



Review Essay: After Dark: Neutralizing Nihilism

Chandler D. Rogers

Boston College, USA

ABSTRACT

This review essay introduces Brian Treanor's *Melancholic Joy* in dialogue with themes in Nietzsche's thought. The book invites this comparison in its penultimate section, which distinguishes briefly its own account from the tenets of Dionysiac pessimism. Finding that section fertile, but tantalizingly short, I parse in greater detail relevant points of convergence and divergence. The first section, "After Nietzsche," follows Nietzsche's development out of the first naïveté of ascetic idealism and into the wanderer's night of biting suspicion. It likens Nietzsche's leonine eschewal of metaphysics and morals to Treanor's sober engagement with the fruits of the physics and philosophy that have ripened in between. The second section, "Second Innocence," contrasts Nietzsche's vision of childlike innocence after nihilism, a renaissance beyond good and evil, with Treanor's vital response to an updated nihilism: a love of world that refuses to deny the many realities of evil, and that responds by embracing the many mundane realities of joy.

KEYWORDS

Nietzsche,
Disenchantment,
Finitude, Vitality,
Joy, *Amor Mundi*

A natural companion to environmental classics such as Thoreau's *Walden*, Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and Kohák's *The Embers and the Stars*, *Melancholic Joy* calls for recognition of the joys of embodiment in response to postmodern pessimism. After weathering an overwhelming barrage of reasons to despair, Treanor argues that experiences of vitality, hope, and love should be acknowledged alongside, as an experiential counterbalance. "From Mortality to Vitality" maintains that embodied experiences of vitality impart a faith that we belong to this world, while "A Twilight Hope" argues that "hope without why" is the proper response to a reality that counsels despair. "Amor Mundi" advocates a love of world that begins from an appreciation of its fundamental goodness. Finally, "Melancholic Joy" weaves these threads together into a vision of renewed joy that confronts and seeks to stave off the darkness.

The book emerges from a concern to combat the specter of nihilism in the twenty-first century. Not nihilism in its otherworldly, "religious" guise, that is, but nihilism as a symptom of overwhelming disenchantment. No longer merely a loss of faith in God, but now rather as a loss of faith in *reality*: despair as a loss of faith in this world after having rejected the possibility of the next. Update the physics by a century and a half, introduce a conception of deep time, consider the coming annihilation of all human, and indeed all terrestrial endeavor. Imagine the ultimate heat death of the universe, and ask: why go on, in the bleak light of a reality that would appear to counsel despair? When the embers of life are finally extinguished, all our projects will have long vanished. Dionysiac pessimism offers a vision of innocence as a response to the problem of nihilism after theism. Melancholic joy offers an alternative vision as a response to the problem of nihilism after Nietzsche.

I. After Nietzsche

The ever-buzzing beehive of our civilization is not simply the background against which our projects take place, as if our historicity could be bracketed in the laboratory or at the writer's desk. In a disenchanted world, sober melancholy beclouds the theories of the philosopher *and* the scientist. For better or for worse, the fruits of our art and our science are products of circumstance. As Nietzsche himself comes to recognize, "our ideas, our values, our yeas and nays, our ifs and buts, grow out of us with the necessity with which a tree bears fruit."¹ Sickly seeds produce sickly trees, reaching restlessly toward the dim consolations of a dying star. These in turn yield feebler fruits. It has become impossible to determine which came first: civilization, or its discontents? Society, or the pallid produce of excess?

At least since the twentieth century the continent's best and brightest have tended to fixate upon the darkest and dreariest aspects of existence. Morbidity is considered the metaphysical microscope that brings ultimate reality into proper focus. Fleeting moments of mundane joy are likened to the veil of Maya, coaxing us to will our own suffering in the service of life's restless struggle to outgrow and outlast death. But the morose one, a black sheep hardened against the false hopes of the herd, sees clearly.

Despite maintaining aspirations to attain the fabled "view from nowhere," the speculations of twenty-first century science have tended to reinforce this melancholic disposition, even while more practical pursuits have fueled utopian aspirations to overcome our human limitations. The myopia of finitude both conditions and further poisons the fruits of our intellectual labor. On the one hand, theoretical physics presents a view of things that has grown increasingly grim. On the other hand, scientific experimentation "politely links hands" with technological innovation, as theory and praxis ally to fuel

¹ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Publishing, 1989, p. 16.

civilization's sybaritic march toward an interstellar Elysium.² Extramundane metaphysical salvation has been succeeded by new faith in extraterrestrial, techno-scientific deliverance.³

Nietzsche's path out of nihilism begins with the rejection of faith, of metaphysics and of morals: the overcoming of the camel, the renunciation of renunciation. His early enthusiasm for Schopenhauer and for Wagnerism, a first naïveté of all-too-eager devotion, buckles under the weight of contradiction. Hypothetical asceticism is betrayed by practical egoism, where the alienating ideal of negation-by-renunciation turns out to mask the will to become powerful among one's peers, and a psychological need for recognition among the masses. Forsaking the prospects of a promising academic career, goaded by his declining health, and influenced by Reé, Nietzsche parts with both the dry, Apollonian guild of academic historians and the Dionysiac crowd of aesthetic idealists. He sets out with no real destination, casting off metaphysical illusions and urban luxuries. He enters the desert alone and begins to see things in a new light, his task being to expose the mechanisms at work behind the societal constructions he now observes from outside. The wanderer sets out in flight from sickness and in search of vitality.⁴

From his mountaintop vantage point the wanderer ignores the metaphysics of the forest. Nietzsche rejects Schopenhauer's vision of the Will behind appearances but keeps the suspicion. Myopia inflamed, he pays more careful attention to the trees and their all-too-human fruits. He adopts the posture of the German Materialists: not the ideal as the real, but the real as the material. Metaphysics is reinterpreted as a veil that conceals and directs investigative attention away from cold, hard, physical reality. Not the Will as the truth behind appearances, then, but the will to power as the force at play behind everything idealized among men, from the religious beliefs that formerly calmed the chaos bubbling beneath urban cityscapes, to the state that demands one's unremitting labor and unquestioning loyalty.

The lone lion sees through the engine of repression that fuels the modern industrial economy, where excess energy is channeled endlessly toward the production of needless commodities, and short-lived satisfactions and consumptive purchasing power mollify the boredom and frustration of exploited earners. The many are satisfied, for the most part, in an internalized struggle for the very lowest of goods. As neighbor exalts himself against neighbor, violence is sublimated by means of commercial competition among increasingly self-interested individuals. The organs of the political body war against one another, rendering it increasingly dyspeptic:

That individuals behave as though they knew nothing of all these anxieties does not mislead us: their restlessness reveals how well they know of them; they think with a precipitancy and with an exclusive preoccupation with themselves never before encountered in man, they build and plant for their own day alone, and the pursuit of happiness is never greater than when it has to be caught today or tomorrow: because perhaps by the day after tomorrow there will be no hunting at all. We live in the age of atoms, of atomistic chaos. [...] Nowadays the crudest and most evil forces, the egoism of the money-makers and the military despots, hold sway over almost everything on earth. In the hands of these despots and money-makers, the state certainly makes an attempt to organize everything anew out of itself and to bind and constrain all those mutually hostile forces: that is to say, it wants men to render it the same idolatry they formerly rendered the church. [...] The

² Cf. Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 21.

³ As I write, new fruits have begun to ripen. Eager to leave our dying planet, celebrity CEOs have begun exiting earth's orbit, reaping a harvest of techno-scientific investment. Unable to part with untenable visions of endless economic growth and expansion, and in flight from detrimental ecological effects, they strain ever upward, in search of new markets.

⁴ Nietzsche all but admits that his idealization of physiological strength arises from his lack thereof: "The fact is that *if* he were it, he would not represent, conceive, and express it: a Homer would not have created an Achilles nor a Goethe a Faust if Homer had been an Achilles or Goethe a Faust" (Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 101).

revolution is absolutely unavoidable, and it will be the atomistic revolution: but what are the smallest indivisible basic constituents of human society?⁵

Expansion of the state eclipses the cultivation of culture, as the war of all against all becomes the war of the modern state against its enemies.⁶ The lion leaves the city of excess and sets out in search of adventure. Whereas Plato's sheepdogs stick together in a pack, herding at the command of a shepherd-guardian, Nietzsche's warrior hunts alone. Ironically individualized, his becoming-lion harkens to the prehistoric nomad in search of adventure, spoils, and glory.⁷

Treanor's notion of melancholic joy embraces a similar practical ideal. Both continental philosophy's tendency to fixate upon the melancholic, and more contemporary manifestations of anxiety toward death—the cult of worship at the fountain of youth, and more generally the modern techno-scientific flight from suffering—are to be overcome in pursuit of *vitality*.⁸ Even while Nietzsche idealized the physiological strength of the lion, biography betrays the extent to which the man of flesh and blood fell short of his ideal: “But while Nietzsche's own dangerous living was primarily intellectual—withstanding a youthful stint in the army and long strolls in the alpine topography around Sils Maria—his entreaty to dangerous living could, and should, be taken literally as well as metaphorically.”⁹ What exactly does this mean? Don't overthink it.

II. Second Innocence

Valorizing the exercise of power for power's sake provides physiological warrant for the pursuit of pleasure and power at the expense of the earth and its inhabitants. Treanor's notion of *vitality*, by contrast, is intended to re-introduce the thrill-seeker to the kind of cold, hard reality “to which we must accede and accommodate ourselves.” It is meant to moderate the all-too-human hubris, and the egoistic affirmation of one's own power, that arise in consequence of “our remarkable success at bending reality to our will.”¹⁰ Willingly relinquishing societal comforts—air-conditioned houses, supermarket convenience, and the roads

⁵ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*. Edited by Daniel Breazeale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 149-150.

⁶ “The waters of religion are ebbing away and leaving behind swamps or stagnant pools; the nations are again drawing away from one another in the most hostile fashion and long to tear one another to pieces. The sciences, pursued without any restraint and in a spirit of the blindest *laissez-faire*, are shattering and dissolving all firmly held belief; the educated classes and states are being swept along by a hugely contemptible money economy. The world has never been more worldly, never poorer in love and goodness. The educated classes are no longer lighthouses or refuges in the midst of this turmoil of secularization; they themselves grow daily more restless, thoughtless and loveless” (Ibid., p. 148).

⁷ “In contrast to all this, everyone ought to say to himself: ‘better to go abroad, to seek to become *master* in new and savage regions of the world and above all master over myself; to keep moving from place to place for just as long as any sign of slavery seems to threaten me; to shun neither adventure nor war and, if the worst should come to the worst, to be prepared for death: all this rather than further to endure this indecent servitude, rather than to go on becoming soured and malicious and conspiratorial!’” (Nietzsche, *Daybreak*. Edited by Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 126).

⁸ For a more focused account of such manifestations, and a more direct suggestion in response to these socio-economic conditions, see the excellent fourth chapter of *Emplotting Virtue*: “A Story of Simplicity: A Case Study in Virtue” (Brian Treanor, *Emplotting Virtue: A Narrative Approach to Environmental Virtue Ethics*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014, pp. 63-86).

⁹ Brian Treanor, *Melancholic Joy: On Life Worth Living*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2021, p. 60. Cf. Nietzsche: “For—believe me—the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is—to live *dangerously!*” (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Edited by Bernard Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 161).

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 65.

paved in between—can put us back in touch with the rock-hard reality from which we have arisen, and our primordial vulnerability.

It is an exercise in privilege to be able to doubt one's existence in a stove-heated room, vital necessities provided for, while those less favored by fortune struggle simply to continue to exist. Likewise, how easy in our own day, surrounded by air-conditioned buildings, luxury-peddling billboards, and intrusion-preventing fences, to assume that reality is a human construction. But when one is faced with the need to lift a two-hundred-pound boulder, or climb a two-hundred-foot rock face—or, for that matter, and unarmed, to avoid becoming prey to a more vigorous natural predator—hard reality is quickly honored again, in its primordial preeminence. Vital needs are remembered again as vital needs, and one's own fundamental state of dependence comes back into view. Far from instrumentalizing resources toward the maximization of power and the increase of pleasure, in the wild one must accommodate oneself to a reality that far outstrips one's own bodily power. And most of the time, when faced with such primal challenges, one must ask for help.

The Nietzschean lion embraces the life that courses through its veins in the *liberation* of the will to power. By contrast with the camel's renunciation, the lion connotes negation by destruction, sublimated as the "untimely" deconstruction of metaphysical ideals and moral valuations. Whereas *vitality* awakens the bodily awareness that I belong to this world, the Nietzschean liberation of the will would sever the shackles of societal restraint by unchaining instincts repressed at society's founding.¹¹ The lion leaves civilization in pursuit of dangerous living also, but by contrast, he overcomes modern alienation by means of a *second* act of repression. Boundaries between the humane and the inhumane are erased in the egoic affirmation of one's own *physiological* strength (at the level of nature), or *aristocratic* strength (at the sublimated level of culture), where enculturated values are simply forgotten:

...once they go outside, where the strange, the *stranger* is found, they are not much better than uncaged beasts of prey. There they savor a freedom from all social constraints, they compensate themselves in the wilderness for the tension engendered by protracted confinement and enclosure within the peace of society, they go *back* to the innocent conscience of the beast of prey, as triumphant monsters who perhaps emerge from a disgusting procession of murder, arson, rape, and torture, exhilarated and undisturbed of soul, as if it were no more than a students' prank, convinced they have provided the poets with a lot more material for song and praise. One cannot fail to see at the bottom of all these noble races the beast of prey, the splendid *blonde beast* prowling about avidly in search of spoil and victory; this hidden core needs to erupt from time to time, the animal has to get out again and go back to the wilderness.¹²

The will to power individuates, separating the blonde beast from the herd. Nietzsche endorses a leonine version of the "atomistic chaos" he had earlier eschewed.¹³ The difference lies in the power: the lion has the *right* to hunt alone, because strength is nature's way. The pseudo-individuation of the herd animal is a democratizing construct, much like the underhanded means by which the weaker masses manage to suppress the strength of an aristocratic few. Anti-nature: for centuries the strong have been pressured to

¹¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 84ff. The founding of higher culture began with the "internalization" of man, or the repression of animal instinct toward the ideal of "divinization," corresponding the renunciation of the camel: "Almost everything we call 'higher culture' is based on the spiritualization of *cruelty*, on its becoming more profound: this is my proposition. That 'savage animal' has not really been 'mortified'; it lives and flourishes, it has merely become—divine" (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Publishing, 1989, p. 158).

¹² Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, pp. 40-41.

¹³ Cf. footnote 5, above.

apologize for their predatory impulses. But nature's counter to the bad conscience is the "positive faculty of repression," the active drive to forgetfulness.¹⁴ The beast of prey does not apologize for acting according to unconscious impulses. He operates in a state of innocence, beyond good and evil.

Yet for Nietzsche destruction is only the beginning of the end, not the end itself. The lion is a stage on humanity's path toward a higher ideal. In his later work Nietzsche begins to recognize that the scientist has simply replaced the metaphysician as the idealist who dreams of life among the stars, sacrificing himself on the altar of the same fundamental impulse as the metaphysicians of yesteryear: the will to truth. Lab coats are the new clerical garb. Furthermore, scientific inquiry is not free from moral and metaphysical suppositions: the scientist does not ascend by geometrical deduction to an ultimate view of things, *sub specie aeternitatis*. Science labors in the service not only of first principles upon which it depends, and cannot question. It labors also in the service of extra-scientific *values*.

The will must overcome itself. Destruction must give birth to creation. Having escaped the iron cage of civilization, the wanderer gropes toward a new ideal of a more powerful human species. A "return" to the primeval innocence of destruction is counterbalanced by a drive toward procreation, as *the child* points to the future of humankind in its self-overcoming. The philosopher emerges from the womb of suspicion:

Finally, lest what is most important remain unsaid: from such abysses, from such severe illness, also from the illness of severe suspicion, one returns *newborn*, having shed one's skin, more ticklish and malicious, with a more delicate taste for joy, with a more tender tongue for all good things, with merrier senses, joyful with a more dangerous second innocence, more childlike, and at the same time a hundred times subtler than one had ever been before.¹⁵

Nietzsche's vision of second innocence reintroduces the Dionysiac ideal with which his journey began, supposedly purged of its romanticizing, metaphysical impulses. For Nietzsche that second innocence is a return, after metaphysics, to the childhood of Western civilization, an exaltation of the "superficial," and the worship of appearances.¹⁶ It is the cult of Dionysus resurrected to march again, in relentless procession. It is nature's impersonal fecundity stretching toward countless new beginnings, destroying incessantly what it has created. It is the endless cycle of eternal return, whose end is its beginning.

Both Dionysiac pessimism and melancholic joy endorse an affirmation of life. They share the same tripartite structure, diving headlong into the night of *skepsis* after having parted with a first naïveté of otherworldly, metaphysical faith. Both emerge newborn with clearer vision, taking up into higher synthesis the grim and sober horrors of reality, on the one hand, and a vigorous affirmation of life, on the other. But the essential difference lies in their divergent conceptions of second innocence. We've seen this in the contrast between the affirmation of life as *vitality*, whereby one's bodily belonging and bodily dependences are affirmed as fundamentally good, and the Nietzschean affirmation of life, whereby instincts toward cruelty and destruction are affirmed as necessary and therefore good, according to nature's bestowal.

¹⁴ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 57.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 7.

¹⁶ "Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to *live*: what is needed for that is to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin; to worship appearance, to believe in shapes, tones, words—in the whole of Olympus of appearance! Those Greeks were superficial—*out of profundity!* And is not this precisely what we are coming back to, we daredevils of the spirit who have climbed the highest and most dangerous peak of current thought and looked around from up there, looked *down* from up there? Are we not just in this respect—Greeks? Worshipers of shapes, tones, words? And therefore—artists?" (ibid., pp. 8-9).

Dionysiac pessimism welcomes *all* that occurs, a Nietzschean analogue to the Spinozist affirmation of God, or Nature as *perfect*. What right have mere modes to challenge their maker?¹⁷ Everything “natural,” from natural disasters to natural impulses, is to be embraced. The innocence of the child, beyond good and evil, coincides with the doctrine of eternal return. Even if we deny it the status of a metaphysical doctrine, the normative reading remains problematic: “On the normative reading of eternal return, any hesitancy to endorse and embrace any aspect of reality is a failure to accept reality, a betrayal of it. The only real “yes” to reality is one that has no room for any “no.” For a melancholic joy sensitive to evils in the world, this is intolerable.”¹⁸ By contrast, melancholic joy refuses to contend that one ought to one run toward and embrace *everything* that occurs, the most humane alongside the most cruel. Nietzsche literally goes mad trying. Rather, the account of love that Treanor endorses affirms the goodness of this world, which is real, and regrets the evil, which is also real. It strives toward the amelioration of specific instances of evil, and the cultivation of goodness in one’s own person.

¹⁷ But without Spinoza’s insistence on maintaining traditional theological terminology, and without the Stoic retreat to theoretical recognition of the rationality of the real.

¹⁸ Treanor, *Melancholic Joy*, p. 137.