



Mountain Perspectives in Europe
with Reference to Hermann Hesse's
Tales In den Felsen and Der
Geheimnisvolle Berg

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Mountain Perspectives in Europe with Reference to Hermann Hesse's Tales *In den Felsen* ("In the Rock") and *Der Geheimnisvolle Berg* ("The Mysterious Mountain")

By: Johannes Balve

The topography of landscapes has always been a subject of description in our understanding of the world. Human beings seek to comprehend their surroundings by ascribing meaning to the land, sea, and mountains. However, the way these elements are perceived is shaped by cultural contexts. In this essay, I will provide a European perspective on one of these landscape elements: mountains.

The Bible offers important inspiration in this regard. Key messages, such as the Ten Commandments, were received by Moses on Mount Sinai. Jesus' most significant sermon is named after the mountain from which he spoke to his disciples. In ancient Greece, Mount Olympus was the mountain of the gods, and the Titans attempted to storm it from other peaks.¹ Over fifteen hundred years later, Dante's *Divina Commedia* introduces the Mountain of Purgation, which sinners must ascend to reach heavenly paradise. Around the same period, another Italian, Petrarca, conceived mountain climbing as a metaphor for expanding intellectual perception in the quest for truth.

In the long history of Europe, the mountain has held many meanings. It has been more than just a natural object resisting human conquest—it has

also served as a mirror of culture, an element of mythology, and a subject of theological and romantic thought. Mountains have even had significance for philosophy, notably in the works of Nietzsche and Heidegger, which trace their roots to older traditions in Latin and Greek literature.

In this essay, however, I will focus on the mountain in literature using examples of Hermann Hesse that are particularly worthy of analysis, specifically two stories that explore mountain climbing.

First, a few remarks on Hesse himself and his role in the literary world. Born in 1877 in Calw, a town in southern Germany, he left for Switzerland in 1912, where he spent most of his life. He became a Swiss citizen and eventually settled in Montagnola, a village by Lake Lugano near the Italian border. Today Hesse, the Nobel laureate of 1946, is less present in the seminars of German academia than abroad.² While I worked as a professor for German at a Japanese university, I was surprised to find a different perspective. A Japanese colleague once explained to me that his gateway to German literature was through Hesse, whose work had always inspired him. Across the Pacific Ocean, Hesse became famous in the United States even earlier. By the late 1960s, he was

¹ The historical roots of the myth-making around mountains are even older and can be found in the ancient oriental cultures. See Rollinger, R.. *Berg und Gebirge aus altorientalischer Perspektive*. In: W. Kofler et al. (Hg.), *Gipfel der Zeit. Berge in Texten aus fünf Jahrtausenden*. Paradeigmata, Vol.12, Freiburg im Breisgau – Berlin – Wien 2010, p. 11-53

² Gunnar Decker's biography of Hesse is not only an excellent introduction to the work and life of Hesse, it also examines the author's difficult relationship with Germany and the hostile attitude of German literary critics towards his work. Decker, G. Hesse. *Der Wanderer und sein Schatten. Biografie*. (2012) München

suddenly catapulted to global fame, almost overnight. The countercultural "hippy" generation saw him as a role model. The cult film *Easy Rider*, with its title song "Born to Be Wild" by the rock band Steppenwolf, even contributed to making Hesse's novel *Der Steppenwolf* (1927) a bestseller. Unfortunately, Hesse did not live to witness this late burst of fame, as he had passed away in 1962. Even if Hesse himself would likely have disdained the cultural frenzy surrounding him—he was a withdrawn, sensitive writer and a conservative, educated bourgeois—it remains worth asking why he became a cult figure for the hippy movement and an inspiration for an entire generation.

There was, of course, much misunderstanding, but also possible parallels to Hesse's earlier life. To understand this better, we need to look back at a youth movement that began at the turn of the 20th century. This movement centered on life reform and tackled issues that still resonate with young people today: natural healing methods, nutritional reform, a new awareness of the body, nudism, free dancing, esoteric theories, meditation practices, and, in general, alternative ways of living. A group of artists, intellectuals, doctors, and life reformers founded a community at Lake Maggiore in Switzerland—this place was called "Monte Verità," or the "Mountain of Truth."³ In 1907, Hermann Hesse briefly became a part of this community.

How could this be? Hesse was a successful, married writer with a country house, a wine cellar, a garden, a

³ A short intellectual history of the life reform movements at Monte Verità is given by Yme B. Kulper. Yme B. Kulper. *Tolstoyans on a Mountain: From New Practices of Asceticism to the Deconstruction of the Myths of Monte Verità*. *Journal of Religion in Europe* 6 (2013) p. 464–481. See also Noschis, K.: *Monte verità, Ascona et le génie du lieu*, PPUR, Lausanne, Coll. Le savoir suisse, 142 pp.

wife, and a son. Why did he join such a community? Monte Verità was a place that ignited the imagination, a destination for dropouts and refugees from civilization, for those weary of city life. It symbolized slowing down in contrast to the acceleration experienced in industrialized society. Hermann Hesse described his situation in this time as a severe crisis - physically but also internally. Yet Hesse's quest for personal, spiritual cleansing at this natural mountain sanatorium was at odds with the anarcho-communist principles of the community's founders. Conflicts soon arose also among the members, and Hesse chose to find his own path by wandering through the wild Swiss mountains surrounding the community.

In the mountains, he sought an intense encounter with nature. Clothing became more of a hindrance than a necessity for him. He practiced naked hiking and even allowed himself to be photographed while doing so. He slept outside, shunned all the comforts of civilization, lived ascetically, and pushed himself to his physical limits. These experiences are reflected in his story *In den Felsen*⁴ ("In the Rock"). It is a tale of life in a mountain hermitage, where questions about a new philosophy of life emerge. Does the ascent of the mountain offer a space for reflection? Does it lead to spiritual purification or self-knowledge? And does man succeed in integrating himself into the natural world, in reconciling the inner self with the external landscape?

The protagonist of the story seeks his 'hermitage' in the mountains, travelling naked, with his clothes in his backpack, wearing only a hat and sandals. Thorns scratch his skin, the sun burns him, yet he still sings hap-

⁴ Hermann Hesse. *In den Felsen. Notizen eines Naturmenschen*. Autobiographische Schriften I., Sämtliche Werke, Bd. 11 (2002). p. 314–322



Werner Friedli, *Certenango, Montagnola*, ETH Library Zurich, Image Archive / LBS_H1-012909



py songs, feeling the joy of the wild, beautiful landscape. Despite the continuous rain, he has nothing to eat, no books, only a pencil and a notebook, and lives in a wooden hut. Here, he feels that he is 'returning to the original life', and that 'dormant instincts' are awakening.

However, he soon reaches his limits. At one point, he loses his linen hat to the wind, runs after it through the brush and stones, gets lost, and feels feverish from the sun's heat. Back at the hut, he has no water, cannot sleep on the hard ground, eats his last piece of bread, searches for a stream to quench his thirst, and lies down in the sun, his skin completely burnt. In great pain, he returns to the hut, where he lies down, unsure whether he will sleep or die. The next day, he feels somewhat better and resists the temptation to descend to the fishing village for help. He endures hunger, but with sufficient water to drink, he digs himself into the earth near the stream 'to test the cooling and healing powers of the earth'. As his hunger increases, he feels clear-headed: „*Ich sah meinen Zustand und meine Umgebung mit merkwürdiger, momentaner Überklarheit und mikroskopischer Deutlichkeit.*“ (I saw my condition and my surroundings with strange, momentary clarity and microscopic clarity.) (p.318). At this point, the narrative reaches a turning point. „*Schön ist es, nachts auf der Rast im Moos zu liegen und durch Gezweige die Sternbilder anzuschauen (...) bei leise strömendem Regen unterwegs zu sein und das weiche, linde Wasser zu fühlen, wie es von den Haaren und den Schultern über die erfrischte Haut hinabläuft.*“ (It is wonderful to lie on the moss at night during a rest and look through the branches at the shining constellations (...) to be on the move in the soft, gentle rain and feel the soft,

gentle water running down from the hair and shoulders over the refreshed skin.) (p.321).

Gradually, the torture of hunger fades. In the coming weeks, he begins to feed on wild strawberries, occasionally descending to the village to buy nuts, though he feels increasingly like a stranger to civilization. Back in the mountains, the stream quenches his thirst, and his skin adjusts to the sun, turning dark brown. He feels like a deer in mountain clefts, slender, tough, nimble, and his senses became keener. He smells strawberries from afar, knows the winds, storms, cloud formations, and weather signs. Apart from his physical recovery, he experiences a renewal in his 'spiritual life': "*Geduld, ein wenig mehr Bescheidenheit, das ist auch ein kleiner Fortschritt in der Wahrhaftigkeit, und die ist doch unsre oberste und wertvollste Tugend.*" (A little more patience, a little more humility—that, too, is a small step forward in truthfulness, and that is, after all, our highest and most valuable virtue.) (p.322).

In this story, which was influenced by his experiences at Monte Verità, Hesse seems to suggest that reconciliation with nature is possible. However, he concludes that this path does not lead to self-knowledge or spiritual liberation. Soon after, his experiment with Monte Verità comes to an end, and he returns to the bourgeois world.⁵

Despite this, Hesse continues to grapple with the relationship between man and nature. There is no better place for this encounter than the isolation of the mountains. Yet, unlike philosophers such as Nietzsche with

⁵ The connection between Hesse's literary activity and his experiences in the community of Monte Verità is examined in Martin Radermacher's essay *Hermann Hesse – Monte Verità -Wahrheitssuche abseits des Mainstreams zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Zeitschrift für junge Religionswissenschaft 6 / 2011

his *Zarathustra*⁶, Hesse is not using the mountain as a metaphor for enlightenment from a higher perspective. What fascinates him is the primal nature that confronts the human individual. A year later, in 1908, he wrote *Der Geheimnisvolle Berg*⁷ ("The Mysterious Mountain"). In this story, the theme shifts to the conquest of nature's last untamed corners—the mountains that have not yet been climbed.

The approach in this tale is entirely different. For the protagonist, mountaineering is about conquest. He is driven by a desire not only to conquer women but also unclimbed mountains. He could be viewed as the counterpart to the sensitive mountain hermit from *In den Felsen*. The problem, however, is that all the beautiful mountains have already been scaled and made accessible—turned into tourist destinations with infrastructure like cable cars and restaurants, making them part of the denatured human world.

Cesco Biondi, the protagonist of *Der Geheimnisvolle Berg*, earns his living by guiding tourists through these mountains, which have become commodified as vacation spots. His true passion, however, is for Monte Giallo (Yellow Mountain), an ugly, barely accessible peak that has been ignored by everyone else. Cesco develops an obsession with this mountain, and his greatest ambition is to reach its summit. The more he attempts the climb, the more familiar the mountain becomes to him, and a friendly relationship begins to develop between them. But over time, the inaccessible moun-

tain increasingly resists him, and Cesco's affection turns into hatred. His frustration grows after he falls and breaks his arm during one of his attempts. He makes several more attempts, the last one with a companion. A gust of wind catches him as he walks along a ledge, and just like in *Im Felsen*, the hat is blown away. He chases after it and falls into a canyon. As he lies dying in the canyon, Cesco experiences the sublime nature of the mountain. The mountain appears to him as an ancient being that has outlasted the history of mankind. "*Er sah nocheinmaldenschartigen Bergrücken, sternengeschienen in der kalten Nachtbläue stehen, er hörte noch einmal das vielstimmige Rauschen und Quirlen der unsichtbaren Wasser in den Schluchten, und während er seine Hände erstarren fühlte, verzog er das harte Gesicht zu einem kurzen, wilden und befriedigten Lächeln, das beinahe wie Schadenfreude aussah und doch nichts anderes bedeutete, als dass er das Geschehene begriff und billigte (...). Der Berg behielt ihn bei sich. Er konnte nicht gefunden werden*" (p.40). (He saw the jagged mountain ridge bathed in starlight against the cold night sky one more time, heard the many-voiced rushing and swirling of the invisible water in the gorges one more time, and as his hands went numb, he twisted his hardened face into a brief, wild smile of satisfaction, almost *schadenfreude*, as if to say that he finally understood and accepted what had happened (...). The mountain kept him with it. He could not be found).

It is only in the moment of death that the story's protagonist learns the secret of the mountain and is reunited with nature. The mountain embraces him, taking him within itself. The message seems to be that union with nature is possible only in death; in life,

6 Sean Ireton explains in his essay the mountaineering in *Zarathustra* as an allegorical function. Sean Ireton. *Ich bin ein Wanderer und Bergsteiger* (in English). *Colloquia Germanica*, 2009, Vol.42, No.3, Mountains in the German Cultural Imagination (2009), pp. 193-212

7 Hermann Hesse. *Der geheimnisvolle Berg*. Die Märchen. Sämtliche Werke. Bd. 9 (2002), p.33-41

the individual faces growing alienation due to the exploitation of nature for human purposes. For Hesse, who also faced dangerous situations while hiking in the Alps, the mountains remained a symbol of the complex relationship between man and nature throughout his life.

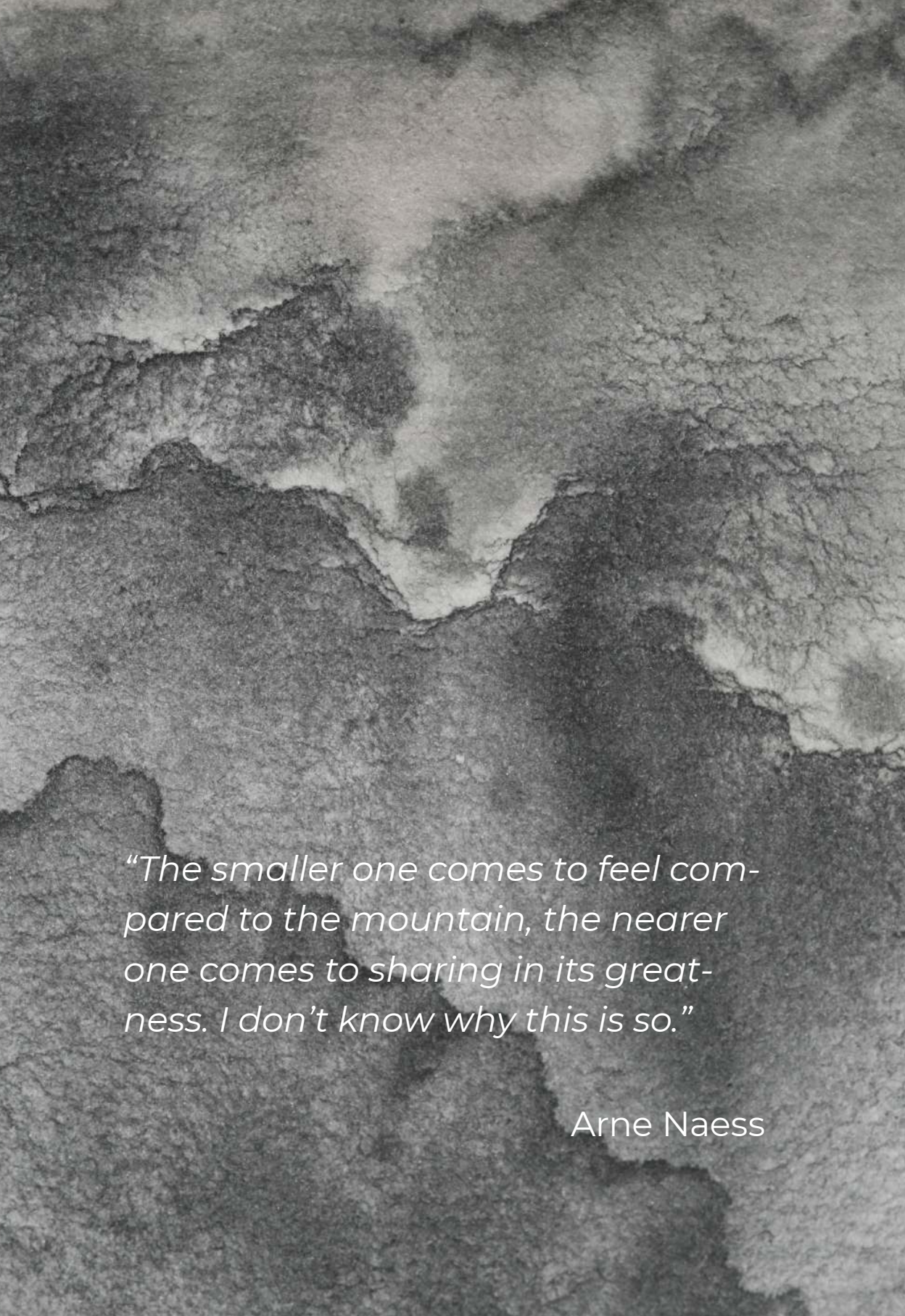
Decades later, Hesse described the Alpine landscape from the Jura Mountains using an image first employed by Friedrich Hölderlin in his poem “der Wanderer”⁸ as a skeleton: “*das Rückgrat Europas, vor uns hingelegt wie das eines Riesenfisches*”⁹ (Europe's backbone in front of us, laid down similar to that of a giant fish), stretching for hundreds of miles across Europe, “*eine starre, klare, kalte, fremde, ja bittere und drohende Welt aus Fels und Eis (...). eine strenge, wehrhafte Barrikade durch die Mitte unserer Welt, ragte hart und messerscharf erstartet wie ein hundert Meilen langer Lavazug, die Kette der Alpen in den kühlen Herbsthimmel.*” (a fortified barricade at the center of our world rose sharply and razor-sharp into the cool autumn sky, frozen like a hundred-mile-long lava flow.) “*Es war eine Art Grausen, die Empfindung eines mit Wonne gemischten Erschrecktwerdens und Frierens wie beim Empfang eines sehr kalten Wasserstrahls (...).*” (There was a kind of horror, the sensation of being frozen and frightened with delight, like being hit by a very cold jet of water (...)).

To summarize, the perspective that Hermann Hesse offers on the mountains is distinctly European, character-

ized by the tension and antagonism between the individual and nature. However, Hesse also explored other perspectives, particularly Eastern ones, in his numerous writings on Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. He became especially known for his novel *Siddhartha*, a book about the historical Buddha. *Siddhartha* represents an attempt to synthesize Eastern and Western thought, bringing together Buddha and Heraclitus. Hesse strove to build bridges between these traditions. This openness for non-European cultures might also have influenced the impact of his reception outside Europe. On the other hand it is not surprising that cultural influences shape reading preferences. Therefore international interest in and appreciation for German literature does not always align with that of Germany itself. Hermann Hesse serves as an illustrative example of this phenomenon.

8 *Fernhin schlich das hagre Gebirg, wie ein wandelnd Gerippe, Hohl und einsam und kahl blickt' aus der Höhe sein Haupt.* Friedrich Hölderlin: *Sämtliche Werke*. 6 Bände, Band 1, Stuttgart 1946, S. 211-214

9 Hermann Hesse. *Beschreibung einer Landschaft*. (1946) *Betrachtungen und Berichte II*, 1927-1961. *Sämtliche Werke*. (2002) Bd. 14, p.210-211



"The smaller one comes to feel compared to the mountain, the nearer one comes to sharing in its greatness. I don't know why this is so."

Arne Naess