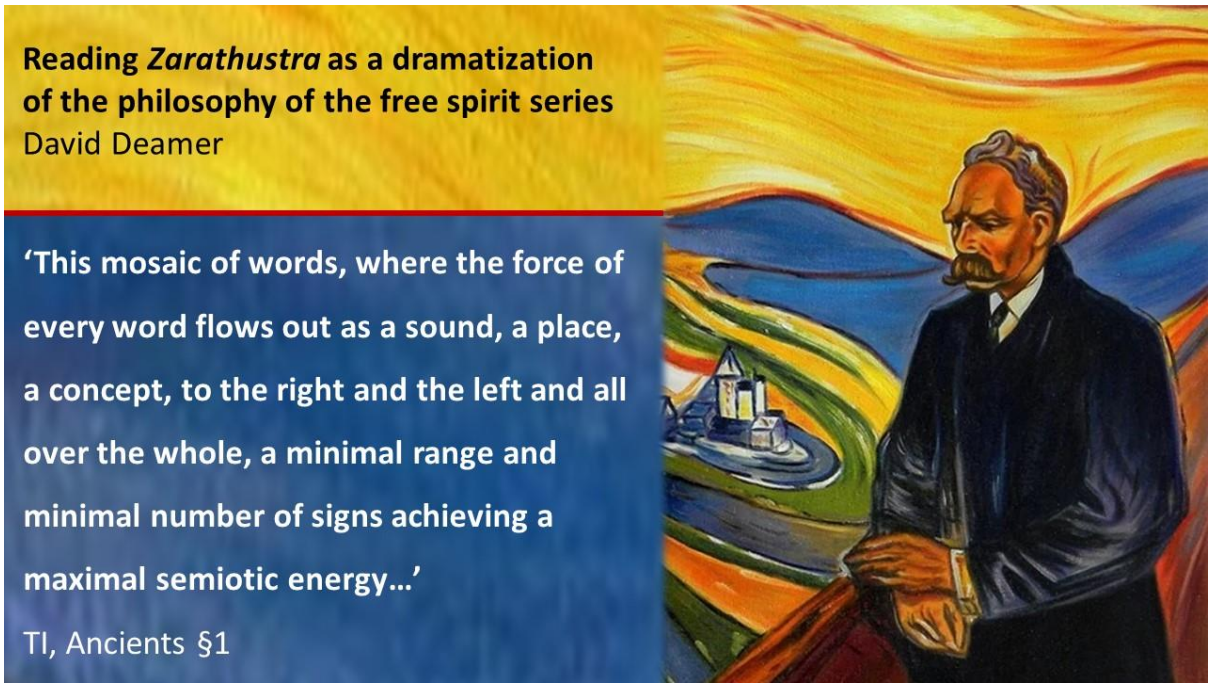
Reading *Zarathustra* as a dramatization of the philosophy of the free spirit series

David Deamer (September 2023)

Written for a panel presentation at "Nietzsche and the Lyric / Nietzsche und das Lyrische": The 28th International Conference of the Friedrich Nietzsche Society, University of Lausanne, Switzerland, September 14-16 2023.
Website: https://www.fns.org.uk/fns-conference-2023.html
Programme: https://www.fns.org.uk/uploads/1/2/1/2/121243126/programme_nietzsche_lausanne_2023.pdf

This transcript for the david deamer website was prepared and uploaded 17 September 2023 and is exactly as was presented by David Deamer at the conference.
https://www.daviddeamer.com/reading-zarathustra-as-a-dramatization-of-the-philosophy-of-the-free-spirit-series/



This paper is a summary of a full essay that I am working on that I hope to publish in 2024. The essay is of the same scope, but it does explore my claims here in more depth, as well as provide a wider range of secondary literature, neither of which – due to the nature of a session paper – I am able draw upon here. Furthermore, I will only have time to hint at the consequences I wish to draw in the conclusion, which forms the second half of the full essay.

Introduction: Two things we know and one we don't

We know *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was written to explore eternal recurrence, both are introduced in the final two passages of the original edition of Nietzsche's previous work, *The Gay Science* (§341/§342). *Zarathustra* 'is clearly designed to present, for the first time, the

doctrine of the eternal recurrence', and conversely, continues Matthew Mayer, eternal recurrence 'is the fundamental conception of *Zarathustra*' (2019: 219); '*Zarathustra*' declares Laurence Lampert 'exists as a vehicle for the thought of eternal return' (1986: 4). Nietzsche himself says as much in *Ecce Homo*: eternal recurrence is 'the fundamental thought of *Zarathustra*'.

So, why must we wait for *Zarathustra III* to encounter eternal recurrence? Why must we pass through *Zarathustra I* and *Zarathustra II*, the overhuman and will to power, before eternal recurrence?

Accordingly, do we not know something else? *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* explicates three central ideas. '[I]t is generally agreed,' writes Graham Parkes, that *Zarathustra* 'contain[s] three major philosophical ideas: the Over-human, will to power, and the eternal recurrence of the same' (2005: xviii). Furthermore, each of these three ideas centre upon the three published volumes: the overhuman in *Zarathustra I*, will to power in *Zarathustra II*, and eternal recurrence in *Zarathustra III*. Furthermore, Nietzsche's account of the significance of the ideas of *Zarathustra* in *Ecce Homo* are more complex than oft quoted. In the very first line of his commentary on the book he will call eternal recurrence the 'basic idea of the work'. Does fundamental simply mean basic? Skip a few pages on and we read 'the idea of "overman" has become the highest reality'. And will to power is a thread running through all his later work.

How to reconcile these two things we know? There are two main solutions. On the one hand, the narrative structure emerges through the internal necessity of the story which explicates the growth of a teacher (Lampert). On the other hand, the three tales and the coda of *Zarathustra IV* mirror the external necessity of the ancient Greek form of tragedy (Pippin and del Caro 2006: viii). All well and good, yet neither response tells us that much. Why exactly the overhuman in *Zarathustra I*? Why exactly will to power in *Zarathustra II*?

I believe we can see *Zarathustra* as dramatizing the free spirit series. So, *Zarathustra I* as dramatizing the three books of *Human, All Too Human*; *Zarathustra II* as dramatizing *Dawn*; and *Zarathustra III* as dramatizing the original edition of *Gay Science*. To position this argument I am drawing here upon two formulations from the literature concerning Nietzsche's writing processes in the philosophical tradition. Parkes sees this in terms of concepts versus imagery (2005). Ansell Pearson and Large in terms of dramatization (2006). Accordingly, the imagistic poetry of *Zarathustra* becomes a lens on the philosophy of the free spirit series, the image of the overhuman dramatizing the concept of the free spirit from *Human*; the image of will to power dramatizing the concept of the vehemence of drives from *Dawn*; and the image of eternal recurrence dramatizing the concept of the comedy of existence from *Gay Science*.

There is precedence for such considerations in Nietzsche studies. It is academic commonplace to say Nietzsche conceived both *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morality* as commentaries upon *Zarathustra* (Horstmann 2001: xv; Parkes 2005: xi; Ansell-Pearson and Large 2006: xvi; Löwith 1997: 19). Equally, if this assertion seems 'old, familiar', or even obvious, all the better (HHII: OM §200). Many, if not all, of the individual moments of the argument have indeed long been fashioned. Nonetheless, the argument has never been, *to my knowledge*, explicitly articulated. Nor, moreover, the consequences drawn.

1 *Zarathustra I* and *Human, All Too Human*

To begin, let's retroactively explore *Human, All Too Human* from the perspective of *Zarathustra I.*

1.1 *Zarathustra I*: the overhuman

'*I teach you the overhuman*' - so begins the first speech of Zarathustra. 'Human being is something that must be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?' (ZI P3). Even in isolating the opening words of Zarathustra's first speech, we learn much concerning the idea of the overhuman. It is the name given to an overcoming. It requires thought (it is a teaching). It requires certain behaviours (it is a doing). Finally, that which is to be overcome is 'human being'. There is something erroneous with the human, with human being, something human, all too human.

In this way, Neitzsche has Zarathustra – in this first speech, in the very first words of the speech – allude to the theme of the first book of the free spirit series.

These first few words also serve as an overview of the whole speech, divided as it is across passages three to five of the prologue. Crucially, despite the human, all too human nature of human beings, Zarathustra loves much about them, about those who are attempting to overcome the nature of human being. Zarathustra proclaims: 'Mankind is a rope fastened between animal and overman – a rope over an abyss' (ZI P4). Traversing this trajectory is dangerous in every way. 'I love,' chants Zarathustra, 'those who do not know how to live unless by going under, for they are the ones who cross over' (ZI P4).

We thus encounter Zarathustra's litany of love, eighteen sentences beginning with 'I love'. Those that he loves are those affirming – each in their own way – the dangerous work of the overhuman. These include 'great despisers' as they are 'arrows of longing for the other shore'; the one 'who makes of his virtue his desire and his doom'; those 'whose soul squanders itself''. And – toward the end this chant – 'I love the one who is free of spirit' (ZI P4). Nietzsche

here irrefutably refers us back to *Human, All Too Human*, with the concept at the very centre of that text. So, the free spirit is here defined through the overhuman. And to note, this happens again later in the text, in ZII: §8: 'this is the free spirit, the foe of fetters'. The word 'fetters', as we will see, is a significant concept in *Human, All Too Human*.

1.2 *Human, All Too Human I & II*: the free spirit

The three books of *Human* has a thesis – in its broadest co-ordinates – that diagnoses the contemporary human condition and explores possibilities for the overcoming of such. This overcoming is the project of people who Nietzsche names 'free spirits'. The free spirit is thus at the centre of the unfolding narrative, as – of course – the full title of the first volume declares.

This centring is also structural. For the 'free spirit' – so-called – barely appears in the first four chapters of *Human I*. It is named just three times (I: §30; III: §133; IV: §153). And these passing mentions are buried amongst a few synonyms, scattered across those chapters of the book, such as the 'great spirit', 'blunt and forceful spirit', 'superior, fruitful spirit' and so on (I: §25; I: §26; IV: §164). We must thus be patient, for the principal appearance and definition emerges in the fifth chapter of *Human I*: 'Tokens of Higher and Lower Culture'.

The fifth chapter of nine, it is the central chapter of the book. The free spirit is formally announced with '*Free spirit a relative concept*' (HH V §225), the second passage of the chapter. Nietzsche writes that someone 'is called a free spirit who thinks differently from what, on the basis of his origin, environment, his class and profession, or on the basis of the dominant views of the age, would have been expected of him. He is the exception, the fettered [there you go!] the fettered spirits are the rule' (HH I §225). The concept of the free – or unfettered – spirit is thus contextual in respect to fettered spirits.

The chapter begins, however, with a passage with the challenging title: '*Ennoblement through degeneration*' (HH I §224). The aim of this passage is to present Nietzsche's theory of social evolution. On the one hand, for there to be society there needs to be shared collective values. Here Nietzsche is describing the conservation of a nation, and the conservative nature of the retention and enforcement of traditions. Such conservative values make a nation and its people strong.

This conservative society, however, is continually at risk. And this risk comes from 'unfettered, uncertain and morally weaker individuals' (§224). Nietzsche is not decrying these spirits, quite the contrary. Rather, these are the people 'who attempt new things and, in general, many things' whereupon '*spiritual progress* depends' (§224). Nietzsche will go on to call these

unfettered experimenters such things as the degenerates, the mutilated, the damaged, the sickly. All of these appellations are affirmations. 'Degenerate natures are of the highest significance wherever progress is to be effected' (§224). All of this – of course – is echoed in Zarathustra's litany of love.

Anyhow thus we are now in a position to fully understand Nietzsche's basic claim: 'The strongest natures *preserve* the type, the weaker help it to *evolve*' (§224).

If in the first four chapters we saw 'great spirit', 'forceful spirit', 'fruitful spirit' as synonyms for the free spirit, we must now add the uncertain, immoral, weak, degenerate. There will be other synonyms and a lot of fun can be had locating them, teasing out the contexts, their relationality. And this continues throughout the four subsequent chapters of *Human I* and into *Assorted Opinions* and *The Wanderer*. For instance 'anticipatory man' (HHI 9 §614). Or 'the noble traitor' (HHI 9 §637). Spiritual nomads (HH2 OM §211). And – the overhuman…

The naming of the overhuman in *Human, All Too Human* is often overlooked. Yet it appears in passages §143; §164; §441; and §461; and after that in *The Wanderer and His Shadow* in passages §73 and §190. From this perspective the concept of the free spirit is an earlier form, synonym of, or rehearsal, if you prefer, of the image of the overhuman.

1.3 *Human, All Too Human I & II* and *Zarathustra 1* – conclusions

Human poses the problem of the free spirit. It is thus the classic philosophical problem of human freedom. The problem – as Nietzsche explores it – has been explicated in many ways different and even contradictory ways by numerous authors. And just for this reason, it remains, as Mattia Riccardi calls it, 'The Puzzle' (2017: 364). 'On the one hand, in both his published work and unpublished notes, passages abound where he seems to explicitly deny that we have anything like free will. On the other hand, Nietzsche often appeals to the notion of freedom and its cognates, in particular when he is in the business of sketching his own ideal of humankind' (2017: 364). Riccardi – to illustrate the problem – turns first to *Human* and quotes 'The strongest knowledge' is 'that of the total unfreedom of the human will' (HHII OM 50).

How then is the free spirit, the unfettered spirit, the overhuman free – free enough – to overcome human being? In *Human,* Nietzsche offers no way out of this puzzle. Or rather, in *Human* Nietzsche frames the problem he will go on to explore in *Dawn* and *Gay Science*, and that will – in turn – power the narrative and poetry of *Zarathustra*.

2 *Zarathustra II* and *Dawn*

Turning now to *Dawn from the perspective of Zarathustra II*…

2.1 *Zarathustra II*: will to power

Zarathustra II begins with a new teaching. 'New ways I go,' declaims Zarathustra, 'a new speech comes to me' (ZII §1). The first mention of will to power occurs not in *Zarathustra II*, however, but rather around two thirds of the way through *Zarathustra I* in §I.15: 'On a Thousand and One Goals'. 'A tablet of the good hangs over every people. Observe, it is the tablet of their overcomings; observe, it is the voice of their will to power'. Here overcoming appears in a more durational, collective form'. The second mention, the first in *Zarathustra II*, expands upon this. In §II.12 'On Self-Overcoming' Zarathustra says 'what the people believe to be good and evil reveals to me an ancient will to power'. So, rather than with the overhuman as spiritual evolution through temporal succession, what we have here is the weight of duration, ancient forces of collective genealogical power. As he puts it a little later in §II.20 On Redemption: the curse of 'time and time's "it was."'.

How can we define this 'time's "it was"'? In 'On Self-Overcoming' there are clues. The passage opens asking what should we name 'that which *drives* you'; and later 'the *drive* to a purpose' (my italics). That name is – of course – will to power. And Nietzsche here is aligning will to power with his concept of drives. Katrina Mitcheson in her recent book on visual art expands upon this. She writes: 'Nietzsche ultimately understands the multiplicity of drives as a multiplicity of wills to power. He argues that: "Our intellect, our will, likewise our feelings depend on our drives and the conditions of their existence. Our drives can be reduced to the will to power"' (17). And this is the project of *Dawn*.

2.2 *Dawn*: the vehemence of drives

As Maudemarie Clarke and Brian Leiter identify, *Dawn* has some key differences to the *Human* books. They write: 'it is the book that develops in a substantial way […] his critique of the conventional view of human agency, as well as his development of a "naturalistic" conception of persons' (2006 viii). *Dawn* is where Nietzsche shifts the perspective from psychology to physiology: a philosophy of the body.

Nietzsche writes, people should 'not [be] ashamed to have descended from animals or trees (the noble races thought themselves honoured by such fables)' (D I.31). This is the insight of biological science and the theory of evolution. It informs his theory of drives and his theory

can be said to have three moments. First, the fundamental nature of drives at a biological level. Drives are that 'which teach us to seek food and elude enemies' (D I.26). There is also the 'drive to life' (D §I.72), the 'drive to knowledge' (D §I.45) and so on. In this way, a drive 'evolves' (D §I.38). Human society is thus an accumulation of the affects, effects and objects of drives, a deep culture, and deep history which manifest in relatively transitory moralities and laws. Accordingly: 'However far man may go in self-knowledge, nothing however can be more incomplete than his image of the totality of drives which constitute his being' (D II.119). Rather – all we ever encounter is the screaming of a drive: Nietzsche writes: 'words really exist only for *superlative* degrees of … drives… Anger, hatred, love, pity, desire, knowledge, joy, pain – all are names for *extreme* states' (D §II.115). Accordingly, 'the milder, middle degrees, not to speak of the lower degrees which are continually in play, elude us, and yet it is they which weave the web of our character and our destiny' (D §II.115).

In the second instance, then, Nietzsche wants to explore the ways in which we can overcome an overwhelming drive (D II.109). Nietzsche identifies 'no more than six' different methods' but the crucial point is this. In the third instance – we encounter Nietzsche's unsettling proposition – '*that* one *desires* to combat the vehemence of a drive at all, however, does not stand within our own power; nor does the choice of any particular method; nor does the success or failure of that method' (D II.109).

We are determined by our drives. We are not free. In *Dawn* Nietzsche puts forward the strongest argument possible *against* human freedom. But not, as we will see, the free spirit as such…

2.3 *Dawn* and *Zarathustra II* - conclusions

The explication of the vehemence of drives permeates *Zarathustra II*. Toward the end of the book – in II:20: 'On Redemption' – Nietzsche writes: 'Will – thus the liberator and joy bringer is called; thus I taught you, my friends! And now learn this in addition: the will itself is still a prisoner. Willing liberates, but what is that called, which claps even the liberator in chains?' The answer is the will to power. And this image of chains is again one taken from *Dawn*, most beautifully in the concept of dancing in chains. Accordingly, whereas *Zarathustra I* finished on a celebratory note, this is not the case with *Zarathustra II.*

3 *Zarathustra III* and *The Gay Science* (original edition)

So, finally, the original edition of *The Gay Science* from the perspective of *Zarathustra III*…

3.1 *Zarathustra III*: eternal recurrence

Zarathustra III is very different to I and II, the teacher is now a solitary wanderer on a journey passing through many lands and experiencing the ways of living of many people, returning the long way round he reaches home about halfway through the book at III.9 'The Homecoming'. And once returning home, he remains solitary as he continues to experience the thought of eternal recurrence.

Eternal recurrence, however, is properly named quite late in *Zarathustra*, in III.13: 'The Convalescent'. Yet, it has been emerging and coming into focus – though remaining unnamed – by the end of *Zarathustra II*. So II.19 'The Soothsayer' and in particular II.20 'On Redemption'. It then appears, again unnamed, early on in *Zarathustra III*, hinted at in III.1 'The Wanderer' and described in III.2 'On the Vision and the Riddle'. And then of course (but still unnamed) in III.12 'On Old and New Tablets', the chapter that precedes 'The Convalescent' where it is – finally – named.

What does the unwillingness to name this image mean? Eternal recurrence as it appears in *Zarathustra* is the unthinkable, presaged by and appearing as terrifying dreams, mythic encounters, delirium and signs. It can barely be uttered, barely be named. It is – for Zarathustra – a diabolical image. In this way, it accords with its first expression in Nietzsche's published works, at the end of the original edition of *The Gay Science*.

3.2 *The Gay Science* (original edition): the eternal comedy of existence

In 'The heaviest weight' (GS 341), Nietzsche gives us his famous thought experiment. What if a demon were to 'say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence".' Would you 'throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon'? Or would you say '"never have I heard anything more divine".' Thus the question: 'how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to long for nothing more fervently than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?' (341)

In this way, and as we have seen, the original version of *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra* are intimately connected. The final few passages of *Gay Science* Chapter 4 lead straight in to *Zarathustra*, and eternal recurrence is laid out – if not explicitly named – in the penultimate passage. But more than this, the entire book, the entire *The Gay Science*, was written in the aftermath of Nietzsche having the thought of eternal recurrence. *Dawn* was published late July 1881. The same month Nietzsche was at Sils-Maria and on the shore of the Lake Silvaplana and found that pyramid-shaped rock. In his notebooks for Summer 1881 there is a sequence entitled "The Recurrence of the Same. Sketch", which includes the phrase 'the heaviest weight'. It is after this that he begins writing aphorisms for what will become *The Gay Science* (See Prideaux).

The whole of the original edition of *The Gay Science* is conceived, written, and organised in the wake of the thought of eternal recurrence. Eternal recurrence is not a thought that is tagged onto the end of the book simply in preparation for *Zarathustra*. Rather, eternal recurrence is there from the very first pages. We can see this if we observe how the original edition of *The Gay Science* operates, something that can be difficult as we now tend to read the book as it appears to us with the additions – most significantly the fifth chapter – added in the 1887 edition.

For the book may end with the unnamed eternal recurrence but it also begins with eternal recurrence under another name. In the first passage of the first book ('The teachers of the purpose of existence'). Nietzsche sets out his stall: 'To laugh at oneself as one would have to laugh in order to laugh *from the whole truth*', 'something that is beyond even the best of us'. And 'Perhaps even laughter still has a future for at present, the comedy of existence has not yet "become conscious" of itself; at present, we still live in the age of tragedy, in the age of moralities and religions' (S1). The key idea here is the comedy of existence, or – as he will name it a little later in the passage: 'the eternal comedy of existence'

In this way, we can see *The Gay Science* – the original edition of *The Gay Science* – as a loop. A Mobius loop which leads us from the final passages back to the beginning of the book. Yes, it ends with 'the tragedy begins' (342), which picks up on the gnashing of teeth and throwing oneself to the ground; but it also leads us back to the beginning of the book and the eternal comedy of existence. Where we can say '"never have I heard anything more divine"' (341). Yet in looping back it joins two articulations of eternal recurrence, and there are loops within loops here.

Chapter 4 itself loops within the wider loop of whole of *The Gay Science*, four chapters like four seasons, where the final chapter – the only one with a title ('St Januarius') – begins

with passage 276: '*For the new year*'. This – of course – is the famous articulation of amor fati: 'I want to learn more and more how to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them - thus I will be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love from now on! I do not want to wage war against ugliness. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse the accusers. Let looking away be my only negation! And, all in all and on the whole: some day I want only to be a Yes-sayer!'

Eternal recurrence, the eternal comedy of existence, and amor fati – three perspectives, three synonyms. The latter connection is well documented. Adrian del Caro warns us against 'trivializ[ing] the thrust of *The Gay Science* by limiting its existential force to this single aphorism. In fact, the whole of *Gay Science,* in its structure and content, is a non-metaphysical rendering of *amor fati*, love of fate, which Nietzsche […] developed philosophically in *The Gay Science*, which includes the first published formulation of the most life affirming thought possible, viz., the eternal recurrence of the same' (2012: fn36).

The philosophical implications of amor fati have perhaps never been better explored than by Robert C. Solomon in his 'Nietzsche on Fatalism and "Free Will"' '"Amor fati" ("love of fate")' he writes 'hardly makes sense as a paean to causal essentialism' (69). 'Fatalism, in contrast to determinism, begins at the end, that is, the outcome, and considers the outcome as in some sense necessary, given the nature of the person's character, which in turn entails a protracted narrative that, all things considered, encompasses the whole of that person's life, culture, and circumstances' (67) 'One might argue that Nietzsche's concept of fate is teleological in form' (67). Or perhaps as I would prefer to put it – futural.

3.3 *The Gay Science* (original edition) and *Zarathustra III* – conclusions

Eternal recurrence as amor fati is resolved in the eternal comedy of existence. The loop: the tragic end of *The Gay Science* brings us back to the eternal comedy of existence. The thought experiment is revealed as a joke! As existential laughter. This is not a theory of humour based upon the more traditional concepts of incongruity, superiority, or the release of energy as catharsis (Lippit).

Greg Whitlock writes that 'Nietzsche's philosophy is first and foremost the recognition of the value of humour for life. Zarathustra's antics of self-coronation and holy pronouncements are a comical celebration of the triumph of zarathustran lightness over rival nihilistic and desperate philosophies' (from Lippit).

Or… as Georges Bataille puts it: laughter is 'the only imaginable and definitively terminal result. .. of philosophical speculation' (from Lippit).

Conclusion: Zarathustra, the free spirit series, and temporality

In conclusion, Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* dramatizes the philosopher's preceding free spirit series: *Human, All Too Human*, *Dawn*, and the original edition of *The Gay Science*.

Nietzsche himself saw this, in various ways at different times. For instance, in a letter to Franz Overbeck in April 1884, Nietzsche writes that while re-reading *Dawn* and the original edition of *The Gay Science*, 'I found that there is hardly a line that cannot serve as an introduction, preparation, and commentary on *Zarathustra*. It is a fact that I made the commentary before the text' (B: 7 Apr. 1884) (My translation). Perhaps he even did not have the patience at this point to re-read the three books of *Human*!

A couple of years later, Nietzsche writes to Ernst Wilhelm Fritzsch, his publisher of the time, that 'in order to have all the prerequisites for understanding *Zarathustra* […] all my earlier writings must be understood seriously and deeply; also the necessity of the succession of these writings and the development expressed within them' (B: 29 Aug. 1886) (My translation). All this, then, becomes a diabolical *mise-en-abyme.*

Finally, given the time left, I can only hint at some implications of the temporal dimensions that have been exposed in this exploration: succession, duration, becoming. The repetition in succession, ongoing overcoming. The repetition in duration, the deep past as determinator. The repetition of becoming, the open future.

The overhuman is an ongoing overcoming, the succession of life. The succession of life as lived by the free spirit. Our presentness. Will to power: the past, the ancient past, that which collects up our animality and the history of the world that each of us embodies as drives. Eternal recurrence, the eternal comedy of existence, amor fati, the telos of our purpose, that which is in the future that draws us forward. Nietzsche resolves the problem of the free spirit and the overhuman by conceiving three temporalities each of which are intratemporal that interweave like a trefoil knot. Presentness – past, present, and future as ongoing succession. Pastness – past, present, and future captured in duration as determinism. Futureness: Past, present, and future orientated towards becoming, becoming who you are. Embracing the comedy of existence, laughing along with eternal recurrence fractures the determinism of drives, of the will to power, and such overcoming frees the spirit, becoming the overhuman.

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DB *Daybreak*: *Thoughts on the Presumptions of Morality*, 1881 [aka *Dawn*]
Reissued with a preface, 1887

GS *The Gay Science*, 1882
Reissued with a preface, a fifth book and a book of songs, 1887

SZ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, composed 1883–5
Book 1, published 1883
Book 2, published 1883
Book 3, published 1884
Book 4, private circulation only, 1885
Books 1, 2 and 3 reissued in a single volume, 1887
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GE *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1886

GM *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 1887

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