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I LOVE, THEREFORE, I AM: *To the Wonder as Existential Apologetic*

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Terrence Malick may turn out to be the closest thing to a cinematic apologist Hollywood ever produces. His two most recent films, 2011's *The Tree of Life* and 2012's *To The Wonder* explicitly explore Christian theology. The films' dialogue constantly alludes to Scripture as well as important Christian thinkers such as Augustine, Thomas à Kempis, Dostoyevsky, and Kierkegaard. It is hard to know for sure if Malick is a Christian because he doesn't do interviews and stays completely out of the public eye. I suspect he wants his films to stand on their own.

A PRE-CHRISTIAN POINT OF VIEW

Malick's films are difficult. His style is often described as "abstract," "elliptical," and "impressionistic." He seems to want his films to operate on an unconscious level. They don't present arguments so much as invite viewers to try on a perspective. Insofar as the perspective they present is consonant with a Christian worldview, Malick's films can be seen as a kind of "cinematic apologetics."

Yet, as apologetics, these films aim more for existential transformation than for rational belief. For example, *The Tree of Life* is a theodicy. But on my reading, his answer to the problem of evil—much like God's speech from the whirlwind in Job 38–41—is not to explain God's reason for permitting suffering, but to portray the presence of God in the beauty and mystery of creation in such a way that faith in God is sustained even in times of suffering. Likewise, *To The Wonder* wants to make unbelievers feel the lack of God so that we might leap into God's arms and be born again. The point of view Malick is presenting here could be called "pre-Christian" in the sense that it is a necessary stage on the journey toward faith. Unbelievers must first realize their *need* for God. Only then can they turn toward God for salvation.

On the other hand, while Malick might not go as far as making a rational argument aimed at the viewer's conscious understanding, I think his films certainly contain enough material to make them useful to more traditional apologists who do wish to engage viewers in explicit conversation about the rationality of religious belief.

The challenge to this approach, however, is that Malick's films are so formally difficult that most people have a hard time getting much out of them. For example, *To The Wonder* has neither plot nor dialogue. Practically nothing happens in the film, and the main characters are never given names. The story is simply this: an American man falls in love with a French woman. After initially refusing to commit to her, they get married, but the marriage fails, and she returns to France. What's more, the characters almost never talk to each other on screen. Most of the film's words are the inner thoughts of the characters expressed in whispered voice-over.

To The Wonder is a tough movie for the average viewer to watch, to say the least. But, along with *The Tree of Life*, it is a major work of art and also one of the most deeply Christian films ever made. My goal in this article is to open up *To the Wonder* and make it more usable for apologetics.

CLIMBING THE LADDER OF LOVE

To The Wonder is a movie about love. It deals with all types of love: friendship, romance, marriage, family, charity, and love of God. It is no accident that there are three sex scenes in the film, covering all varieties of erotic love. One scene is premarital, one is marital, and one is adulterous.¹ Likewise, what's the point of giving a main character a daughter if not to introduce the idea of parental love? Malick is systematically depicting all forms of love and revealing them all to be temporary and unsustainable apart from God.

The film is a meditation on "the ladder of love," a metaphor first used in the *Symposium* where Plato describes a gradual ascent from erotic love toward knowledge of the divine, an idea that greatly influenced Christian Platonists such as Augustine. In the medieval era, the ladder image became a symbolic representation of the process of sanctification by which we ascend toward God in Christlikeness by learning to love as Christ loved.

Malick draws on this Platonic tradition, using the sun as a symbol for God and the Earth as a symbol for that which separates us from God. In all his films since 2005's *The New World*, Malick repeatedly points his camera directly into the sun as its light peeks through tree branches. With upward-sweeping camera movements he draws our vision toward the sky and visually embodies the characters' yearning for the eternal. At the same time, earthbound images, especially of flowing water, represent the unceasing change of the temporal world.

THE WONDER OF IT ALL

The title of *To The Wonder* refers to the abbey at Mont-Saint-Michel on the coast of Normandy, which the French refer to as "the Wonder of the West." In an early scene, the main characters visit this Christian pilgrimage site as tourists, a journey the woman describes as "climbing to The Wonder." But what makes Mont-Saint-Michel so special is that it is on a strip of land that becomes an island at high tide. The setting encapsulates the film's premise of life as an ascent toward God as well as the ebb and flow of the soul's relationship with God. Just as The Wonder is an island that is often inaccessible

to those of us who dwell on earth, so the path to the eternal is often obscured by the waters of time and change.

Throughout the film, Malick asks us to reflect on the fact that the feeling of love doesn't last. We all know that romance is fickle, so it is no surprise that the film's young lovers fall out of love as the film proceeds, but Malick draws our attention to the fact that a Christian's feeling of love for God doesn't last either. The film's third main character, a Roman Catholic priest, is depicted as an obedient servant of Christ, but he also struggles with feelings of loneliness and the absence of God.

In one of Malick's many allusions to nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, the priest points out in a sermon that we are *commanded* to love (Matt. 22:27–40). We cannot command our feelings, the priest argues, so love must be a choice.² Yet, for Kierkegaard, the choice to love is different than other choices. What we love determines the entire shape of our lives; it determines who we are and thus shapes all our other choices. Kierkegaard's way of putting this is to say that love is an *infinite* commitment to something whose value cannot be compared to anything else. And, as infinite, such a commitment can never be completed in time.³ The choice must be constantly made anew in each moment.

Thus, Kierkegaard concludes that one's "self," or personal identity, is in a constant state of flux. The only thing that can bring stability to one's identity is to ground it in something outside of the self that doesn't change. And, since the only entity that never changes is God, this means that love of God is the only thing that can form a stable basis for one's identity. Conversely, when we get our identity from loving anything other than God, we will inevitably suffer the despair of losing our love.

A BORN-AGAIN LOVER

Let me illustrate my thesis about the relationship between love and personal identity with a close reading of two scenes from the film. This exercise will also, hopefully, demonstrate the interpretive process by which a viewer might approach Malick's films.

Over a black screen, we hear the film's very first lines. A woman's voice says, "Newborn, I open my eyes." This is Malick's characteristic whispered voice-over in which we hear the characters' innermost thoughts. Then, in the first images of the film, we see home video footage. This is the only scene in *any* Terrence Malick film shot with a home video camera. He is intentionally drawing our attention to the fact that this image is mediated; it is someone's point of view. But the footage cannot be the point of view of the woman whose thoughts we are hearing, because it is footage of *her*. It is not what she sees when she "opens her eyes." Rather, we are seeing what her *boyfriend* sees when he looks through his camera at her.

So we have a complex point of view going on here. We are hearing one character's thoughts while looking through the eyes of a different character. What seems to be going on here is an exploration of subjectivity: the way we construct our sense of who we are. Malick is suggesting that the woman has defined herself as an object of the man's gaze. This is not strictly a feminist point. Following Kierkegaard,

Malick seems to think we *all* define ourselves in relation to those whom we love. We get our identity from what we love.

Ultimately, the man cannot return her love. He cannot provide a stable center for her to ground herself. Part of the problem, of course, is that he cannot commit to her. But the real problem is that he, too, is an ever-changing temporal being who needs his own source of stability.

REFLECTIONS OF CHRIST

One image of stability is found early in the film when the couple visits the Cluny Museum in Paris where they see the famous medieval tapestry of “The Lady and the Unicorn,” an allegory of the Virgin Mary and Christ. “What is she dreaming of?” the woman wonders. “How calm she is” —in contrast to the woman, who has been flitting around Paris like a butterfly with her boyfriend. “In love. Forever at peace.” A key part of the image is a mirror that the Lady holds, theologically positioning Mary as reflection of Christ. This point about reflection anticipates a long prayer by the priest late in the film.

At the climax of the film, we see a sequence depicting the priest’s acts of charity among the poor, sick, and imprisoned people of his parish. Over these images we hear him reciting the famous prayer of St. Patrick, “Christ with me. Christ before me. Christ behind me.” Here Malick is suggesting that the only stable object of love is Christ in others. The priest concludes his prayer: “Flood our souls with your spirit and life so completely that our lives may only be a reflection of yours.” Malick’s suggestion here is that the only true love is the Spirit of God loving through us.

I am nothing apart from Christ, and you are nothing apart from Christ, so the only way we can really love each other is *in Christ*. In other words, love is only sustainable if the lovers are journeying together “to the wonder.” As Kierkegaard puts it, “Worldly wisdom is of the opinion that love is a relationship between persons; Christianity teaches that love is a relationship between: a person–God–a person, that is, that God is the middle term.”⁴

THE LOVE THAT LOVES US

But can we really find rest in loving others in God? *To The Wonder* is about the search for a stable object of love. The film reveals true love as an infinite commitment to God. So no finite creature can ever be “finished” choosing to love God. We will always face new choices, and so we will always face the possibility of failing to love God as we ought. So does this mean that our love is not ultimately stable after all? Isn’t our identity only as stable as our fallible ability to choose God?

Fear not, says Malick, for love never fails us. As the woman puts it in the final scenes of the film, God is the “love that loves us.” It is not ultimately our love that grounds our identity but God’s love of us. We are caught up in the love that loves us beyond our control and beyond our deserving. Love is always ready to take us back if we choose again. As the priest says, “To choose is to commit yourself, and to commit

yourself is to run the risk of failure, the risk of sin, the risk of betrayal. But Jesus can deal with all of those. Forgiveness, He never denies us.”

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NOTES

- 1 Be warned. *To The Wonder* is certainly not pornographic—the sex scenes are very mild by Hollywood’s standards—but the first two sex scenes do contain glimpses of nudity.
- 2 Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 29.
- 3 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 30.
- 4 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 106–7.