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Beyond Face and Heel: Nietzsche's Agonism and the Pro-Wrestling Spectacle

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Wrestling, defined as the attempt to use one's own body to overpower another being, is perhaps the most fundamental form of combat, and has been used by writers as early as Plato (who was himself a wrestler) as a metaphor for all variety of contests and struggles, including psychological discord and philosophical disputation. This by itself justifies an attempt to understand how Nietzsche's ideas about *agon* might bear some relation to wrestling itself. Following, Acampora (2013), I see "agonism" as central to Nietzsche's philosophical project throughout his writings. On this view, Nietzsche takes *agon* or contest to be essential to the project of value creation that makes human life meaningful and drives the engine of cultural change. I argue in what follows that the modern phenomenon of pro-wrestling, which just happens to have its genesis during Nietzsche's lifetime, becomes especially interesting when viewed through the lens of Nietzsche's ideas, given that it reflects the values of those who watch and participate in it – values that are depicted as engaged in perpetual struggle, making pro-wrestling a mirror image of the contest that Nietzsche sees as intrinsic to culture at large.

First, clarification concerning the phrase “professional wrestling” is needed. Wrestling is a sport, dating back at least to ancient Greece itself, but likely has existed in some form throughout civilization. In a wrestling match, individuals attempt to defeat one another by forcing or “pinning” one another to the ground. The term “amateur wrestling” refers to the contemporary version of this sport, practiced almost exclusively by students and Olympians, i.e. people who aren’t paid, hence the “amateur” epithet. Until recently, if someone wanted a career in “wrestling” after graduation, they would have to become a pro-wrestler, which is another sort of thing entirely. Nowadays, many amateur wrestlers learn other fighting styles, such as Muay Thai kickboxing and Brazilian jiu-jitsu, and practice Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), where the wrestling knowledge and training ethic accrued from their amateur experience often allows them to excel. What is called “professional wrestling” or “pro-wrestling” differs from amateur wrestling and MMA in one crucial respect: in pro-wrestling, the individuals are not actually *trying* to pin one another. The results of pro-wrestling “matches” are pre-determined, sometimes by individual “bookers” or “promoters”, and other times by large staffs of writers, with input from a variety of corporate executives. A pro-wrestling match is not actually a competition between two wrestlers, but a simulation of one. The “wrestlers” in a pro-wrestling match are not actually trying to defeat one another, but are working together to best appear as if they are, while eliciting a reaction from the crowd. For most of pro-wrestling’s existence, its purveyors portrayed matches as legitimate competitions, though they often faced media scrutiny and exposure. Within the past thirty years, there has been a shift toward admitting that it is a show – entertainment or even art, rather than a legitimate sport. Pro-wrestling¹ blends athletic and theatrical elements, resulting in a unique cultural phenomenon. Its drama is in large part an artistically accentuated representation of the spontaneous drama of sports.

1 From here on I will use the word “wrestling” interchangeably with “pro-wrestling”.

However, pro-wrestling is competitive, just not in the same way that sports are. For one, pro-wrestlers compete with one another for relative positions of prominence within a wrestling organization (or “promotion”), with only the very top spots securing lucrative contracts and global exposure, similarly to how Hollywood actors compete for leading roles. Wrestlers use their athletic and other performative skills to put on the most engaging show possible so as to prove their value to the management of the promotion for which they are working. But in addition to competing for places of prominence within the show, there is another kind of competition going on: a competition of values. Wrestlers, and the people in the crowd who cheer or boo those wrestlers, represent different ways of life, different attitudes, i.e. different values. The story of a wrestling match is the story of these values in conflict. Typically, the principal characters in such a story include a “babyface” (or just “face”) and a “heel”. Babyfaces are the protagonists of the wrestling story, motivated by the cheers of the crowd (or by the expectation of cheering) to defeat their opponents. Heels, on the other hand are the faces’ antagonists and are despised by the crowd (the feeling usually reciprocated).

The traditional characterization of wrestling “faces” and “heels” is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s ideas about *agon*, particularly in, his early essay, “Homer’s Contest”, where he explains the flourishing of Greek culture as depending on its artistic and athletic contests being characterized by one of two versions of the goddess *Eris* whose name means “strife”. In Hesiod’s *Works and Days* a distinction is drawn between the two versions of the goddess, in terms of the kinds of actions and attitudes each *Eris* inspires in human beings. One *Eris* inspires envy or jealousy, which are seen by Hesiod as positive emotions, necessary for a society to achieve greatness, as they engender healthy competition (*Wettkampf*), while the other *Eris* motivates actions that are malicious and destructive and a desire to eliminate ones opposition (*Vernichtungslust*). The traditional dichotomy between faces and heels in wrestling neatly maps on to that of the two *Erises*. Faces, in nearly all periods of wrestling have been characterized by their desire to excel by outdoing their opponents through their own skill as well as the power they

draw from the audience's enthusiasm. By contrast, heels try to cheat their way to victory or injure their opponent before the match even begins. A face typically welcomes a challenge, while a heel avoids it. In this way, wrestling models both the healthy contest itself, as well as the threat of its disruption by the destructive *Eris*, who motivates those in her thrall to eliminate their opposition in order to win by default.

The content of a particular wrestling production is largely determined by the tastes of the crowd and which wrestlers they support or admonish. Together, the producers, performers, and consumers of pro-wrestling form a larger community built around the wrestling product. According to Acampora (2013), Nietzsche sees the nature of Greek agonistic activity as essentially communal:

For the agon to be an effective means of producing shared cultural values, the community itself must have significant involvement in virtually all its dimensions since it is the community that creates and sanctions the institutions or forums in which agonistic encounters can occur. Thus, it is the community and not any great individual competitor that founds this form of interaction. The community has this priority by virtue of the fact that it provides the conditions for the possibility of meaningful agonistic exchange—it provides the judges, the grounds for deciding outcomes, and the conditions for participation. And so the community defines and delimits the agonistic arena. As it facilitates and supports (or not) prospective competitors, relevant measures, and mechanisms to determine outcomes, it founds and grounds the ethos that supports the economy of agonistic exchange... (Acampora 17)

Pro-wrestling well represents this tight relationship between contest and community due to the unique role that the crowd plays in the production, for they are not mere spectators, but a constitutive part of the spectacle itself. What matters in a pro-wrestling performance is not only what happens in the ring, but also what happens in the stands, and the dynamic interplay between the two. The crowd is at once audience and also the varyingly compliant or recalcitrant material manipulated by the wrestlers, as well as an active creative participant. Crowds that contain manifold, conflicting sentiments bear the greatest potential for aesthetic failure, but also for unique and interesting successes, especially when such crowds somehow come together to express a uniform sentiment. The character of a particular pro-wrestling product is immanent to the relations of power between the different values represented.

Unlike athletic contests in sports, which have some significance in the absence of spectators, a pro-wrestling match in front of no one can be no more than a rehearsal. The role of the crowd in pro-wrestling bears interesting similarities to that of the chorus in Attic tragedy as Nietzsche conceives it in *The Birth of Tragedy*. There Nietzsche rejects the prevailing view derived from A.W. Schlegel that the chorus represents the "ideal spectator", "[f]or we had always believed that the right spectator, whoever he might be, must always remain conscious that he was viewing a work of art and not an empirical reality. But the tragic chorus of the Greeks is forced to recognize real beings in the figures on the stage." (BT, §7) Similarly, while most people at pro-wrestling events know the results to be predetermined and the dramatic situations fictitious, they also know to act as if they believe that what is happening in front of them is real. In this way, what is enacted in the pro-wrestling spectacle is a kind of ritual performed by wrestlers and crowd alike that has a nature akin to the instantiation of the mythical in tragedy.

Following Schiller's analysis, Nietzsche says the chorus is a:

living wall that tragedy constructs around itself in order to close itself off from the world of reality and to preserve its ideal domain and its poetical freedom... For this chorus the Greek built up the scaffolding of a fictitious *natural state* and on it placed fictitious *natural beings*. On this foundation tragedy developed and so, of course, it could dispense at the beginning with a painstaking portrayal of reality. Yet it is no arbitrary world placed by whim between heaven and earth; rather it is a world with the same reality and credibility that Olympus with its inhabitants possessed for the believing Hellene. The satyr, as the Dionysian chorist, lives in a religiously acknowledged reality under the sanction of myth and cult. (BT, §7)

Similarly, the conventions of pro-wrestling are such that drawing attention to its artifice, claiming it is unrealistic, is to miss the point. Like tragedy, pro-wrestling is an idealization of reality, whose very artificiality allows for its aesthetic effect. As Roland Barthes puts it, in his 1957 essay "The World of Wrestling"

in wrestling, a man who is down is exaggeratedly so, and completely fills the eyes of the spectators with the intolerable spectacle of his powerlessness... The gesture of the vanquished wrestler signifying to the world a defeat, which, far from disguising, he emphasizes and holds like a pause in music, corresponds to the mask of antiquity meant to signify the tragic mode of the spectacle... What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself. There is no more a problem of truth in wrestling than in the theater. In both, what is expected is the intelligible representation of moral situations which are usually private. This emptying out of interiority to the benefit of its exterior signs, this exhaustion of the content by the form, is the very principle of triumphant classical art. Wrestling is an immediate pantomime, infinitely more efficient than the dramatic pantomime, for the wrestler's gesture needs no anecdote, no décor, no transference in order to appear true. (Barthes 24-26)

Nietzsche's discussion of tragedy, specifically the interplay between "Apollinian" and "Dionysian" forces that he believes give rise to the tragic effect, offers further resources for understanding the pro-wrestling spectacle. The Apollinian is identified with image, appearance, illusion, individuality, symbol, naïveté, sculpture, and "all plastic arts," (BT, §1) while the Dionysian is identified with intoxication, music, and an annihilating of the individual subject, who is swept away in the "feeling of unity leading back to the very heart of nature." (BT, §7) Nietzsche takes the chorus to be the Dionysian element in tragedy, and if the crowd is the chorus's analogue in wrestling, then it makes sense to think of it too as Dionysian. It is part of the experience of being in such a crowd, that at the moment of greatest fervor, when the crowd behaves as a unity, one feels oneself to be dissolved into the throng. The actions of the wrestlers, on the other hand, like the actors on the tragic stage, are all image, mask, and artifice, i.e. Apollinian. Hence, the interaction between the wrestlers and the crowd has the potential to generate something akin to the tragic effect in which

[t]he Apollinian appearances in which Dionysus objectifies himself are no longer 'an eternal sea, changeful strife, a glowing life, 'like the music of the chorus, no longer those forces, merely felt and not condensed in images, in which the enraptured servant of Dionysus senses the nearness of the god... (BT, §8)

Barthes understands wrestling as a spectacle of excessive gestures, which represent a struggle between good and evil, governed by a logic of universal moral significance, such that wrestlers "are, for a few moments, the key which opens Nature, the pure gesture which separates Good from Evil, and unveils the form of a Justice which is at last intelligible." (Barthes 32) He compares wrestling to both Ancient tragedy and the theatrical comedy of

writers such as Molière. This characterization is mostly apt. However, the moral dynamic of pro-wrestling does not always fit so neatly under labels of “good” and “evil” or universal conceptions of each. The values at play vary according to time, place, and generally, the values of the individuals that make up the crowd present at any particular wrestling event.

Barthes is somewhat sensitive to these axiological differences as he contrasts French and American wrestling, but gives no indication that he understands the play of values in wrestling to be generally fluid and dynamic. This omission is to be expected as changes to pro-wrestling’s character were glacially slow up until the past thirty years. Barthes describes American wrestling as “a sort of mythological fight between Good and Evil (of a quasi-political nature, the ‘bad’ wrestler always being supposed to be a Red),” whereas “[t]he process of creating heroes in French wrestling is quite different, being based on ethics and not on politics. What the public is looking for here is the gradual construction of a highly moral image: that of the perfect ‘bastard’ [*salaud*]” (Barthes 30)

However, for most of wrestling history in both Europe and the U.S., faces and heels were primarily distinguished along the lines of norms of sportsmanship. Faces followed the rules, were hardworking, courageous, humble, honest, traditionally masculine, chaste, and merciful. By contrast, heels were sore losers, lazy, cowardly, arrogant, lying, effeminate, promiscuous, and cruel. It was only ever acceptable for a face to break rules as a receipt to an earlier transgression by the heel. The ethics of classic wrestling of both the U.S. and Europe bore much similarity to primitive principles of justice, such as the Code of Hammurabi. As Barthes himself puts it:

it is the pattern of justice that matters here, much more than its content: wrestling is above all a quantitative series of compensations (an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth). This explains why sudden changes of circumstance have in the eyes of wrestling habitués a sort of moral beauty... (Barthes 29)

Much of U.S. wrestling until the fall of the Soviet Union² was decidedly political on the surface. However, not all heels were Communists, and even those who were still earned their boos through cheating. A more radical transformation of what the crowd regarded as moral beauty came in the 1980s. That decade’s most popular wrestler, Hulk Hogan, often bent or broke the rules, behaved spitefully, was braggadocious and ill-tempered, yet was revered by the crowd in spite of, and even because of these qualities and behaviors. He fought against wrestlers who were bigger and stronger, more intelligent, and more athletic than he, yet most of the crowd preferred him to them all. Hogan embodied an American ethic of exceptionalism. His powerfully charismatic personality and superlative patriotism were such that he could do no wrong, especially when battling oversized monsters, smarmy wisecrackers, jealous cuckolds, the aforementioned Communists, and scheming foreigners of all stripes. He was beloved by the crowd less for his specific actions and more for his identity as a “real American”. A wrestler’s actions by themselves don’t make that wrestler a face or heel. Faces act to fulfil the desires of the crowd and because they believe that the crowd desires for them to win.

As the Regan era gave way to the more muted jingoism of Clinton, and the U.S. presented itself as less domineering, and more gentle and cooperative in the global arena, American wrestling followed suit. The top star of the largest American wrestling organization, the World Wrestling Federation (WWF, now World Wrestling Entertainment or WWE), became Bret “Hitman” Hart, a Canadian, whose popularity stemmed from his virtues of respect, fairness, loyalty, and devotion to his craft – a return to the traditional babyfaces of wrestling’s past, though without the modesty of those earlier heroes, as Hart shamelessly referred to himself as “The Best There Is, the Best There Was, and the Best There Ever Will Be.” This status quo didn’t last long, however, as a wholly different set of values was

2 Contemporary purveyors of pro-wrestling try their best to present it as apolitical.

brewing within the cauldron of wrestling culture. In keeping with lurid late 90s counter culture icons such as Jerry Springer, Howard Stern, *South Park*, Marilyn Manson, and *Jackass*, the true top star of the 90s turned out to be “Stone Cold” Steve Austin: a disrespectful, beer swilling vulgarian, whose main appeal was his anti-authoritarianism.

I see the change from Hart to Austin as an example of revaluation by the wrestling community along the lines of what Nietzsche claims was achieved, first by Socrates and then Jewish and Christian morality – a “revaluation of their enemies values...,” an inversion of “the aristocratic value equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = beloved of God)...” saying ‘the wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are pious... and you, the powerful, the noble, are on the contrary evil... there begins *the slave revolt in morality...*’ (GM I §7) While the specific values at issue are different, Austin uses the same tactic as the Judeo-Christian moralizers, taking Hart’s noble values of respect, discipline, and sportsmanship, and recasting them as cheesy, conformist, naïve, timid, and weak.

The example of Hart and Austin is particularly notable because their reversal of roles, or “double-turn” (Austin moving from heel to face and Hart vice-versa,) occurred in a specific match between the two at Wrestlemania 13 in 1997. Leading up to that match the tides were already beginning to shift, as an increasing number of fans were cheering Austin and booing Hart, but WWF owner Vince McMahon caught on to this change in sentiment and decided to catalyze it in dramatic fashion. In a masterful display of sensitivity to and manipulation of crowd psychology, under McMahon’s direction, Austin and Hart, through their actions in the ring, successfully transformed Austin into the arch-face and Hart the arch-heel of the company. Austin obstinately refused to admit defeat and submit to Hart’s “sharp-shooter” submission hold, instead passing out in a pool of his own blood, cementing his status as the new hero of wrestling. While not a complete inversion of values (Austin is courageous in refusing to give up and Hart is

petty and vindictive, attacking Austin after the match is over) Austin largely represents radically different values from Hart’s and other faces that preceded him. More importantly, the source of Austin’s values is *ressentiment*, as Nietzsche thinks is true of Judeo-Christian morality (c.f. GM I §10), for Austin’s “good” is defined in spiteful opposition to goods valued by others (Hart, and later, McMahon) that are unattainable for Austin himself. Given the ignoble origin of his values, Austin could hardly engender a pro-wrestling characterized by *Wettkampf*. In fact, the elevation of Austin despite Hart’s official win constitutes victory for the destructive *Eris*, “one who leads human beings into hostile fights of annihilation against one another” over the *Eris* who “provokes human beings to action – not to the action of fights of annihilation but rather to the action of *contests*.” (HS, p. 3)

Both Hogan and Hart (as characters), though in many ways opposed, wanted to be the best wrestlers they could possibly be – to rise above their opposition to greater heights. In Nietzsche’s terms their mode of action is *erheben*, an attempt to elevate above one’s opponent, as opposed to *herabdrücken*, or forcing back – trying to eliminate one’s opposition in order to attain victory by default. The latter mode, motivated by the destructive *Eris*, leads not to healthy contests, but meaningless violence, which, along with increasing vulgarity, is characteristic of the period following the “double-turn”, known in the wrestling community as the “Attitude Era”, which involved minimal technical excellence and an escalation of brutality that left many wrestlers crippled. McMahon seemingly realized that Austin as shining exemplar was untenable, so unlike most top WWF/E faces, “Stone Cold” was most consistently engaged in the chase for the gold, rather than holding it. By contrast with the Northeastern based WWF, the wrestling of the Southern U.S., governed by the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA), and then Ted Turner’s World Championship Wrestling (WCW), typically had a heel as the top star, rather than a face, the energy of its contests built mostly on the crowd’s hatred, rather than their admiration. However, even there, the babyfaces’ mode of action was closer to *erheben*, as they attempted to overcome the heel champion by excelling. Wrestling comes closest to

Wettkampf in Japan, especially the “King’s Road” style of classic All Japan Pro Wrestling (AJPW) in the 90s, which presents itself more like a genuine sport than does most U.S. wrestling. The audience responds primarily to the vigor of the contestants as they mutually attempt to rise above one another to ever greater heights of achievement. By stark contrast, the Attitude Era is the epitome of *Vernichtungslust*.

Nonetheless, just as Nietzsche claims that it was due to the slave revolt of the priests “that man first became *an interesting animal*, that only here did the human soul in a higher sense acquire *depth* and become *evil*” (GM I, 6), the inversion of values that brought on the Attitude Era was necessary for pro-wrestling to become interesting. Shortly after the double-turn, in late ’97, McMahon himself became the principal villain of the WWF, due to the events of the infamous “Montreal Screwjob”, in which Hart was encouraged by McMahon to sign a lucrative contract with WCW (because McMahon could no longer afford him), and then was given an ignominious farewell, as he was misled about how his final match would end. I think of this happening along the lines of Nietzsche’s discussion of ostracism in “Homer’s Contest”

as, for example, the Ephesians express it in their banishment of Hermodorus: ‘Among us no one should be the best; but if anyone is, then let him be elsewhere and among others.’ Why should no one be the best? Because with that the contest would dry up and the perpetual source of life in the Hellenic state would be endangered... One removes individuals who tower over the others only to reawaken the play of powers... In a natural order of things, there are always *several* geniuses who incite each other to reciprocal action as they keep each other within the limits of measure. (HS, p. 5)

Hart, who completely outmatched everyone else in terms of his technical wrestling acumen, could not exist in the Attitude Era, in which all other participants attained dominance not by technique, but either brutish brawling or else the force of their over the top personalities, expressed mostly through insult and profanity. Though this was largely a degeneration of pro-wrestling’s agonistic space, it also allowed for a proliferation of myriad values in play at once as opposed to the strict dichotomy of face and heel that preceded it. The Attitude Era is known for the numerosity of its “geniuses” as titans such as Mick Foley, The Rock, Triple H, and The Undertaker, competed with Austin for supremacy. While Austin was near universally beloved, other wrestlers, embodying various kinds of values, were affirmed and rejected by different segments of the crowd, in contrast to the near monolithic uniformity of past wrestling crowds.

Perhaps most importantly, the Attitude Era, assisted by the developing internet wrestling community (IWC), engendered a new kind of self-consciousness amid the fanbase who became increasingly aware of their own role in shaping and promoting values within the production.

The wrestling public has an intuitive sense of potential disruptions to the *agon* as a conduit for meaning. On one level this manifests in their distaste for the traditional heels, who, motivated by *Vernichtungslust*, hope to win, not by outdoing their opponents, but by annihilating them. However, in recent years pro-wrestling crowds have also rebelled against what they take to be a forceful promoting of wrestlers as both top heel and top face who they believe are not best suited for those positions. It is then not the characters themselves that the crowd opposes, but the creative decisions behind their actions and place within the larger narrative. This calls to mind Nietzsche’s claim that Socrates corrupted the Greek rhetorical *agon*. As Acampora puts it:

Nietzsche concludes that the Platonic Socrates diminishes contestability, constricts the possibilities for agonistic engagement, and fixes in advance the potential outcomes; thus, the regenerative potency of agonism (the organizing powers he so admired in the Homeric and tragic contexts) was lost. (Acampora 11)

WWE viewers have begun to regard McMahon as like Socrates in this way – artificially, constraining the contest to his liking – which takes them out of their roles within the fabricated reality of the spectacle, reducing them to external critical observers, something more like the “ideal spectators” that Nietzsche claims to be quite the contrary of the tragic chorus. Furthermore, now as critics, the crowd no longer reveres the wrestlers as larger-than-life gods. The wrestling superstar has ceased to be an idealization, but instead a representation of the “ordinary person” as if they stepped out of the crowd themselves. Nietzsche blames Euripides for tragedy’s demise because he “brought the spectator onto the stage and thus qualified him to pass judgment on the drama.” (BT, §11) Similarly, wrestlers of the past decade, including Austin himself and later CM Punk in his “pipe bomb promo”, have, from within the wrestling narrative, complained of their misuse by management – not receiving the places within the hierarchy that they deserve. While initially an exciting “breaking of the fourth wall,” such maneuvers have had the effect of shattering the immersive spell of the wrestling spectacle.

At the same time, despite its origin in *ressentiment*, it’s hard not to see Austin and the Attitude Era as Dionysian in character – an orgiastic wave of sexuality, violence and drunkenness (with Hart embodying the Apollinian). Perhaps it is like Euripidean tragedy in which the Dionysian is itself made into a problem: “Is the Dionysian entitled to exist at all? Should it not be forcibly uprooted from Hellenic soil.” (BT, §12) McMahon does attempt to

constrain and/or ostracize Austin. Or perhaps the innovative characterization of McMahon himself as a villain is akin to Euripides’ novel representation of Dionysus. Regardless, WWE eventually became bloodlessly PG, with Dionysus nowhere to be found, having shriveled up and vanished under the withering gaze of self-consciousness.

However, wrestling seems to be surviving the period of nihilistic decay. Fans are learning again to play their roles within the ritual symbol world of the spectacle. This may lead to new possibilities for the *agon*, and therefore meaning and value creation. The past several years have seen a transformation in the makeup of the crowd and hence the character of the wrestlers and their stories as a reflection of the crowd’s valuations. For instance, as reported by Barthes, traditionally, any hint of effeminacy or homosexuality was nearly universally abhorred by wrestling crowds. However, the opposite is now the rule, as openly LGBTQ performers, such as Sonny Kiss, Effy, and Ashley Vox, are beloved heroes. There has also been a renaissance in women’s wrestling. Whereas until about 2015 women in American wrestling were primarily relegated to a titillating sideshow, now women’s wrestling is presented as of equal stature to men’s, with stars such as Sasha Banks, Becky Lynch, Charlotte Flair, and Ronda Rousey often main-eventing major shows, including “the grandest stage of them all,” Wrestlemania. Aside from changing attitudes about sexuality and gender, wrestling crowds have begun to embrace faces such as Kenny Omega, Asuka, The New Day, and Orange Cassidy who defy expectations about wrestlers and wrestling in myriad ways. Rather than tragedy, Nietzsche may have understood this new era of wrestling as more akin to “*New Attic Comedy*” in which “the degenerate form of tragedy lived on as a monument of its exceedingly painful and violent death.” (BT, §11) Nonetheless, while the shape that pro-wrestling will take in the future is uncertain, it may have the resources to drive revaluation and creation of values in ways that cast new meanings on our collective experience, and, as is Nietzsche’s ultimate aim (EH.iii.BT, §2), and wrestler Daniel Bryan’s rallying cry, allow us to say “yes” to life.

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The Waves Rise Around Your Mountain

Daniel Brennan

*That is why I must descend to the deep, as you do in the evening when you pass beyond the sea and bring light even to the underworld, you over-rich star! (Z1 “Zarathustra’s Prologue”)*¹

In Robert McFarlane’s *Underland*, the author describes a mountaineering trek he undertook in Norway to some stone-age cave paintings.² The caves were in an isolated, cliff-lined landscape bordered by a ferocious and unruly ocean and the figures, for McFarlane were an expression of deep-time, linking pre-history to the present. His recounting of setting off towards the cave as a storm approached is full of the human drama that mountaineering can produce. As he hiked through dangerous snow drifts and across risky precipices, he also reflected on the way that the original painter of the cave art would also have made a similar kind of risky journey to make the art. That is, for McFarlane the mountaineering was a necessary part of the human endeavor to understand oneself. That in order to grasp the meaning of the human condition some kind of ascension away from the town and its decadence, undertaken in a manner which forced the mountain climber to confront and overcome great challenges and potential suffering, is clearly some-

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common (Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg, 2016) Retrieved April 25, 2020, from https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998-h/1998-h.htm#link2H_4_0070

2 Robert McFarlane, *Underland*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019), 253-286.

thing that is also found in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and there is a strong Nietzschean tone to McFarlane’s prose. For example, while at the threshold to the cave where he is to descend to find the cave art, McFarlane pauses to look around, taking stock of the natural features which inform his conscious thinking. “Roar of waves on far reefs, the distant churn of the Maelstrom. A sea eagle turns overhead, wingtips near the cliffs that drop sheer to the water.”³ For McFarlane, the mountaineer, this view of nature at its most extreme and threatening, punctuates his discovery of some of the earliest and most profound artistic expressions.

When we consider McFarlane’s observation alongside the epigraph of this paper, he seems just like Zarathustra on the precipice of a cliff, about to hear the abyss calling. At these high places, nature, in its raw and powerful state is all that can be seen from the vantage where the modern mind can reach back in to the past, beyond culture and history, to something more primal and essential about the human experience. For me what also stands out about this passage is the powerful significance of the sea. It borders and frames all the insight the mountaineer has before his descent into the cave. If we turn our attention back to Nietzsche, who also writes of waves breaking alongside mountains, waves of such height they can rise up the mountain and carry Zarathustra to a new state of awareness, we can discern a similar metaphorical significance of the sea. More than merely serving as a light pointer to slightly related meaning, there is an element of forceful argumentation through the employment of the sea as a metaphor. Laurence Hinman, in exploring Nietzsche’s understanding of metaphor shows that for Nietzsche the metaphorical process begins with a physical perception which is then used to express the relation of things to man.⁴ The metaphor carries one sphere to another, and the metaphor in return carries us (if we are willing to dare to be carried by the metaphor) from one sphere to another, that

3 *Ibid.*, 277.

4 Laurence M. Hinman, “Nietzsche, Metaphor, and Truth”, In *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Dec., 1982), 184.

is, from the world to imagination. For Nietzsche, “the boldest metaphors” designate the most profound relations. Hence, in exploring the image of the sea in Nietzsche, we can learn much about his examination of the human condition and the role of striving in his philosophy of becoming. Where there is already an abundance of writing on Nietzsche and hiking and mountaineering, in this paper the consideration is of those individuals who seek out the natural space of the ocean as it flings mountains of water towards the shore, and who find pleasure, and knowledge in the insights gained through trying to ride those waves as expend their energy on the shore-line.⁵

In Nietzsche’s writing, when the sea appears he describes the sublime character of the moving body of water: its power, violence, and magnitude. He also dwells on the notion of a shoreline separating two worlds of experience - one seemingly solid where the crowd set up and live, and the other a wine-dark place of liquidity and journeying. The overwhelming noise and power of the ocean frame much of Zarathustra’s story. Besides travelling across the sea, Zarathustra, like McFarlane, wanders on cliffs beside raging seas that beat upon the solid rock, looking to descend to the abyss for the kind of wisdom that comes by thinking outside culture and it’s determined concepts of good and evil. However, the sea also comes for Zarathustra, rising up the mountain while he sits at the peak.

“Am I sitting high and dry then?” — asked Zarathustra, laughing. —
“The waves around your mountain,” answered the soothsayer, “are rising and rising, the waves of great distress and tribulation: and soon they will raise your boat and carry you away.” — Zarathustra was silent at this and marveled (Z: 4 “LXII: The Cry of Distress”).

5 See for example: John Kaag, *Hiking with Nietzsche: On Becoming Who You Are*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

The image of the ocean taking Zarathustra away in a craft that rides the waves is reminiscent of the surfer’s actions sliding across a wave. When one considers the practice of surfing, much of the metaphorical significance of the sea in Nietzsche’s writing, and the ideas he was expounding, can be further illuminated. Furthermore, when we consider surfing in the light of Nietzsche’s ideas, a value of surfing can be discerned.

The most sought-after experience of surfing is riding a wave so that one becomes enclosed in the cavern created by the breaking wave. This is known in surf-culture as ‘barrel riding’ or ‘tube riding.’ In surf literature, the most poetic surf writing attempts to describe the sublime vision that the surfer is gifted while riding encased in the crystal cabinet of the breaking wave. It requires great skill attained through years of practice to be able to ride in a barrel, and it also requires a greater degree of risk in that the waves which are tall enough and breaking over a shallow enough reef or sandbank to allow a tube to form, are much more dangerous than other waves surfers ride. The barrel is much like the description of caves in Nietzsche’s writing, especially in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Surfers describe the barrel as a place where time stops or where one meets god. It is a place of wisdom getting, where one emerges utterly changed by the experience. That Zarathustra could sit in a cave with the waves crashing below him, does seem to suggest an experience quite similar to surfing. Where for Hinman, the metaphor leads from the physical world to imagination, we can also work backwards and have the insights of the imagination understand the perception that generated them.⁶ In order to better understand what kind of wisdom the surfer might receive in barrel riding if we approach it from the lens of Nietzsche’s writing, it is first important to unpack the metaphorical meanings of the sea itself.

In *Human All Too Human*, Nietzsche uses the metaphor of a wave to describe his disdain for modern understandings of the term ‘vanity’.

6 Hinman, “Metaphor”, 199.

Thus that fundamental conviction that on the waves of society we either find navigable waters or suffer shipwreck far more through what we appear than through what we are (a conviction that must act as guiding principle of all action in relation to society) is branded with the general word “vanity.” (HH: §2, p. 319)⁷

Here the description of waves carries relevance for surfing. The allusion is to a kind of wave riding -- using the wave to traverse through the process of becoming -- which will result either in destruction (getting dumped or wiping out), or navigation to safe waters after an exhilarating ride. The shipwreck Nietzsche alludes to results from a kind of faith in appearances which take us away from how things actually are – how things really are is in a process of becoming, rather than fixed and stable. The underlying concept that draws out this difference between safe wave-riding and suffering the consequences of not navigating the wave or selecting the wrong wave is his idea of the dichotomy between the Apollonian and Dionysian forces first elaborated in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The Apollonian force can be a consciousness that suppresses chaotic and passionate versions of life with appearances of reason and balance (BT).⁸ The suppressed and ecstatic force of the Dionysian is a kind of free and amoral drive which the Apollonian sense of good taste strives keeps at bay. For Nietzsche, the full experience of suffering, joy, and the loss of the sense of self that comes through such orgasmic emotion found in the Dionysian contrasts with the mere appearance of ordered reality that the Apollonian offers. For Nietzsche, the power of the Dionysian is to erode the boundaries of ordinary life.⁹ Culture that promotes the Apollonian as the full experience of life, for Nietzsche rides the wave of society to shipwreck. Also, in another sense the sailor who risks shipwreck,

7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All-Too-Human; A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. Alexander Harvey (The Floating Press, 2013).

8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy or Hellenism and Pessimism*, trans. William August Haussmann (Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg, 2016) Retrieved April 25, 2020, from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/51356/51356-h/51356-h.htm>

9 Ibid.

who skims the surface of the wave, potentially takes into themselves the Dionysian.¹⁰ In my view the surfer taking the wave most likely to barrel risks shipwreck. If they fail they are engulfed by the swirling tendrils of the ocean which pull her down to the ocean floor. When the surfer emerges out of breath and scanning the horizon, she paddles back out and attempts the enterprise again. The most profound moment of surfing is when the Dionysian ocean surrounds the surfer and they continue to glide across the wave's surface. Such tightrope walking between two forces is indicative of Nietzsche's thoughts on the overman.

Before Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer also used the image of a ship returning to harbor to describe the futility of a life of appearance and the problem with a loaded term like vanity. In his essay 'On the Vanity of Existence', he writes:

In the first place, no man is happy but strives his whole life long after a supposed happiness which he seldom attains, and even if he does it is only to be disappointed with it; as a rule, however, he finally enters harbor shipwrecked and dismayed. In the second place, however, it is all one whether he has been happy or not in a life which has consisted merely of a succession of transient present moments and is now at an end.¹¹

In both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the sea is a space of becoming. It is risky and in motion. In the *World as Will and Idea*, Schopenhauer describes the self as a two-fold consciousness in the midst of a rising monstrous sea – it is at once aware that the self is frail and can be damaged by the whims of

10 Amy Mullin, “Whitman's Oceans, Nietzsche's Seas”, In *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Fall., 1998), 271.

11 Arthur Schopenhauer, 'On the Vanity of Existence' in *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), 52.

nature, and also as a knowing subject, aware of the connectedness of will.¹² The pessimistic notion of self is also celebrated by Nietzsche, but in his hands the focus is on the significance of the moment where the individual consciousness is aware of its being surrounded by eternal risk and becoming. Through the Dionysian which erodes the Apollonian cultural apparatus which are set to steer us on the wave of society, Nietzsche opens the potential for the bare moment that remains to be filled with the sublime potential of the Dionysian consciousness.

If I be fond of the sea and all that is of the nature of the sea, and even most fond when it angrily opposes me:

if that joy in seeking be in me which drives the sails toward the undiscovered, if a seafarer's joy be in my joy:

if ever my rejoicing cried: "The coast has vanished — now the last chain has fallen from me — — the unbounded roars around me, far out there time and space gleam for me, well them! come one! old heart!" (Z: 3 "The Seven Seals")

In the above extract, the sea, as the Dionysian, erodes not only Zarathustra's sense of the appearance of himself but the coastline as well – the stable, harbored culture from which his ship launched. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche refers to the misplaced sense of certainty that passes for knowledge amongst the crowd as the "solid, granite foundation of ignorance".¹³ The sea faring journey, the riding of the waves, is a dialectical struggle between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, and the joy of the ride is height-

12 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R.B. Haldane & J. Kemp (Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg, 2011) Retrieved April 25, 2020, from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38427/38427-pdf.pdf>.

13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil; Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 35.

ened along with the intensity of the sea's opposition. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche opposes to the placid and calm sea a rider, who through relinquishing a desire for control and takes on greater risk finds a bliss (BGE §1). Similarly, the surfer, who, riding waves of great magnitude, seeks out the most critical parts of that wave and is rewarded with a sublime experience.

Such experiences in surfing and the risk required to attain them is well explained by Pulitzer Prize winning memoirist William Finnegan, who in his recount of his life surfing large and dangerous waves says the following about the almost mythical was that break on the coast of the island Madeira. "The shore was rocks and cliffs, which often multiplied the danger quotient, which was already high, by a large factor. We were mining a rich lode of bliss. But disaster never felt far away."¹⁴ The "bliss" Finnegan refers to is captured in an observation he makes about the beauty of barreling waves in a good swell.

To someone sitting in the lineup trying to decipher the structure of a swell, the problem can, in fact, present itself musically. Are these waves approaching in 13/16 time, perhaps, with seven sets an hour, and the third wave of every second set swinging wide in a sort of minor-chord crescendo? Or is this swell one of God's jazz solos, whose structure is beyond our understanding? When the surf is very big, or in some other way humbling, such questions tend to fall away. The heightened sense of a vast, unknowable design silences the effort to understand. You feel honored simply to be out there. I've been reduced on certain magnificent days to just drifting on the shoulder, gawking at the transformation of ordinary seawater into muscled swell, into feathering urgency, into pure energy—impossibly sculpted, ecstatically edged—and, finally, into violent foam. This solitary session at Four Mile does not contain that level of grandeur. It does, however, have a sweet, jewelled quality that leaves me

14 William Finnegan, *Barbarian Days: A Surfing Life*, (London: Corsair, 2015), 361.

peering from the channel into the last, cracking section, trying to hear what oceanographers call the entrainment of air burst free as the wave breaks—millions of air bubbles collapsing into smaller and smaller bubbles, from which the entrained air finally escapes with a barely audible hiss.¹⁵

This description of the sublime music of waves is for me similar to Nietzsche's consideration of Odysseus, and those with the ears to hear, listening to the Siren's music. There is the surfboard-as-mast that the surfer is strapped to, being paddled beside the abyss-like barreling wave which threatens destruction and shipwreck, and the surfer gazing wondrously at it all, calculating how best to ride – all so that sublime beauty can be experienced in what will, in the end, only be a moment of bliss that feels like eternity. If the surfer hesitates, like Nietzsche's interpretation of Hamlet, before the monstrosity of the Dionysian force before them, all is lost and the wave consumes them. If they apply skill, courage, and attunement to the conditions, then the full majesty of the Dionysian moment is taken into their consciousness.¹⁶

In Genevieve Lloyd's *Being in Time*, the author points to the startling potential of the moment in Nietzsche's thought. "Eternity enters the moment in the refusal to see the present teleologically, as if it were just a gateway to the future. Eternity is in the moment, not beyond it as the goal towards which mind moves. No moment exists for the sake of another."¹⁷ The surfer knows intuitively to what Nietzsche and Lloyd are referring to. William Finnegan describes the wonder that surfers experience through their practice as heightened on days when the waves are especially large. On those

15 Finnegan, *Barbarian Days*, 334-335.

16 Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 62.

17 Genevieve Lloyd, *Being in Time: Selves and Narrators in Philosophy and Literature*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 118.

days, when wave heights are well over two or three times the size of an average adult, there is a kind of contraction of the experience into the moment. Nothing else exists except for the loud crashing of the waves and their terrifying beauty as they cyclically contort into new possibilities for human endeavor or destruction. Consider the following, again from Finnegan:

On smaller days, perseverance was usually rewarded. Bigger days were another matter. From the water's edge, looking out across a stepladder of six or seven walls of cold, growling, onrushing white-water, the idea of paddling out actually carried with it a whiff of lunacy. The project looked impossible, like trying to swim up a waterfall. It took a literal leap of faith to start... The waves as they approached sounded like bowling balls rumbling down a lane, and then like the crashing of pins as they slammed into and rolled over your bowed head and shoulders, inducing instant ice-cream headaches... Breathing turned to gasping, then rasping, and your mind began to play ever-shorter loops, turning over the same half-nonsensical questions: *Is perseverance rewarded?...* Meanwhile, underneath this aimless, half-hysterical activity, your brain struggled to detect the underlying patterns in the surf.¹⁸

In the above passage, Finnegan describes the way that the surfer's thought reduces to a cyclical repetition of irrational questions as they push through the trough of breaking waves. The quote was employed as evidence of a connection to Lloyd's consideration of Nietzsche's eternal return – what he calls, in *The Gay Science*, "the greatest weight."¹⁹ For Lloyd, the eternal return in Nietzsche is a shaking of the privileged position being has over becoming.²⁰ For Lloyd, eternity is to be thought of in terms of movement – as

18 Finnegan, *Barbarian Days*, 289.

19 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kauffman, (New York: Vintage Books, 1947), 271.

20 Lloyd, *Being in Time*, 120.

a narrative.²¹ Consider the movement of the surfer, as Finnegan describes it paddling out to large waves through the almost impenetrable trough of whitewater. As the surfer is immersed in the experience their thought becomes cyclical; it recurs. The reward is not a state of stable consciousness, but fleeting moments of wave riding that are best described as becoming, as the surfer is always in motion on the wave – to stop is to fall. Even then falling is to become a part of the cyclical movement of the water as it churns and rushes towards shore.

Who could possibly want to dwell in such a moment – it doesn't *seem* at all pleasant. Yet, as Finnegan writes, after enduring the crashing waves in the attempt to paddle out through large surf, if one has been attuned, or lucky enough to find a pathway through, the surfer immediately looks for waves to ride – “[t]hat after all, is what we were out here for.”²² For my mind there is something of the overman in the surfer's struggle to experience beauty. That is not to say that all surfers are overmen, or even that all surfers who surf large waves are overmen. Rather there is a strong metaphorical significance in the way that some surfers reflect on their difficulties in accessing waves. Aaron James, in *Surfing with Sartre*, is somewhat dismissive of the relevance of Nietzsche to surfing; however it is a rather popularized version of idea of the eternal return that he bases his dismissal on.²³ On the more nuanced view suggested by Lloyd, the surfer's willingness to embrace recurrence, even the recurrence of intense danger and suffering, gives the idea that the surfer might have some overlap with the concept of the overman more cogency. The relevance of Nietzsche is made even clearer when we consider the surfer's reward for making it out to where the waves are breaking and choosing the right one: the barrel.

James describes the significance of the barrel, or tube, for surfers.

21 Ibid., 120 & 122.

22 Ibid., 291.

23 Aaron James, *Surfing with Sartre: An Aquatic Inquiry into a Life of Meaning*, (New York: Doubleday, 2017), 295-296.

As every surfer will tell you, riding inside the tube of a wave is an ecstatic, even orgasmic experience (almost, anyway). “Time stands still in the barrel,” they'll say... - a thesis they'll corroborate by vividly retelling each moment of their best tube ever, even decades after the fact, as though they've just been reading Proust...

The towering, reeling deep-blue/green wall, with the surfer gracefully standing in the spinning vortex, is plainly its own ting of splendor, a feat of natural and human possibility, of attuned flow between person and wave.²⁴

Lloyd, in reading Nietzsche's notebooks, finds interesting Nietzsche's use of the image of an insect frozen in amber to describe some implications of the eternal return.²⁵ For Lloyd, the insect analogy shows “the bearer of immortality is the movement, caught by another impressionable substance.”²⁶ However Lloyd suggests that the petrifying force of the amber does seem to pull against Nietzsche's meaning.²⁷ With James's evocative description of the importance of barrel-riding for the surfer, I suggest a better image for the eternal return and the overman as the bearer of the greatest weight. The surfer is locked in a timeless moment, but at the same time is also in fast motion. The wave seems to immobilize the surfer, but the surfer, through the graceful action, remains in motion. They are, in a sense, immortalized becoming. James is right when he claims that the surfer recounts these moments in the barrel with incredible vividness, even if they are apt to fall back on cliché. What they see, in the cave of the barrel, defines their desire to keep surfing, to endure.

24 Ibid., 3-4.

25 Lloyd, *Being in Time*, 119-120.

26 Ibid., p. 120.

27 Ibid., p.120.

In 'Zarathustra's Prologue' the wanderer leaves the lake of his home for the mountain.²⁸ Abandoning the still waters for some more spirit sustaining location, he spends ten years living in a cave before emerging to wander back to the world to talk of what he learned. There is great commonality with the phenomenon of barrel riding where the surfer seeks solitude in the wave's sublime crystal cabinet and emerges, changed and elevated by the experience: the journey away from the lake of life to the rolling sea, the sense of time stopping in the cave of the cave of the wave, the getting of wisdom in that timeless moment and, finally, the emergence from the cave, changed by the experience. Zarathustra, in first announcing the overman, declares that "one must be a sea to receive a polluted river and not be defiled" (Z: 1 "Zarathustra's Prologue"). In the image of the surfer mastering courage, perseverance, and leaping into the Dionysian waters, this reference to the sea makes sense. What is so valuable about the potential of surfing to act as a metaphor, is that it offers an activity where one can dance with forces much greater than oneself and do it with grace.

28 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 39.