

**SWITCHBACKS: ASCENDING THE CATSKILL
MOUNTAIN HIGH PEAKS**

KATHRYN KURTZ

Artistic Design	1
<u>Organizing Principle</u>	98
INTRODUCTION	98
<u>Ascent</u>	99
BLACKHEAD	100
WINDHAM	101
PLATEAU	101
<u>Summit</u>	102
HUNTER	102
<u>Descent</u>	103
SLIDE	104
GRAHAM	104
BALSAM LAKE	105
<u>Summary of Switchbacks</u>	106

PART II

Introduction	109
<u>Layman Monument</u>	
Chapter One	130
<u>Blackhead Range</u>	
Chapter Two	153
<u>Windham High Peak</u>	
Chapter Three	170
<u>Plateau Mountain</u>	
Chapter Four	186
<u>Hunter Mountain</u>	
Chapter Five	200
<u>Slide Mountain</u>	
Chapter Six	226
<u>Graham Mountain</u>	
Chapter Seven	236

Balsam Lake Mountain

Catskills Map

266

Switchbacks

260

The facts of the life of Nature that are transpiring about us are like written words that the observer is to arrange into sentences.

John Burroughs: "Sharp Eyes"

All that we can do, is to keep steadily in mind that each organic being is striving to increase at a geometrical ratio; that each at some period of its life, during some season of the year, during each generation or at intervals, has to struggle for life, and to suffer great destruction. When we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with the full belief, that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply.

Charles Darwin: Origin of Species

Chapter Three Artistic Design

Organizing Principle

INTRODUCTION

The movement that informs Switchbacks is the movement between evolution, adaptation, and integration. This model is an analogy based upon Darwin's Origin of the Species. The presumption in the introduction, Layman Monument, is that the protagonist comes from a family that is not fit. Somehow, she must survive the extinction of her origins—both human and environmental. She must make the strong physiological and behavioral traits of her family members undergo an evolution. This process is analogous to Darwin's theory: "[...] when a plant or animal is placed in a new country amongst new competitors, though the climate may be exactly the same as in its former home, yet the conditions of its life will generally be changed in an essential manner. If we wished to increase its average numbers in its new home, we should have to modify it in a different way to what we should have done in its native country; for we should have to give it some advantage over a different set of competitors or enemies" (Darwin XIV). The protagonist's enemies appear as associations with other similarly damaged organisms within her species. Her desire for modification places her in a new landscape, the landscape of her ancestors where she experiences not only the extinction of her inherited deviations, but the extinction of certain traits in herself, an inevitable consequence of the flowering of new favorable modifications. The protagonist learns to exist in a protected, isolated habitat—the Catskill forest. There she regains the strength of ancestral traits, which she mimics. It remains to be seen if this will protect her from extinction, if she will defeat her inherited mutations in the struggle for existence. Subsequent chapters resolve the journey, even though she gives birth to a son who is himself a variant, but both he and she persist. She, because of her recovered reason and Individualism that make her physiology more specialized; hence, she is more fit. Her fitness enables her to integrate her son into her specialized ecosystem. He persists because, through a better physiology, he has acquired mental, behavioral, and mimicking variants for fitness.

Ascent

The narrative arch itself evolves along with the protagonist's. Her family was quite literally subject to extinction as she is the last female descendant. Her reproduction is singular in the family of origin. Her three sons reproduce herself and her dead brothers. The varieties of men she encounters serve unconsciously as links in the chain of her evolution and her offspring. There are damaged men and damaging selections along the way that do not serve her purpose. Her purpose is to flourish, to reproduce characteristics of fitness. In her evolution she models this through exercise, relationships, education, creativity, and therapy. Her goal is to help her family evolve into a cooperative community. She must repetitively dislodge her enemies, the men with the deviations. Her excursions teach her which traits to mimic in order to gain an advantage over the predators in the ecosystems she encounters. She wants recovery, which is fitness for survival. She wants to adapt to her rooted landscape in cooperation with her extended family. She returns to the Catskills and brings with her some of the variants of her urban landscape. Not all of these are useful. She picks up men along the way, ones who will model fitness, especially for her children. She picks up men who are deviant and weak, so she lets them go. As she evolves, she acquires Individualism and she sheds unfavorable modifications more quickly. These excursions must be taken in order; she cannot skip steps towards self-sufficiency. She cannot easily shed the men who help support her; she must evolve, ascend, in a more suitable landscape—the Catskills—her place of adaptation. Darwin thus compels the literary evolution construct in Switchbacks:

“Man does not actually produce variability; he only unintentionally exposes organic beings to new conditions of life, and then nature acts on the organization, and causes variability. But man can and does select the favorable modifications given to him by nature, and thus accumulate them in any desired manner. He thus adapts animals and plants for his own benefit or pleasure. He may do this methodically, or he may do it unconsciously by preserving the individuals most useful to him at the time [...]” (xiv). As the protagonist evolves, she gains fitness in the mountains. She begins weakly; she cannot climb a high peak easily. Each ascent pushes her farther and more quickly; each ascent is a small arch. The first cluster of three mountains instills the fitness she will need to adapt. Eventually each arch adds up to the entire arch of all the high peaks, a dragon’s back with each spike analogous to a bioregion within the ecosystem. The protagonist thus accomplishes, through evolution, Darwinian adaptation to the most dicey challenges in a new environment as “birds breeding on precipices, and good fliers, are unlikely to be exterminated [...]” (xiv).

BLACKHEAD

On Blackhead adaptations develop due to the changing demands of the environment. The protagonist must adapt to a draught while her own body undergoes a draught. She finds that she flourishes in the landscape but her depleted body cannot adapt at that elevation without fitness. She switches and learns a new growth expression that results in a modification for fitness. The narrative construct is fragmented on shaky ground. It switches rapidly between memoir narratives and nature narrative. The plotted style is paratactic. Many switches confuse both the protagonist and the reader. However, each switch is a step, small steps within the small arch that will eventually cover all the mountains. Darwin writes, "As natural selection acts solely by accumulating slight, successive, favorable variations, it can produce no great or sudden modification; it can act only by very short and slow steps. Hence the canon of 'Natura non facit saltum,' which every fresh addition to our knowledge tends to make more strictly correct, is on this theory simply intelligible" (iv). The protagonist cannot take these steps straight up the mountain; she must experience stasis at each horizontal switch where she gains the fitness to ascend.

WINDHAM

On Windham High Peak the main issue in evolution is how organisms deal with unknown futures. The protagonist is disabled by dread—of her body and of her emotional instability. She cannot ascend comfortably, yet she cannot turn back on the journey. Genetics propel her and deter her. She is threatened with extinction if she does not push for variants in character and body. She reaches for a connection between the two. It is small but it adds a degree of fitness for the climbs ahead. This is the second step on her journey. Each step is an agony of modification. Darwin writes, "The forms which stand in closest competition with those undergoing modification and improvement, will naturally suffer most" (iv). The frenzied switches between narrative genres continue, although the protagonist begins to blend them toward the end of the chapter due to a modification in her health.

PLATEAU

On Plateau Mountain the challenge is to conserve selected essential information to produce new favorable modifications. Plateau is indeed a plateau of accomplishment. She has undergone an excision of unfavorable behavioral and psychological traits. Her energy has faltered and she wonders if she will regain it. These personality modifications are unfavorable genetic traits from her family of origin. The protagonist herein plots her path of recovery toward a new fitness in which she develops favorable habits for survival. Darwin writes, “[...] nature moves by graduated steps in endowing different animals of the same class with their several instincts. I have attempted to show how much light the principle of gradation throws on the admirable architectural powers of the hive-bee. Habit no doubt sometimes comes into play in modifying instincts; but it certainly is not indispensable, as we see, in the case of neuter insects, which leave no progeny to inherit the effects of long-continued habit” (iv). In Plateau the genres continue to switch, but the modifications in the protagonist’s body sustain adaptation on a plateau of fitness as well as in her tendency to separate her mind, emotions, and body from nature. She has made short term physiological adaptations to this point.

Summit

It is important to note that as both the protagonist and the narrative ascend in the manner of a roller coaster, perception is heightening at the same time. Both accumulate useful tools and images, useful and necessary relationships in the landscape. The protagonist is on the verge of a new relationship with a man who has more fitness and fewer unfavorable modifications; the partnership propels her more quickly. They are cooperative as organisms in the same ecosystem. Her current level of fitness is analogous to the mountain climber adapting slowly to thinner air. She will surpass these climes and bring her children with her.

Darwin’s theory continues the literary construct:

“As natural selection acts by competition, it adapts the inhabitants of each country only in relation to the degree of perfection of their associates; so that we need feel no surprise at the inhabitants of any one country, although on the ordinary view supposed to have been specially created and adapted for that country, being beaten and supplanted by the naturalized productions from another land. Nor ought we to marvel if all the contrivances in nature be not, as far as we can judge, absolutely perfect; and if some of them be abhorrent to our ideas of fitness. We need not marvel at the sting of the bee causing the bee's own death; at drones being produced in such vast numbers for one single act, and being then slaughtered by their sterile sisters; at the astonishing waste of pollen by our fir-trees; at the instinctive hatred of the queen bee for her own fertile daughters; at ichneumonidae feeding within the live bodies of caterpillars; and at other such cases. The wonder indeed is, on the theory of natural selection, that more cases of the want of absolute perfection have not been observed” (xiv).

The literary protagonist is as fit as her associates. As she ascends she will achieve the fitness she needs to adapt to the ecosystems that reflect her evolving level of adaptability. Those who did not ascend with her because they were not fit will be left behind.

HUNTER

On Hunter Mountain the process by which favorable traits have come about climaxes in a capacity to cope with challenges to fitness. Here the adaptations to the environment are behavioral and developmental; hence they are longer term adaptations. The protagonist reaches a fruitful switchback on Hunter where the arrangement of trail elevations otherwise insurmountable are ascended by a series of zigzags until the summit is reached; except on this mountain that switch which was previously linked to another only by a leap of the imagination is henceforth linked by a gathering integration. On the descent the switches will begin to be linked by concrete facts. She will bring this new found information to bear on her Individualism and interconnectedness in an ecosystem of her family and peers, plants and animals. The narratives of memoir and nature will begin to form halting but explicit links because she knows what they are.

Descent

The narrative descent is paralleled by the protagonist's descent into the shared ecosystem. She makes further adaptations along the way that add to her character, her fitness. Most importantly, she unequivocally recognizes the enemy, the unfavorable modifications of character, the lack of fitness in the fauna and flora around her. She cannot be brought to extinction by them because she moves in a different system. She will now assume some of the characteristics of her new associates through mimicry and reach the same degree of perfection. She will come back to her landscape changed, possessing knowledge that will ensure her place and benefit her connected family.

It is a beautiful system, this seven-step arch of mountain climbing that leads her through recovery. She appears like a hexagon, at once visible and blended into the background of her system where every living thing will flourish in cooperative stasis. There is no other recovery; it must occur in a system bigger than the protagonist. Darwin concludes with his loving narrative of one fertile garden of great diversity in which all things connect:

"It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth with Reproduction; inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the external conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved" (xiv).

The protagonist becomes one among others in community life because she fits: she is not struggling in a system for which she is unfit by reason of conditioning or inheritance, nor is she rebelling in a system which she has surpassed. Her old system has become extinct along with its members. Her new system is balanced (and thus peaceful) precisely because she is a member whose talents are essential to the interdependent cooperation of the whole system.

SLIDE

On Slide Mountain the protagonist is modulated by an environment in which she copes with overcrowding and erosion. The slide on Slide was created in a monumental culmination of environmental stimuli that resulted in a shedding of parts of the mountain. The protagonist has undergone a similar shedding of unfavorable traits.

GRAHAM

On Graham Mountain the protagonist identifies the source of her inherited and protracted suffering in an interaction with a man who might have gripped her in the past, but with her adaptation at a new level of self-sufficiency, she is able to shed him. He is not a peer she needs to mimic. He is not a cooperative inhabitant of in her ecosystem. He possesses unfavorable variations for fitness. But like the strange dwarfed trees on the summit, she appreciates him.

BALSAM LAKE

On Balsam Lake Mountain the protagonist furthers her acquired knowledge and favorable modifications through learning. Learning is like 'tracking' in the way animals' track territory for survival. The protagonist, like the animals, is endowed with select genetic potential that is favorable for survival, but some of these traits must be modeled before she can discover their use. Similarly, bear cubs must observe their parents hunting to be able to become self-sufficient as adults themselves. The ability to learn allows the cub, in effect, to make the right moves. When a gene is stimulated by environmental factors, as it is in the above case, it is called facultative (it allows but does not force its occurrence). The protagonist is thus stimulated by her natural environment to express fitness and by an environment of her peers to excel psychologically. She discovers this from her newly adapted fire tower elevation and view of the bog, a perfect ecosystem. The narrative is stimulated by the writer's increasing ability to discern the plot of her life. Darwin writes,

"[...] the wolves inhabiting a mountainous district, and those frequenting the lowlands, would naturally be forced to hunt different prey; and from the continued preservation of the individuals best fitted for the two sites, two varieties might slowly be formed. These varieties would cross and blend where they met [...] there are two varieties of the wolf inhabiting the Catskill Mountains in the United States, one with a light greyhound-like form, which pursues deer, and the other more bulky, with shorter legs, which more frequently attacks the shepherd's flocks" (iv).

The protagonist, in a sense, becomes "a new variety" of her family of origin. All the members inhabited the same region, but she has developed traits of fitness that adapt her to a new site. Her adaptability is the result of these newly evolved traits for survival.

She has reached a stasis of Individualism and integration in her environment via the metaphor of the bog. It is a morphologic, long-term adaptation in which the structure of the environment, the structure of her words, and the structure of her body are the same. The narrative resolves parataxis, the gaps that prevent integration, in an analogous process. The protagonist's thinking is now congruent with reality, as is the narrative. Her mind, the environment, and the story are one.

SUMMARY OF SWITCHBACKS

Following is a summation of switchbacks ecology and the tents of the model:

- A. "Embellishment" is not the "literary" part of Literary Nonfiction.
- B. "Literary" is "relational," that which exists between separate objects in the landscape, that which exists between mind and landscape.
- C. Literary Nonfiction is the conduit between landscape and mind, between exterior and interior.
- D. This process is perceptual, chemical, neurological; such perceptions must be rooted in, and reproducible in, the landscape.
- E. The pattern of the landscape passes into the mind in a pattern that becomes a narrative.
- F. If the pattern of the narrative matches the pattern of the landscape, that is its plot and it is accurate.

- G. Subsequently, the pattern of thought will match the pattern of land; such congruency is the relationship between mind and land.
- H. The fact that these two patterns match automatically produces an accurate narrative; the absence of a match might be called insanity, a lie, or deception.
- I. This relationship reveals the universal meaning of the narrative.

**LANDSCAPE + RELATIONSHIP + MIND = PATTERN + PLOT + PATTERN >
ACCURACY > LITERARY NONFICTION**

1. Switchbacks are diagonal zigzagging trails that ease vertical mountain ascents. An organism ascends to its highest level of potential through the process of evolution and adaptation. A climber adapts to thinner air, for example; red spruce ascends the Catskill Mountains seeking a cooler drier climate. Each switch achieves a higher elevation of relatively unpopulated territory where a species may spread and flourish. Each switch bestows new fitness upon the organism.

2. Growth is stimulated by environmental conditions present in varied forms at varied elevations. The organism in effect switches from one elevation, one growth expression, to another until it reaches its genetic and psychological potential. Transitional species persist in between growth expressions, or switchbacks, of ascending species; these facilitate environmental stability via root systems and drainage, i.e., as “stepping stones” for the maximum ascent of hardier species.

3. Evolution is, metaphorically, a capitalist model in that an individual, a family, or a species, must be free to survive and to flourish, to switch and ascend, unrestrained. Metaphorically, this is free enterprise for humans where producers own the products of their efforts and all transactions are entered into voluntarily for mutual benefit; for humans, like organisms in an ecosystem, must cooperate for maximum productivity. The narrative, in a parallel evolution, is also a product of free thought. As the organism ascends, it develops unique traits of fitness for the environment that become essential to its survival and to the survival of its ecosystem. This is called individualism.

4. Switchbacks in narratives occur as parataxis when fragmented ideas persist without connections, relationships, or integration, as organisms juggle for space in an ecosystem. This can occur at the sentence level to the genre level. A narrative evolves analogously to an organism, as rapidly as the beaks of finches adapt to climatic changes in the landscape. A narrative develops fitness in the same way and at the same time the writer achieves fitness for the rigors of the landscape.

5. A narrative is created when the writer discerns facts in the landscape through the perceptions of a rational mind. These facts, when accurately interpreted, can be reproduced as accurate narratives. The pattern of the landscape is the pattern of the narrative, its plot. If these patterns are congruent, i.e., if the narrative can be reproduced to match the facts of the landscape, then accuracy in Literary Nonfiction is achieved.

6. The absence of accuracy is a failure to adapt and to integrate the fragments of a narrative by rational interpretation; hence, the narrative does not “ring true.” The failure to adapt in the individual results in mental illness. At first, acts of the imagination, i.e., hypothetical models, make connections between the narrative parataxis. Similarly, the individual may tell herself stories about reality to fill in gaps of misunderstanding, the same gaps that exist between fictions and literary nonfictions. As the writer ascends and adapts to her highest potential, parataxis ceases at the same time the switchbacks cease because her perception has broadened at the summit of the mountain.

7. This new found knowledge and fitness is a boon to the individual’s ability to interconnect in a family, as the organism cooperates similarly in an ecosystem. The individual cannot sustain her place in the environment alone, she requires the stasis and homogeny that many of her kind contribute, as in a capitalist system. The narrative survives as accurate representation, as literary Nonfiction, when the writer achieves a state of mental health, when the writer tells a story that is reproducible in reality. The genres are woven together just as the inner and outer landscapes are interwoven to achieve integration just as the switchbacks interweave to achieve the highest elevation.

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