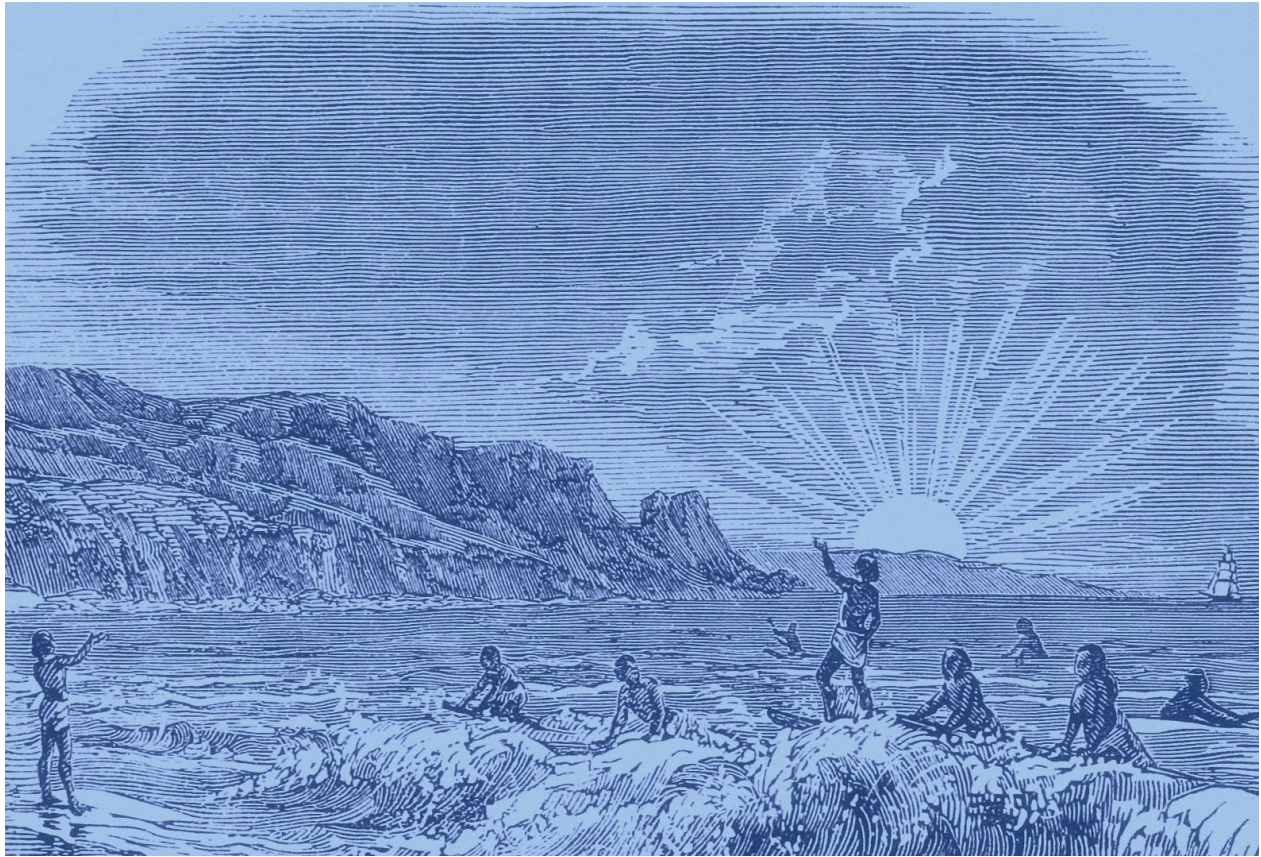


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Ocean Reveries

On paying attention to the sea.

Illustration of Hawaiians surfing from *California Magazine*, 1858.

Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

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Attention matters. We know this. We worry about our “attention spans.” We fret about the “attention economy.” The sea matters, too. We also know this. Even when the ocean’s out of sight, its churning depths and inner workings will decide the planet’s fate.

Important as they are, both the sea and our attention can slip through our fingers. In what follows, I propose we cup our hands and hold them—together.

In the last 15 years, a new kind of technologically sophisticated, computationally intensive, and financially ruthless business model (what I and others have called "[human fracking](#)") has placed the attentional behaviors of human beings under remarkable and destructive pressure. In this context, a reframing and reconsideration of many aspects of our cognitive and sensory and social and environmental lives in *explicitly attentional terms* may have emancipatory and transformative potential.

The distinctive modes of attention associated with how we relate to the 71 percent of Earth's surface that's underwater—the particular postures (of body, of thought, of sensation) and particular durational experiences (voluntary, involuntary, epistemic, affective) by which we engage our oceans—may be especially instructive. We are creatures of the land, but the sea provides a powerful frame for examining attentional habits, forms, and norms. Its alterity beckons, and challenges too.

Attention is powerful as a way to think *now* because our attentional lives are moving through a period of notable attenuation, depletion, and disruption—on account of remarkable and rapid transformations in the political economy of digital media and the violently extractive regimes of Big Tech. These changes invite an explicitly attention-oriented rethinking of . . . everything. Including the ocean.

This attentional turn can also offer a crucial corrective to the outsized scientism that animates most serious and responsible conversations about most topics these days. Science is great! But *science cannot save us*. We are awash in techo-scientific information—untold trillions of gigabytes of empirical data of a very high standard. There is *lots* of it. Misinformation, too, yes. But competently trained folks can parse all of that, for the most part. At this point, the machines generate the bulk of the information, and they can now analyze and organize it in amazing ways. They can quite effectively teach you what they know, as well. All of which is a great boon. But while information is essential to the work of knowing, it has become increasingly clear (as the AI systems perform their stupefyingly dramatic enclosure maneuvers across the wide plains of the knowable), that the work of *understanding* is a different matter. Understanding is an *event*. It happens to people, in time. Understanding is, ultimately, an *attentional process*. Through understanding we achieve what we achieve by way of an actual relationship to the world, to others, to time and fate and matter. We *need* this. And it comes, if and when it comes, out of our attention. Our attention to what obtains.

So, then, let's experiment with some attention to the sea.

Sea Edges and the Attentional Sublime

At the start of *Moby-Dick*, Melville's Ishmael, having introduced himself, turns to the sea, and to sea-turnings in general. He begins in New York City, and more specifically "your insular city of the Manahattoes," where, he notes, "Right and left, the streets take you waterward." Follow any of them to their terminus, and there, he assures you, you shall find: "Posted like silent sentinels all around the town . . . thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries."

The novel's opening conceit is that there is a special metaphysical force native to the large body of water—that such depths secrete philosophical pheromones irresistible to the thinking person. Indeed, Ishmael goes so far as to assert that one may use *spiritual longing* itself as a practical dowsing rod, a water-detector at scale: "Let the most absent-minded of men be plunged in his deepest reveries—stand that man on his legs, set his feet a-going, and he will infallibly lead you to water." We move, without even knowing, toward the sea.

And what happens there, at the water's edge? Musing. Musing happens. It is to this *musings* that Ishmael makes himself a witness. Because those who stream, lemminglike, to the edges of the abyss do not jump. No, they reach the verge, and then are brought up short: "They must get just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in. And there they stand—miles of them—leagues." They stand. And they *meditate*, since, he tells us, "as every one knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever."

At the water's edge we are brought to the scintillation of being and non-being. What *sort* of meditation is catalyzed by this edgewater gazing? Here Ishmael prefigures the larger problem of his quest. For he seems to wish us to understand that *attention to the sea* is inherently a kind of fatalism (at best) or even a proper mode of suicidal ideation (at worst). He opens the question with a flourish of bravado, explaining that he himself takes to the sea whenever his organic and psychic conditions begin to limn catastrophic collapse—when he gets "grim about the mouth," and a "damp, drizzly November" permeates his soul; when, indeed, he must exert heroic self-control to arrest a consuming desire for "deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off." It is under these conditions that our protagonist realizes he must *leave the land*—a move he asserts is no different than Cato's, as he fell on his sword in self-possessed defiance (*modo romano*). Going to sea, Ishmael tells us, is "my substitute for pistol and ball."

A few lines later, the form of self-erasure occasioned by the large body of water is slightly modulated: the peculiar form of rumination characteristic of those who *regard* the

sea is likened to the experience of Narcissus, who stared at the water because he saw himself therein—and, maddened by the mystery of that ungraspable image, “plunged into it and was drowned.” But for Ishmael, attention to the sea is attention to the “image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.” At the water’s edge we are brought to the scintillation of being and non-being. Attention to the ocean, by these lights, is a species of transduction: an occasion for existence to be permeated by signals received from its alternative.

The term “sublime” traces its etymology back to Latin: “up to the threshold” or “right to the edge.” The Ishmaelian mode of sea-attention is indeed an at-the-edge *waiting*—a waiting which flirts with crossing over, with erasure, undoing, dissolution. At the very limit of the sea there is, thus, a mirroring of the infinite (*by* or *on* or *within* our finitude) that is not at all unlike the philosopher Bernard Stiegler’s account of the phenomenology of attention itself, in which the object becomes a mirror for a series of trans-individuating linkages that extend forever in all directions. These filiations are, in some sense, inside us, even as they become manifest in whatever absorbs and holds true attention.

Caught Inside

A storm here, just yesterday. My phone made that strange honk, suddenly, which is a reminder that we do not truly control these devices (the sound was “off”). But someone had spotted an actual tornado over the bay. And this triggered a series of emergency warnings and state-agency activity, which culminated in an urgent alert spreading through the ether, awakening the sleeping networks. A genuine waterspout within a few miles, heading toward our sandy cay—cause for *immediate action*. Once a twister is upon you, it is very much too late. So we took a bag of potato chips down to the reinforced part of the garage, and played ping-pong for a while as the baby watched. It all blew over: the green sky, boiling; the strange tendrils of dark cloud bending to earth; the sheets of spatter-thick rain.

But oh how it roiled the surf! Today, red flags along the beaches, so I had to wait until 5 pm, when the lifeguards all shoulder their little orange plastic lifesaver-torpedoes (wrapped around with long yellow lines), get on their bikes, and pedal home. Only then could I go out and manage myself a bit in the towering breakers. It is a special kind of sea-bathing, conducted in and among and between real waves. One stays mostly on one’s feet, but survival is a matter of quick judgements and a certain willingness to move toward, rather than away from, giant, frightening, oncoming walls of water. That’s because there is almost always safety down under a breaker, but getting caught up in a curl or getting hit by a crashing wave can be really dangerous—especially in shallow

water. Lively attention is wanted, since the rollers line up, and even a five-foot wave smacking you into the hard-packed sand is a very bad thing.

I learned to bodysurf very young. Indeed, before I remember “learning” anything. So I guess I mean to say “I grew up bodysurfing.” I still like the full-body sense of a wave, the way the rolling propulsion moves in relation to one’s own movements in the streaking rush of a ride. You cannot see anything. You can only feel. And there are decisions to be made on the basis of those feelings. If you are up high on a big wave, you can sense when the “drop” to come may be too precipitous to manage, tipping your board-rigid body over in the kind of wipeout that drives your head directly into the sea floor. Knifing down the front of that big boil is high-speed fun if you can keep your feet behind you and your head out front; but the perils of being pile-driven into the sand are very real. In such a situation, it is necessary to make a choice: Try to stay stiff and plank out for the ride, or go “fetal,” balling up to protect yourself. But there is no way to pull out. You are *inside* a crashing wave.

One watches. For hours and hours. Because everything always hinges on an instant. Daniel Duane’s 1997 memoir, *Caught Inside*, carries the descriptive subtitle “A Surfer’s Year on the California Coast.” This makes it sound like a companion volume to a Beach Boys album. But in fact, it is an uncanny cocktail of epistemology and coenaesthesia (from the Greek *koinos*, “general, common, shared,” and *aesthesia*, “feeling, perception, sensation”; hence, *coenaesthesia*, the overall sense of one’s own body-situation). I just looked up what Gemini has to say about the book and am touched to discover that it lives in the AI-supermind as a “cult classic.” I’d be delighted if that were true, as it surely merits the special status that term describes: ongoing devotional commitment from those who decline to be as others are. What makes it so worthy? I’d put it this way: In 1936 the German philosopher Edmund Husserl wrote his (unfinished, restless) *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. It is a book about the way scientific knowledge got going by means of a Faustian bargain, in which knowers sold themselves out in order to get the stuff-to-be-known. By mostly bracketing ourselves (what it is like to be us), we proved able to say a lot of things that were awfully repeatable, reliable, and effective about the world out there. But the original move, Husserl sensed, had made it very hard to make sense of ourselves and may even have fundamentally muddled our efforts to understand all the stuff that is *not* ourselves. If Husserl had been a surfer, he would have written *Caught Inside*. It is the “wet” version of *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften*.

Duane paddles out, again and again, into the breakers. And again and again, he tries to sort out what it means to “know” a break. Yes, there are elaborate sciences dedicated to

waves: hydrodynamics, the physical oceanography of littoral environments, coastal engineering. Waves can be plotted, modeled, measured. The shifting bathymetry, tidal cycles, and wind conditions that generate and maintain certain kinds of “roller”—these things can be known. There are books, equations, and computationally intensive simulations. But then there is a guy named Duane. And his weight shifts slightly to his back foot as he noses his longboard down the live and sloping face of a particular wave at a misty point break at Four Mile on a glassy dawn. That wave is itself one of the countless millions that happen at this particular location on the globe—all different, but also all, in certain difficult-to-articulate ways, identifiably the waves “of this break,” which that guy, Duane, has surfed . . . a lot. He has given his attention to this break for years and years. And therefore, he “understands” it. But what is the “form” of that understanding? It lives in the body of Duane more than in his mind or in the words he puts on the page of *Caught Inside*—though the book is ultimately about this problem.

But to say that the book is “about this problem” is to call this whole situation a “problem,” and I am not sure that is quite right. It is only a problem if you say it is. Whereas if you just keep surfing while paying attention, it is more like “life.” The book is a testament to what happens when the central questions of academic phenomenology (arguably, the science of *giving attention to our attention*) puts on a wetsuit, waxes up its board, and uses the entirety of the body to stand in dynamic relation to the water-world. In this sense, *Caught Inside* is an extended meditation on attention to the sea—to the form of attention that is rolling along with the waves, not merely standing at the edge and looking on.

That word “coenaesthesia” isn’t Duane’s; it’s mine. Not that I made it up. I got it from another book about the sea: Alain Corbin’s *Le Territoire du vide* from 1988, which came into English as *The Lure of the Sea*. It is a little gem of cultural history that traces changes in the European understanding of the seaside from the eighteenth century into the nineteenth. The best chapter is one about the practices of sea-bathing at European seaside spas in the early nineteenth century. This looked nothing like getting a lounger and a mimosa and sitting on the beach. Rather it involved—for some, anyway—being transported into the surf in a cart wheeled by two large men, who would or could (at the appointed time) take you therefrom in their strong arms and dash you a few times into the breakers, in what might well be experienced by you as a kind of terrifying (or invigorating?) near-death experience. All this was thought to be the best way to shake some neurasthenics out of their fussy bad humors. Corbin alleges that being caught up inside the waves under these harrowing conditions produced a kind of full-body wake-up call that was equal parts Eros and Thanatos. It is in describing this new kind of lit-up

hyperembodiment, occasioned by swirling immersion in the surf, that Corbin reached for the recondite term *coenaesthesia*.

In a letter to Freud in 1927, the French writer Romain Rolland tried to describe the boundless sense of eternity that lay at the heart of a religious sensibility. He called it an “[oceanic feeling](#).” Freud was not impressed. He diagnosed the whole thing as a kind of symptom—an infantile echo of womb-oneness with the mother. On land, one might have such an oceanic feeling. But actually in the ocean, inside the wave, driven forward by the rollers, with all senses on the *qui vive*, I think one has *coenaesthesia*, which is more or less the opposite. There is no mother in the surf, and you cannot lift your eyes to heaven. You are not one with all things. You are alone, in the wave.

You are a point, which the sea has made a streak.

Outrigger!

One can look out at the sea from the shore, and that is a kind of sea-attention. One can get caught up inside a wave, and that too is a kind of attending to the ocean. But what looking at the surface of the sea from a *boat*? What about the work of reading the water? What are the hermeneutics of sparkle and splash before the mast?

Take the open-ocean case of trolling for billfish—meaning dragging lures behind a boat while waiting for one of those big fish with elongated, hard “beaks” (sailfish, marlin, et cetera) to come up and take a whack. The lures tend to look like weird little octopus-thingies—like a Coke can wearing a giant hula skirt—which hides a large sharp hook. One usually trolls a “rig” of these, meaning an array of anywhere from four to a dozen, held in a spread by different extender arms on the boat. Generally, a pair of long “outriggers” hold one or two lines out on each side of the vessel, and the net effect, from the fish-eye point of view, is the illusion of a fast-moving school of squid or flying fish splashing around on the surface, looking incredibly delicious.

But there aren’t a ton of big billfish out there in the world. There are never all that many top predators in any ecosystem, and 100 years of intensive commercial fishing (and pollution and everything else) has decreased the oceanic biomass of billfish by something like 60 or 70 percent. To do this kind of fishing always meant you had to be patient, but these days you have to be even more patient. You also have to pay very close attention—for a long time.

Billfish have very hard bills. And they are exploratory animals. They come up into a trolling rig and sort of check the situation out. They very seldom just explode into a strike

and hook themselves. They approach and scope out what is going on. Admittedly, this is a high-speed operation: Trial and error has established an optimal trolling speed for most billfish of just under 10 miles an hour. So when they come up into the lures and nose around, they are doing so at a pretty brisk clip. And while you might figure that the noise of those big engines and the wake of the boat would scare them off, that seems not to be the case: the lures are generally set in a spread that ranges anywhere from 20 or 30 feet astern to more like 120 feet, all of them fanned out in the stirred-up water that extends back behind the vessel.

And this is the point: This kind of fishing involves sitting for hours at a time, looking out at the slick churn of the wake and keeping one's eyes fixed on the skittish skip-dance of the lures as they skid along the topwater. Looking for what? Looking for that telltale glint of a fin or the shearwater slice of one of those hard bills breaking the surface.

There is no mother in the surf, and you cannot lift your eyes to heaven. You are not one with all things. You are alone, in the wave.

It is the skill of billfishing to discern those visual clues as to what is going on out there, since the ideal way to hook one of these animals is to see it mouth the lure (to see the bill itself scissor at it for a moment at the surface) and then to quickly and manually *release* the reel of fishing line, so the spool freely spins, letting out line as the boat keeps moving. If you do this just right, at just the right moment, the lure suddenly stops zipping along at 10 miles an hour and behaves more like a real little squid bitten by a marlin, and it does so just as the fish has taken the lure in its mouth. This permits the fish to turn with the lure in its mouth, to swim away with it. Only then does one hit the lever on the reel that reengages the spool. This, together with giving the rod a sharp snap, should (if everything goes right) be enough to set the hook in the hard beak of a big fish.

I will bracket, for now, the ethics of big game fishing. I'll just say that some of my deepest lessons about attention came from the hours and hours of focusing all of my mental energies and optical powers on the small splash tailing the boat back out at the visible edge of the wake. This act of sustained looking—this act of primitive sea-surface vigilance—has in it something of the deep evolutionary history of the human ability to pay attention. One watches. For hours and hours. Because everything always hinges on an instant.

I thought about that surface-scanning time a lot as I was doing research for several years on a book I published back in 2007, called *Trying Leviathan*. It is a book about the changing scientific understanding of whales and dolphins across the century separating Carl Linnaeus and Charles Darwin—and more generally about changing ideas of natural

order on the threshold of the modern world. But practically speaking, it is a book that sent me into the archives for years to read the logbooks of whalers. And in those thousands and thousands of pages, I came to a deep and strange imaginative inwardness with those who spent years and years up in a crow's nest at the top of the mast, looking out at the surface of the sea. Theirs were lives of reading the surface of the water, keeping watch, and training their eyes for the signs that divulged what lay below. The primary metaphor for critical insight is the image of seeing through or past or under a veil. But the life of a lookout on a whaler was a life of waiting for what moved beneath the waves to spout up, to show itself, to break water. There was no seeing in depth. There was only seeing what the depths *revealed*.

This, too, is a kind of sea-attention. And it feels to me like it discloses something about the right use of the mind and senses. Sometimes our work is not *diving*. It is keeping watch.

*

The sea. Now and again it rises up and strikes at our landworks, as if to say "Forget me at your peril." It sends us things, too. Yes, sometimes a message in a bottle. Though everything that bobs along in it can perhaps be thought of as a bottle in the message. Like the dead fin whale that washed ashore at the end of the summer, on the beach just below the coffee shop on the pier where I wrote most of this essay. A juvenile—perhaps 30 feet in length, and terribly skinny. She might have starved to death, though this is a mere surmise; a ship strike is more likely. The long form rolled in the light surf, the loose pleats of skin in her lower jaw were light pink in distention. It was hard to give this creature my attention. But I tried.

They closed the swim area. I drove back to New York City. ♦

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