

<b>Zeitschrift:</b>	Études de Lettres : revue de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Lausanne
<b>Herausgeber:</b>	Université de Lausanne, Faculté des lettres
<b>Band:</b>	2 (1979)
<b>Heft:</b>	1
<b>Artikel:</b>	The mountains in Moby-Dick
<b>Autor:</b>	Blair, John G.
<b>DOI:</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-870893">https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-870893</a>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 13.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## THE MOUNTAINS IN *MOBY-DICK*

Unlike many of the major studies of Melville over recent years, this essay returns to the text to attest the high artistry which is fundamental to our continuing to care about this man's writing.<sup>1</sup> The imagery of *Moby-Dick*, though obviously dominated by the sea, includes nearly fifty allusions to mountains, hills and associated phenomena like the snow line. Though some carry significance limited to the immediate context<sup>2</sup>, the majority link together to establish a vertical dimension which complements and clarifies the lateral movement from land to sea in search of life's ultimate meanings.

Even the topography of mountains serves to dramatize the effects of ascent on the climbers in *Moby-Dick*, most notably Ahab himself. Whereas the sea is directionless, offering no inherent channeling of the voyager's direction, a mountain progressively narrows towards its summit. The putative direction is always up. He who climbs a mountain will pass successive stages that mark an increasing distance from the normal human community below. From the cultivated lower slopes he passes into a band of forest, then beyond the timberline to the snow line with its inescapable links to cold and whiteness. As the mountain narrows towards the top, the climber has less and less latitude for movement and he must exert more effort and will power to overcome the obstacles hostile to his progress; not merely the slope but also avalanches or perhaps glaciers. In Melville's hands these commonplaces serve as a brilliant means of characterizing Ahab's progressive monomania, both his persistence and his increasing isolation. In the process Melville also draws on a literary and religious tradition based in part on the sheer difficulty and danger associated with the mountains: located among the peaks are those fearsome beings to whom access is denied to ordinary mortals—the gods themselves.

The metaphorical linking of mountains and deities has a venerable history in Western literature and mythology. A few examples must suffice. The Old Testament identifies Jahweh as a

God of the hills, as in Psalm 121 or in Moses' encounter on Mount Sinai, which Melville himself draws into *Moby Dick* by allusion (376-377). The Greeks had their Olympus. In Christian terms, the Hill of Holiness, as we see it in Spenser and Bunyan, embodies similar summetry plus added emphasis on the difficulty of the climb. In romantic literature, most outstandingly in Book XIV of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the vision from Mount Snowdon, while less theological, nonetheless projects the highest spiritual insights. A similar contrast between the mountain and the plain appears in the works of Melville's major American contemporaries. Thoreau exploits it extensively in *The Maine Woods* and in several important letters and journal entries.<sup>3</sup> Emerson draws on the same metaphor to help bring «The American Scholar» to a dramatic close.

Especially in the romantic tradition, which is of course Melville's own, the plains consistently imply slavish routine, ordinary unenlightened human existence, habit, subservience. Those who leave the plain to climb up into the mountains may do so in a spirit of search for enlightenment, as in Wordsworth, or defiantly, as in Byron's *Manfred*. In either case, the locus of spiritual significance is among the summits. Melville clearly exploits the latter vision in depicting Ahab's defiant and painful climb to call the high powers to account. But Melville does not simply presume that the reader will bring with him a knowledge of the literary and theological traditions relating to mountains. He incorporates what the reader needs to know into the text itself.

Fittingly enough, *Moby Dick* himself is the first fictional entity to be associated with the mountains. In Ishmael's anticipatory vision of whaling, «there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, mid most of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air» (6). Ishmael frequently images whales as mountainous in order to dramatize their size, but *Moby Dick*, because of his color and his extraordinary bulk, is easily associated with the highest mountains.<sup>4</sup> By a variety of well recognized means, *Moby Dick* is progressively linked to deity as the story goes on. This initial association simply implies that he who would seek to resolve the riddles implicit in the whale will have to climb up to the snowy regions where the imagery locates him. Obviously any such movement is outside the narrative frame of the sea story and hence will appear only sporadically as Melville chooses to develop it. The remarkable fact is that he did exploit these potentialities so fully.

Once Moby Dick is linked to the mountains, parallel imagery can extend to other creatures mysteriously or even ominously associated with him, like the squid. Before describing the squid himself, Ishmael carefully sets the scene in such a way as to locate the Pequod on the plain so that the squid, even though actually rising from below the surface of the sea, can be perceived as coming down from the hills. He describes the ship thus: «Her three tall tapering masts mildly waved to that languid breeze, as three mild palms on a plain». Then the squid can arrive from above: «In the distance, a great white mass lazily rose, and rising higher and higher, and disentangling itself from the azure, at last gleamed before our prow like a snow-slide, new slid from the hills» (275). Here as in several other passages throughout the story the depths of the sea are linked with the mountain heights as loci of high powers and profound significance, but in the present context the emphasis must go on the arrival of the spectral squid from above like a snow avalanche. Thus the kindred spirit that associates the squid and Moby Dick is given life in mountain imagery as well as in sailors' superstitions.

If the object of the whole metaphysical quest is imaginistically located in the mountains, then those characters who participate in the quest will predictably be related to the mountains as well. The first mountaineer to be identified in the text is Bulkington, the apotheosis of the questing spirit:

His voice at once announced that he was a Southerner, and from his fine stature, I thought he must be one of those tall mountaineers from the Alleganian Ridge in Virginia (14-15).

Another figure, equally stalwart, namely Steelkilt, is not associated with the mountains since he lacks the questing spirit. As the narrative progresses, still more important characters join the company of mountaineers.

Shortly after introducing Bulkington, Ishmael associates himself with the group, albeit in a playful context. He stops the banter of the Spouter Inn's landlord by approaching him «cool as Mt. Hecla in a snowstorm» (17). The humor here is multiple. There is no fire in the Spouter Inn so Ishmael is literally cold, but at the same time boiling mad inside. With Mansfield and Vincent one presumes that Melville was aware of the 1845 eruption of Mount Hecla in Iceland (607-608). At the same time, Ishmael's

youthful bravado in attacking the landlord reflects his as yet innocent and uncomprehending relation to the central metaphysical quest. The slyly humorous tone is appropriate. Later on, as we shall see, Ishmael will locate himself in relation to the mountains with much more precision.

The next important character to be introduced, Queequeg, has a special relation to the mountains. Although he and the other harpooneers in their instinctive savagery are never out of tune with Ahab's challenge to the powers that lie behind this «cannibal world», Queequeg is unique among them as an embodiment of wisdom. Of course, he does not understand intellectually the tattooings on his body, but he is in tune with the universe. His relation to the mountains becomes explicit early in his introduction:

But who could show a cheek like Queequeg? which, barred with various tints, seemed like the Andes' western slope, to show forth in one array, contrasting climates, zone by zone (29-30).

Queequeg is not a quester but rather an embodiment of mountainness, especially as associated with the differing bands of cultivation that colorfully mark the Andes seen from the ocean off Peru, where Melville stopped with the frigate *United States*. As is developed narratively in his relation to Ishmael, Queequeg is one of those beautiful, inspiring, self-contained characters E. E. Cummings called «delectable mountains» in his novel *The Enormous Room*. Non-Western in origin and character, Queequeg is himself a mountainside and a foster brother to the whale.

These connections are established in two widely separated but parallel passages which make the link by way of phrenology. First Queequeg is identified with George Washington through their common possession of uncommon nobility manifested in a «hilly head.» «It (Queequeg's head) had the same long regularly graded retreating slope from above the brows, which were likewise very projecting, like two long promontories thickly wooded on top» (49). Later, the company of those who phrenologically share nobility and wisdom is widened to include Shakespeare and Melancthon, only to have them surpassed by the whale as mountain:

But in most creatures, nay in man himself, very often the brow is but a mere strip of alpine land lying along the snow line. Few are

the foreheads which like Shakespeare's and Melancthon's rise so high, and descend so low, that the eyes themselves seem clear, eternal, tideless mountain lakes; and all above them in the forehead's wrinkles, you seem to track the antlered thoughts descending there to drink, as the Highland hunters track the snow prints of the deer. But in the great Sperm Whale, this high and mighty god-like dignity inherent in the brow is so immensely amplified, that gazing on it, in that full front view, you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature (344-345).<sup>5</sup>

Queequeg, like these wisest of mortals, is surpassed by the whale, but he shares with them the embodiment of a human wisdom which lesser mortals can only strive to comprehend. The whale, grander than all other natural beings, rises beyond human scale among the heights. Given the numerous passages in the novel which reinforce the connection between the mountains and Moby Dick, both mountain and whale become emblems of eternity, inhuman power, and hence danger for mere men.

Foremost among the daring characters who brave that danger for the sake of the quest is obviously Ahab. Since he is not a possessor of wisdom but a desperate seeker after knowledge, he will be among the mountaineers. His identification with the mountains begins with his first appearance in the story. To Ishmael's awed perception Ahab first appears as mountain like. The ship is merely cruising the Atlantic towards the whaling grounds and thus Ahab has no routine responsibilities to distract him from himself and «chase away, for that one interval, the clouds that layer upon layer were piled upon his brow, as ever all clouds choose the loftiest peaks to pile themselves upon» (122). In part this image suggests Ahab's social distance above Ishmael and even the mates, soon to be developed more fully in «The Cabin-Table,» but it also portrays Ahab's inner state in the process of locating him among the heights.

Shortly thereafter, when we begin seeing Ahab's view of himself, we find him transformed into a climber of such hills. «The diver sun — slow dived from noon — goes down; my soul mounts up! she wearies with her endless hill» (165). Ahab links himself with the night and the dark powers and simultaneously with the weary climber who sees no end to his struggle towards the summit. Inescapably the further the climber advances, the more lonely and isolated he becomes, as Ishmael reminds us in the process of cataloguing the terrors whiteness holds for him.

To the native Indian of Peru, the continual sight of the snowhowdahed Andes conveys naught of dread, except, perhaps, in the mere fancying of the eternal frosted desolateness reigning at such vast altitudes, and the natural conceit of what a fearfulness it would be to lose oneself in such inhuman solitudes (192).

Thus even the natives who — like whalers — are on familiar terms with their particular horror do not escape, at least in Ishmael's imagination, the awesomeness of the high mountains. Ahab as climber is clearly heading for just such inhuman regions.

Ishmael finally establishes his personal relation to Ahab's unrelenting ascent in a crucial passage at the end of «The Try-Works.» There he conceives of the quest in terms of a Catskill eagle flying in the mountains or even beyond the earthly frame of reference they embody.

There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness. And there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he forever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar (423).

Thus once again Ishmael uses the distinction between mountain and plain to dramatize his understanding of what is at stake in the voyage. This time he, for one, will limit his movement upwards. Those who remain on the plain are in effect landlubbers who fail to perceive any need to soar, to explore the significance of this life. But those who do voyage and soar may range more or less far and high. The preceding context in this chapter suggests that Ishmael has on his mind the need to escape being locked into overconcentration on the black side of life. He affirms that one must be internally free to dive into the black and soar out again into the sunny spaces: such is the wisdom that is woe. But also the quester can go too far in a single direction; hence the woe that is madness, Ahab's state. With overtones of Icarus, Ahab as eagle soars wildly beyond all relation to earthly existence, a metaphorical extension of his one-sided preoccupation with blackness. Ishmael, by implication, will prefer to stay within the mountain gorges, leaving Ahab to mount ever higher till he becomes lost. Once Ishmael has thus dissociated himself from the intensity and audacity of Ahab's

climb, his references to mountains center around Ahab as the action builds towards climax.

Shortly after «The Try-Works,» the mountains reappear on the doubloon. The gold coin itself was «raked somewhere out of the heart of gorgeous hills» (427), and clearly images the meaning of life as seen by each person who contemplates it. As in the case of Queequeg's tattooing, however, no one knows how to read it except as a mirror for his own prior convictions. Ishmael goes out of his way to emphasize the coin's metaphysical significance by reminding us that «it had been cast midway up the Andes, in the unwaning clime that knows no autumn» (428). In short, it comes from outside of time as conceived on an earthly scale. What men see in it reflects their deepest convictions on the nature of the unseen.

Ahab instinctively allies himself with mountaintops, boastfully locating himself on the summits which defy still higher powers.

«There's something ever egotistical in mountain-tops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things; look here, — three peaks proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that too, is Ahab; all are Ahab» (428).

In an effective dramatic contrast Starbuck will shortly identify himself with the valley between the protective, «heaven-abiding» peaks. As the narrative continues, Ahab's grim defiance carries his metaphysical summetry still further.

For a time Ahab continues to imagine himself as already having conquered the mountains as a stage in mounting still higher. In «The Candles», he protests :

«Avast!» cried Ahab; «let's have fair play though we be the weaker side. Yet I'll contribute to raise rods on the Himmalehs and Andes, that all the world may be secured» (498).

For the moment he asserts that the mountains are as accessible as the mastheads, just as, in his long harangue directed at the power of fire, he asserts that he is no longer afraid of fire but rather would enlist its aid against the still higher beings which control it. Soon, however, the imagery reveals just how much bravado has filled these claims.

That night a violent storm leads Starbuck to request permission to sail more cautiously by lightening the canvas. Ahab

replies: «Strike nothing, and stir nothing, but lash everything. The wind rises, but it has not got up to my table-lands yet» (502). Thus he transforms himself into a mountain upland which stubbornly resists the vindictive storms of the gods. Yet a bit later he must look up to curse the mountain gods for their harsh treatment of Pip: «There can be no hearts above the snow-line. Oh, ye frozen heavens! look down here. Ye did beget this luckless child, and have abandoned him, ye creative libertines» (514). Since Ahab, though high among the mountains, is still metaphorically below the snow line, we suspect that his ascent will be stopped short of its goal.

In the intense activity of the final three days Ahab is explicitly located above the level of the plain yet frustrated in his climb by a Moby Dick who is still higher and forever unreachable. On the first day, even in a momentary collapse after the destruction of his boat, Ahab retains his mountaineership: «Far inland, nameless wails came from him, as desolate sounds from out ravines» (543). He recovers his composure only to be more than ever conscious of the isolation and the cold suffered by the mountaineer who presses his defiance beyond the limits of humanity: «Ahab stands alone among the millions of the peopled earth, nor gods nor men his neighbors! Cold, cold — I shiver» (545). It is precisely the Andes' fate Ishmael has foreseen. Ahab suffers all the privations of the climber without succeeding in mastering the summit powers.

On the second day Moby Dick now blocks Ahab's way like an enormous glacier come down to the flat plain of the sea as if to emphasize how little Ahab has in fact been able to transcend the human:

So suddenly seen in the blue plain of the sea, an relieved against the still bluer margin of the sky, the spray that he raised, for the moment intolerably glittered and glared like a glacier; and stood there gradually fading and fading away from its first sparkling intensity, to the dim mistiness of an advancing shower in a vale (549).

The glacier, naturally, proves stronger than Ahab, and the third day of the chase brings the narrative to a close with the final overwhelming bulk of Moby Dick as mountain:

At length as the craft was cast to one side, and ran rangingly along with the white whale's flank, he seemed strangely oblivious of its advance — as the whale sometimes will — and Ahab was fairly within the smoky mountain mist, which, thrown off from the whale's spout, curled around his great, Monadnock hump; he was even thus close to him (562).

Thus Ahab reaches tantalizingly close to the summit, but, unexpectedly, not on a mountain grand enough to possess glaciers. For the first and only specific mountain linked to Ahab, Melville chose not an Everest or a Matterhorn but New Hampshire's Mount Monadnock (3,165 feet above sea level or roughly 1000 meters). Monadnock may attract a traveller's eye because it rises alone above a relatively low countryside, but despite the numerous poems written to and about it in nineteenth-century America, it is a mountain of local importance only. Its bulk is sufficient to image Moby Dick's size in relation to Ahab's physical self, but at the cost of a considerable comedown from the Himalayas and the Andes.

The reduction in scale of his mountain climbing reflects a self-generated limitation on his earlier metaphysical and imaginative probings. His insistence on final and tangible certainty leads him to locate the power and mystery of the godhead in one specific earthly being, Moby Dick. Earlier, when Moby Dick was dominantly an idea burning in Ahab's tortured consciousness, Ahab was imaginatively free to climb even higher than the highest peaks in order to challenge the powers that be. At the end he seeks to limit the mountain-god-whale to the confines of one physical body. The mountain that images that whale becomes similarly fixed in name and reduced in size from Ahab's earlier metaphysical probings. He who would have soared beyond all limits is brought low, in major part because he himself insists on concrete earthly knowledge of the godhead. In consequence, Ahab will be reduced to a physical entity, a corpse incapable of further speculation. The physical implements indispensable for Ahab's quest, his ship, his crew, and his body, are swallowed by the abiding, all-secret sea. Only Ishmael remains to ponder the significance of the metaphysical climb up the mountains of the mind and its final failure.

The voyage, after all, has taken place as much in the mind as in space. If the sea and the ship have been the primary vehicle to give literary form to the voyage in space, the mountains have served to highlight the vertical dimension, the voyage of the mind. In his next novel, *Pierre*, Melville would go so far as to dedicate the work to another New England peak — Mount Greylock.

John G. BLAIR.

## NOTES

M. le professeur John G. Blair, professeur de littérature et de civilisation américaines à l'Université de Genève, a assumé une longue suppléance à la Faculté des lettres de Lausanne en qualité de professeur invité. C'est à ce titre que nous joignons son étude aux travaux de la Section d'anglais.

<sup>1</sup> For example, Edgar Dryden's *Melville's Thematics of Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968) offers several excellencies but proceeds through intellectual indirection toward enlightening the text. John Seelye's *Melville: The Ironic Diagram* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970) pursues abstract metaphorical patterns. Robert Zoellner, in *The Salt-Sea Mastodon: A Reading of Moby-Dick* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) comes closer to the mark via the text.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Ishmael speaks in «The Whiteness of the Whale» of the contrasting effect of the White Mountains as opposed to the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, but the context makes it clear that he is interested in the impact of the word «white» rather than in the mountains themselves. See p. 190 of the Hendricks House edition (1962), ed. Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent. All further references to *Moby Dick* will indicate page references to this edition in parentheses. The interested reader will find additional references to mountains and hills which have dominantly local significance on pp. 2, 30, 32, 166, 193, 436, 458, 486.

<sup>3</sup> See my «Thoreau on Katahdin» (with Augustus Trowbridge), *American Quarterly*, XII (Winter 1960), 508-517.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, pp. 62, 179, 271, 345, 355, 380, 384, 388, 454.

<sup>5</sup> See also p. 328 for another passage identifying the whale's eyes with mountain lakes separated by the towering bulk of his head.