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Terrence Malick Beyond Nature and Grace: Song to Song and the Experience of Forgiveness

Abstract

In *The Tree of Life* Terrence Malick poses the question of the relation between the order of grace and the order of nature in the cosmos and in human existence, a question presented through the relation of mother and father in the O'Brien family. The aim of this article is to analyze this issue and to present the role of glory in *The Tree of Life* as the transfiguration of nature operated by grace. Specifically, the example of forgiveness as one strand of this glory seems to be an helpful tool to understand the movie. Forgiveness, already present in *The Tree of Life*, becomes particularly important then in *Song to Song*. I will present this movie as an exemplar analysis of the human soul and of the capacity of forgiveness to draw the soul close to the eternal, as already happening in *The Tree of Life*. Underlining the relationship between forgiveness, sacrifice and glory will help to understand both the continuity between the two movies and the specificity of *Song to Song*.

Keywords

Malick, Song to Song, The Tree of Life, Nature, Grace, Glory, Forgiveness

Author Notes

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Introduction

It is impossible to think of Terrence Malick without recalling his philosophical background: a summa cum laude Harvard graduate, Malick was fascinated by Heidegger thanks to Stanley L. Cavell's Philosophy class and ready to move to Oxford to write a dissertation on Heidegger and Wittgenstein. Oxford, however, was not the right place: "These were the days [when] Oxford was analytical philosophy. The last thing anyone at the philosophy department there wanted was to supervise a dissertation on Heidegger. So he kept on hitting a blank wall."¹ After long discussions on his dissertation topic, Malick left Oxford and, with it, any academic future. Why does this matter? The answer comes from Malick himself when asked "why philosophy?" According to a testimony, Malick confessed that he had been extremely disappointed by philosophy at Harvard because none of the classes "helped him understand himself or his place in the order of the cosmos."² If it is true that every film is a way to deal with a burning question, then Malick's films are his way to answer the question of human dwelling. The clearest example seems to be *The Tree of Life* (2011).³ This movie has indeed been the subject of articles, books, and conferences not only in film-studies, but also philosophy and theology, throughout the last ten years.⁴ When public interest in Malick started to wane, the academic interest seemed to diminish as well. Starting from *To the Wonder* (2012), the first movie to receive extremely negative reviews, scholars lost the habit of writing on Malick: it is still hard to find well-articulated reflections on *Knight of Cups* (2015) and *Song to Song* (2017). In particular, *Song to Song* has

been described as “plumbing new boreholes of cringe,” “hitting all the wrong notes,” “sometimes exasperating, sometimes mesmeric,” and has made critics wonder whether Terrence Malick “should take a break.”⁵

The aim of my paper is not only an attempt to overcome this gap by reflecting on his latest film *Song to Song*, but also to understand the relation that this movie has with the more considered *The Tree of Life*. It is indeed my conviction that a deep connection is present, between the two movies that still needs to be studied. Specifically, I believe *Song to Song* to deepen one fundamental aspect of *The Tree of Life* – the relation between nature and grace – on a more existential level. If *The Tree of Life*, with its opening statement on the orders of nature and grace, clearly recognizes an underlying struggle within the cosmos *as a whole*, I believe Malick illustrates this struggle at play within the depths of *the particular human soul* particularly well in *Song to Song*. That is, the same struggle is illustrated, but on a personal-scale rather than cosmic.

Furthermore, I claim that this approach in *Song to Song* allows Malick to focus particularly well on one of the many “routes of grace” present in *The Tree of Life*, the route of forgiveness. To be clear, if *The Tree of Life* proposes an expanded vision of grace and its relation to glory (a concept that I will here analyze), I believe *Song to Song* to present clearly one of the possible declinations of this glory in the human experience, particularly in its relational aspect.

1. The Two Orders in Reality: *The Tree of Life*

(voice over of Mrs. O'Brien): The nuns taught us there are 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. Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries. Nature only wants to please itself. Get 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, when love is smiling through all things. They taught us that no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end.

The opening lines of *The Tree of Life* seem to give us a guide for the entire movie. We are told there is a dichotomy in life between two ways: nature and grace.⁶ These two ways have been recognized by the vast literature on this film to be embodied by Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien, Father (nature) and Mother (grace). It is indeed evident that these two characters are archetypes of the cosmic adventure that Malick wants to narrate through the history of a normal American family. The plot of the movie is simple. The O'Brien's have three sons: Jack, RL, and Steve. We soon find out that RL dies around the age of 19. We follow Mrs. O'Brien in her grief over her loss; soon after, we meet a grown-up Jack wondering about his brother's death and, consequently, about the meaning of his entire life. He poses the same question as a child when experiencing the death of a friend: "Where were you? You let a boy drown. You'll do anything." It is not without meaning that his own name, *Jack O'Brien*, brings us to the opening quote of the movie, from the Book of Job. His questions is also the question of the crying mother over the loss of her child ("Why? Where were you? Did you know? Who are we to you? Answer me!"), a question that

becomes the origin of the great scene of the creation of the cosmos, which seems to be a suggested answer to the question about the origin of each soul. This clearly mirrors God's answer to Job's question about innocent suffering, an answer that Malick puts indeed as an epigraph at the outset of the film.⁷ Creation flows and we find ourselves following the birth and growth of the O'Brien children, their education, their first experiences of love and pain, always lived through their relation with their mother and father.

The mother's presence dominates the entire movie. It is the order of grace that introduces each child into the experiences of life. But not only that: they see her accepting the suffering coming from a hard husband. The father indeed represents the order of nature, the necessity of being strong, of "fighting back" against adversity: "your mother is naïve. It takes fierce will to get ahead in this world. If you're good, people take advantage of you." Jack, whom we follow closely throughout the movie, is clearly the son of both: "Mother. Father. Always you wrestle in me." Nature and grace are united as in a marriage; they are both present in the education of the children and, however much we are tempted to see grace as the "right" way against the greediness of nature, it is also clear that one cannot be without the other without risk of collapsing. In fact, it is when Mr. O'Brien is away that, after a few moments of joy and light in the household, Jack breaks into the neighbor's house, stealing a nightgown and discovering how evil his own soul can be.

Although a dualism of sorts between nature and grace remains throughout the whole movie, a deeper unity seems to be stated. The clearest

example is the aforementioned scene of creation: the universe is described in its beauty (grace), but this beauty seems to fight continuously with some sort of randomness and violence (nature).⁸ It is not an easy collaboration – the relation between Mr. and Mrs. O’Brien is not idyllic, for Malick does not naively see the struggle as painless.⁹ Creation is not simply grace *or* nature, but neither is it grace *against* nature. The famous scene of the wounded dinosaur spared by the stronger one seems to suggest that there is no clear opposition, that the cosmos contains “moments of grace” even when apparently dominated by the order of nature. The world is clearly the history of grace *and* nature.

The question we want to face now seems clear: *where does this unity come from?* If we turn from the cosmic level to the individual soul (recognizing that a strict separation between the two is never possible in Malick), where do we experience this kind of unity in life?

I believe *Song to Song* to provide one example of the human experience of the union between nature and grace, in the particular (but not unique) example of forgiveness. Behind forgiveness lies, I claim, what Malick calls *glory*, the experience of the presence of grace in nature and its power of transfiguring nature itself. Before moving to *Song to Song*, I believe it necessary to deepen the question of glory in *The Tree of Life*. This will help us to see the continuity between the two movies here considered, and to comprehend better the meaning of a forgiveness that can only be understood in relation to this glory.

2. “I didn’t Notice the Glory”: The Relation between Grace and Glory

I believe a third fundamental element is present in Malick’s filmography, and that is the order of *glory*. It is crucial to understand that glory is not an additional element *imposed* upon nature and grace, rather, it takes “the best” out of the two, resulting in a new order. This third order is necessary since the unity between nature and grace is not at the expense of one’s victory over the other: grace over nature or nature over grace. The impossibility of this dualistic vision is evident from the words of Mrs. O’Brien’s opening statement: “The nuns taught us there are *two* ways through life....” Malick does not easily accept this potentially dualistic vision, but takes it as a hypothesis to verify throughout the movie. At the opposite extreme, the order of glory does not combine the two orders in a pantheistic fusion: this would lose the individuality of the orders of nature and grace in one big, vague sea. Thus, between nature and grace there is neither opposition nor fusion: each one seems to anticipate the other, and in the moment when this mutual presence is recognized, glory emerges, as we will unfold below.

Mr. O’Brien, the archetype of nature, wants the world to be perfect. It is striking how often he is depicted working in the yard, even after RL’s funeral, pulling weeds to make the garden look perfect – the same garden that for Mrs. O’Brien and the children is a playground, a place of joy. In the same way, Mr. O’Brien wants his children to behave and be strong. Instead of noticing what is already given he chooses to mold reality to his will. But for some reason, after experiencing the failure of this attempt, he recognizes the glory already present

in the world. After losing his job, Mr. O'Brien realizes his misery over having grounded his life in the idea of success and respect. When Mrs. O'Brien takes his hands in a sign of forgiveness, a gentle breeze blows through the window, as glory seems to appear clearly to Mr. O'Brien: "I wanted to be loved because I was great. A big man. But I'm nothing. Look at the *glory* around us. Trees, and birds. I lived in shame. *I dishonored it all and didn't notice the glory.*"¹⁰

Nothing is superadded: grace is always already in relation to nature. But it requires human freedom to notice it, to notice the work of grace into nature. The result of this work, I believe, is what Malick calls *glory*. I believe glory is not simply a synonym of grace but neither does it supplant the orders. Glory is the shining of the real form of nature, glory is the transfiguration of nature that happens when we recognize and chose the way of grace: with its *roots* in grace, *glory flourishes* in the order of nature.¹¹ In this sense, I say glory is not merely synonymous with grace, but rather the shining of a grace that was always and already present in nature, that which requires human freedom to be recognized and therefore to shine at our eyes. In this sense it is not by eliminating nature that grace can truly shine – as it is not without Mr. O'Brien that peace can reign in the house. Rather, peace can reign everywhere when grace emerges in the realm of nature, when nature itself discovers the grace in its deep essence, as it happens, for example, when Mr. O'Brien allows himself to forgive Jack after being forgiven by his wife. For this reason, I claim glory to be the transfiguration of nature, that is to say, grace is not the negation of nature nor

its dialectical opponent; rather, grace lies deep within nature and its shining is exactly what I consider to be glory.

Grace and nature (in all its harshness) remain: for after acknowledging the glory, Mr. O'Brien falls back into his old routine. While preparing the car for moving out of the house, he is still hard on his sons; he seems to be exactly as he was before. There is therefore no once-for-all fusion of the orders: the transfiguration into glory is no easy thing.¹² This seems to lie already behind two of the most complex aspects of *The Thin Red Line*, expressed by Private Witt's voice over:

One man looks at a dying bird and thinks there's nothing but unanswered pain. That death's got the final word, it's laughing at him. Another man sees that same bird, feels the *glory*, feels something smiling through it.

...

Darkness, light. Strife and love. Are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face? Oh, my soul. Let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. *All things shining...*

Darkness and light: the opposites, as the orders of nature and grace were opposed for the nuns in *The Tree of Life*. They could be seen as different features of the same face, of the same unique soul. But when this soul is brought to look "out at the things," it realizes that nature *shines* ("*all things shining*"). These three words, on which articles and books have been written, are considered to represent Malick's entire production. I agree, but I think they need to be better understood: things are not shining because of the disappearing of darkness and the absolute victory of light, but rather for an elevation of nature

itself: grace operates a transfiguration of nature, it reveals something more *in* it, not *behind*. This ‘more’ always arises in humanity, in pain, in nature. Malick’s transfiguration occurs through man’s acceptance of the value of nature itself, of its innermost mystery. This is what brings together the remaining distance between nature and grace, the war between them at the heart of the world, a distance that is traversed only by a free human decision. Somehow, we could say, glory is the step after grace and nature, a step freely taken.¹³ This can be seen in the final minutes of *The Tree of Life*. The scene, usually considered an image of paradise, ought to be interpreted in a more complex sense, as suggested by two elements.

I) The Eternal Everyday

First, this scene is not the conclusion of the movie. After witnessing the reunion of the O’Briens and of every character in the cosmic history, Jack awakens in the ‘real’ world. He has the same experience as his father, his own awakening to “the glory around us, the trees, the birds.” He descends in an elevator, walks among the trees, sees the sky and seems to smile, noticing the glory, the reflection of the sky in the skyscrapers. In the first draft of the screenplay, instead of “glory” we encounter the word “eternal.”¹⁴ The relation between “glory” and “eternal” seems to follow the Christian idea of the eternal life as a transfiguration of the earthly life itself (and not merely as an opposition), an eternal that we can already taste in this life: “a hundred times as

much in this present age and in the age to come eternal life.”¹⁵ Describing the previous scene of creation, Malick writes:

We have lost the eternal -- within us and without. How did it first come to pass? How does it happen even now, today, in the life of each and all? How shall we recover the eternal which increasingly we seek for, without knowing how we should?¹⁶

“Now, today, in the life of each and all”: this is what Malick wants. Not merely a vision of paradise nor a promise of something to happen, when nature will be destroyed. What has been lost — and what Jack needs to experience — is the glory today, *now*, in the life of each individual being. This is the meaning of the very last scene, Jack’s return to his everyday life.

We return to the present, to the noise and confusion of the everyday, to the place we set out from. We see it now *as though for the first time*. What seemed plain and familiar *glows* with a *radiance* it did not display before. We have found the infinite in the everyday, the commonplace.¹⁷

Malick has never been so clear – not merely in the screenplay, but in the film itself: what is at stake is the transfiguration of the commonplace, not its loss. For this reason we see Jack going back to the place of the “everyday”, the building where he works, and smiling at it. Only when this experience happens does one become able to see what seems familiar with a new radiance — the glory. But just as Mr. O’Brien’s experience of glory, Jack’s requires a new commitment, made each and every day. The screenplay says more than the movie here:

Jack looks about. Will the revelation be forgotten? Will it seem a passing fancy - a dream? *And still the vision is not the journey.* The real journey has yet to begin. Will he give himself to this new life? Does he dare?¹⁸

If we watch the scene carefully, however, we realize that even in the actual movie “the real journey has yet to begin.” As the elevator goes down, the camera moves back from the tree that we saw in the O’Brien’s yard. This element of “returning to the present” is followed by Jack’s smile that we see for the first time in his adult life. Immediately after this we see a bridge, that I take to symbolize the reached unity of nature and grace which, not being an automatic process, is a threshold that requires human initiative. This is suggested also by the three images with which the first draft ends: a stranger smiling, a threshold, a star (what, in the final movie, could become the orange light).¹⁹ The star was present in the scene of creation, in the same draft described as “a promise of that which here [in the city] is but a legend.”²⁰ It is the promise of the eternal, what so often goes forgotten in the everyday life. The stranger’s smile seems to represent the introduction of the promise of a new order into the everyday life, something unexpected and “unfamiliar.” The star is not anymore a promise far away; it becomes concrete, it takes a human form. Between these two images, between the promise and the realization, there is always a threshold, a door – in the final movie, a bridge: man’s free move, a personal decision needing to be made. Will man give himself to the new life of glory? Will he make the eternal present?

II) The Depth of the Individual Soul

A second sign that the scene is not a simple vision of paradise is once again suggested by the first draft of the screenplay, but clear also in the final movie. In the draft Malick describes the mentioned scene in this way:

We have traveled up to the river of time – ascended, from nature to the soul. Paradise is not a place here or there. The soul is paradise; it opens before us; here, today. The humblest things show it. We live in the eternal, even now.²¹

The scene is not simply a description of paradise: it is the depth of the individual soul, of the individual existence. It is not simply a moment “after” life, but a possibility given in every moment of life.

We pass beyond death. We arrive at the eternal, the real - at that which neither flowers nor fades, which neither comes into being nor passes away.²²

The moment of glory is not a superimposed moment of joy, something that man can find by annihilating nature. It is, on the contrary, precisely a new world *in* the world, a new depth of the soul. Once again, at stake is not a universal, abstract unity, but the individual soul, the particular man. Behind this idea of the depth of the soul lies in my opinion the movement from *The Tree of Life* to the latest trilogy (*To the Wonder*, *Knight of Cups*, *Song to Song*). To be clear, I do not suggest this movement as a discontinuity; on the contrary, I suggest reading *The Tree of Life* as a threshold that already contains the fullness of the concept of glory which, in the following movies, Malick will consider in its various possibilities.²³ If in *The Tree of Life* for the first time we are asked to

think in terms of nature and grace as general order of reality, the aforementioned final scene seems to offer the passage toward the drama of the individual soul. This drama will be the focus of his last three movies, and in particular *Song to Song*, as I will now show.

3. The Story of a Soul: *Song to Song*

We described glory in *The Tree of Life* through Mr. O'Brien's reconciliation with his son. I believe this example to suggest a reflection on one of the possible declinations of glory: forgiveness. If we quickly look back at the aforementioned scene of Mr. O'Brien "not seeing the glory" we notice that immediately after this scene we see him admitting to Jack that he has been too hard on him and embracing him. This experience could be seen as flowing directly from the embrace that Mrs. O'Brien gave to her husband when he had lost his job. In the same way, Jack's ability to forgive his father in the aforementioned scene of the car seems to come from his experience of being forgiven by his brother RL after he shot his finger in the woods. The other exemplar scene presented is the final scene on the beach. This, too, is full of "fruits" of the glory in the shape of forgiveness: Mrs. O'Brien kissing her husband, Jack touching his father's shoulder.

I believe this experience of forgiveness to become the central point of Malick's latest movie, *Song to Song*. Without any discontinuity, what in *The Tree of Life* is suggested to be one fruit of glory is the central point of an entire relationship in *Song to Song*. Furthermore, *Song to Song* helps us to understand

better what it means that the order of glory is a transfiguration of the order of nature. Before this, I will explain why I consider *Song to Song* to be the history of not a “cosmic” soul, but an individual one.

Song to Song is apparently a love story or, better, a story of many love twists. Faye, who wants to be a musician, begins a relation with Cook, a producer that should help her with her career. Their love is violent from the very first scene: a door (once again, the threshold of man’s freedom) is open, she moves in a room where Cook is waiting for her. We hear her voice: “I went through a period when sex had to be violent. I was desperate to feel something real.... nothing felt real. Every kiss felt like half of that it should be.” The scenes are fragmented, scattered, as confused as her experiences. “I wanted experience. I told myself: any experience is better than no experience. I wanted to live... sing my song.” Behind this confusion lies a deep lust for authenticity. Faye is not naïve, she does not pose her hope in Cook, in such a violent love; she desperately seeks her own song. But we never see her playing in these first scenes. She wants to sing her song, but she ends up only listening to fragments of someone else’s songs. From the very beginning of the movie Faye is, I believe, the clear image of the human soul, of the quest for truly being oneself, to sing one’s own song.²⁴ For Malick it is in this desire, in this longing, that lies the essence of each soul.²⁵ Looking for her own song, Faye “thought that we could just roll and tumble.” This does not happen only with Cook: Faye meets BV, a musician who also wants Cook’s help, and she starts a relationship with him too. Describing this relation, Faye speaks of jumping “from song to song,

from kiss to kiss.” Their relationship, however, is not as aggressive as that with Cook. It is still voracious and has some aspects of violence, but remains what seems like a more genuine love.

Faye is, in my opinion, one of the most complex and human characters of Malick’s production. She is not anymore an archetype of one feature of the human being: she contains them all. She is not Malick’s typical woman, angelic and graceful, twisting in the air. Rather, her movements are heavy, her soul stretched between two different feelings: her desire of self-affirmation and success (that brings her to Cook) and the clear unhappiness in the relationship with him that makes her strive for more. “I didn’t believe enough in love. Afraid it’d burn me up. I wanted to escape from every tie. Every hold. To have life at any price. To not settle. Go up. Higher. Free.” Faye lives the temptation of every soul: the idea of being totally free of limits and rules, the temptation of autonomy. This illusion of an absolute freedom goes together with an underlying sadness that Malick shows us in the long sequences on her face every time she is going to see Cook. Even when she clearly recognizes that Cook is not bringing her anywhere, even when she glimpses the beauty of the love of BV, she goes back to Cook. “I love pain. It feels like life. Sometimes I admire what a hypocrite I am. Strange when you get used to it.” Why? Why does she fall again into something that will not help her, nor give her any joy?

We see here the dramatic character of the modern existence at stake in *Song to Song*: the continuous falling of Faye between Cook and BV, the experience of something “positive” followed by a new fall, a new “negative”

that constitutes the entire film. The first half of the movie is a twirl of fragmented scenes, of songs that are never played entirely.²⁶ It is the story of a soul that, despite the desire to find itself, ends up discovering more paths and possibilities than expected. Until Faye recognizes something different, when in an hour with BV everything changed: “That was the first time in my life I knew. Everything came from that hour. I wish it could last forever.” That hour is a promise of eternity, exactly as the star in the scene of the creation in *The Tree of Life*. In the scattered modern world, writes Malick in the first draft of *The Tree of Life*,

change seems the only constant in this city; disappearance, loss. Being in a shadow. There is nothing but this endless flux. Nothing eternal, nothing sure... Physical life in a world abandoned by the spirit. Organized unreality. The soul a hindrance in one’s dealing here. A burden. A mere quantity of thoughts and desires... All await a *new Creation*. None know how to bring it forth.²⁷

These lines, written to describe the universe, can be read in light of *Song to Song* as the description of the fragmented existence of the soul. Faye recognizes that an hour with BV is “a new Creation” from which “everything came.” She wishes it could last forever, but finds herself dragged in the endless flux of desires. That hour is the promise of a new Creation, but no one, not even BV yet, knows how to bring it forth. It is interesting that behind this movement from song to song, from kiss to kiss, lies the title that Malick originally considered for the movie: “Weightless.” The idea comes from Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*. Here, one of the characters wonders how to go on “without a self,

weightless and visionless, through a world weightless, without illusion.”²⁸ Caryn James writes of this that “like Malick’s recent work, *The Waves* is more lyrical than narrative. Substitute voiceovers for literary monologues, and you have an exact model of a Malick film. And like *Song to Song*, Woolf’s novel raises the open-ended question of whether the fragments of a life can ever coalesce into a whole.”²⁹ Where does this weightlessness come from? What makes the modern life, the life of every soul, so dramatic?

I believe the character of Cook to be a fundamental key to understanding this struggle. He is more an archetype than a singular person, as suggested by the fact that to build his character, Malick did not provide the actor with a script, but asked him to read a book, specifically, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.³⁰ Cook clearly has some diabolic features that emerge in many scenes – even Faye once calls him “devil.” After Faye’s first meeting with BV, Cook tells her that BV does not love her, that the only thing about which BV cares is his own freedom – the same freedom that Faye was looking for. “He leaves us alone this way. Because he wants us to be free. All his life, he’s tried to get free. He doesn’t know how. You aren’t who you think you are. He doesn’t love you. I like you this way.” Cook seems to suffocate Faye’s desire for BV, not simply by telling her that BV does not love her, but also by saying that he does not really know her, and that only with him, Cook, can she be truly herself, free of any bound.³¹ Behind the drama lies a genuine desire of the soul, that of finding oneself, a quest that soon becomes the illusion of self-affirmation.

Another important aspect to Cook's role is that he also seduces and corrupts Rhonda, ultimately bringing her to self-annihilation. Emblematic is the scene when, feeding her with honey, he murmurs: "Gives you life. Eat it. Try it. This is dipped in God. They've never been where we've been. Open your eyes. Right here you know. You won't die. Here I reign." These words contain a clear reference to Satan's words in Genesis 3: "You will not certainly die. For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." The opening of the eyes to real knowledge mirrors the promise that Cook makes to Faye of giving her musical fame – at the price of the corruption of her soul, of her seeing herself naked, limited, full of mistakes. The words "Here I reign" also remind us of Milton's "better to reign in hell than serve in Heaven." Indeed, Faye describes Cook as a master, and not entirely in negative terms – as happens in *Paradise Lost*, where Satan appears full of all the (apparently) positive values of modern man: "He did everything. He exhausted every poison. He knew every form of love, suffering, madness. So that he could reach the unknown. He experimented."

These elements reveal that Cook is not simply a "negative" character: he is desirable because he promises to give to Rhonda, to Faye, and to BV something that they sincerely want - freedom. He offers them the chance to sing their own song. To Rhonda he gives a house for her mother, to Faye a contract, to BV an album and the promise of success. This happens, however, always at the price of a corrupted bond: an open marriage for Rhonda, a tricky contract for BV, an unhealthy sexual relation for Faye. The reason behind the dramatic

life of the soul is precisely because the soul desires authentic freedom, but is lured by deviations containing the false promise of fulfilment. Cook offers to each character something that appears to be good, but he does it always in exchange for a bond that gives him power and deprives them of their real freedom. Cook's power is not the transfiguration of nature but, on the contrary, its enslavement: no one, with him, discovers anything more about himself, but always becomes something less. The struggle in Faye's life is therefore due to the choice between a (promised) power given by a freedom that becomes enslavement, or the abyss of the true love of BV that, in its gratuity, seems to bring "nothing" but beauty. This contrast appears when Cook speaks of Faye and BV: "they have a beauty in their life... that makes me ugly." The beauty of the relation between Faye and BV is the inverse of Cook's life. The absence of domination between BV and Faye somehow makes Cook ugly, and less desirable.

4. Following the Path of Glory: the Event of Forgiveness

While being with Cook, Faye suddenly —without any apparent reason—starts wishing for something different. She starts to make a decision: "I love him. I don't want to do this anymore. I want out." After a long on and off, Faye confesses to BV about her affair with Cook. "I'm low. I like the mud. I don't deserve you. I'm a beast. I don't seem to bring happiness to people anymore." BV suffers, and the two break up — but exactly in this break, Faye seems to realize what she truly needs: "I wasted your love. I was wrong. Will

you forgive me?" After the break up, they both begin relationships with other people, however these seem to occur without significantly affecting either of them. In this whirlwind of relations, the element that I believe can answer our question emerges in one of the most powerful monologues of the movie: that of Faye. "I forget what I am. Whose I am. You're so far off. I'll die if you don't come soon." I argue that her monologue is actually a dialogue with the remote beloved. In other words, what seems to be taking place is the staging of the biblical book of the *Song of Songs*, a dialogue between a waiting bride and her beloved who is far away. Without any trite comparison of the whole movie with the *Song of Songs* (that the title itself resembles it so closely seems to make it too easy to be true), I believe that the moment of Faye's acknowledgment of her wish for BV to return mirrors the desire of the lover's soul to be visited again by the beloved, as in *Song of Songs*. Like Faye ("I don't deserve you"), the bride in the *Song of Songs* does not feel worthy of the groom's love: "Do not stare at me because I am dark."³² Faye suffers; everything around her seems to be an empty, betrayed promise: "I don't like to see the birds and the sky. Because you've seen them with me." The flourishing of nature now becomes a constant source of suffering, the memory of what could be possible again only if BV could be back. The groom, coming back, will bring the spring after the long winter where the lover was alone, waiting for the beloved. It is only with him that the spring can give again its gift: "See! The winter is past. Flowers appear on the earth, the season of singing has come."³³ Faye, in the winter of her heart, wishes BV to come, to bring her away with him, back to her spring: "I had to

find my way out to you. To life.” Hers is not a titanic effort to win back his love after the betrayal — she does nothing, she simply recognizes what she truly needs and invokes it. “Come save me from my bad heart,” says Faye. “Take me away with you — let us hurry!,”³⁴ says the bride of the *Song of Songs*.

Soon after this invocation, we hear BV: “I don’t know how to change. I want to.... How do you? How do you get better?” A voice answers: “Gotta sacrifice something.” Here lies the last step that guides us towards Malick’s answer. BV, despite the anger, recognizes that something is wrong in him, he needs to change — and indeed the way to change lies in a sacrifice, the sacrifice of his own anger. Malick does not have this sacrifice occur in BV’s relationship with Faye, but in his relation to his father. We know from the first part of the movie, in a dialogue between BV and his brother, that the relation is troubled:

Brother: Do you think about forgiving him?

BV: No, I don’t.

Brother: You pray for him?

BV: Not anymore.

Exactly as with Faye, something probably broke the bond of trust and BV does not even think about forgiving his father. Now, however, BV does it: he sacrifices his pride and goes to his father to forgive him. Soon, Malick will show us for the second time a scene from the beginning, a song played at the piano soon after the aforementioned dialogue with the brother. After saying to

Faye that he wanted “all that pain to be for something. Turn it into something,” he plays his song: “Take your burden to the lord and leave it there.” While we see him crying in his father’s home, BV seems to have finally left his burden, daring to take the great step of forgiveness — a totally unexpected, freely-given forgiveness. The gratuity of forgiveness, one of the way of glory, is the real change and transfiguration of nature. Soon after that scene, in fact, we are brought back to Faye, and we realize that BV does indeed go back to her, as he did with his father. No explicit scene shows us the moment when this happens. Malick once again uses an indirect way: he shows us when BV and Faye first meet, at Cook’s party, and scenes from their first days together. Why? The answer lies deep in the event of forgiveness as an example of the transfiguration of nature operated by glory.

With BV’s forgiveness, everything can start anew, fresh. The burden is laid down, there is no on-off anymore, no chasing, no violence. Only mercy, forgiveness, can make things new and eternal. We remember Father Quintana’s homily in *To the Wonder*: “To love is to run the risk of failure, the risk of betrayal. You fear your love has died; perhaps it is waiting to be transformed into something higher.” BV takes the risk, he goes back to his father, and back to Faye, running the risk of being betrayed, but gaining the transformation of his love into something higher. This does not erase the suffering that was, neither in BV nor in Faye: “I wish I could take back every wound, every doubt.” We see scenes of nature, a great absence in the first half of the movie; it is a quiet nature, but full of fog. Faye recognizes her wounds: “I took sex, a gift; I

played with it, I played with the flame of life.” Soon after, Patti Smith sings, partially quoting Blake's poem *The Divine Image* : “one road was paved in gold, one road was just a road. (...) Mercy has a human heart.”³⁵ Faye reads on the poem after her: “For Mercy has a human heart; Pity, a human face.”³⁶ This line seems to contain my thesis of *Song to Song* as a movie on the experience of the individual soul, who experiences the human face of glory through the most human and yet supernatural possibility, that of forgiveness. Faye walked down the fake, golden path of Cook, but on the simple road she met the human face of mercy: BV's forgiveness. “You found me. You held out your hand,” she says. As the groom in the *Song of Songs*, BV came back and knocked at her door, coming in again in her life. “It was like a new paradise. Forgiveness.”

Here lies, I believe, the answer to our question. Glory, the transfiguration of nature, generates a new eternal paradise that has in *Song to Song* the shape of forgiveness. The change is not only in Faye, but also BV himself is deeply changed: “I gotta go back and start over. Like a kid. I didn't have the right heart in me.... You're the only one I love. Even after all we've been through.” On the path of forgiveness, his heart changes and moves him to start over, as we see in the decision to go back to a quiet life, to stay closer to his father, and in his question to Faye to follow him. “You asked me if I wanna come,” we hear Faye saying. We knew that his previous relation, with the singer Lykke, failed because he never asked her to follow him (“I would give it all up, if you'd ask me. But you never do, you know?”). But now that his heart has changed he asks Faye to follow him, and she accepts. The entire relation is transfigured in the

heavy light of glory, as Faye recognizes: “Mercy was a word. I didn’t think I needed it as much as other people do. You asked me if I wanted to come out, too. I’ll come find you.” The last scene is a desert, the same desert that Faye and BV were wandering in the first half of the movie. Now, however, the desert is full of trees. We see water, a pond that they do not simply jump into, rather, BV gently touches Faye with hands full of water, as she lets herself be cleaned, redeemed, forgiven. They simply hug, without violence, without playing, and the movie ends.

Conclusion

I believe the category of forgiveness to already be at play in *The Tree of Life* as a manifestation of glory, and *Song to Song* shows a clear example of how glory operates exactly through the specific example of forgiveness. Jack and Mrs. O’Brien’s question to God, stated at the very beginning of *The Tree of Life*, seems to come back in the life of Faye, although in a different form. Why does she go back to Cook despite loving BV? Why do love and beauty seem to be so easily forgotten? Or, with the words of the sermon of the O’Brien’s priest in *The Tree of Life*, “is there nothing that is deathless, nothing which does not pass away?” When these words are spoken, the camera points to the window of the church representing Jesus’s trial. An innocent and gratuitous suffering seems to be pointed as an answer. Where do we see this in the life of the O’Briens? And where in Faye’s experience?

If we go back to the reconciliation scene in *The Tree of Life* we can remember that, from Mrs. O'Brien's hug to her husband, forgiveness flows also to and from Jack, who also changes in the relation with his father. A useful suggestion is given by the first draft of the script:

He hugs his father close. He has learned to love and be loved. In forgiving, he receives forgiveness too. Forgiveness has given him the key to reality. He sees it now: love is the answer to evil and sorrow. He will love every leaf and every stone, every ray of light! This is the way to the lost kingdom. This is what life will be: drawing closer and closer to the eternal.³⁷

What does it mean that forgiveness is the key to the lost kingdom, to the eternal? As I have shown in the relationship between BV and Faye, forgiveness is one way in which glory shows itself in human relationships. In this sense, it is not only a consequence of glory, but a path to it. Through forgiveness Malick's characters are able to find the peace given by glory, and at the same time demonstrate that it is the shining of glory itself that opens up the possibility of forgiving. The final scene of *The Tree of Life* shows clearly the reached peace, that same peace yearned for by the soul of the protagonist of *Song to Song*. It is not, we said, a trite representation of paradise: it is the transfiguration of the entire world, seen in the shining light of glory. Glory is a step both *beyond* nature and grace, and indeed deeper *into* nature and grace. In the aforementioned scene we see in fact the mother forgiving God, in her giving Him her son.³⁸ The same can be seen in Jack's having to forgive God, and we understand he does this by the relieved expression of his face in the very end of the movie. Even more, after Jack shoots RL, we see Jack's attempt to somehow

repair the evil committed: “You can hit me with this if you want.” But RL does not answer through the way of nature, rather with a completely gratuitous act of forgiveness, laying his hand on Jack’s shoulder. In this sense we can say that forgiveness was already a key element in *The Tree of Life*. Forgiveness might not be the only path from and to glory, but is one that Malick explores in *The Tree of Life* and develops even further in *Song to Song*.

In the innocent and gratuitous suffering of Christ indicated during the priest’s question in *The Tree of Life*, and in Mrs. O’Brien’s ceaseless love for her husband, we have an “answer” proposed to the question of how to achieve the eternal in this life. So also in BV’s apparently sudden and gratuitous return to his father who (we suppose) hurt him and to Faye who betrayed him.³⁹ Malick seems to suggest to us that only forgiveness can draw closer to the eternal, that only the gratuity hidden in sacrifice and, even deeper, in love, can open up reality to something more lasting than any other possible answer. If we follow the suggestion of Cook as a diabolic character, it is easy to see BV’s return as an act of gratuitous mercy towards Faye. Even more, we can see an aspect of sacrifice that mirrors the many acts of forgiveness hinted in *The Tree of Life* as related to Christ’s redemptive sacrifice depicted in the church’s window. This sacrifice is the human aspect of glory, the necessary and yet completely free human decision. In this sense eternity is not opened without the contribution of human nature – on the contrary, it needs the effort of man’s freedom. This human freedom is symbolized by the door that Jack finds in the desert in *The Tree of Life*, and by the many doors that Faye walks through in *Song to Song*.

Freely stepping through this door is the beginning of the eternal, of a new birth: in *The Tree of Life* we see a short image of the creation when Jack steps through the door. In the same way, while we see BV knocking at Faye's door we hear her: "It was like a new paradise. Forgiveness." The free and gratuitous step of human freedom is the beginning of a new creation. In this sense we can say that forgiveness draws us closer to the eternal: it reveals to be one occasion to see glory at work in life, transfiguring nature in a new creation. As the groom in the *Song of Songs* brings spring, the renewal of nature, to the bride, so does BV with Faye's whole life. Just as we are back to Jack's everyday reality after the scene of forgiveness, so also in *Song to Song* Faye and BV start their life once again, together.⁴⁰

Malick is not naïve: BV's coming back is an act of sacrifice and therefore, always, a risk, because it requires as we said an act of freedom. In the aforementioned scene of the car, Jack also realizes that glory is not once gained, forever had. As the first draft says, Mr. O'Brien seems to be "back at his old ways, tormenting them with scoldings and arbitrary orders. Has he forgotten his great revelation? Jack's nerves are taut. *It seems forgiveness must be an ongoing business.*"⁴¹ The order of glory is not *simply there* once and forever, as nature and grace are; it is rather an ongoing business. For glory to shine our constant decision is necessary, an unceasing beginning, the always-new free decision to walk the ways that glory opens and that, at the same time, leads us to glory. The same idea of eternal beginning is present in the first draft of the *The Tree of Life* in its cosmic form: "We see the creation, not as an event in the distant past, the

result of a finished and forgotten act, but rather as something which happens in every moment of time: no less a miracle now, this present hour, than it was in the beginning.”⁴² As always in Malick’s movies, the level of the universal mirrors that of the individual soul:

Creation is eternal birth. A beginning without end. It happens in every instant of time. The same power which burns in the stars burns equally in us. Our being is a miracle, equal with creation of the universe, and like the universe, each day is created anew.⁴³

Each day is created anew: after the event of forgiveness, every day in the life of Faye and BV is new, a new Creation, and everything is transfigured. Interestingly, even the medium itself is transfigured: the scenes, we said, become longer and quiet, not scattered anymore. We can notice that the harmony and linearity typical of Malick’s style are back, regained on a new level. It is a new order, reached by a soul that passed through the evil, through the heavy burden of weightlessness and that found home again in forgiveness.

Following an inspiration given by *The Tree of Life*’s production designer, Jack Fisk, we could almost say that in *Song to Song* Malick develops what in *The Tree of Life* was opened as one of the many possibilities: “I think that by completing this long-planned and personal film [*The Tree of Life*], Terry has passed through a gate. It has opened up the possibility of a new and experimental work – his post-*Tree* period.”⁴⁴ *Song to Song* is one realization of this possibility, the result of passing the gate. This aligns with the common interpretation of *The Tree of Life* as the movie where Malick opens the “liminal arrival to the possibility of God.”⁴⁵ If *The Tree of Life* is an open door to God,

Song to Song is the discovery of the individual human experience of the divine category of mercy. If *The Tree of Life* poses the cosmic question, *Song to Song* gives the dramatic, human answer. Consequently, the new order of glory operates the transfiguration of a soul that wanted to live and that, after moving from song to song, finally finds herself in one song. A song played by an Other that invites her to follow, to which she simply needs to say her ‘yes’ — just as the lover who yearns in the *Song of Songs* simply needs to follow the beloved. A beloved who sings sitting next to her at the piano. “Slower. It’s a love song.”

¹ So reports one of his fellows, Rhodes Scholar Jonathan D. Culler. Melanie Y. Fu, *Terrence F. Malick ‘65: A Nontraditional Start to Filmmaking*, in *The Harvard Crimson*, 1965 Reunion Issue (2015). Much has been written about Malick’s relation to Heidegger. A few remarkable examples are: Robert Sinnerbrink, “A Heideggerian Cinema? On Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*”, *Film-Philosophy*, v. 10, n. 3, (2006): 26-37; Marc Furstenau and Leslie MacAvoy, “Terrence Malick’s Heideggerian Cinema: War and the Question of Being in *The Thin Red Line*,” in Hannah Patterson, ed., *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, 2nd edition (London: Wallflower Press, 2007): 179-191; Martin Woessner, “What Is Heideggerian Cinema? Film, Philosophy, and Cultural Mobility”, in *New German Critique* 38, no. 2 (113) (August 1, 2011): 129–57.

² The event was a meeting of the Council for Philosophical Studies, devoted to the teaching of philosophy in the American academy, event sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Council for Philosophical Studies, *Phenomenology and Existentialism: Continental and Analytic Perspectives on Intentionality in the Philosophy Curriculum* (San Francisco: San Francisco State University, Council for Philosophical Studies, 1981), 4. The event is reported by Martin Woessner in the mentioned “What is Heideggerian Cinema? Film, Philosophy, and Cultural Mobility.”

³ On Malick’s movies as an answer to the question that academic philosophy had left unfulfilled, see Martin Woessner, “Cosmic Cinema: On the Philosophical Films of Terrence Malick,” *Philosophy Today*, online first: June 12, 2017.

⁴ A few recent examples of theological approaches to Terrence Malick are: Christopher Barnett, “Spirit(uality) in the Films of Terrence Malick,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 17, no. 1 (April 1, 2013); Jonathan Beever and Vernon W. Cisney, *The Way of Nature and the Way of Grace: Philosophical Footholds on Terrence Malick’s The Tree of Life* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016); Peter J. Leithart, *Shining Glory: Theological Reflections on Terrence Malick’s Tree of Life* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013); Bertha Manninen, “The Problem

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⁵ Respectively: Robbie Collin, *The Telegraph*; Peter Travers, *Rolling Stone*; Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*; Steve Rose, *The Guardian*. Some exceptions are however present, as Manohla Dargis for *The New York Times* who considers it "a beautiful puzzle" or Richard Brody for *The New Yorker* who appreciates its "novelistic amplitude" and "breathhtakingly generous, gentle beauty."

⁶ Among the many presentations of this issue, see the mentioned Beever and Cisney, *The Way of Nature and the Way of Grace: Philosophical Footholds on Terrence Malick's The Tree of Life*.

⁷ On this see especially Manninen, "The Problem of Evil and Humans' Relationship with God in Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*."

⁸ Danny Fisher, "The Tree of Life (2011)", *Journal of Religion & Film* 15, no. 2 (August 16, 2012).

⁹ This issue was already addressed in *The Thin Red Line* (1998), in the first voice over of Private Edward P. Train: "What is this war in the heart of nature?"

¹⁰ Malick seems here to recall almost literally a passage from Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. Here Starets Zosima's brother, who had left his faith, comes back to it and claims: "Yes, there was such a glory of God all about me: birds, trees, meadows, sky; only I lived in shame and dishonoured it all and did not notice the beauty and glory." Fëdor M. Dostoevskij, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958), 339-340.

¹¹ I indirectly draw here from the concept of glory shaped by Hans Urs von Balthasar in the first volume of his *Theological Aesthetic*. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord Vol. 1 – Seeing the form* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985).

¹² Even in *The Thin Red Line*, it is clear that the war at the heart of being remains paradoxical: war is an experience that can "poison the soul" but also "reveal the glory."

¹³ I believe Leithart in his *Shining Glory* to assimilate too quickly the order of grace and the category of glory that, as I am trying to show, has a deep relation to the order of nature too.

¹⁴ Terrence Malick, "First Draft of *The Tree of Life*. Writers Guild of America, 25 June 2007, p. 125. The script is available at <https://indiegroundfilms.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/tree-of-life-the-jun-25-07-1st.pdf>.

¹⁵ Gospel of Mark, 10:28-31.

¹⁶ First draft, p. 18.

¹⁷ First draft, p. 125.

¹⁸ First draft, p. 125.

¹⁹ First draft, p. 126.

²⁰ First draft, p. 12.

²¹ First draft, p. 121.

²² First draft, p. 124.

²³ Much could be said with *To the Wonder* and *Knight of Cups* regarding the relationship between grace, glory, and beauty, but also between glory and love. I believe these movies to be examples of the many “paths” of glory.

²⁴ More attention should be given not only to the active use of music in the movies, but to the role that music plays in the stories. Music seems to be always a sign of harmony and of truth: the scene of creation in *The Tree of Life* is described in the screenplay as “a new song.” Similarly, the peace in O’Brien’s house seems to be present when the father plays the piano.

²⁵ The fundamental role of the individual soul for Malick is already evident in the preface of the first draft of the screenplay of *Tree of life*: “The ‘I’ who speaks in this story is not the author. Rather, he hopes that you might see yourself in this ‘I’ and understand this story as your own.” First draft, preface. And again: “The soul: the crown and apex of creation: the self, the center and inside of nature. Great not in space and time, but in capacity, in depth and power of apprehension. Where does it come from? When is it first born? How does it advance? *Towards what?*” First draft, p. 19.

²⁶ In the first draft of *The Tree of Life* the fragmented scenes are described as intentionally illustrating the features of the fragmented human life: “The cutting is quick and staccato, to suggest the fractured quality of modern life.” “The others do not meet his eyes. Each makes his way alone, shut up within himself. None can be sure of the other. No tie is fixed or lasting.” First draft, p. 9.

²⁷ First draft, pp. 9-10.

²⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 238.

²⁹ Caryn James, “Does Terrence Malick’s take on hipster culture work?,” 17 March 2017, bbc.com.

³⁰ Carlos Aguilar “Devilish Charisma: Michael Fassbender on Making Song to Song With Terrence Malick and Emmanuel Lubezki”, interview with Michael Fassbender. *The Moviemaker*, March 22, 2017, moviemaker.com. A lot more could be said about Malick’s use of literature to prepare the actors, an habits that seems to unite the three latest movies.

³¹ The world *diabolic*, from the Greek *dia-ballo*, means indeed to divide, to set apart or at odds.

³² *Song of Songs*, 1, 6.

³³ *Song of Songs*, 2, 11.

³⁴ *Song of Songs*, 1, 4.

³⁵ Patti Smith, “My Blakean Year.”

³⁶ William Blake, “The Divine Image,” in *Songs of innocence and of experience*, reproduction of Blake’s original illustrated book, ed. with introduction and commentary by G. Keynes, Rupert Hart-Davis Ltd., London, in association with The Trianon Press, Paris, 1967, plate 18.

Smith admits to being influenced by Blake's poem:
http://www.pattismith.net/trampin/myblakeanyear_blakepoem.html

³⁷ First draft, pp. 114-115.

³⁸ Another element that support the thesis of glory as the transfiguration of nature is given by the fact that in the first draft it is the father, and not (as in the movie) the mother, who “lays down” his son to God: “Father, I give him my blessing. There’s so much I can’t do, and haven’t done. I give you my son. Bless and keep him.” First draft, p. 114.

³⁹ Once again a parallel can be traced with *Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoevsky, through the character of Ivan, poses the question of suffering and does not propose any philosophical answer, as Malick does not seem to propose a philosophical answer neither to Mrs. O’Brien and Jack’s cry to God concerning the loss of RL, nor to Faye’s continuous falling into Cook’s temptation. The answer that Ivan receives is not dialectical or theoretical, but the kiss of his brother Alyosha.

⁴⁰ This same new beginning marks the last words of *Knight of Cups*: “My son. Remember. Begin.”

⁴¹ First draft, p. 117.

⁴² First draft, p. 15.

⁴³ First draft, p. 120.

⁴⁴ Daniele Villa, *Terrence Malick: Rehearsing the Unexpected* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), 296.

⁴⁵ George Handley, *Faith, sacrifice, and the earth’s glory in Terrence Malick’s The Tree of Life*, *Angelaki*, 19:4, (2014): 79-93, 89.

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