



January 2016

## "Aftertones of Infinity": Biblical and Darwinian Evocations in Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* and *To the Wonder*

Gregory Allen Robbins  
*University of Denver*, grobbins@du.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>

Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

### Recommended Citation

Robbins, Gregory Allen (2016) "'Aftertones of Infinity': Biblical and Darwinian Evocations in Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* and *To the Wonder*," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 17.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.20.01.17>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol20/iss1/17>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

---

## “Aftertones of Infinity”: Biblical and Darwinian Evocations in Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* and *To the Wonder*

### Abstract

In this article I argue that in *The Tree of Life* and *To the Wonder* Terrence Malick continues to explore, on an epic scale, a theme that permeates the previous four (*Badlands*, 1973; *Days of Heaven*, 1978; *The Thin Red Line*, 1998; *The New World*, 2005): innocence to experience. I suggest that Malick’s *oeuvre* reflects a recurring evocation of and commentary on the primeval, biblical stories of Genesis 1-11. The title of his 2011 installment betrays, however, a more encompassing vision. Viewers whose gaze is oriented by biblical studies will associate “the tree of life” with Genesis 2 and Revelation 22. Few will recognize “the tree of life” as the name Charles Darwin gives to the *only* diagram in his *On the Origin of Species* (1859). *The Tree of Life* is a sprawling meditation on both “trees.” *To the Wonder* continues in the same vein. Malick, I maintain, is reckoning with those forces that seem to be built into the cosmic and societal scheme of things—energies that are at once creative and nurturing, destructive and tragic—and the mythic traditions to which moderns have explanatory recourse. By contrast, *To the Wonder* is a smaller film. While its title seems to promise something both grandiose and mystical, the film offers only fleeting glimpses of the transcendent, the numinous. Like *The Tree of Life*, it is consumed with disappointment and loss, with yearning and the desire for return, and, in the end, resonates with the sentiment Joseph Schwanter captures in his poem and his Pulitzer Prize-winning musical setting of it: “Celestial voices echo the lost dreams of the children of the universe/the aftertones of infinity.”

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

### Author Notes

Gregory Allen Robbins is chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Denver and associate professor of the history of Christianity and its scriptures. His article, “Mozart & Salieri, Cain & Abel: A Cinematic Transformation of Genesis 4,” appeared in the inaugural issue of *The Journal of Religion and Film*, Volume 1, Number 1 (April, 1997): <http://www.uomaha.edu/jrf/robbins.htm>. Robbins currently serves as vice president of the board of directors of the Society for Values in Higher Education.

Dreams from a dark millennium  
Empyreal visions,  
vague myriad tendrils floating  
on an eternal voyage,  
journeying primordial pathways  
through cosmic cauldrons,  
to afterworlds beyond the edge of the future.  
Celestial voices echo the lost dreams  
of the children of the universe  
the aftertones of infinity

--Joseph Schwanter

Until quite recently, the films of Terrence Malick had been few and far between. When he released *The Tree of Life* in 2011, it was only his fifth feature-length film in 38 years. The director has most certainly picked up his pace. In short order he produced a sixth: *To the Wonder* (2013). *Knight of Cups* (2015) was screened on February 8<sup>th</sup> at the Berlin Film Festival (Chang, 2015; Zacharek, 2015; Bradshaw, 2015). Release of a documentary, *Voyage of Time*, is said to be imminent. An as-yet untitled drama, we are told, is soon to come. Anticipation of Malick's cinematic offerings creates a sense of occasion, usually for good reason. *The Tree of Life* won the *Palme d'Or* at the Cannes Film Festival. Despite the smattering of boos at its première, it has since inspired enthusiasm bordering on the ecstatic – and no small measure of bafflement (Scott, 2011).

Malick himself is, by nature, a cipher. He does not comment on his work; he hasn't granted a major interview since the early 1970s. The films must speak for themselves. Everything is left for the viewer. And the recent reviews have been decidedly mixed. As the critic Jim Emerson noted about *The Tree of Life* on his Scanners blog, "Whether they've 'liked' it or not, those who've written about it can't even agree on what they've actually seen (Emerson 2011/12)." *To the Wonder*, a flash-back intercalated

scrapbook of memories, has been less critically acclaimed, but no less discussed (Denby, 2013).

In this paper I shall argue that, in *The Tree of Life* and *To the Wonder*, Malick continues to explore, on an epic scale, a theme I believe permeates the previous four (*Badlands*, 1973; *Days of Heaven*, 1978; *The Thin Red Line*, 1998; *The New World*, 2005): innocence to experience. In doing so I want to suggest that Malick's *oeuvre* reflects a recurring evocation of and commentary on the primeval, biblical stories of Genesis 1-11.

The title of his 2011 installment betrays, however, a more encompassing vision. Viewers whose gaze is oriented by biblical studies will associate “the tree of life” with Genesis 2 and Revelation 22. Few will recognize “the tree of life” as the name Charles Darwin gives to the *only* diagram in his *On the Origin of Species* (1859), an illustration that captures graphically the implications of “descent with modification” over time by means of natural selection.

*The Tree of Life* is a sprawling meditation on both “trees.” *To the Wonder* continues in the same vein. Malick, I maintain, is reckoning with those forces that seem to be built into the cosmic and societal scheme of things—energies that are at once creative and nurturing, destructive and tragic—and the mythic traditions to which moderns have explanatory recourse. He does not achieve, in my estimation, a synthesis, a cinematic reconciliation of the so-called “conflict” between science and religion (Stenmark, 2004). *The Tree of Life*, proffers a visual counterpoint that overlays *imago dei* and the “selfish gene” (Dawkins); it is an image-rich fugue in which the biological record

"red in tooth and claw," as limned by Tennyson (*In Memoriam A.H.H.*), concurs with the Psalmist's praise of heavens that "tell the glory of God" (Psalm 19.1)

By contrast, *To the Wonder* is a smaller film. While its title seems to promise something both grandiose and mystical, the film offers only fleeting glimpses of the transcendent, the numinous. Like *The Tree of Life*, it is consumed with disappointment and loss, with yearning and the desire for return. A well-positioned visual quotation of *The Tree of Life* (one hour and eight minutes into the film) underscores that poignantly. In the end, *To the Wonder* resonates with the sentiment Joseph Schwanter captures in his poem and his Pulitzer Prize-winning musical setting of it: "Celestial voices echo the lost dreams of the children of the universe/the aftertones of infinity" (Schwantner, 1979).

### Evocations of Genesis

Unlike Malick's previous films, *The Tree of Life* and *To the Wonder* open in the present. In *The Tree of Life* Sean Penn plays Jack, an architect or designer. He lives in a Philip Johnson-like Glass House. Malick may intend to evoke Le Corbusier's architecture (he designed many homes, though not in the United States) rather than the residence Johnson was commissioned to produce for a site in New Canaan, CT. Le Corbusier's altarpiece for Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp famously has a depiction of the Tree of Life. According to Flora Samuel (2007: 6-8), "the ultimate symbol of Le Corbusier's cosmos, the tree, simultaneously refers back to nature, the tree of life, the tree of alchemical process, and the tree of the iconostasis in his poem, *Of the Right Angle*." It is

worth noting that Frank Lloyd Wright, creator of the Prairie Style of architecture, was also fascinated by the “tree of life” image (Menocal, 1983/4).

Regardless, when an amorphous stream of water pours from the polished stainless, sculptural faucet above the bathroom sink in Jack’s house, it seems positively alien. An odd commemoration also interrupts the daily routine. Jack lights a votive in a blue holder that looks completely out of place, a bit of Church kitsch in his temple of modernity. At work, he distractedly checks a stack of blueprints. He seems imprisoned by the glass and steel geometry of his own (or, likely, I.M. Pei’s) design. Leaning into his cell phone and a curtain wall precipice, we hear him as he tries, falteringly, to reconnect with his father, to apologize, to make amends for harsh words spoken, for language that has broken down. Inner turmoil, haunting memories, guilt of oceanic proportion, his knowledge of things falling apart, of the center not holding—all belie the sterile, rigidly controlled environment Jack occupies both at home and at work. He lives in Babel.

The visual vocabulary of *To the Wonder* is not architectural, rather painterly. The lighting of the laundromat and the Sonic drive-in pays homage to Edward Hopper. The often misty or rain-soaked scenes of Paris take on the palette of Gustave Caillebotte. The female protagonist who, amidst the tallgrass prairie’s ruddy stand, queries the meaning of life, recreates Andrew Wyeth’s *Christina’s World* (“Where are we,” she asks. “When we’re there? Why not always? Which is the truth? What we know up there? Or down here? Why do we come back down?”).

In *The Tree of Life*, the contemporary soon dissolves into the past, to Texas of the 1950s. A city truck spraying insecticide tells the viewer the setting is Waco (the credits reveal that the film was shot largely in the town of Smithville, TX). It is a sort of Eden.

The truck notwithstanding, there is almost no traffic. Children play, unmolested, on tranquil streets canopied by massive live oaks whose spreading branches filter and dapple the sun's rays. Among the kids is Jack, eldest brother to R.L. and Steve. His parents, neither of whom earns a first name, are the O'Brien's, played by a heavier, jowly Brad Pitt and Jessica Chastain, of *Zero Dark Thirty* notoriety. They are stand-ins for the Primordial Couple; they are Adam and Eve.

In *To the Wonder*, the couple's names are revealed only in the credits. No one utters those names in the body of the film (Brody, 2013). They are Neil (Ben Affleck) and Marina (Olga Kurylenko). The on-again/off-again Stateside relationship is played out in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, a setting Marina describes as "calm," "honest," and "rich." Super-sized tract homes boasting manicured lawns and capacious, fenced-in back yards underscore her first impression. There are patriotic street fairs, and impromptu barbeques with neighbors. Jet contrails suggest it is a fly-over place, not a destination. Not really. Bartlesville is the town the Phillips Petroleum Company built. Phillips is a company invested in augmenting the sweat of the brow of human labor. It brings to bear the resources of petrochemical energy to fuel human innovation, invention and aspiration. And so we notice, too, the high-voltage electrical towers striding across the landscape. We soon learn that the other side of the tracks, so to speak, is a polluted mess.

Returning to the 1950s of *The Tree of Life*, we are also quickly cognizant of the fact that Jack's mother is no June Cleaver. She is a pre-Raphaelite angel. At one point, magical realism intrudes, and she literally dances on air. When the father makes an extended trip to Asia (east of Eden), the boys relax into near-Oedipal bliss, tended by a mother who intones, "Love everyone. Love every leaf, every ray of light." Her creed is,

as *The New Yorker*'s Anthony Lane quips, "a singular blend of the prim and the pantheistic" (2011). Marina, in *To the Wonder*, is likewise a dancer, frequently given to romping in the landscape, to tripping the light fantastic through interiors (nearly devoid of furnishings...).

Jack's father works at a plant doing we know not what. He doesn't walk on water. He does play the piano at home, and the organ at church (Bach's d minor *Toccata and Fugue*). He platters up Brahms' Fourth Symphony during supper. We sense that his life has taken an early and wrong turn, one that can't be undone. Perhaps he hasn't lived up to others' expectations of him. Perhaps he has shortchanged his own expectations of himself. Whatever life lessons he might have learned, whatever wisdom he might proffer, is couched in hypercriticism. He vents his frustrations on his family; severity and affection intertwine. When tempers flare, dishes fly, and young offenders are shut in closets for daring to talk back. The patriarch's weary disenchantment is palpable.

These personality traits carry over to Neil. He is taciturn tending toward sullen. He works as a field engineer inspecting oil rigs for leakage. He seeks out soil contamination, tests for groundwater pollution. Lead. Cadmium. He troops around on chemical laden muck that is as squishy as the sands of Mont Saint Michel at low tide. When hard-scrabble Okies, whose lives he disrupts as he carries out this not-entirely perspicuous mission, share their fears, offering up human (and canine) specimens of the degradation he seems to be documenting, it barely registers. We are surprised when Marina says,

"I feel so close to you. There is always this invisible something that I feel so strongly, which ties us tightly together. I love this feeling even if it



makes me cry sometimes. It is so strong this conviction that I belong to you. Maybe you'd like me to stop telling you I love you. I know strong feelings make you feel uneasy."

Indeed, when Neil feels uneasy, household goods are smashed – what little of them there is to break.

Disillusion is not his or the elder O'Brien's alone. Almost all of the folks in *The Tree of Life* and *To the Wonder* devote more time to murmurs, confided to us from the recesses of their own minds, than to conversing with their fellow-humans. There are lots of voice-overs, scarcely audible, or impossible to discern (the viewer who watches at home will never be so grateful for ability to toggle on the closed-captioning option). The effect strikes some as a sort of prayer; others find it maddening. "Brother," "Mother," and "It was they who led me to your door" are the first things we hear clearly in *The Tree of Life*, followed not long after, by a plea: "Lord, why?...Where were you?...What are we to you?" This is uttered by the mother. It could equally have come from the lips of Job, who is quoted in the film's epigraph (Job 38:4, 7: "Where were you when I created the foundations of the earth...when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"). It is safe to assume, I think, that the question ("What are we to you?"), is directed toward the cosmos, to God.

In *To the Wonder*, the Roman Catholic priest, Father Quintana (played by Javier Bardem) surveys the poverty, the misery, the loneliness and alienation everywhere apparent in his parish. They mirror his own dark night of the soul. Many dark nights of the soul, actually. As he does so, in an extended voice-over, he intones a prayer, based in

part on the Celtic lorica or breastplate prayer, a chant sung while dressing oneself or arming for battle, attributed since the late 7<sup>th</sup> Century to Saint Patrick (Adam, 1988). The music that accompanies this brilliant montage is not the traditional hymn tune, *Deirdre* (Glover, 1994). Rather, it is the plaintive, 8-part canon of the second movement of Henryk Górecki's Third Symphony, his "Symphony of Sorrowful Songs."

And what is the Almighty's reply to these cries and whispers? It is not a speech from the whirlwind. Rather, in *The Tree of Life*, starting at 19 minutes and 40 seconds into the film and lasting for almost 20 minutes thereafter,<sup>1</sup> we see glimmers of unfathomable light, vast interstellar conflagrations, drifting throngs of stars, planets in their formless infancy, sun and moon occluded by dark storms, energizing jolts of lightning, gulping primordial pools, early plants, nascent creatures, slow-dancing jellyfish, hammerhead sharks, a dinosaur lounging on the shore, an embryo's eye, and, last but not least, a child being born – to a white-clad mother, who neither sweats nor shouts (Lane, 2011) – in post-war suburban Texas. All of this is accompanied by the haunting soprano obbligato of Zbigniew Preisner's *Lacrimosa 2*.

The anthropic *telos* of both *The Tree of Life* and *To the Wonder* alert us to the fact that these are, in the end, grief-powered movies. A telegram arrives. We soon learn that Jack's younger brother, R.L., has died at the age of 19. The pious-tinged theodicies of well-meaning neighbors ring hollow. The platitudes of the parish priest and the *Prayerbook's* Psalms do not console. About his younger son, a guitar-playing, sensitive

---

<sup>1</sup> I am reminded of Mahler's near 20-minute evocation, in the fourth movement of the Second ("Resurrection") Symphony, of the final trumpet that Paul says (in 1 Corinthians 15.52 and 1 Thessalonians 4.16) will herald the *Parousia*, the second coming of Christ. Offstage horn calls build to some of the most elaborate fanfares ever composed. As Steven Ledbetter claims in his liner notes to the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra's recording of the work (Telarc, 1983), "if the dead are to be called to judgment through a musical fanfare, it will be one like this, which seems to fill the entire universe" (10). However one might hope, in the future, to convey an image of what 4 billion years of evolutionary history might look like, surely Malick's will have to be a point of departure.

sort, gullible and naïve, the Father says, "I made him feel shame—my shame." He asks, "How did you come to me? In what shape? What disguise?" The complaint that is floated, if never spoken, by the O'Brien's in their loss, as might be by any mourner, particularly parents consumed by grief, is "Why forge everything, from the Big Bang onward, if it's all going to conclude with *this* – the far greater cataclysm, to us, of a loved one's having been cut down in his prime? What, O Lord, was the point of it all?" (Lane, 2011).

There are reports, unconfirmed by Malick (of course), that his own brother committed suicide in the 1960s. Some suggest that *To the Wonder* is the reminiscence of the director's failed, early marriage. If these reports are to be trusted, they lend a certain perspective on the films, and their sometimes self-indulgent, over-wrought excesses. Could this be the director's very personal coming to terms with those chapters in his life? Who knows? Regardless, Anthony Lane's reaction to *The Tree of Life*'s 20-minute, cosmic, evolutionary interlude is one I share: "Now, you can call this entire passage overblown, or diversionary, but what it is not is incoherent or mad. It strikes me as a straightforward account of creation, Malick's Genesis, ending, in the Eden of Jack's childhood; everything else in the film dramatizes the loss of that prelapsarian grace and the rare, Proustian instants at which it is remembered afresh" (Lane, 2011).

### **Evocations of Darwin**

It is also possible to argue that the screenplay of *The Tree of Life* both parallels and dramatizes Charles Darwin's intellectual and spiritual journeys culminating in the

publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859.<sup>2</sup> Tragedy struck the quiet and immensely happy domestic activity of the Darwin family in 1851. While no Victorian was ever immune, a death in the family hit Darwin and his wife deeply. Their second child, the daughter they called Annie, died of an unidentified fever, at the age of 10. She was, by all accounts, the apple of Darwin's eye, precocious, curious, and a prankster. By then the Darwins had had eight children: William (b. 1839), Anne (b. 1841), Henrietta (b. 1843), George (b. 1845), Elizabeth (b. 1847), Francis (b. 1848) and Leonard (b. 1850). One little girl had died at only three weeks old in 1842; two additional sons would be born later: Horace in 1851 (shortly after Annie's death) and Charles in 1856. Annie's death may have finally tipped Darwin into agnosticism (a neologism coined by his closest ally, Thomas Huxley) or outright disbelief. The doctrines of the Bible in which his wife Emma Wedgwood (who was also Darwin's first cousin) took such comfort were hurdles he could not jump. In a short memoir that he wrote for his and Emma's eyes only, in which he praised Annie's sunny nature, the despair can easily be read (Browne, 2006). How could a caring, beneficent Creator extinguish such an innocent child? How could God make a child suffer so? His science told him that Annie was irretrievably gone. After this, Darwin turned back to his work with a new grimness—an edge of determination that helped him carry on, when other men might have abandoned their studies.

The keenest grief could not last forever. Emma produced the next baby and other diversions eased into view, including the Great Exhibition in Joseph Paxton's glittering Crystal Palace later in the year. During this period of study Darwin devised what he called "the principle of divergence." It was the only major alteration that he made to the

---

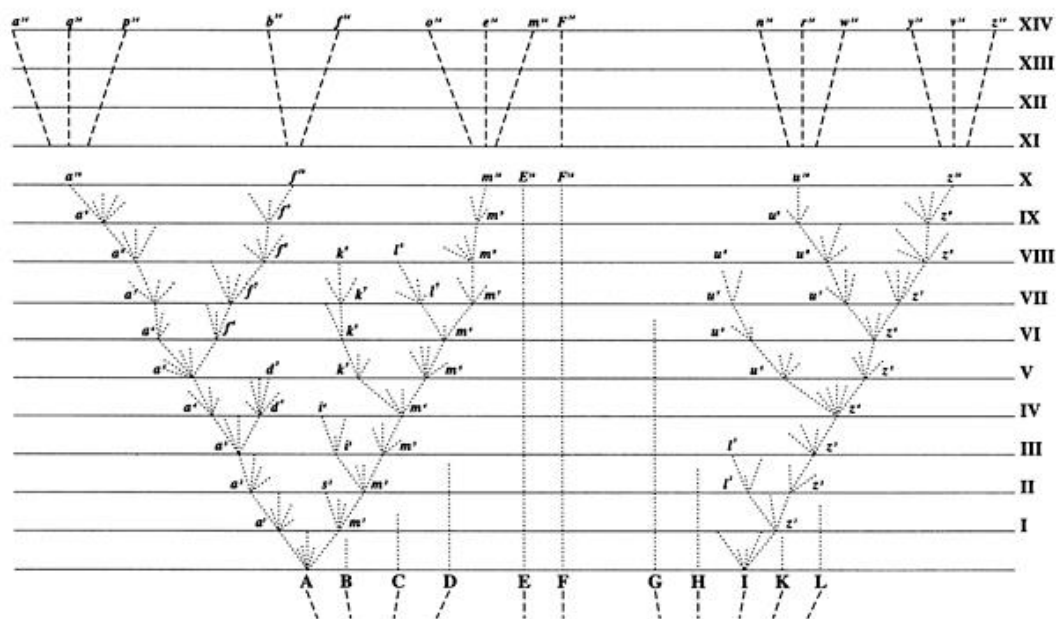
<sup>2</sup> Darwin's title for the first edition of the book was *On the Origin of Species*, but he dropped the *On* in the sixth (and last) edition released during his lifetime. The shorter title has been commonly used ever since. See: Appleman (2001, 95, n. 1).

original theory of natural selection that he had formulated some twelve years before. This principle was easy enough to characterize in words. He said that it was always *advantageous* for living beings to diversify: "The more diversified the descendants from any one species become in structure, constitution and habits, by so much will they be better enabled to seize on many and widely diversified places in the polity of nature, and so be enabled to increase in numbers" (Browne, 2006: 73). Competition for the same "places" in nature (niches) forced animals and plants to specialize, which in turn stimulated a multiplication of places and greater efficiency in the use of resources. In a worryingly brutal phrase, he went on to liken individual animals and plants to steel wedges thrusting ever harder into the softly yielding face of nature (Chapter III on the "Struggle of Existence"). Here lay the roots of some of the harshest economic and social doctrines that others, most notably Herbert Spencer, who (not Darwin) was responsible for the phrase "survival of the fittest," would take from his writings. Darwin shattered all previous images of pastoral harmony. In his world, the urge to succeed was brutal. Individuals needed to kill to survive.

In explaining divergence for his book, Darwin chose not to rely on words alone. He also introduced one of the most powerful and lasting metaphors of his career. He characterized the history of living beings as a *tree*, describing extinct ancestral forms as if they were the roots and trunk, each main group of organisms as the branches, and all the multitude of species in existence at the present day as the green leaves and buds: a smoothly spreading evolutionary tree that linked nature and history into a single, indivisible, living whole, spanning the ages. "The great tree of life," Darwin declared,

“...fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever-branching and beautiful ramifications” (Browne, 2006: 73-74).

His ability to visualize the evolution of life in this way became almost synonymous with understanding it. He made his point with a diagram – the only diagram in the book – which he called “an odd looking affair but indispensable to show the nature of the very complex affinities of past and present animals” (Browne, 2006: 74). The diagram showed how a number of ancestral forms might diverge over time, some becoming extinct and others contributing to the next generation – the stark dotted lines hardly indicating the luscious pictures of trees that cascaded from naturalists’ pens or decorated the pages of John James Audubon’s folios a couple of decades earlier.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> See the helpful explanation of how to read the diagram in Kenneth R. Miller, *Finding Darwin's God*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2007), 44: According to Darwin, “A” to “I” represent the “species of a genus large in its own country. Taking species A as an example, the “fan of diverging dotted lines of unequal lengths proceeding from (A), may represent its varying offspring.” When “a dotted line reaches one of the horizontal lines,” enough variation has accumulated that distinct varieties have formed. After “ten thousand generations, species (A) is supposed to have produced three forms, a 10, f10, and m10,” each of which may now be distinct enough to be considered separate species or subspecies.” Miller considers this diagram a marvel in that it illustrates not only the process of speciation but also extinction, evolutionary stasis, and the uneven pace of evolutionary change.

At the deepest, most satisfyingly symbolic level, Darwin supplanted the ancient biblical imagery of the tree. There we find the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" and "the tree of life" (Genesis 2.9). Darwin's is the tree of *time*. It is the tree of biological *history* spanning thousands of millennia, i.e., Charles Lyell's history based on an examination of the geologic record, not Bishop Ussher's "young earth" biblical chronology. His is a tree of knowledge, to be sure; it is a tree of life, and life's success, certainly. It is a tree Darwin discovers in the Book of Nature, not the Book of God. And for Darwin, unlike William Paley (in his *Natural Theology, or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity Collected From the Appearances of Nature*, 1802), Nature's Book does not necessarily bespeak a Divine Designer.

### **A meditation on both trees?**

In making this film, I think Malick has both construals of the tree of life – biblical and Darwinian – in mind. The "tree of life" is symbolic. The symbol is tensile (Perrin, 1976). It points beyond itself not simply to one thing. It has the capacity to evoke myths, those complexes of stories, some fact, some fiction, that for various reason human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and human existence (Watts, 1971). As moderns, the biblical and Darwinian dramas are ones to which we regularly appeal for their explanatory function and value.

And, these mythic stories admit multiple readings. One line of reading is hopeful; the other is despairing, nihilistic. I think that is why Malick introduces "The Two Ways," in the early minutes of *The Tree of Life*, as a voice-over rendered by the mother who

appears as a child. We are familiar with the schema. We find it laid out in the Gospel of Matthew 7:13-14. It appears in Chapters 1-5 of the *Didache* and near the end of the *Epistle of Barnabas* (Ehrman, 1999). In Malick's *Tree of Life*, these are hermeneutical strategies for negotiating life. The mother says we are taught, "Two Ways through life: The Way of Nature and the Way of Grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow. Grace doesn't try to please itself. It accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. It accepts insults and injuries. Nature *only* wants to please itself, get others to please it, too. It likes to lord it over them, to have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it, and love is smiling through all things... No one who loves the Way of Grace ever comes to a bad end. I will be true to you, whatever comes."

In *To the Wonder* Father Quintana speaks of "two streams of love," as he delivers a marriage sermon based on Ephesians 5. One stream is derived from the depths of the earth; it is a gift from above; its origin is divine. The other stream of love is human. It is a stream that "goes dry." It depends on rain for replenishment. Quintana knows this from experience. Of God he says, "Everywhere you are present, and still I can't see you. And I have no experience of you, not as I once did. Why don't I hold onto what I've found? My heart is cold. Hard."

These Two Ways might be regarded as hermeneutical strategies for watching *The Tree of Life*, as well. The two streams provide an interpretive lens through which to view *To the Wonder*, and by which to understand the significance of the roads that lead, on the one hand, to the cloistered garden aerie of Mont Saint Michel, and, on the other, to the grounded earth ocean of Oklahoma.



In positing the Two Ways, the two streams, does Malick run the risk of reifying a naïve dualism? Perhaps. I'm not quite sure. We do not get very far with these films if we simply regard the mother as having steadfastly pursued the road of Grace, and the father the path of Nature. We fare no better by woodenly assuming that Marina and Neil are their named counterparts or that their stories are but extensions of the dichotomy between Nature and Grace, between God's love and human love. Nor do we gain much leverage if we substitute the Way of Science for the Way of Nature, the Way of Religion for the Way of Grace. We know from *The Tree of Life* that the Way of Grace is fraught with doubt, as is the stream of God's love in which Quintana lives and moves and has his being. We know, too, that the Way of Nature, which cannot be equated merely with fallen human nature, produces much of astonishing beauty, which we see repeatedly in *To the Wonder*, a film in which Malick exploits the "magic hour" as beautifully as he did in *Days of Heaven*, those twenty or so minutes of soft, source-less light after the sun has slipped below the horizon, when no shadows are cast.

In his evocation of Darwin's theory in *The Tree of Life* and *To the Wonder*, Terrence Malick does not reproduce the branching diagram. As noted earlier, in *The Tree of Life* he approximates the Edenic trees of Genesis with Smithville, Texas' live oaks. A scrawny shrub stands sentinel when the dinosaurs make their appearance in the creation sequence. Other trees may and should be noted throughout *The Tree of Life* and in *To the Wonder* as well (the scene that marks the end of the film's exposition, shot in the Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris with the score referencing Respighi's suite, *Ancient Airs and Dances*, comes immediately to mind, as does the near final scenes of Marina in a

landscape with scarred trees, perhaps wrenched by one of Oklahoma's frequent tornados). They are there.

Malick does not beat us over the head with dendrology. Rather, Malick's signature iconographic element for this film is what appears to be a shifting "flame" of red-yellow light. Critics have been confounded by the flame. Robert Koehler (2011), of *Variety*, dismissed it as a "yolk-colored blob"; Amy Taubin (2011), writing in *ArtForum*, called it "a great whatsit"; and *The New York Times*' A. O. Scott concluded that it "can only represent the creator."

Those of us who stay for the credits learn that the "great whatsit" is the work of light artist, Thomas Wilfred – his "Opus 161" (1965-66). As Gregory Zinman of the *New Yorker* (2011) has subsequently reminded us, Wilfred's "lunia compositions," as he called them, are both feats of bric-a-brac engineering and ethereal works of art. Wilfred employed reflective mirrors, hand-painted glass disks, and bent pieces of metal – all housed in a screened wooden cabinet, or, in one case, mounted on a walnut "tea wagon" – to transform beams of light produced by a series of lamps and lenses. To look inside a lumia instrument is to see an apparent scrap heap put to near-magical use. Wilfred began honing his technique in the 1920s, and by the 40s and 50s, his work was in the permanent holdings of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. MOMA's founding director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., wrote to Wilfred in 1959, informing him that, "I think it would please you to know that we receive more letters and telephone calls asking for information about Lumia than about any other single work in the Museum's collection"—a collection that, in 1959, included Pablo

Picasso's "Guernica" and his "Demoiselles d'Avignon" (1907), not to mention Vincent Van Gogh's "Starry Night" (Zinman, 2011).

A piecemeal transcendentalist, Wilfred sought to represent "the universal rhythmic flow" in his art. He produced roughly forty works before his death in 1968. Only 18 lumia pieces have survived. As Zinman spins the tale, Eugene Epstein, a retired radio astronomer, and his wife Carol, who reside in Los Angeles, own about half of the extant Wilfred's, including the one featured in *The Tree of Life*. Wilfred resisted attempts to record the lumia, which he regarded as installation pieces to be experienced *in situ*. While Malick spent hours recording "Opus 161" at the Los Angeles Contemporary Art Museum and the Epstein's' home, the total screen time given over to the lumia in *The Tree of Life* is about two minutes. One suspects that Thomas Wilfred would not have been entirely pleased with the appropriation (Zinman, 2011).

Nonetheless, for Malick the lumia flickers; we are drawn to it ineluctably. In *To the Wonder*, the lavish cinematography of Emmanuel Lubezki (who also shot *The Tree of Life*) and the quick-cut editing of A. J. Edward, which ends with a final glimpse of Mont Saint Michel, accomplish the same aesthetic goal. They are apertures, chthonic openings, gates that beckon the viewer to join a cosmic meeting of humanity that portend an experience both unitive and celebratory.

These evoke the tantalizing image of the tree (literally, "the wood," ξύλον)<sup>4</sup> of life in the Book of Revelation. Whether you thought the Garden of Eden was closed for repairs or closed forever, this sentinel grove occupies "either side of the river of water

---

<sup>4</sup> See Rev. 2.7. Ultimately, the image derives from Ezekiel's vision in 47.7, 12, where "a great many trees" are found along the banks of either side of the sacred river that flows from the temple. Rather than the single tree of Genesis 2.9 and 3.22, "the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God" contains a fructifying stand ("wood") of trees.

that flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb in the holy city, with its twelve kinds of fruit producing its fruit each month,” with leaves that “are for the healing of the nations” (Rev. 22.2). It is not unlike the compelling, entangled bank Darwin teases his readers to contemplate in the final paragraph of *On the Origin of Species*, “clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth.” Darwin invites the inured hiker to “reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have been produced by laws acting around us.” Darwin hymns in prose that rivals Gustav Holst’s seven-movement orchestral suite glorifying the celestial bodies, *The Planets* (Opus 32), or Joseph Schwantner’s symphonic poem, *Afbertones of Infinity*: “There is a grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being, evolved” (Appelman, 174).

There is much grandeur in Malick’s *The Tree of Life* and *To the Wonder*, enough to rivet our attention on the first and, indeed, many subsequent viewings.

## Bibliography

Adam, D. (1988). *The edge of glory: prayers in the Celtic tradition*. Wilton, CT.

Albaugh, Michael D. (2004). *Moment form in Schwanter's "Aftertones of Infinity."*

Charleston, WV: ProQuest.

Appleman, ed. Philip. (2001). *Darwin*. A Norton Critical Edition, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition .New York:

W. W. Norton & Company.

Bradshaw, Peter. (2015, February 8). Berlin 2015 review: *Knight of Cups* – Malick's

back! With the least interesting spiritual crisis in history, *The Guardian*. Retrieved

from <http://www.villagevoice.com/2015-02-11/film/knight-of-cups-berline-film-festival/>.

Brody, Richard. (2013, April 10). The cinematic miracle of *To the Wonder*. *The New*

*Yorker*.

Browne, Janet. (2006). *Darwin's ORIGIN OF SPECIES: A Biography*. New York, NY:

Grove Press, 2006.

Chang, Justin (2013, February 8). Berlin film review: 'Knight of Cups.' *Variety*.

Retrieved from <http://variety.com/2015/film/reviews/berlin-film-review-knight-of-cups-1201425546/>.

Dawkins, Richard. (1990). *The selfish gene*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Denby, David. (2013, April 15). "Commitments." *The New Yorker* (84-85).

Ehrman, Bart D. 1999. *After the New Testament. A reader in early Christianity*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Emerson, Jim. (2011/12). "Shame, Tree of Life: Ambiguity or Bust?" Retrieved from [http://blogs.suntimes.com/scanners/2011/12/shame\\_tree\\_of\\_life\\_ambiguity\\_o.html](http://blogs.suntimes.com/scanners/2011/12/shame_tree_of_life_ambiguity_o.html).

Glover, Raymond F. (1994). *The hymnal 1982 companion*, Volume 3A. New York: Church Hymnal Corporation.

Koehler, Robert. (2011). "Cannes: Ears to the ground (2)." Retrieved from <http://filmjourney.weblogger.com/2011/05/18/cannes-ears-to-the-ground-2/>.

Lane, Anthony. (2011, May 30). Time trip: Terrence Malick's "The Tree of Life." *The New Yorker* (72-74).

Ledbetter, Steven. (1983). *Mahler, symphony no. 2, "resurrection,"* conducted by Leonard Slatkin, St. Louis Symphony Orchestra (Telarc).

Menocal, Narciso G. (1983-84). Form and content in Frank Lloyd Wright's *Tree of Life* window, *Elvehjem Museum of Art Bulletin* (18-32).

Miller, Kenneth. (2007). *Finding Darwin's god*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York, NY, HarperCollins.

Perrin, Norman. (1976). *Jesus and the language of the kingdom: Symbol and metaphor in New Testament interpretation*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Samuel, Flora. (2007). *Le Corbusier in detail*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Architectural Press, Elsevier, Ltd.

Schwantner, Joseph. (1979). *Aftertones of infinity*. New York: C.F. Peters Corporation, 1.

Scott, A. O. (2011, August 25). "Summer cinema worth debating," *The New York Times*.

\_\_\_\_\_. (2013, April 11). Twirling in Oklahoma, a dervish for love, Terrence Malick's "To the Wonder." *The New York Times*.

Stenmark, Mikael. (2004). *How to relate science and religion. A multidimensional model*. Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Taubin, Amy. (2011, May 27). Bible camp. *ArtForum*. Retrieved from <http://artforum.com/film/id=28334>.

Watts, Alan. 1971. *Myth and ritual in Christianity*. Boston, Beacon Press.

Zacharek, Stephanie. (2015, February 11). Berlin film festival: In *Knight of Cups*, Terence Malick doesn't even get the shoes right, *The Village Voice*. Retrieved from <http://www.villagevoice.com/2015-02-11/film/knight-of-cups-berline-film-festival/>.

Zinman, Gregory. (2011, June 27). Department of optics: Lumia." *The New Yorker* (25-26).