The conjunction of Nietzsche and mountains is fraught with complexities and interpretive entanglements – in part because Nietzsche himself displays an ambivalent attitude toward mountainous heights. On the one hand, he liked to stylize himself as a solitary mountain dweller if not intrepid mountain climber, and he generally considered his philosophy inseparable from the Alpine environment in which some of it was conceived. As he has, for instance, stated in Ecce homo: «Philosophie, wie ich sie bisher verstanden und gelebt habe, ist das freiwillige Leben in Eis und Hochgebirge» (KSA 6, 258); and in a letter from 2 August 1875 he boasts: «Es kommt mir so vor als ob ich ein geborner Bergsteiger sei» (KSB 5, 95).1 On the other hand, even though Nietzsche spent a great deal of time in the Swiss Alps and by all accounts was physically robust and well-tanned from his long walks, he never climbed a major peak or set foot on a glacier.2 Nor was he inclined to venture above tree line, since his ophthalmic afflictions and susceptibility for migraines compelled him to avoid too much sun exposure, especially at higher altitudes. Moreover, because of his myopia and sensitive optic nerves he preferred forest paths that were not only deeply shaded but also well groomed and clearly marked. In a letter to his mother describing his first summer in St. Moritz, he offers a more realistic glimpse into his ideal outdoor surroundings: «Wälder, Seen, die besten Spazierwege, wie sie für mich Fast-Blinden hergerichtet sein müssen […]» (KSB 5, 424). A few years later, he would praise the Verschönerungsverein of Sils-Maria for creating such a fine network of comfortable walking trails (see Gilman 555) – not exactly the kind of remark one would expect from a dauntless mountaineer.

In sum, one might say that Nietzsche suffered from wistful mountain fervor, accompanied by sporadic spells of delusional summit fever. He can best be regarded as an enthusiastic Spaziergänger, perhaps a hardy Wanderer, since he often rambled around the Upper Engadine Valley for up to eight hours a day on his so-called «Gebirgsmärsche» (KSB 8, 67).3 Yet throughout the twentieth century he tended to enjoy the reputation of a staunch Bergsteiger, a dubious image promoted by early intellectual devotees, occasional Alpine club articles, National Socialism, and even by Reinhold Messner himself.4
his study *Scholar Mountaineers: Pioneers of Parnassus* (1950), Wilfrid Noyce goes so far as to identify a post-Nietzschean shift in mountaineering practices, particularly among German-speaking Alpinists during the interwar years:

British climbers still [i.e., after the infamous Matterhorn calamity in 1865] accepted the principle of caution and the sanctity of human life, even when they began to climb without guides. The voice of Nietzsche struck a new note, that of dangerous living sought expressly for its contribution to the attainment of Superman. This voice called towards the pessimism and habit of self-immolation of some of the Continental climbers between the wars, the «pitoneers» who went cheerfully to their death on the north faces of the Eiger or Watzmann. (19)

The irony here, of course, lies in the fact that Nietzsche’s relationship with mountains was mainly rhetorical in nature, full of literary devices, vicarious encounters, and his patented technique of hyperbole. To rely on the thesis of Robert Macfarlane’s *Mountains of the Mind* (2003), one might say that Nietzsche «imagined» his mountains into existence. As Macfarlane illustrates through both personal biography and a cultural history of Alpinism, mountains transcend their brute existence as geophysical formations that have arisen in the wake of diverse tectonic forces; they are also products of human perception and invention. And as he further notes: «A disjunction between the imagined and the real is a characteristic of all human activities, but it finds one of its sharpest expressions in the mountains» (19). Numerous foolhardy and often fatal mountaineering enterprises have attested to this disjunction, perhaps none more famously than George Mallory’s pathological obsession with Mount Everest, to which Macfarlane devotes an entire chapter. Everest, a mountain that was not even known to exist by outsiders until the mid-1800s, when it became triangulated as the abstract Peak H and then Peak XV, became a construct – somewhere between reality and illusion, or delusion – of the British imperial mind. And as Mallory himself realizes on the first of his three expeditions between 1921 and 1924, what previous explorers had visualized regarding Everest’s north face did not conform to the existing terrain: the imagined low-gradient slopes «turn out to be the most appalling precipice nearly 10,000 ft high.»⁵ A similar fascination and ambition obtains vis-à-vis Nietzsche and the mountains upon which his philosophy is ostensibly predicated. And here, too, conjunction is perhaps at bottom disjunction.

Despite these preliminary qualifications and disclaimers, there can be no doubt that mountainous environs constitute an integral landscape in Nietzsche’s life and mind. Between 1869 and 1888 he visited the Swiss Alps nearly every summer; indeed, during most of the 1880s he spent intervals of three to four months in the Oberengadin village of Sils-Maria, walking the local pathways, savoring the curative air, scribbling ideas into a pocket notepad, and
thus elaborating his philosophy in true peripatetic fashion. Not surprisingly, then, images and tropes of mountains abound in his writings, whether letters, notebooks, scattered poems, or the better-known books of philosophy that he released for publication. Even his juvenilia – poems, stories, and fantasies largely written in the tradition of Romanticism – contain numerous and detailed evocations of lofty peaks, most of them in what would appear to be the Alps though he also describes an ascent of El Mulhacén, the highest summit in mainland Spain (see Frühe Schriften 1, 390). Mountain metaphors dominate his philosophical works, especially from the first volume of Menschliches, Allzumenschliches (1878) onward. Yet already in Schopenhauer als Erzieher (1874), one finds an illuminating example of what will become a common thread in his thought, namely the connection between the mountain climber and the freethinking individual: «So hoch zu steigen, wie je ein Denker stieg, in die reine Alpen- und Eisluft hinein, dorthin wo es kein Vernebeln und Verschleiern mehr gibt und wo die Grundbeschaffenheit der Dinge sich rauh und starr, aber mit unvermeidlicher Verständlichkeit ausdrückt!» (KSA 1, 381). The most sustained thematization of mountains in Nietzsche’s oeuvre can be found in Also sprach Zarathustra, which its author, true to his proclivity for metaphors involving Alpine heights, once characterized as «das höchste Buch, das es gibt, das eigentliche Höhenluft-Buch» (Ecce homo, KSA 6, 259). This work, written in four parts from 1883 to 1885 and featuring a narrative blend of philosophy, poetry, and prophecy, can also be considered Nietzsche’s «symbolic autobiography, one that requires explication and interpretation to fully disclose how intimately it relates to his life» (Brobjer 31). But Zarathustra is more than just Nietzsche’s «alter ego» (Himmelmann 17; Hüser 54); he is «the sublimated Nietzsche» (Brobjer 30), that is, the valley wanderer elevated to new heights. In accordance with this upgrade in elevation, montane topographies form a crucial backdrop in the work’s setting and plot. More significantly, the central idea of upward movement, as embodied by the Übermensch and its defining attribute of self-overcoming, rests on a fundamental vector of verticality. As Zarathustra declares, his principal nemesis is «der Geist der Schwere,» an inevitable law of physics that any climber must contend with. In his conception of the Übermensch and its mountain-dwelling prophet Zarathustra, Nietzsche outlines two ascendent trajectories: the implicit verticalized axis of human evolution from apes to homo erectus to the Übermensch; and the inherent risk-taking enterprise of scaling a peak. In the following, I will examine the mountain-related subtexts of Also sprach Zarathustra, which, granted, is a product of the imagination but also of an historical era when Alpinism and its real-life narratives flourished. Although it is doubtful that Nietzsche was familiar with the burgeoning Alpinist litera-
ture or had contact with the emerging climbing scene in Sils-Maria during the latter half of the nineteenth century, one would be remiss to dismiss, at least not without sufficient exploration, the role that mountains and mountaineering play in the book. I will therefore contextualize Zarathustra within the discourse of Alpinism and interpret its major ideas – the Übermensch, eternal recurrence, and the basic imperative of ascension – from the standpoint of climbing. The real question then remains whether the mountains depicted in Zarathustra are mere accretions of the mind or have a more solid, material basis in reality. Or, as often the case with Nietzsche, for whom truth is not an absolute: to what extent they perhaps occupy a middle ground, somewhere between Zarathustra’s idealized existence on remote mountaintops and Nietzsche’s more routine sojourns in the Alps.

It is misleading to think that Zarathustra only inhabits high mountainous territory. Many of his journeys take place at or near sea level, along rocky coastlines and on craggy islands, including one with an active volcano that could well be an allusion to Mount Etna. This unmistakably Mediterranean landscape reflects Nietzsche’s own preferred places of residence (and convalescence) during the winter months: the French and Italian Riviera. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that the physical scenery in Also sprach Zarathustra remains consistently rugged and that Zarathustra always seems to be moving either up or down geological folds. Nietzsche himself eschewed the beachside bustle of the resorts, gravitating instead toward the steep hills along the Ligurian coast of Italy or the Côte d’Azur of southern France. Here he conceived and composed major portions of Zarathustra. While the inspiration for the idea of eternal recurrence overcame him at 6,000 feet above sea level during one of his regular walks along Lake Silvaplana at a pyramidal boulder now known as the «Zarathustra-Stein,» he envisioned the entire first part of the work in the heights above Rapallo (see Ecce homo, KSA 6, 335–37). In fact, three-quarters of Zarathustra was written on the Mediterranean: part I in Rapallo; part II in Sils-Maria; parts III and IV in Nice. It is perhaps symptomatic of these geographically diverse work sites that Zarathustra’s cave, which for well over half of the book seems to be located high in the mountains, is revealed to lie near the sea by the beginning of part IV: «[M]an schaut aber dort auf das Meer hinaus, und hinweg über gewundene Abgründe» (KSA 4, 295). In his classic commentary on Also sprach Zarathustra, Gustav Naumann speculates that this cave topographically corresponds to Montefino, a 600 meter crest between Genoa and Rapallo (see vol. 1, 31, 35). This theory deflates, if not outright debunks, the myth of high elevation insinuated by Nietzsche’s occasional references to his rented room in Sils-Maria as a Zarathustrian
«Ich bin ein Wanderer und ein Bergsteiger»

«Höhle.» Zarathustra’s mythical mountain grotto seems situated in far greater proximity to the Mediterranean Sea than to the Swiss Alps.

Zarathustra thus wanders through hybrid ground. One should also not ignore the Middle Eastern embellishments in the backdrops that Nietzsche paints, some of which are meant to invoke the desert locale of ancient Persia through which the historical Zarathustra/Zoroaster roamed, while others are satirically suggestive of biblical scenes and scenarios associated with Moses and Jesus. As one scholar has explained this complex of land features: «Was Zarathustra in der Zwiesprache mit seinem Land im Land wahrnimmt, ist, konkret gesagt, das in eine Vertikale gebrachte und in die Bergwelt eingeschriebene biblische Ineinander von Wüste und Gelobtem Land» (Kreis 148). Verticality is a key aspect of the book, one that transcends its literary trappings of plot, setting, and action and that informs its deeper philosophical themes. As already mentioned, irrespective of the specific environment in which Zarathustra happens to travel, he tends to move in either an upward or downward direction. In more concrete terms, he is continually engaged in acts of ascent or descent with regard to mountains, hills, cliffs, canyons, and divides. Summit elevation is not a critical factor in these pursuits. As any experienced climber knows, the objectively measured height of a mountain means little; a 7,000 foot peak in the Olympics or North Cascades can be as arduous to climb as a Colorado 14,000er or an Andean 20,000er. Altitude is relative and much depends on the physical relief and terrain as well as on one’s own physiological acclimation. In the end, it does not greatly matter whether Zarathustra operates in an Alpine or maritime milieu; the essential issue is that he seeks new acmes of existence. In the grand scheme of geohistory, there is, after all, no definitive difference between mountains and oceans: the former have arisen, and indeed continue to rise, out of the latter. As Nietzsche well knew, whether through the influential works of Thomas Burnet (The Sacred Theory of the Earth, 1681), James Hutton (Theory of the Earth, 1785–99), Charles Lyell (The Principles of Geology, 1830–33), or their reception in some of his favorite authors like Goethe and Stifter, many of the most massive mountain ranges of the world are the result of tectonic shifts – powerful continental collisions and ensuing geological uplifts – that occurred hundreds of millions of years ago. Even the upper reaches of Everest are riddled with rock bands containing the fossilized remains of creatures that inhabited the Tethys Sea some 180 million years in the past (see Macfarlane 228). As Zarathustra alternatively puts it: «Woher kommen die höchsten Berge? so fragte ich einst. Da lernte ich, dass sie aus dem Meer kommen. Diess Zeugniss ist in ihr Ge-stein geschrieben und in die Wände ihrer Gipfel. Aus dem Tiefsten muss das Höchste zu seiner Höhe kommen» (KSA 4, 195).
Also sprach Zarathustra is abundant with such metaphors of verticality. As the philosopher Gaston Bachelard claims, although «Nietzsche was not a mountaineer [alpiniste in original]» (159; 184 in French edition), he nonetheless exemplifies «the prototype of the vertical poet, the poet of the summits, the ascensional poet» (127). For Bachelard, who has philosophized about the traditional four elements in a series of books, Nietzsche embraces the primal stuff of air over the other substances of earth, fire, and water. Aerial tropes pervade Nietzsche’s poetic texts as a reflection of the vertical linearity implied by his life-affirming ethics of existence. In an article on the same subject, F.D. Luke explores Nietzsche’s literary «height imagery» and psychological «height complex,» finding fault with a «rhetorical debauch of images» (107) that saturate Zarathustra and dilute its philosophical content. In the course of Zarathustra’s poeticized orations, Luke maintains, the idea becomes subservient to the image. While I tend to agree with Luke’s argument, it does not affect my own, which is thematic in focus and not overly concerned with the discursive differences between philosophy and literature. In this sense, I am more interested in his observation: «[W]e find that Zarathustra himself, when he is not speaking, spends most of the time mountaineering» (106). And he primarily does so, according to both Bachelard and Luke, out of an ascensionist motivation to reach the sky. In Zarathustra’s own words:


[…]
Und wanderte ich allein: was hungerte meine Seele in Nächten und Irr-Pfaden?
Und stieg ich Berge, wen suchte ich je, wenn nicht dich, auf Bergen?
Und all mein Wandern und Bergsteigen: eine Noth war’s nur und ein Behelf des Unbeholfenen: – fliegen allein will mein ganzer Wille, in dich hinein fliegen!
Und wen hasste ich mehr, als ziehende Wolken und Alles, was dich befleckt? (KSA 4, 207–8)

Yet Zarathustra not only climbs skyward; he also descends to the lowlands, thereby risking his literal and figurative downfall. Nietzsche linguistically conveys these two directions of movement through the incessant use of the prefixes über and unter, the main variants of which include Übermensch, Überwindung, (sich) überwinden, Übergang, hinübergehen, über sich hinausschaffen, Untergang, and untergehen. But numerous other constructions, many of them neologisms, bolster this lexical network, one so dense that it has led Ludwig Klages to comment:

Alles in allem ist der Zarathustra eine schwärmerisch unheimliche Exegese des Bezugswortes «Über». Überfülle, Übergüte, Überzeit, Überart, Überreichum, Überheld, sich übertrinken, das sind einige aus der großen Zahl teils neugebildeter,
teils immer wieder verwendeter Überworte und ebensoviel Lesarten des einen ausschließlich gemeinten: der Überwindung. (204)

The major operative concept in Zarathustra’s prophetic proclamations to humanity is thus Überwindung. He first presents this notion and its implications near the beginning of the preface, shortly after his descent (Untergang) from his cave up in the mountains: «Ich lehre euch den Übermensch. Der Mensch ist Etwas, das überwunden werden soll. Was habt ihr gethan, ihn zu überwinden?» (KSA 4, 14). The human being in its present condition must be overcome, transcended. Despite the various reductionist interpretations of this idea along Darwinian evolutionary lines, most notoriously as a National Socialist biologic paradigm, most postwar scholars of Nietzsche agree that the Übermensch has a principally existential or individual application. In an era that has experienced the death of God and a concomitant loss of transcendent metaphysical hopes, Nietzsche issues a challenge, rhetorically couched in lexical variations on the morpheme über, urging us to outstrip our previously attained states of being and achieve perfection right here in our terrestrial existence. Divine transcendence, in other words, becomes supplanted by self-transcendence, which is itself but a form of immanence and the upshot of Zarathustra’s chthonic maxim: «bleibt der Erde treu» (KSA 4, 15).

Annemarie Pieper has expounded on the central meaning of über in Zarathustra, arguing that it has both vertical and horizontal connotations. Whereas the über in Übermensch denotes verticality, the über in überwinden suggests horizontality, «eine Bewegung von etwas weg auf etwas hin, die Dynamik eines Hinüber, mit welcher die Vorstellung eines Zwischenraums, einer Kluft suggeriert wird, die es zu überbrücken gilt» (94). This latter directionality becomes most apparent in the tightrope walker’s attempt to traverse the «Seil, geknüpft zwischen Thier und Übermensch, – ein Seil über einem Abgrunde»; indeed, his endeavor as a whole represents «[e]in gefährliches Hinüber» (KSA 4, 16; my italics). My highlights here indicate the difficulty of separating the two distinct dimensions embedded in the linguistic unit über.

Nevertheless, Pieper’s point is well taken, and English has inherited an analogous duality of signification from the Latin trans. The tightrope walker acts as a kind of horizontal climber, a figure that does not actually move upward yet that still pushes the limits of gravity and risks plummeting into the abyss. In the context of this segment from the prologue, his transgressive stunt illustrates an attempt to surpass his present human condition and realize the ideal of the Übermensch. His traverse therefore can be viewed as a form of transcendence, especially in the further nonphysical sense of trans as meta. Though his goal lies before him in the literal spatial dimensions of the scene (a horizontal rope stretched between two towers, high above a crowd gath-
ered at the marketplace), he pursues a noble, indeed lofty objective, one that looms somewhere beyond him. Zarathustra’s words later in the book point to the multidirectional paths that lead to this supreme objective: «hinauf, hinaus, hinweg zu dem Übermenschen!» (KSA 4, 186). Yet the tightrope walker fails, that is, falls. His Übergang results in an Untergang, which graphically demonstrates the risk involved in self-overcoming: the individual walks a fine line between existential complacency and transformation.

The vertical and horizontal tendencies of über, along with its corresponding compounds, can also be applied to the respective activities of hiking and climbing; that is, to traversal and transcendent motion. As foreshadowed by the example of the tightrope walker, Zarathustra moves through the varied landscapes of the book – mountains, foothills, valleys, shorelines, the open sea – both horizontally and vertically in his capacity as wanderer and climber. In the first chapter of part III, entitled no less «Der Wanderer,» he defines himself in precisely these terms:

Ich bin ein Wanderer und ein Bergsteiger, sagte er zu seinem Herzen, ich liebe die Ebenen nicht und es scheint, ich kann nicht lange still sitzen. Und was mir nun auch noch als Schicksal und Erlebniss komme, – ein Wandern wird darin sein und ein Bergsteigen: man erlebt endlich nur noch sich selber. (KSA 4, 193)

This chapter traces Zarathustra’s traverse of a mountainous island and is rich in topographical detail. Like the dual trajectories discussed above, his nocturnal cross-country trek combines a horizontal passage from one side of the island to the other with a vertical scramble over a summit that forms the geophysical backbone of this landmass. Along the way, he recalls «des vielen einsamen Wanderns von Jugend an, und wie viele Berge und Rücken und Gipfel er schon gestiegen sei» (KSA 4, 193), thereby reiterating his translocomotive existence. As is often the case with the physical settings that Nietzsche presents, a more profound metaphorical level of meaning soon emerges. Here Zarathustra reflects, transcendentally, on the ultimate purpose of his mission, and the literal denotations of Wanderung, Berg, Gipfel, and Höhe quickly cede to the traditional tropes of inner journey, impediment, trial, and triumph. To defer to Macfarlane here: «When we walk or climb up a mountain we traverse not only the actual terrain of the hillside but also the metaphysical territories of struggle and achievement. To reach a summit is very palpably to have triumphed over adversity […]» (142). This sense of victory in the face of hardship is evident in several images pertaining to height and depth, for instance: «Vor meinem höchsten Berge stehe ich und vor meiner längsten Wan-
derung, darum muss ich erst tiefer hinab als ich jemals stieg» (KSA 4, 195). And to cite an even more symbolically charged testimony of Zarathustra’s
geographical crossing and simultaneous spiritual crossroads here midway through the book:

Von sich absehn lernen ist nöthig, um Viel zu sehn: – diese Härte thut jedem Berge-Steigenden Noth.
Wer aber mit den Augen zudringlich ist als Erkennender, wie sollte der von allen Dingen mehr als ihre vorderen Gründe sehn!
Du aber, oh Zarathustra, wollest aller Dinge Grund schauen und Hintergrund: so musst du schon über dich selber steigen, – hinan, hinauf, bis du auch deine Sterne noch unter dir hast!
Ja! Hinab auf mich selber sehnd und noch auf meine Sterne: das erst hiesse mir mein Gipfel, das blieb mir noch zurück als mein letzter Gipfel! – (KSA 4, 194)

The somatic progression of ascending a mountain thus merges with the inner process of transcending one’s self: Zarathustra rises to new heights of self-awareness and self-fulfillment. He sets foot on the «Spitze des Berges, wo es kalt war» (KSA 4, 195) and then promptly wanders back down to the sea, having overcome what would appear to be a relatively low-lying Mediterranean summit but an all the more formidable mountain of the mind.

In the next chapter, «Vom Gesicht und Räthsel,» Zarathustra narrates his ascent of another decisive mountain, one on which he gains insight into the prospect of eternal recurrence. Whereas his previous climb was a test of conviction and commitment, this one challenges the very meaning of his existence within the greater flux of being. Once again, his foray begins in a materially descriptive setting, one in which Nietzsche also appeals to the reader’s aural faculties:

Ein Pfad, der trotzig durch Geröll stieg, ein boshafter, einsamer, dem nicht Kraut, nicht Strauch mehr zuprach: ein Berg-Pfad knirschte unter dem Trotz meines Fusses.
Stumm über höhnischem Geklirr von Kieseln schreitend, den Stein zertretend, der ihn gleiten liess: also zwang mein Fuss sich aufwärts. (KSA 4, 198)

The allegorical function of this ascent is underscored by its intertextual nod to Dante, who evokes a similar image of the upward-striving foot in the first canto of the Inferno. And of course Dante’s further ascension – after a lengthy detour through the circles of Hell – from Mount Purgatory to Paradise only reinforces the transcendental if not metaphysical aspect of climbing. To mention another prominent example from Dante’s era, one could also argue that Petrarch’s celebrated (and not undisputed) ascent of Mont Ventoux in 1336 is more a religious allegory than a credible climbing narrative. Petrarch’s entire account may have been «simply a convenient fictional framework over which to drape [his] metaphysical musings, and an opportunity to draw a pious moral» (Macfarlane 147). On his analogous albeit nonreligious quest for en-
lightenment, Zarathustra experiences a vision of self-transcendence. He sees a gateway above which stands the word «Augenblick» and beneath which two interminable paths converge, one extending backward into the past, the other forward into the future. This apparition expresses Nietzsche’s concept of «die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen.» True to its metaphorical presentation, eternal recurrence should not be interpreted as an historical cycle of perpetual repetition (though there are indications in Nietzsche’s notebooks that he may have, for a time at least, half-believed in this pre-Socratic and Stoic cosmological principle). In Ecce homo, he famously described this hypothetical proposition and existential provocation as «diese höchste Formel der Bejahung, die überhaupt erreicht werden kann» (KSA 6, 335). Like his Übermensch prototype, eternal recurrence is not a universal doctrine meant to reflect reality but a propositional truth aimed straight at the individual. In this case, Nietzsche, through his mouthpiece Zarathustra, urges us to live in such a manner that we would joyfully embrace each «moment» of our existence as if it were to recur eternally. Put in more negative terms: Could we stand in the crucible of the «Augenblick» and accept our current state of being if it were to repeat itself for all eternity? If not, then it is time to make a change and convert the radical possibility of eternal recurrence into the actuality of a consummate life.

Much more could be said about eternal recurrence, especially in light of its vibrant reception in Nietzsche scholarship. Numerous interpreters have also grappled with the apparent conceptual incompatibility between eternal recurrence and the Übermensch. Whereas the latter theory entails an upward trajectory toward self-perfection, the former involves a cyclical structure within which the individual is expected to affirm his existence in all its plenitude. In other words, the Übermensch is a developmental notion that presupposes a greater, perhaps infinite, continuum of time; eternal recurrence, on the contrary, implies a completed infinity, a cycle that is self-enclosed and perfected (i.e., finished) from the start. These two models – one linear and dynamic, the other circular and normative – would seem to be contradictory. How does the self-overcoming individual, rising to ever higher tiers of existence, break out of the vicious circle of eternal recurrence and find the supreme moment – the Faustian «höchsten Augenblick» – in which to abide? A number of scholars (for example Kaufmann 307–33, Müller-Lauter 135–88, Magnus 111–54, and Pieper) have offered interpretive solutions to this dilemma. My more restricted aim here is to embed these ideas within the discursive field of mountains, which is precisely where the transcendental movement of Zarathustra, a fore-runner of the Übermensch, and the eternal moment of a superlative existence coincide.
As mentioned earlier, Nietzsche reportedly conceived of eternal recurrence during one of his «high»-elevation walks along the rocky and wooded shores of Lake Silvaplana. He reminisces on this incident in *Ecce homo* (see KSA 6, 335), yet originally recorded it in a notebook with the concluding lines: «6000 Fuss über dem Meere und viel höher über allen menschlichen Dingen» (KSA 9, 494). This comment typifies his fascination with altitude and its numerical expression. As Andreas Hüser has observed (see 95), the many letters and postcards that Nietzsche sent from his annual excursions to the Alps never fail to mention the elevation of his lodgings. «Höhe des Hotels gegen 7000 Fuß, ich bin der erste und höchste Pensionär [i.e., Pensionsgast] der ganzen Schweiz, unbestreitbar» (KSB 5, 346) – so he quips in one of his more extreme missives, extreme in terms of both its overstated claim and the statistically given altitude itself, which roughly corresponds to the geographical highpoint in Nietzsche’s life. As for the existential highpoint that Zarathustra envisages in the portal inscribed «Augenblick,» it occurs on a mountain, presumably on a mountaintop. Although the text never specifies whether Zarathustra has arrived at the summit of this nondescript peak (as it does with regard to the island crest in the previous chapter, «Der Wanderer»), his repeated exhortations of «Aufwärts [...] Aufwärts» and «Ich stieg, ich stieg» (KSA 4, 198) testify that he is making definite headway toward the top. And it is here that the vertical path of the Übermensch and the cyclical pattern of eternal recurrence intersect, where the aperture of infinite possibility opens up and one can shout, at the pinnacle of one’s existence: «War das das Leben? Wohlan! Noch Ein Mal!» (KSA 4, 199).

Annemarie Pieper has convincingly argued that this affirmation of existence through the act of climbing has a precedent in the myth of Sisyphus, at least as interpreted by Camus in his existentialist essay from 1942. Sisyphus, eternally condemned to push a boulder up a mountain only to have it roll back down and begin his task anew, can be said to personify the coexisting paradox of the Übermensch and eternal recurrence. Like Zarathustra, he must learn to create meaning within this never-ending cycle and make the most of its absurdity. He does so by rejecting the gods (transcendence) and focusing on the mountain (immanence) that constitutes the only reality he knows. His interminable striving up its slopes and illusory arrival at its apex can be summed up as follows: «Es gibt keine Zäsur mehr zwischen dem Weg hinauf und dem Weg hinab. Für Sisyphos hat sich der Kreis geschlossen, in welchem sich der Übermensch als der Sinn seines Lebens zeigt» (Pieper 117). Sisyphus has thus managed to construct his existence around the existentially paralyzing prospect of eternal recurrence; indeed, his very being consists of an endless routine defined by ascent and descent. But he learns to infuse it
with meaning, perhaps even joy, as hinted in the final sentence of Camus’s text: «One must imagine Sisyphus happy» (91). Sisyphus has superhumanly risen above (über) his lot, and toward the end of part III Zarathustra does the same, creating his own rings of fate and thereby soaring to sublime heights of existence: «Ich schliesse Kreise um mich und heilige Grenzen; immer Wenigere steigen mit mir auf immer höhere Berge, – ich baue ein Gebirge aus immer heiligeren Bergen –» (KSA 4, 260).

Like Sisyphus, Zarathustra may have conquered his own personal «höchsten Berg» (KSA 4, 195) and maximized the promise of eternal recurrence, but what about the rest of humanity that he seeks to enlighten? How are they to transcend themselves through self-overcoming and meet the challenge of an infinitely perpetuated existence? In the course of the first three parts, Zarathustra has adopted a variety of approaches to convince humankind of his message and he has experienced a number of literal as well as figurative ups and downs in the process. In addition to his ascents and descents through diverse terrains, he has battled bouts of melancholy, illness, and the worst affliction of all: pity. At the beginning of part IV, now aged and gray, he decides that he will no longer «go down» (untergehen) to the people and suffer their flatland mentality; he will instead elevate them to his level, namely to the top of a high mountain, where they can better grasp the import of eternal recurrence and rise to the task of becoming Übermenschen.

Zarathustra’s first action in part IV is to climb «einen hohen Berg» (KSA 4, 296), one that appears to lie near his cave and hence not far from the sea. As discussed earlier, his refuge is situated in a topographical amalgam of Alpine highlands and coastal hillsides, which are based on Nietzsche’s seasonal abodes of Sils-Maria, Rapallo, and Nice. Here readers are given further details regarding Zarathustra’s domain, including «Wälder,» «moorig[e] Gründe,» and «Felsen» (see KSA 4, 309, 313, 327). Furthermore, the mountain upon whose summit he stands is a solid geological formation, one that mirrors his own steadfastness and unwavering search for «superior» – this word taken literally as the comparative of superus – individuals: «auf einem ewigen Grunde, auf hartem Urgesteine, auf diesem höchsten härtesten Urgebirge, zu dem alle Winde kommen als zur Watterscheide, fragend nach Wo? und Woher? und Wohinaus?» (KSA 4, 298). Here he engages in a symbolic act of fishing in order to lure potential self-overcomers «hinauf […] in meine Höhe» (KSA 4, 297). As Nietzsche already declares in Schopenhauer als Erzieher, anticipating this vertical thrust of the Übermensch, one has to climb up («hinklettern») to one’s genuine self, «denn dein wahres Wesen liegt nicht tief verborgen in dir, sondern unermesslich hoch über dir oder wenigstens über dem, was du gewöhnlich als dein Ich nimmst» (KSA 1, 340–41). And much like
Schopenhauer served Nietzsche as an instrumental educator (Erzieher) on his path toward becoming a free-thinking individual, Zarathustra intends to teach people down below, in the «Menschen-Abgrund» (KSA 4, 297), how to rise above the common crowd – even if this means drawing them upward by force, as connoted in the following variations on the verb ziehen:

*Der nämlich bin ich von Grund und Anbeginn, ziehend, heranziehend, hinaufziehend, aufziehend, ein Zieher, Züchter und Zuchtmeister, der sich nicht umsonst einstmals zusprach: «Werde, der du bist!»

Also mögen nunmehr die Menschen zu mir hinaufkommen [...] (KSA 4, 297)

Like Jesus, Zarathustra is a fisher of men, which is but one of many parodistic parallels that Nietzsche creates linking these two redeemers of mankind who preach opposite values. One should not forget, however, that Jesus also spent pivotal moments on mountaintops, or at least hilltops, where he overcame temptation by the devil; delivered a lengthy sermon that encapsulates the essence of Christianity; was transfigured as a sign of his divine nature; despaired of his cause in true human fashion (in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives); and was crucified upon the mound/mount of skulls known as Golgotha. All of these stations, or at least their transvalued analogies, play a part in Zarathustra’s own teachings and wanderings. And like Jesus, Zarathustra has mixed success in conveying the good word to humanity.

Zarathustra’s high-altitude «Fischfang[.]» (KSA 4, 297) yields a mixed catch of so-called «höhere Menschen.» This strange assemblage of characters represents a wide range of positive (read: anti-Christian) cultural values, yet they all have one common failing: while they transcend the current human norm, they have not yet ascended to the status of Übermenschen. There is no room in my analysis to devote adequate attention to these assorted figures that appear in what many critics regard as a flawed finale to the more organically constructed first three sections of *Also sprach Zarathustra*. Nietzsche himself was wary of public reaction toward this fourth part and had it published in a limited private edition. Suffice it to say that these higher beings are also limited; they are but stepping stones toward the Übermensch. Or to invoke Nietzsche’s profuse imagery:

*Ihr seid nur Brücken; mögen Höhere auf euch hinüber schreiten. Ihr bedeutet Stufen: so zürnt Dem nicht, der über euch hinweg in seine Höhe steigt! [...] Als Vorzeichen kamt ihr mir nur, dass schon Höhere zu mir unterwegs sind, –* (KSA 4, 351)

In the end, Zarathustra remains alone in his mountains, since no one has yet proved himself worthy of these transcendent heights. Yet here, up high, he
awaits his true companions, «glühend und stark, wie eine Morgensonne, die aus dunklen Bergen kommt» (KSA 4, 408).

As indicated earlier, Wilfrid Noyce would later associate these companions with Germanic or at least Continental mountaineers, who, under the auspices of Hitler and Mussolini, sought new and dangerous routes on such legendary peaks as the Watzmann, Eiger, Drei Zinnen/Tre Cime di Lavaredo, and Grandes Jorasses (see 133). Noyce characterizes *Also sprach Zarathustra* as «a difficult, a rambling and poetical outpouring» that «gives in its oracular utterances the clue to much of the Continental mountain philosophy in the period between the wars» (132). He goes on to claim that «[t]he element of risk was of course a «sine qua non» of German climbing between the wars, and linked curiously with the Nietzschean theory of the perfect man» (134). While these assertions come across as somewhat facile or at least smack of a mid-century British bias toward the recent wartime enemy, there can be doubt that the notions of danger and risk are vital to Nietzsche’s philosophy. In an oft-quoted dictum from *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, he beseeches us to overcome ourselves by living dangerously – «gefährlich leben!» (KSA 3, 526) – and thereby prepare the way for a higher rank of human being. Two aphorisms later he continues this train of thought, suggesting where this perilous path of self-overcoming may ultimately lead: «[V]on da an immer höher steigen, wo er nicht mehr in einen Gott ausfliesst» (KSA 3, 528). This aphorism significantly bears the heading «Excelsior!» and thus emphasizes the deeper connection between elevation and inner excellence (*ex* = «beyond,» *celsus* = «lofty»). By way of conclusion, I will pursue these Nietzschean imperatives of danger, ascension, and super-humanness within the discourse of what Mikel Vause calls «the philosophy of mountaineering.»

Nietzsche’s trans-Darwinian model of human development, based on the scale *Affe – Mensch – Übermensch*, has its correspondence in certain theories concerning the role of mountains in anthropological history. Just as the physical evolution of humankind from hominoids to *homo erectus* entailed a shift of the body axis from a horizontal propensity (left/right and forward/backward mobility) to a carriage of verticality, mountainous heights have further spurred the intellectual and spiritual advancement of the erect-standing human. In classical as well as Christian terminology, man is both a horizontally articulated *cultivator terrae* and a vertically oriented *contemplator coeli* (see Böhme 47). These spatial dimensions define the telluric and transcendent extremes of human existence. The surging sweep of the Andes, the colossal massif of Kilimanjaro, the conical symmetry of Mt. Fuji – these and countless other geological landmarks have attracted the ascendant gaze of upright humans for millennia. Hartmut Böhme summarizes the cultural-anthropo-
logical significance of mountains as follows: «Berge führen also zur Transzen-
denz, sie sind – schon visuell – Medium des Aufstiegs, des Überstiegs und der
Transgression» (48).

The renowned British mountaineer Geoffrey Winthrop Young, who was
a mentor and climbing partner of George Mallory before the latter’s death
in 1924, expands on these correlations between topography and anthropol-
ogy. In his published speech, «The Influence of Mountains upon the Devel-
opment of Human Intelligence,» he contends that the presence of mountains
has helped contribute new mental dimensions to human existence and thus
promote the civilizing process. Mountains created an added dimension of
height and depth to those of length and breadth that had long constituted the
horizons of many traditional peoples. The Alps, in their steepness and vast-
ness are, for instance, partially responsible for stimulating the Italian mind.
According to Young, the real «break-through […] in the evolution of man-
kind» (22) occurred, however, in ancient Greece, where the mountains that
rise from the sea «are set like upright rulers, to mark the scale, against the per-
spectives of plain and sea and sky» (24). The varied relief of this rugged land-
scape fostered the human ability to compare, to assess, and, eventually, to rea-
son. It also enlivened the imagination and intimated a sense of spirituality and
divinity, as is visually manifest at Delphi, which, like Zarathustra’s cave, lies
amidst desolate crags that overlook valley and sea. Whether in Italy, Greece,
or other parts of the world, «mountains became the first forces to lift the eyes
and thoughts of our branch of animal life above the levels of difficult existence
to the perception of a region of spirit, located […] in the sky above» (14). In an
argument that brings to mind the über-motif and the broader theme of ascen-
sion in Zarathustra, Young further holds that this aspect of spirit belongs to
an even higher, non-perceptible realm, for it transcends the limits of human
intelligence and uplifts us in other ways and toward other goals. Mountains,
in sum, instill in humans the «principles of measure, proportion, order, and
of an uprightness that points a way beyond clouds and, at least, towards the
stars» (30).

Climbers of course represent an extreme example of human-mountain in-
teraction. In his essay «Knights of Nothingness: The Transcendental Nature
of Mountaineering and Mountain Literature,» Mikel Vause not only stress-
es the idea of transcendence that I have discussed in Nietzsche and briefly
sketched by way of Böhme and Young; he also grounds this vertical aspiration
of climbing in the sensory experience of high-risk sports. Drawing on an arti-
cle published in Outside magazine (see Furlons), Vause distinguishes between
the common perception of risk-taking activities and the theory of risk exer-
cise espoused by the physician Sol Ray Rosenthal. According to Rosenthal,
«there is something in risk that enhances the life of the individual – something so real, something with such impact that people who have experienced it need to experience it again and again» (441). On the surface, this statement seems to echo the usual clichés associated with adventure-seeking activities, namely that they produce an addictive adrenaline rush and a joy of success let alone survival. Yet risk exercise differs from reckless stunts or death-defying exploits in several respects. First of all, it is a measured and disciplined pursuit, one that assumes «that the risk taker has the skills to match or overcome the risk» (441). Secondly, it generates a sustained form of exhilaration outlasting adrenaline highs and quick kicks. The individual attains a heightened, indeed «transcendent» state of consciousness that can be compared to the transcendental experiences described by Emerson, Thoreau, and John Muir (see 441). One ascends to a whole new plane of mindfulness in which one is completely focused on the «moment» (441), but a moment that perdures throughout the venture rather than transpires as a fleeting thrill. This condition of euphoric well-being, I would add, resembles the «Augenblick» of an eternal present that Zarathustra comes to realize on his own risk-imbued climb toward ever greater altitudes of insight. The fact that Nietzsche was most likely inspired by Emerson, the quintessential transcendentalist, for the original conception of Zarathustra and perhaps even the Übermensch12 further underscores the transcendental implications of the many mountain-climbing escapades found in Also sprach Zarathustra, whose titular hero programmatically proclaims: «Ich bin ein Wanderer und ein Bergsteiger [...] ich liebe die Ebenen nicht und es scheint, ich kann nicht lange still sitzen» (KSA 4, 193).

Notes

1 Throughout this article I refer to the Kritische Studienausgabe of Nietzsche’s Sämtliche Werke and Sämtliche Briefe, using the standard abbreviations KSA and KSB, respectively, along with appropriate volume and page number.

2 Though he had aspirations of climbing the popular Mount Pilatus (6,982 ft/2,128 m) outside of Lucerne, he was most likely thwarted by bad weather and hence never reached the summit (his philosophical predecessor, Schopenhauer, did). Pilatus occupies a prominent place in the history of European attitudes toward mountains, ranging from medieval superstition to modern technological domination. First attempted in 1387 but not successfully climbed until 1518, Pilatus is now accessible by cog railway and cable car. In Nietzsche’s day it was no more than a mildly strenuous jaunt. Nietzsche did, however, hike up to a number of mountain passes that top out over 2,000 meters. The highest elevation that he probably attained, based on his own documentation and also according to Hüser, is the Männlichen (7,687 ft/2,343 m), a relatively low mountain in the Berner Oberland that stands in the shadow of the iconic triumvirate Eiger, Jungfrau, and Mönch. He wrote a handful of letters from the Männlichen lodge, variously refer-
ring to the altitude as somewhere between 6,000 to 7,000 feet (see KSB 5, 344–46). The only semi-steep mountain that Nietzsche appears to have climbed is a peak outside of Rosenlau, also in the Bernese Alps, that he dubbed «Druidenaltar» and upon whose summit he often lounged after scrambling up its 20 foot «Grat» (see KSB 5, 280). For biographical details of this nature, I draw not only on his letters but also on the classic three-volume biography by Janz; the documents assembled by Gilman; the narrative photo album by Krell and Bates; and the recreated accounts by Hüser.

For an informative account of Nietzsche’s walks in the region see Raabe’s *Spaziergänge durch Nietzsches Sils-Maria*. This practical guidebook traces all of his routes and further comments on other cultural figures associated with the area (Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, Hermann Hesse, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, et al.). See also Krell and Bates, *The Good European: Nietzsche’s Work Sites in Word and Image*, for details regarding the philosopher’s travels in the Upper Engadine Valley as well as Italy and France. Both books also feature numerous photos of the landscapes that figure prominently in Nietzsche’s life and work. In his «philosophischer Wanderführer,» *Wo selbst die Wege nachdenklich werden: Friedrich Nietzsche und der Berg*, Hüser intimately describes and reflects on Nietzsche’s experiences in the Alps, especially the Oberengadin.

See, for instance, in chronological order: Bertram, «Nietzsche und die Berge»; Walcher, «Nietzsche als Bergsteiger»; and Messner, «High Mountains of Mathematics, Measurement, and Morality.» For these references I am indebted to Noyce and Bolland. Thomas Mann, perhaps Nietzsche’s most prominent and long-standing literary admirer, is also not immune to the pathos of the Nietzschean mountain climber. Compare, for instance, his remark regarding the philosopher’s intellectual path of peril: «Welch ein Sich-Versteigen in tödliche Höhen! Das Wort ‹verstiegen›, zum moralischen und geistigen Urteil geworden, stammt aus der Alpinistensprache und bezeichnet die Situation, wo es im Hochgestein weder vorwärts noch rückwärts mehr geht und der Bergsteiger verloren ist» (677).

Nietzsche mistakenly imagines El Mulhacén in the Pyrenees of northern Spain rather than in the Sierra Nevada range located in the extreme southern part of the country. Nevertheless, he is astounding accurate in naming nearby localities and in describing the expansive summit view: «Wir waren kaum eine Stunde emporgestiegen als bereits der blaue Spiegel des Meeres über den duftigen Bergen von Orchiva, die das Thal von Trevelei nach Süden schlies [sic], auftauchte und bald den ganzen südlichen Horizont zu umsäumen begann. Nach 12 Uhr erreichten wir die höchsten Felsenmassen des Gipfels. Ein Meer von Gebirgen lag gen Osten» (*Frühe Schriften* 1, 390).

Like Nietzsche, Schopenhauer was fond of mountains and mountain metaphors, as is evident, for example, in the following extended comparison between philosophy and Alpinism: «Die Philosophie ist eine hohe Alpenstraße, zu ihr führt nur ein steiler Pfad über spitze Steine und stechende Dornen: er ist einsam und wird immer öder, je höher man kommt, und wer ihn geht, darf kein Grausen kennen, sondern muß alles hinter sich lassen und sich getrost im kalten Schnee seinen Weg selbst bahnen. Oft steht er plötzlich am Abgrund und sieht unten das grüne Thal: dahin zieht ihn der Schwindel gewaltsam hinab; aber er muß sich halten und sollte er mit dem eigenen Blut die Sohlen an den Felsen kleben. Dafür sieht er bald die Welt unter sich, ihre Sandwüsten und Moräste verschwinden, ihre Unebenheiten gleichen sich aus, ihre Mißtöne dringen nicht hinauf, ihre Rundung offenbart sich. Er selbst steht immer in reiner, kühler Alpenluft und sieht schon die Sonne, wenn unten noch schwarze Nacht liegt» (vol. 1, 14).
See, for instance, the second appendix, «Nietzsche and alpinism,» in Bolland 193–207. Bolland’s central claim is that Nietzsche remained aloof from if not blissfully ignorant of Alpinism as a sport – and this despite the increasing attraction of the still largely unexplored peaks of the Oberengadin, particularly the Bernina massif. The most famous Alpinist to emerge from Sils-Maria, Christian Klucker, worked at the Hotel Alpenrose, where Nietzsche habitually lunched. Whereas Janz speculates that Klucker may have influenced Nietzsche with respect to the latter’s «Hochgebirgsmetaphern» (vol. 2, 310), Bolland and Hüser reject this idea. Their point is well taken, as Klucker’s mémoire, Erinnerungen eines Bergführers (1930), makes absolutely no mention of Nietzsche despite the philosopher’s unprecedented (albeit posthumous) fame at this point in history, a fame that would have been palpable even in the culturally remote Sils-Maria due to the flocks of Nietzscheans that made pilgrimages to the region.

For other attempts to interpret Also sprach Zarathustra within the context of mountains, see Monneyron and Kowal. Both of these articles are, however, severely limited, both in length and depth. The chief merit of Monneyron’s study lies in its intertextual approach. After a brief, indeed barely existent, discussion of Zarathustra, he outlines some interesting connections to Hermann Hesse’s Peter Camenzind, Thomas Mann’s Der Zauberberg, and Jack Kerouac’s On the Road (although the Zauberberg discussion comes up short and has received much better coverage by others, for instance Nehamas). Kowal’s piece starts out promising but soon devolves into a litany of citations and a series of digressions. The less academic study by Noyce flirts with interpretations of Zarathustra, but does not cut very deep. Still, despite its inadequacies with respect to literary analysis, it at least attempts to place Nietzsche’s book within the historical context of Alpinism.

The list of these scholars is long, but some representative voices from 1950–2000 include, in chronological order: Kaufmann 307–33, Müller-Lauter 116–88, Pieper, and Safranksi 266–85.

For further details regarding Nietzsche’s shrewd intertextual allusions to the Commedia and other classical texts (the Odyssey, the Aeneid, and Augustine’s Confessions) in this chapter, see Verdicchio.

In the essay «Character,» Emerson discusses «Zertusht or Zoroaster» as an example of a great individual (see 376). In his German edition of Emerson’s essays, published in 1856 as Versuche, Nietzsche noted in the margin next to this passage: «Das ist es!» (see Stack 291). In fact, his entire copy of Emerson is heavily underlined, which attests to his deep preoccupation with the American transcendentalist, to whom he refers on occasion in his published writings. For an exhaustive investigation of Emerson’s influence on Nietzsche, especially concerning the idea of the Übermensch, see Stack, esp. 309–61.

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