... without something to support them....⁷

Replace the word “substance” with “mountain,” and “qualities” with “instrumental use” and such a passage seems equally true, and equally perplexing. Just as we do not know exactly how a given “thing” stands to support whatever qualities we attribute to it,⁸ why is it that a mountain should “support” one instrumental use rather than another, or for that matter, any at all?

“Has the question of silences and rights been settled yet?” – voice of the pragmatist. As in the thousand pipes of nature Chuang Tzu often alludes to, “ringed with cavities, holes like noses,

⁷ John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch (Oxford University Press, 1975), II.xxiii.2.

⁸ Part of the worry stems from the assumption that that the substance has qualities of its own. As E.J. Lowe puts it: “In itself, it seems, the substratum must be utterly featureless – for if it had qualities of its own, then these would, by the same train of reasoning, require some yet more basic ‘stuff’ to ‘support’ them. But now we appear to be embroiled in absurdity: for if the basic stuff or substratum is utterly featureless, what is it about it that enables it to perform its supposed role of ‘supporting’ qualities – how is an utterly featureless ‘something’ different from nothing at all?” E.J. Lowe, *The Routledge Guidebook to Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Routledge, 1995), 74.

mouths, ears, like sockets or goblets, like mortars,”⁹ musicians also might have their own interpretation of “mountain.”

Listen to Cesar Franck’s tone poem, “What man hears on the mountain,” inspired by Victor Hugo’s eponymous poem, and you will hear the swelling voice of the ocean, which like the winds carried into reaches of pine trees in a Sappho poem, rolls forward in large, launching tectonic movements between low double-bass and scintillating first and second violins, in a cataclysmic effort to balance two voices: humanity and nature.

Yet when one is in nature – when one listens silently to the pines’ masts creaking above on their voyages, does one feel this duality between “human” and “nature,” or between “oneself” and “other,” wholeness with difference? I personally only really remember the half loaf of bread, the moss, slugs, conspicuous lack of predators, eerie pines above, when I spent time in the hills north of Aberdeen, Scotland. Perhaps the arts even compel us, in the way they represent nature, to trade in dualities.

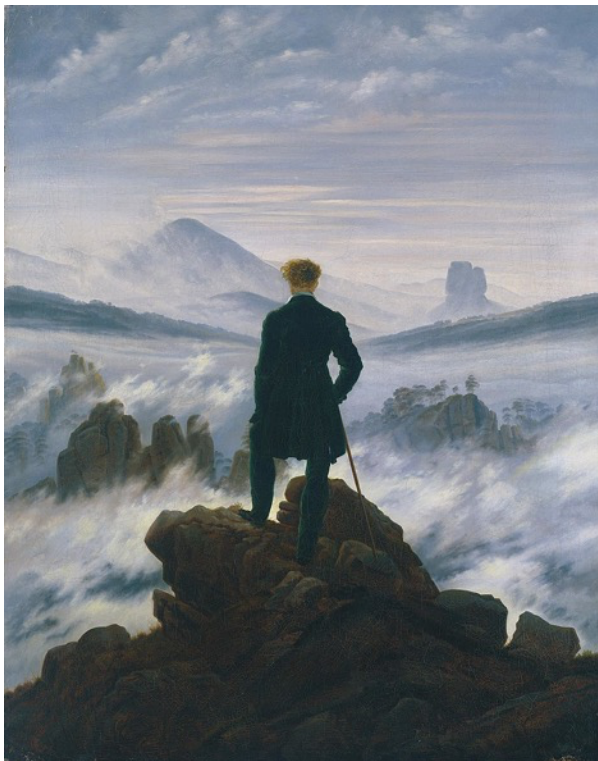


Image: Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, ca. 1817, oil on canvas, Kunsthalle Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wanderer_above_the_Sea_of_Fog#/media/File:Caspar_David_Friedrich_-_Wanderer_above_the_sea_of_fog.jpg.

⁹ Chuang Tzu, “All Things Being Equal,” 8-9.

Can mountains have movement without being represented as “part of” nature (and so, non-human)? “They are solid, stable, unmoving,” Naess writes. “A Sanskrit word for them is *a-ga*, that which does not go. Curiously enough, though, there is a lot of movement in them. Thus, a ridge is sometimes ascending; there is a strong upward movement, perhaps broken with spires and towers but resuming the upward trend, toward the sky or even toward heaven. The ridge or contour not only has movement up and up, but also may point upward, may invite elevation.”¹⁰

Perhaps the movement, the pointing of the mountain, replicates its own formation. The artist Emile Bernard recalls the way Cézanne approached painting Mt. Sainte-Victoire: “He began with the shadows and with a touch, which he covered with a second more extensive touch, then with a third, until all these tints, forming a mesh, both coloured and modelled the object.”¹¹ Layers after glaciation.

One imagines Cézanne painting the same mountain day after day from the steeply-terraced slope above his studio in Aix-en-Provence, and shortly thereafter the mountain Cézanne was to become. It is obsession to single-mindedly pursue one thing, but it is also a devotion very close to Kierkegaard’s “purity of the heart is to will one thing,” yet we forget that the mountain is not just one thing. It can elude us even when ensconced in its depths; as one critic writes of Cézanne: “Flatness coexists with depth and we find ourselves caught between these two poles – now more aware of one, now the other. The mountainous landscape is both within our reach, yet far away.”¹²

¹⁰ Naess, “Modesty and the Conquest of Mountains,” 65.

¹¹ Emile Bernard, *Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne*, (Paris: Societe des trente, 1912), 26, quoted in Ronald Alley, *Catalogue of the Tate Gallery's Collection of Modern Art other than Works by British Artists* (Tate Gallery and Sotheby Parke-Bernet: London, 1981), 107-8.

¹² Ben Harvey, “Cézanne, Mont Sainte-Victoire,” Khan Academy, accessed November 13, 2020, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/late-europe-and-americas/modernity-ap/a/czanne-mont-sainte-victoire>.



Image: Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, 1902-1904, oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, <https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/102997.html>.

Perhaps Cézanne is offering a 2D representation of our spatial experiences when ascending a mountain, how a given ridge pulling our eyes and bodies upward also lends itself to downward movement, especially when fatigued. Sometimes we forget that a sense of space must be learned against our bodily limitations. Is this obsession?

Obsession, perhaps, but seeing Mt. Sainte-Victoire as a sort of pilgrimage for Cézanne: definitely. In his essay on Dogen, Gary Snyder writes: "One does not need to be a specialist to observe that landforms are a play of stream-cutting and ridge-resistance and that waters and hills interpenetrate in endlessly branching rhythms. The Chinese feel for land has always incorporated the sense of a dialectic of rock and water, of downward flow and rocky uplift, and of the dynamism and 'slow-flowing' of earth-forms."¹³

¹³ Gary Snyder, "Blue Mountains Constantly Walking," in *The Practice of the Wild: Essays*, (Counterpoint, 2004), 109.

Synder is discussing mountain and waters landscapes in the Eastern philosophical tradition, but Cézanne also arguably had his own dialectic of “downward flow and rocky uplift,” expressed on a “flat” canvas, as he painted the mountain so many times from so many different positions and under such different lighting conditions, the latter of which certainly affect the sense of upward movement – a dim path in the dark, upward, unknown, naturally meets more resistance than in the light.

Artists, musicians, are in a sense climbers all endeavoring to see things under different aspects, as that is how one sees the world as if for the first time. Truth is not an eye, but a mountain ridge. Many ridges, many truths, all belonging to one mountainous being. A new truth created every time an old one erodes. The impossibility of straddling *exactly* along the ridge. All the equipment one is willing to sacrifice in order to obtain a view from such a height – of one’s own home!

3.

The mountain can become treacherous.

Looking down from the mountain, we mean more than “a fall from this height would be fatal;” we imagine, not pictorially, but viscerally, what it would be like to be toppled among the rocks, our limbs twisted, spread impossibly apart, our bones and joints having suddenly pushed past any evolved limitations, upon impact.

Yet from the safety of the mountain we picture it, looking down upon our own mangled bodies – who will find them in the heap? This, as opposed to imagining what we would see from the perspective among the rocks, is a vertigo qua out of body experience, with the difference that in an actual out of body experience one has a perception as of oneself from a vantage point that one could not possibly occupy (since a person cannot be in two places at once).

Thus at the mountain pass, soon after looking over the edge, and weary of the wind, the precariousness of our balance, our footing where one false step could set in motion the fall (we largely blank this part out) whose culmination is the unrecognizable body below, we snap back to a more secure place, where the exposed roots, handholds, are firmer. Truth comforts.

Intuitively, we sense that the security is relative; we can derive this notion by consideration of ourselves upon the mountain pass, or even more bluntly and grotesquely if we are affluent enough to be sherpa’d up Mount Everest, which is littered with unsalvageable climbers of the past expeditions.

Any mountain climbing is somewhat strenuous, but under such extreme conditions, how can it be possible to contemplate oneself or reflect on one’s smallness relative to the mountain? How can it be possible to remain modest?

In a letter to Augustinian monk and Petrarch's confessor, Dioniso Da Borgo San Sepolcro, Petrarch details his 1332 ascent of Mount Ventoux in the Provence region of southern France. After a jovial discussion of how the mountain thwarted his attempts at an "easier," "longer," "more circuitous," "roundabout," "going downward" course,¹⁴ and realizing he ought to follow his brother's steep ascent, Petrarch finally comes to a view of the summit:

At first, because I was not accustomed to the quality of the air and effect of the wide expanse of view spread out before me, I stood there like a dazed person. I could see the clouds under our feet, and the tales I had read of Athos and Olympus *seemed less incredible* as I myself was witnessing the very same things from a less famous mountain. I turned my eyes toward Italy, the place to which my heart was most inclined. The great and snow-capped Alps seem to rise close by, though they were far away – those same Alps through which that fierce enemy of the Roman name once made his way, splitting rocks, if we can believe the story, by means of vinegar.¹⁵



Image: Jules Laurens, *Mont Ventoux from the Road to Carpentras in Bédoin*, ca. 1825-1901, oil on canvas, Musée Comtadin-Deplessis, Carpentras, France, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jules_Laurens-Mont_Ventoux.jpg.

Here, by occupying what we could call the perspective of the mountain, which has overseen the wars and grand, heroic deeds of men, a world of action opens up to Petrarch which was previously unavailable. The possibilities of space offered by the mountain extend even beyond

¹⁴ Petrarch, "The Ascent of Mount Ventoux," in *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, trans. Mark Musa (Oxford University Press, 1985), 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 14 (emphasis added).

Petrarch's own body. He finds himself able to believe things he could not previously believe – at least for the one moment where he is “dazed” outside of himself, in that the sense of his original motive in ascending the mountain, “the wish to see what so great a height had to offer,”¹⁶ becomes lost in a vision of past conquest.

It is curious that Petrarch seems to degrade this moment of contemplation at the summit, since, detailing his experience a few pages later in the letter, he draws the reader's attention to an apparently more significant episode; this is the one where, like a school child spinning a globe and settling his finger upon the random country he thinks will be his destiny as an adult, Petrarch opens to a random page in Augustine's *Confessions*:

I opened the little volume, small in size but infinitely sweet, with the intention of reading whatever came to hand, for what else could I happen upon if not edifying and devout words. ... As God is my witness and my brother too, the first words my eyes fell upon were: ‘And men go about admiring the high mountains and the mighty waves of the sea and the wide sweep of rivers and the sound of the ocean and the movement of the stars, but they themselves they abandon.’¹⁷

Petrarch climbs down the mountain in silence, presumably having absorbed a moral lesson about the vaingloriousness of worldly pursuits; which is strange, since his attitude upon reaching the summit was much more elevated than one of “admiration.” A rift (crevasse?) between worldly and spiritual, opened by the necessarily steep ascent of the mountain, with its immanent risk of failure, symbolizing the spirit's ascent, leads him to abandon the perspective of the mountain.

Yet while the perspective of the mountain is not worldly, nor spiritual in the Christian sense, it is worthwhile from a biocentric point of view. Perhaps we should wonder why Petrarch, or anyone, need face such inner conflict: how many unities are possibly simultaneously attainable? Need modesty imply the falling short of some ideal?

The Christian unity is one ideal; another ideal is to recognize nature (as opposed to the supernatural) as a single, interconnected whole, of which one (and one's species) is but one complex piece; psychologically, it seems hard to reconcile the realization of both ideals; perhaps the difficulty is illustrated in this case by Petrarch's abandonment of the “dazed” mountain perspective in favor of the pursuit of otherworldly soul absorption into the Godhead.

Another ideal is purely physical. Those who descend Everest as their oxygen bottles have run low are physically spent; theirs is a purely physical feat (I would define “physical” widely enough that it included “fortitude”): there is no time to rest at the top of Everest, to take in the view from the

¹⁶ Ibid, 11.

¹⁷ Ibid, 17.

summit, to place one in the empathetic perspective of the summit, to lose oneself there in the contemplation of the mountain as it has withstood our history.



Image: Anonymous, *Mount Everest from Rongbuk*, May 2005, photograph, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mount_Everest_from_Rongbuk_may_2005.JPG.

They remain like those Augustine describes, who admire the high mountains, which subsequently fall under the concept of “conquest,” or “bucket list,” but “they themselves abandon,”¹⁸ while this does not seem to be the case for Petrarch even if subsequent reflection upon Augustine and his own worldly pursuits leads him to mistakenly believe that it is.

At the same time, the phrase “they themselves abandon” might suggest (albeit not to Augustine) an experience of non-self which extreme climbers realize, perhaps of the same kind that accompanies any skillful performance in which one maximizes one’s capacities, leaving no energy for the conscious self to hover over one’s activity, surveying the scene.

It does seem true that in any risk-taking endeavor which is such that one has the ability to appreciate the full course of it – sky-diving, high category white-water rafting, mountain-climbing (of certain elevations), perhaps bow-hunting – through contact with the natural world one becomes aware of one’s own vulnerabilities, and more broadly the blatant fact that one is the member of a species which has evolved to fill a very specific niche with very fine-tuned parameters for “success.”

¹⁸ Perhaps the point extends to those who would purport to write about them, e.g., in a persona poem while there is no perspective to take up.

This is in fact one notion of “self-knowledge” which is not mysterious, but completely natural, and importantly, the sort of knowledge which is non-propositional: it must be experienced, and is not describable in terms of some set of propositions which can then be relayed to others who have not had a comparable experience with the expectation that they will “understand it.”

Petrarch’s descent in silence is perhaps reflective of the (unwittingly) non-propositional content of his knowledge, having made the ascent of Mount Ventoux. There is some indication of this in his urgency to document the experience soon after he had descended and found an inn: “Then, while the servants were busy preparing our supper, I spent my time in a secluded part of the house, hurriedly and extemporaneously writing all this down, fearing that if I were to put off the task, my mood would change on leaving the place, and I would lose interest in writing to you.”¹⁹

By contrast, it seems hard to describe those who ascend Everest as having acquired a similar sort of non-propositional knowledge if, like Sisyphean tourists, they have had no time to rest at the summit of their labors, no time to reflect, in situ, on the strange and different air, the distant snow caps, the looming crevasses, all the while being plagued by certain flagships of alterity: the numerous corpses that dot the landscape of Everest.

Green Boots²⁰

In such feats consciousness grapples
with itself, peaks
with unity.

Night’s shelter is a harness of ice.

A harness of ice is whispers
besetting the empty
cathedral, ogive

¹⁹ Ibid, 19.

²⁰ “Green Boots,” Wikipedia, accessed December 14, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_Boots. A familiar landmark on the north face of Everest, he is known only as “Green Boots;” while not officially identified he is believed to be the body of an Indian climber, Tsewang Paljor, who perished in 1996.

ascendance. All wind
downwind of the ledge, toppling
wind, wind-salt
in the wound.

Bone-gripe, hypoxic urge
to rest, everything heavier,
breath packed
like snow,
casts a conception

of immobility,
that ice-crystals
form around eyelids
and no one stop.

Green Boots, asleep in his cave.

4.

Given all these comparisons, let us not end in judgment.

Naess claims that understanding ourselves as part of nature is such that “the smaller we come to feel ourselves compared with the mountain, the nearer we come to participating in its greatness;”²¹ the contrapositive also holds: the more distant we are from occupying the perspective of the mountain, the greater we come to feel ourselves compared with the mountain; as a corollary to this, the more we come to regard the mountain as merely instrumentally valuable, relative to our interests.

What would it mean to be “distant”? Well, how about sitting pretty at an office desk in a concrete skyscraper somewhere? Thomas Hill, Jr. expresses the contrapositive generally when he writes:

²¹ Naess, “Modesty and the Conquest of Mountains,” 67.

“those who fully accept themselves as part of the natural world lack the common drive to dissociate themselves from nature by replacing natural environments with artificial ones. A storm in the wilds helps us appreciate our animal vulnerability, but, equally important, the reluctance to experience it may *reflect* an unwillingness to accept this aspect of ourselves.”²²

Yet the perspective of the mountain remains elusive, when we think we have arrived at a sense of smallness and parthood, and hence greatness and wholeness, our own mortality, a shadow which lies just beyond our vulnerability, calls us helplessly back to our own perspective; as Emerson once described in his essay, *Nature*: “I am glad to the brink of fear.”²³ Weakened thus, we lapse into prudence, recoiling from the edge where a stray mountain bush, or a tuft of dittany has just begun to set its roots: it would be death for us to fall from such a height.

It would be death *for us* to fall from such a height – what kind of being could survive it, except one that is very small, can be carried by the wind as by its mother, our friend in infancy, when the invisible hand rocks us in our fevers, can be caught up in the reeds, or along the gentle tendrils of fronds unfurling, hidden from view in the mountain, where every kind of womb surrounds living beings, even the spermatozoa we once were, in part, seeking some aimless submission through a conduit of human fluids whose “objective properties” and “propagation” all fall under the heading of “fluid dynamics.”

Even the lowly lyme, carried within a tick burrowed for winter warmth into the pine needle carpet of the mountain, must possess a certain distinct geometry to propagate through our blood; the fearfulness of death, the indifference to our survival, too, have a way of fading into the background of experience as one “moves to” a certain level of abstraction: one gazes forward, winded, having climbed a peak midway to the summit; one can only ever then look down upon the smaller world – the city in the distance with its sad spires of symbolic longing, the hawks circling over a neighboring field, the far horizon which no one can ever solely own.

²² Thomas Hill, Jr., “Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments,” in *The Ethical Life*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford University Press, 2015), 344.

²³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Nature addresses and lectures, vol. 1*, (UMDL Texts, University of Michigan Library, 2006), <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/4957107.0001.001>. Emerson may not have said this of mountains specifically, but it still rings true considering that he was among the first non-Native Americans to climb Mount Katadhin (literally: The Great) in Maine.



Image: Frederic Edwin Church, *Drawing, Mount Katadhin from Lake Katadhin, Maine, ca. 1853*, brush and oil paint on thin paperboard, Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, New York, New York, <https://collection.cooperhewitt.org/objects/18196989/with-image-19614>.