

***THE WAY TO GRACE:  
TERRENCE MALICK'S ECOTHEOLOGICAL VISION IN  
THE TREE OF LIFE***

There are two ways through life: the way of nature, and the way of grace. You have to choose which one to follow. – *The Tree of Life*

**Keywords:** *creation, deep ecology, ecotheological, God, innocence, Nature, spiritual.*

**Abstract:** *Terrence Malick's fifth and most experimental film The Tree of Life provides a fertile ground for exploring the various facets of Nature, along with the questions these raise and the implications they carry for understanding our fraught relationships with the divine. As I argue, by affirming its protagonists' vital relation to the "deeper world" they inhabit, the movie projects an ecotheological vision that casts Nature as a matter-spirit continuum, a vast "church" filled with intimations of immortality, a place they can call "home."*

What do we talk about when we talk about nature? A porous term that encompasses historically and culturally shifting meanings, nature has been variously defined: in theological terms, as the "earth" – "the material-vital aspect of God's creation" (Santmire 11); in the pre-modern sense as an organic, living entity – a concept that has resurfaced in the contemporary "Gaia hypothesis" advanced by the chemist James Lovelock; as a philosophical concept, denoting the finitude implicit in our physicality and embodiment; in the modern sense, as a demystified world, an exploitable resource, and an object of scientific investigation (Jervis 141–42); in a psychological sense, as the "wilderness" within, or the self's "other"; in poetic terms, as a beautiful or sublime landscape to be grasped by the creative imagination, rather than conscious reflection; and last but not least, in the (deep) ecological sense of a network of interrelated organisms and species whose value is intrinsic (that is, apart from their usefulness to humans).

Terrence Malick's fifth and most experimental film *The Tree of Life* provides a fertile ground for exploring some of these meanings, along with the questions they raise and the implications they carry for understanding our fraught relationships with others, nature, and God.

As I intend to show, a strong desire for achieving communion with God and others in one mystical body goes hand in hand with a longing to restore a dimension of

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depth – an aura of sacredness, even – to nature itself, by envisioning it as matter-spirit continuum, a vast “church” where we can find a sense of belonging, of being part of something greater than ourselves.

*The Tree of Life* has been critically acclaimed as “deeply spiritual” (Cashill), “alternately baffling and beautiful,” a “crazy spiritual allegory” (O’Hehir), “the most unorthodox Hollywood drama in many moons” (Pinkerton), “a film of vast ambition and deep humility” (Ebert).<sup>1</sup> Best known for “Badlands” and “Days of Heaven,” Malick has studied philosophy – he translated Martin Heidegger’s *The Essence of Reasons* (1969) – and, according to Brad Pitt, he loves science, nature, and God. The convergence of these passions in *The Tree of Life* may explain why the movie has been said to give churchgoers a “serious headache” (Pinkerton). Its rendering of the history of creation, in particular, has been viewed as either “markedly Darwinian” (Pinkerton) or a “pie in Darwin’s face” (Cashill). “The problem,” Jack Cashill has complained, “is that most film critics no longer know enough about our Biblical legacy to review a movie about faith.” *The Tree of Life* is not only about what it means to feel close to God but also about how it feels to be at home – to dwell in what Heidegger called “the fourfold” (the earth, sky, divinities, and mortals), or in what Arne Naess, the founder of the deep ecology movement, has referred to as our “deeper world.” More pointedly, in reminding us that we live in a world of unsurpassed wonder, beauty, and hope, the visionary director seeks to capture the miracle of life before Darwin, to re-enchant us with every aspect of it – its mysterious origin and great diversity, its fundamental relationships (between parents and children, God and humanity, etc.) and rites of passage.

Both the biblical account of creation and the Book of Job are relevant touchstones for the movie. The quotation from Job reads as follows: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? ... What supports its foundations, and who laid its cornerstone as the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?” (38: 4, 7). In this passage, Cashill explains, “God chides Job for daring to think that he, like Darwin, knows how life on earth began.” The epigraph is followed by a flicker of light that brings to mind the third verse of The Book of Genesis, “And God said: Let there be light: and there was light.” The first words we hear are uttered by Jack, the oldest of the O’Briens’ three pre-adolescent sons: “Brother, mother, it was they that led me to your door.” The “door” is actually figured as a doorframe whose symbolic significance as the gate to heaven also resides in the passage that it opens from the natural to the spiritual world. The line between the two worlds is further blurred by the hauntingly beautiful images that Emmanuel Lubezki’s camera brings to the screen: a window opening onto a field on which cows are grazing, birds and insects are heard chirping, children and their parents are playing, and the sunlight streams through the branches of an oak tree that towers above a shady lane in Waco, TX (Malick’s hometown) in the 1950s. A site of affective kinship, the tree represents the portal through which the O’Brien family, headed by Mr.

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<sup>1</sup> Ebert and O’Hehir, among others, have also compared it to Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

O'Brien (Brad Pitt) and Mrs. O'Brien (Jessica Chastain), connect to the origins and life of the universe. Especially revealing is the image of a ladder that is propped up against the tree which the O'Briens' sons climb up to play.

The Eden of their childhood resounds with the myriad sounds of nature, and amid the chorus we recognize both the singularity and universality of their lives. As Anthony Lane perceptively notes, "everything else in the movie dramatizes the loss of [this] prelapsarian grace and the rare, Proustian instants at which it is remembered afresh." Told mainly from Jack's perspective, the coming-of-age story at the heart of the film is propelled by recollections and projections, by what happened in the past – even from before he can remember – and what will happen in the future. This deeply personal human story is embedded in a cosmic tale stretching back to the beginning of time and presaging the end of time. Put another way, the O'Briens' story is merely the frame by which Malick brings into focus his all-encompassing vision of a wider and deeper world that fully manifests God's presence.

The O'Briens are Roman Catholic, so they see the world through Catholic lenses. As the nuns have taught the mother, "there are two ways through life: the way of nature, and the way of grace. You have to choose which one to follow." "Nature," she goes on, "only wants to please itself, but others to please it too. 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." These lines describe nature in quite narrow terms, as fickle and ruthless, easy to offend and difficult to placate, an image we also find in Canto 56 of Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* A. H. Hallam (1850), where the speaker trusts that

. . . God was love indeed  
And love Creation's final law  
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed.

"Nature, red in tooth and claw" here refers to a violent world in which predatory animals cover their teeth and claws with the blood of their prey, as well as to the essentially selfish, calculating human nature. In the creation sequence of the movie, such Darwinian undertones are reinforced by images showing the endless competition among organisms for survival – we watch as one dinosaur casually steps on the head of a wounded fellow critter. In the social world, too, the strong thrive at the expense of the weak, as Mr. O'Brien warns Jack: "Your mother's naïve. It takes fierce will to get ahead in the world. If you're too good, people take advantage of you." A young Jack (played by the excellent Hunter McCracken) participates, not wholeheartedly, it is true, in a vandalism spree, during which one of his friends ties a frog to a roman candle and sets it off with a skyrocket.

By contrast with the callous laws of nature, "creation's final law" is nothing short of divine love, or agape. As Mrs. O'Brien explains, "Grace doesn't try to please itself. It accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked, accepts injuries and insults. No one

who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end,” she reassures her sons, while vowing to stay “true” to God “whatever comes.” Grace, in other words, provides a way out of the mechanical cycle of existence – the cycle of life and death – associated with and contained within nature (Frye 108). This, essentially, is the point driven home by the Catholic priest who delivers the sermon in the church that the O’Brien family attends. Drawing on the Book of Job, the priest reminds his congregation not only about the injustice and ubiquity of suffering, but also about life’s transitoriness, “the passing shows of time,” as opposed to the eternal life promised by “that which is greater than fortune and fate.”<sup>2</sup>

Though the film’s opening scene and the sermon above press viewers towards the abstract division of nature and grace, matter and spirit, the rest of the movie works against this philosophy, projecting a holistic, ecotheological vision that affirms the interrelationships among God, humanity, and nature. Nature, Malick suggests, is not that which gets in the way of grace, but rather the way *to* grace. Before we look more closely at how Malick accomplishes this, we need to understand the larger context that frames his awe-inspiring portrait of nature.

In *The Travail of Nature* (1985), Paul H. Santmire identifies two motifs – a spiritual and an ecological one – that run through Western theology and account for its “thoroughly ambiguous” approach to nature. The “spiritual motif” is predicated on a “vision of the human spirit rising above nature,” transcending it to attain “communion with God,” as expressed, for instance, by the young Augustine in his soliloquies: “I desire to have knowledge of God and the soul” (Santmire 9). On this view – also referred to as the “inner logic” (Gordon Kaufman) or “other-worldly focus” (Roach 159) of Christian faith – the natural world is validated only in terms of the spirit. In *The Tree of Life*, as we have seen, this logic explains the dichotomy between the way of grace and the way of nature, which also corresponds to Northrop Frye’s description of the two levels of nature posited by Christianity down to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the negative side of the ambiguity became dominant<sup>3</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> To quote from the sermon: “We run before the wind. We think it will carry us forever. It will not. We vanish as the cloud. We wither as the autumn grass, and like a tree, are rooted up. Is there nothing which is deathless? Nothing which doesn’t pass away? We can’t stay where we are. We must journey forth. We must find that which is greater than fortune and fate. Nothing else can bring us peace.”

<sup>3</sup> In the modern period, acceptance of the “nature-as-machine” metaphor led to a progressive estrangement from nature – what Max Weber called a “disenchantment of the world” and Carolyn Merchant meant by “the death of nature – the most far-reaching effect of the Scientific Revolution” (193). Thus as reconstituted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, under the influence of Darwinism, the medieval “great chain of being” is a “celebration of human – specifically masculine – triumph, with Man at the apex of the chain” (Jervis 136). This anthropocentric view of nature, which has been questioned by the deep ecology movement, “replaces continuity with dichotomy, community with distance, participation with manipulation” (Jervis 136).

The upper level was the “good” divine creation of Genesis; the lower level was the “fallen” order that Adam entered after his sin. Man is born now on the lower level, and his essential duty in life is to try to raise himself to the higher one. Morality, law, virtue, the sacraments of the Church, all help to raise him, as does everything educational. . . . [M]an is confronted with a moral dialectic at birth and must either rise above physical nature [by choosing the way of grace] or sink below it into sin [by choosing the way of nature]. The nature around us is permeated by death and corruption, but we can discern within it the original ‘good’ creation. The symbol of this original nature, and all that is now really left of it, is the sky. (113)

The “ecological” motif highlighted by Santmire is premised on “a vision of the human spirit’s rootedness in the world of nature and on the desire of self-consciously embodied selves to celebrate God’s presence in, with, and under the whole biophysical order, as the context in which the life of obedience to God is to be pursued” (9).<sup>4</sup> A paradigmatic example of this motif can be found in narratives about St. Francis’s death: “how at this moment of his most intimate communion with God, he kept reciting his elegant *Canticle to the Sun*, thus placing himself in solidarity with the birds, insects, the sun and the moon, and indeed the whole of nature” (Santmire 10). Another example is *The Tree of Life*. More than a mere backdrop for the human drama unfolding in the film, nature emerges as humanity’s proper home – a key player in our maturation process, both as individuals and as a species. In Santmire’s terms, Nature is a “theological *fundamentum*,” established in “the original moment of theological reflection” (10). Its spiritual significance as the ground, rather than limit, of our being has been emphasized by various belief systems, from Transcendentalism (Emerson’s “The Oversoul”) to ecotheology – Rosemary Radford Ruether’s notion of a “Cosmic Christ” (141) and Sallie McFague’s conceptualization of the earth as the “Body of God (xviii) – and deep ecology (the “fluid” and the “expansive, field-like” Self advocated by Naess and Warwick Fox, respectively).<sup>5</sup>

Malick shares with these thinkers the belief that human existence is inseparable from the whole of creation, from the planet’s living body. We are not uniquely privileged and alone worthy of God’s grace, but just one branch in the tree of life, just as the

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<sup>4</sup> In Santmire’s view, the turn to Eastern religions and native American religions bespeaks a need for “the new kind of inclusive thinking that the emerging ecological consciousness seems to require – to view humanity as part of nature, not as a species above or against nature, to understand God as immanent in the vast expanses and diversities of cosmic history, as well as immanent in the unfolding dramas of humanity” (1).

<sup>5</sup> Naess, for whom self and ecosphere are one, calls the ecosophy he expounds ecosophy T (“T” for Tvergastein, his hut on the Hallingskarvet Mountain in Norway). Up there, “the world participates in that which I feel, and the other way about.” The self feels “more like a *flow* than anything solid” (23). The values at the heart of deep ecology – particularly that “all living creatures have their own intrinsic value” and that there are “fundamental intuitions about what is unjust” – are compatible with religious feelings and experiences (6, 7).

O'Briens are members of an extended family, a community of beings bound by reciprocal ties and obligations. This deep sense of cosmological involvement lends a mystical quality to the larger sense of Self projected by the movie, exposing us to the infinitely complex and intense flux of life that flows through and beyond us.

As evoked through the memory of her now-middle-aged son Jack (Sean Penn), Mr. O'Brien and Mrs. O'Brien are archetypal polar opposites between which he shuttles back and forth, intimately attached to both: "Mother, Father, always you wrestle inside me." The loving and forgiving mother would seem to embody the way of grace: "Help each other. Love everyone. Every ray of light. Forgive," she urges her sons, pointing at the sky to remind them that "God lives there." We even see her dancing on air for a few seconds. In contrast, the stern and demanding father embodies the way of nature, teaching his sons to box – even to swing a punch at him – and to make their way in a business world that "lives on trickery." Hence his advice to them: "You want to succeed, you can't be too good." Upon his father's admission that he was tough on him sometimes, Jack defends him against himself: "It's your house. You can kick me out whenever you want to. You want to kill me. She only loves me." Moreover, when asked, "Do you love your father?," the boy replies "Yes, sir," though his love is mixed with fear and resentment. "Why should I be good if you aren't?" he asks his father. "I'm as bad as you are. I'm more like you than her." His rhetorical question seems also addressed to God, with whom he becomes equally disillusioned after his brother's death: "Why does he hurt us? Our Father?"

The film complicates the nature-spirit dichotomy, for the older Jack gets, the more complex and conflicted his parents appear to him (and to us): at once weak and strong, bound by necessity and free. Both mother and father foster their sons' creativity – the former by reading to them, the latter by playing the piano at home and the organ in church, and listening to classical music during supper. Equally important, they both nurture their sons' reverent apprehension of nature's grandeur. Jack's love-hate relationship with his father is conveyed through emotionally charged scenes, such as the one in which the voice-over narration of Jack's hostile thoughts about his father ("He insults people. He doesn't care. He tells us not to put our elbows on the table, but he does," etc.) is contradicted by the camera shots revealing the latter's affectionate side, which surfaces as he tucks the boys in bed after playing with them. Moreover, we see the father tending the garden, planting trees with Jack, whom he calls "my sweet boy" and urges to follow his dreams: "I dreamed of being a great musician but I let myself get sidetracked." But we already know that Jack will also feel trapped in his job, as unhappy with the choices he has made as his father: "When you're young, it's all about your career. You don't understand anything. I feel like I'm bumping into walls," an older Jack admits to his father on the phone.

Mrs. O'Brien's character also intrigues because she can be seen as both nature and spirit, a fusion of the earthly and the ethereal, of human and cosmic creativity. Though mainly perceived as passive and weak, she is capable of standing up to her husband, as when, angry at one of his outbursts, she tries to hit him. He grabs her arm, restrains her, and then holds her in a loving embrace. This gesture redeems him, as does

his humble exhortation: “Look at the glory around us. Trees, birds. I lived in shame. I dishonored it all by not *seeing* it all. I’m nothing” (emphasis mine). The powers of sight are directly linked with the powers of insight, or self-knowledge. As much as he wants to believe that “You make yourself what you are. You control your own destiny,” Mr. O’Brien learns through the losses he suffers (of his job at the local factory and especially that of his son) not only that freedom is limited but that it also entails responsibility. The mother too teaches the boys to love the natural world around them – a lesson Jack has taken to heart: “You [that is, God] spoke to me through her. You spoke with me from the sky. The trees.”

Hence the suggestion that it is God, acting *in and through* nature, that gives and takes away. Mr. O’Brien’s comment, “He’s in God’s hands now,” is qualified by his wife: “He was in God’s hands all the time, wasn’t he?” By the same token, it is nature – in its creative *and* destructive aspects – that provides the answer to Jack’s question: “How did you [Lord] come to me? In what shape? What disguise?”<sup>6</sup> The terrible news of her son’s death elicits the mother’s anguished cry “Oh, God!” which the camera punctuates with shots of a barren tree and the sunset. Just as Job’s friends come to see him in his misery, so neighbors come to extend sympathy to the O’Briens. “Life goes on,” one of them says. “People pass along. Nothing stays the same. The Lord gives, and he takes away. That’s his way.” Like Job, the O’Briens struggle to make sense of God’s mysterious ways, especially the necessity for, or inevitability of suffering. Blaming himself for the tragedy, the father expresses remorse for the way he treated his late son (punching his face for no reason, criticizing the way he turned the pages at the piano, and making him feel shame). In her turn, the mother, looking up at the sky, cannot help asking: “Was I false to you? Lord, why? Where were you? Who are we to you? Answer me.”

If, to quote Frye, any causal explanation for Job’s plight “takes us back to the First Cause, that, is the creation” (196), it is not surprising that God’s answer, as Malick imagines it, takes the form of an extended visual representation of the birth and expansion of the universe: the formation of galaxies, interstellar conflagrations, the appearance of life on the molecular level, early life forms, plants and creatures (including dinosaurs). The recurring image of the planet as a remote ball suspended in space, swirled in the atmosphere, illuminates the beauty but also the mystery of the earth. As Cashill rightly observes, “The fact that Malick uses imagery pulled from the Hubble Telescope and the like does not make it Darwinian.” Moreover, Malick’s use of spiritual music throughout the sequence, some of it Gregorian, suggests that “blind chance and natural selection were not exactly at play here.”

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<sup>6</sup> This ambiguity, Frye points out, characterizes the view of creation taken in the Book of Job, in the sense that, with the separation of land from sea and the division of light from darkness, chaos and darkness [and, implicitly Satan] are thought of as “dialectically incorporated into creation,” “creatures of God as well,” rather than “enemies of God outside creation,” which is the more usual view of the prophets (110–111).

In *The Tree of Life* this process culminates in the birth of a baby boy to the O'Briens – their first son, Jack. The labor of childbirth is linked with “the travail of nature,” each involving both pain and promise, both “distress and hope” (Santmire 11). One of the film’s most touching scenes, fittingly entitled “Innocence,” shows the baby sleeping in his parents’ arms, being baptized, taking its first steps, laughing, dancing, playing with animals and learning their names. “You’ll be grown before that tree is tall,” the mother tells the boy. As in Shel Silverstein’s parable *The Giving Tree* (1964), the tree remains a constant presence throughout the O’Brien brothers’ lives, its system of roots, trunk, and branches paralleling their own physical, emotional, and spiritual development.<sup>7</sup> In this and other scenes, sound and image work powerfully to create a vivid portrait of their idyllic childhood – the long summer days of play and idleness, of racing along tree-shaded streets or rolling in the grass, an innocent curiosity toward the adult world, as well as a great urgency to experience some of its thrills and discover its secrets. Besides knowledge of good and evil – suggested, among other things, by the disturbing sight of a cripple, a drunkard, or a convict – what the boys acquire in their “fall” is an awareness of mortality, as when they witness a boy drowning in a local swimming-pool. This incident, which is shown towards the end of the movie, echoes the misfortune that befalls the O'Briens and tests their faith in God: one of Jack’s brothers (R.L.) dies by drowning at the age of 19.

Much of the film’s energy derives from the psychic reverberations of this trauma. “I see the child that I was. I see my brother. True. Kind. He died when he was 19.” As uttered by a grownup Jack, these words – along with the question “How do I get back to where they [his family] are?” – articulate his nostalgia for a life rooted in a place where everything formed an organic whole and God was truly all in all. More generally, Malick also implies, how can human beings, in their fallen state, reconnect with nature and God? Or, as Heidegger would ask, how can they build so that they could truly dwell? This spiritual longing drives the scene entitled “City,” which begins with Jack waking up and going to work in a skyscraper, talking with a co-worker and preparing for a meeting. It is significant that Jack has grown up to be an architect who feels a stranger in the “house” he has “designed” for himself. His heart is not in it, for he gazes wistfully at the sky reflected in the high-windows of the buildings outside or, down below, at the church-tower that stands out among these buildings. Then the camera cuts to Jack wandering about a desert (a metaphoric wasteland), pausing before a doorframe, and asking “How did I lose you? Wandered? Forgot you?” while a voice from the past (his dead brother’s) beckons him, “Find me.” If, in Heidegger’s terms, building is a form of dwelling, of making yourself at home in the fourfold (150-51), then Jack’s existential crisis is a matter of having become estranged from the deepest source of his being, the primal oneness in which earth and sky, God and human beings belong together.

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<sup>7</sup> Whether read as a symbol of unqualified maternal love or divine love, the tree in Silverstein’s parable anchors and sustains the boy’s life by satisfying his changing needs, physical as well as psychic (to eat, play, buy things, build a house, have a family, travel, and rest).



Like the Book of Job, which “follows the U-shaped progression of original prosperity, descent to humiliation, and return” (Frye 193), *The Tree of Life* tells a “U-shaped story” (Frye 193) that follows the trajectory of human and cosmic redemption and that restores the unity among humans, nature, and God. The movie ends with a vision of an afterlife: once Jack passes through the doorframe that stands for the gate to heaven, the previously desolate landscape turns into a shallow beach that fills with people who “solemnly recognize and greet one another, and all is understood in the fullness of time” (Ebert). Hesitant at first, Jack walks through the doorframe, kneels in the surf (a symbol of baptismal water), and reunites with his parents and brothers as he remembers them from his childhood: “Keep us, guide us, till the end of time.” His rebirth is thus also a homecoming. This hopeful, uplifting message is further emphasized by the field of sunflowers on which the camera hovers for a while. Ultimately, Malick conjures up a vision of love, for those people who touch Jack’s heart do not just pass on – they live on in his memory, his recurrent visions of them bearing the truth of his mom’s statement that “Unless you love, your life will flash by.”

Malick’s approach to his characters has been described as “fragmented” and “impressionistic” (Pinkerton), or even “solipsistic” (Lane) in that they tend to “devote more time to murmurs, cries, and whispers, confided to us from the prison of their own heads, than to conversing with their fellow-humans” (Lane). In my opinion – and in light of what I have shown above – although the characters appear to be locked in their own worlds,<sup>8</sup> the movie also widens the focus to acknowledge the interconnected power and dependency of all (organic and inorganic) life. If the famously reclusive director agreed to an interview about *The Tree of Life*, this is how, I think, he would sum up the film’s message:

Would it be anything but an enhancement of God’s grace, not to begrudge the generosity of God, rather to confess that the creatures of nature also have an eternal determination, that God intends to have a history also with the galaxies and the dinosaurs, and the birds of the air, that they also, in due proportion, along with all our fellow human beings, are our ‘covenant partners’ ... Could we not see the tree of life coming to fruition with many branches, not just with one? (Santmire 126–27)

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<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, the musical score composed or selected by Alexandre Desplat fills many of the gaps in which we might expect talking. On the other hand, the sparse dialogue may also be Malick’s way of saying that we inhabit a reality for which words are inadequate and explanation is much too poor.

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