

# The Waves Rise Around Your Mountain

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*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”)*<sup>1</sup>

In Robert McFarlane’s *Underland*, the author describes a mountaineering trek he undertook in Norway to some stone-age cave paintings.<sup>2</sup> 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-

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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](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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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

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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.<sup>5</sup>

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”).

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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.<sup>6</sup> 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’.

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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)<sup>7</sup>

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).<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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,

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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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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

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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.<sup>12</sup> 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".<sup>13</sup> 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-

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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."<sup>14</sup> 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

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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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup>

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."<sup>17</sup> 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

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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.<sup>18</sup>

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."<sup>19</sup> For Lloyd, the eternal return in Nietzsche is a shaking of the privileged position being has over becoming.<sup>20</sup> For Lloyd, eternity is to be thought of in terms of movement – as

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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.<sup>21</sup> 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.”<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.

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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.<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup> For Lloyd, the insect analogy shows “the bearer of immortality is the movement, caught by another impressionable substance.”<sup>26</sup> However Lloyd suggests that the petrifying force of the amber does seem to pull against Nietzsche's meaning.<sup>27</sup> 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.

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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.<sup>28</sup> 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 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.

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28 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 39.