

**Tell Us a Story from Before We Can Remember:
Gnostic Reflections on Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life***

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The Dutch Gnostic scholar, Gilles Quispel, describes the history of [01] Western Spirit as being composed of three primary strands: the tradition of Reason associated with Athens, the tradition of Faith associated with Jerusalem, and a Pansophic (or Perennial Wisdom) tradition associated with Alexandria. This Wisdom tradition rightly appears third here, both in its pertinence to our common expression *tertium non datur*, i.e., “the third thing not known” and given the tradition’s lineage from the Pre-Socratic philosophers, through Jewish apocalyptic, to Gnosticism, alchemy, Renaissance hermetism, Goethe, William Blake, and on to C.G. Jung.

Exponents of this tradition were soulful visionaries who generally knew their Cabbala, were astrologically adept, and whose purview was born of and intent upon immediate experience of psyche and the spiritual world. While crucial to us, Reason and Faith tend to separate or abstract things, while the Wisdom tradition is holistic, intuitive, imaginal, and attuned to revelations from the “in-between” space over which the goddess of Wisdom, Sophia, presides. The biblical Sophia reveals herself as “Wisdom” in a third, sadly neglected, creation narrative (Genesis has two of them) in Proverbs 8:23: “Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. [...] when he had not made earth and fields, or the worlds first bits of soil.” The celestial soprano voice you will hear shortly might well have commenced her song right there.

Quispel affirms the Gnostic conviction that the fundamental purpose for the creation of this world was the necessity for the Spirit to pass through sensual and moral experiences for the sake its own education. Birger A Pearson observes furthermore that

One of the chief characteristics of Gnosticism is *mythopoeia*, the construction of elaborate myths through which revealed gnosis is transmitted. [T]he Gnostics put forth in story form their insights into the human predicament and the means of salvation. Mythopoeia was

an ongoing activity of many Gnostic teachers, who recorded and elaborated their mythology in revelatory literature (apocalypses, revelation dialogues, etc.). The main themes of Gnosticism are *theosophy*, elaborating on the transcendent God and the divine world; *cosmology*, how the world came into being; *anthropology*, involving the origin and imprisonment of human beings; and *soteriology*, how the human self can be saved.” (Pearson, Birger. *Ancient Gnosticism*, pg. 14)

Today, 13.7 billion years after the Big Bang, 4.6 billion years after the Sun first flared and Earth emerged from its luminous proto-planetary disc, and 3.5 billion years since life first stirred along our young planet’s restless [02] shores, it is accordingly a privilege to share with you some personal reflections on Malick’s *The Tree of Life*,” a unique and deeply reverential work of art by a cinematic genius rightly considered in relation to the Pansophic tradition. [Comment: “Aphrodite’s Green Moon”] It was Pearson’s words on Gnostic *mythopoeia* as “revelatory literature” “in story form” that prompted the final subtitle for this talk: **“Tell Us a Story from Before We Can Remember,”** this the beguilingly simple request of one of the three brothers in the film to their enchanting mother on a lazy summer afternoon.

Let this appeal to the child in you, for yes, “Gnosticism” with that capital “G” always sounds so lofty and is rooted in so complicated a syncretism of Jewish mysticism, Isis lore, Platonic influence, and early Christian developments, that I am quick to add that *gnosis* with a small “g” is also used by religious historians generally to indicate “deep original insight.” With that, I turn to the self-revelatory feminine voice of a famous Gnostic poem, “The Thunder, Perfect Mind,” which entreats us to

Come forward to childhood,
and do not despise it because it is small and it is little.
And do not turn away greatness in some parts from the smallnesses,
for the smallnesses are known from the greatnesses. (NHL pg 300)

Again, the most familiar text of the Gnostic corpus, the *Gospel of Thomas*, extends this theme to the child in the adult and the kingdom in the child, recording that:

Jesus saw infants being suckled. He said to his disciples,

“These infants being suckled are like those who enter the kingdom.”

Later in *Thomas* Jesus responds to his literalistic disciples’ impatience for the advent of that kingdom, saying

It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying “here it is” or “there it is”. Rather, the kingdom of the father is spread out upon the earth and men do not see it.”

Extremely ambitious, sequential yet as nonlinear as memory itself, cosmic yet biographic, visually spectacular and graced by the music of Mahler, Smetana, Berlioz, Brahms, et.al., *The Tree of Life* consists in three [03 / 04] interweaving layers: 1) an extended world creation portrayed in fascinating morphogenetic detail, [Comment on slide 2] the births, nascent personalities, emotions and moral lessons of a middleclass Waco, Texas family in the 1950s, and 3) the sober retrospective musing of one adult son, Jack, played by Sean Penn, who moves fitfully within the architectural [05] confines of downtown Houston.

Penn’s character Jack is played in youth by Hunter McCracken, the [06] oldest son, while a third brother is a mere presence compared with his [07] more sternly fated brothers. In contrast to both the relative silence of Jack’s adult character and the external dialogue of transpiring onscreen, Malick makes extensive use of *narrative* to access the interiority of his characters, their private sorrows, unspoken confessions, and yearning for understanding. Examples: (Adult Jack:) “Brother. “Mother. It was they who led me to your door.” (Jack as boy) “Are you watching me? I want to know what you are, want to see what you see.” (Father in late regret:) “You spoke to me through her, the sky, the trees, before I knew I loved you, believed in you.” Finally ~ for all of us: “*Who are we to you?*” Be it Creator, Creatrix, God or Universe to whom they speak, the cosmic Other is addressed throughout as an omnipresent sentient being, however veiled.

Minutes into the film, the mother, played by beautiful Jessica Chastain, [08] learns that her second son (perfectly cast as Brad Pitt’s child) has been killed. The agonizing phone call to his father finds him struggling to hear, and slowly to believe the tragic news. Thus we meet the *pater-familius* played by Brad Pitt, a classical music lover and organist whose own creative aspirations have long since succumbed to his focus to wealth, standing, and power. For both parents the heart-rending moment is a palpable test of a

theological proposition articulated moments before by Chastain regarding two avenues through life: the way of Nature and the way of Grace. “Nature only wants to please itself and others; likes to lord it over others, find reasons to be unhappy when love is shining all around,” while “Grace doesn’t try to please, it accepts insults and injuries. No one who follows the way of Grace ever comes to a bad end.” The contrast is personally reflected in her husband’s statements to the boys, “You make yourself what you are!” vs. “Your mother is unrealistic!” The attitudes and relational styles of each parent, dad’s tedious ordinances and domestic violence and mom’s gentle sympathetic ways repeat this variously.

Proximate onscreen and essential to note here is the *only* specific religious *text* of the entire film, the carefully edited words of Job 38. 4 & 7, which read “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? When the morning stars sang together and the sons of god shouted for joy?” It is commonplace that the God of the Old Testament figure as a model for an earthly father. Brad Pitt’s character is a sad parody of the same until his son’s death cracks him open. Yahweh’s jealousy, dominion and proneness to wrath are immediately apparent in to that lording *Where-were-you?* attitude toward Job. This is one reason of many why certain freethinking Jews explained these character traits as rooted in [09] Yahweh’s ignorance that Sophia was his mother! It also raises the reciprocal question of an archetypal model of the earthly mother, Chastain’s role, what to make of that “When the morning stars sang together?”

While many similarities appear in biblical language of Yahweh and Sophia’s handiwork, the emphasis with Sophia is on Grace. Proverbs 8.31 tells of her “rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.” But Malick offers more than a hint of the mother’s identification with Sophia in a telling detail: Sean Penn lighting a single blue candle in the film’s opening moments, that candle’s reappearance near the end, and midway a unique scene of Chastain levitating adrift in a light blue dress beside a towering Sycamore. Anima mundi and world axis, the mythic tree nymph writ large, she is blue like sky and sea, the encircling *caelum*, the kingdom poured out on animate earth.

The creation story of the 2nd Century Gnostic, Valentinus of Alexandria, the greatest of Sophia devotees, describes the origin and essence of the matter composing this world as emotionally and psychically consubstantial with Sophia:

[F]rom her longing for the bliss of the ideal world the world-soul [10] derives its origin; earth rose from her state of despair; water from the agitation caused by her sorrow; air from the solidification of her fear; while fire [...] was inherent in all these elements. [Sistrum!]

Furthermore she knows:

the beginning and end and middle of times,
the alternations of the solstices and the changes of the seasons,
the cycles of the year and the constellations of the stars,
the nature of animals and the tempers of wild animals,
the powers of spirits and the thoughts of human beings,
the varieties of plants and the virtues of roots; (Wisdom 7:15-22)

Malick's creation sequence corresponds precisely in its lavish portrayal of the elements in motion, the play of air, water, earth, fire from the stars of heaven to fiery volcanic sparks rising above the first bits of earth we behold.

Exemplary of the elements progressing to anthropology and life lived are the "smallnesses" (which may be "greatnesses") of a sort we hear in analytic memory and association: the boys play exuberantly with mother, scare her with a lizard, break windows in an old shed, get caught, shoot a skyrocket in the air with a frog tied to it, hurt each other, make up, sneak into a neighbor lady's house to explore her lingerie, walk crazily in jest only to encounter a real polio victim, witness a drowning, a criminal's arrest, etc.

Myriad details in *The Tree of Life* remain, including what speculation on soteriology, i.e., salvation, one may venture in response to the film's very simple finale. But after many references to Sophia, Gnosticism, etc., I think of Jung's observation that "Psychology is concerned with the act of seeing, and not with the construction of new religious truths."

In this spirit, and thinking of Tom Thumb's "smaller than small, larger than large," the universal principle of the One and the Many, or the astrological dictum "As Above, So Below," I can trace my real world Gnostic reflections to the memory of a rainy night before I was three, when my mother carried me from the car curbside to a baby sitter's door as I gazed enchanted into a sparkling stream of water reflecting the street lights above me in the cool rain-dimpled flow below. Paradigmatic of the childhood game I played of

seeing how often before falling asleep I could coax corresponding [11] streams of scintillae across my inner eye to stabilize as a field of potential imagery, I've come to appreciate how the soul sparks are 1) a kind of cosmic background radiation of psychic existence, 2) an "imaginal retina" in Wordsworth's understanding Nature's presentations as both "what I perceive and what I half create," and 3) the foundational myth of astrology, Gnosticism, and hermetic science where a shattered vessel of aboriginal light spreads bits of light abroad in the darkness to one day animate the specific forms of all created things. Thus Leibnitz can observe, marvelously: "Souls in general are the living mirrors or images of the world of created things.

In closing, I share the dream of a 19 year-old patient just past a suicidal crisis, a little Sophia, who actually dreamt of vampires. It reflects the Gnostic idea that cosmos and self share a common substance and the kindred imagery of creation mythology and individuation symbolism.

I'm on the beach with a wonderful friend of mine, when truck load of trustworthy friends pull up. Looking up I see thousands of beautiful galaxies spiraling across the night sky. They sparkle and turn as little connecting lines and subtle geometric forms begin to be generated. Golden bands like arrows move up, down, and across the sky as a gigantic keyhole appears in the middle region. I'm afraid I might be pulled into the hole but then, from another part of the sky, comes an enormous key that slides into the dark keyhole and turns into it tightly. Then I am back at home with a knife, killing vampires quite methodically. [12]

Finally, the way of seeing I've hinted and the ocular apparatus of choice for viewing Malick' film to salutary effect is captured perfectly by Gerard Dorn:

Thus little by little [one] will come to see with her mental eyes a number of sparks shining day by day and more and more and growing into such a great light that thereafter all things needful to her will be made known." Dorn in CW 8, par. 389.)

On Terrence Malick

Film writer and director, Terrence Malick, now 67, lives in Austin, Texas; the state where our human drama in *The Tree of Life* also transpires. This fifth film of his career follows *Badlands* (1973), *Days of Heaven* (1978), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), and *The New World* (2005). One notes with no small curiosity the full 20-year break after *Days of Heaven*, 1978-98. Following its release, Malick had begun developing a project for Paramount called *Q*, which was to explore the origins of life. But in pre-production, he suddenly moved to Paris, disappearing from public view while teaching and writing in France.