

“What Was It You Showed Me?”
Perplexity and Forgiveness: The Tree of Life as
Augustinian Confession

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In the opening scene of *The Tree of Life*, as the flame of the cosmos blooms out of darkness, we hear a whispered prayer: “Brother ... Mother ... It was they who led me to Your door.” This opening initiates us into an unexpected intimacy: what will follow is not simply the narration of a life, but rather the *confession* of a soul. To the consternation of some viewers, the drama of Terrence Malick’s film is not to be found primarily in the unfolding of a plot. We are offered instead a disclosure of the intimate interplay between perplexity and praise in the hearts of the members of the O’Brien family. The whispered prayers throughout the film—offered by Mrs. O’Brien, by Mr. O’Brien, and especially by Jack himself—ask of us a reverential viewing, a mindful attentiveness in response to confession.

What we are asked to consider is the confession of Jack’s spiritual *itinerarium*, the journey of his soul toward God. I interpret the initial unfolding of this journey as follows: first, spontaneous faith in the goodness of nature (an easy rapport with being); next, a rupturing encounter with nature as equivocal, destructive (an experience of non-moral evil betrays naïve faith); then, the self awakens to its own destructive capabilities (the betrayal is interiorized, issues forth in sin: “I do what I hate”).¹ We know well these happenings in our own

¹ My way of construing Jack’s *itinerarium* has been profoundly influenced by the philosophical approach of William Desmond (see especially *God and the Between* [Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008]). There is hardly room to do justice to Desmond here, but I do wish to mention the three dimensions of his thought that are most relevant for my reflection upon *The Tree of Life*. (1) Desmond identifies four senses in which we might think about being: the univocal, the equivocal, the dialectical, and the metaxological (for a systematic account of the “fourfold sense of being,” see *Being and the Between* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995]). Particularly relevant are the *equivocal* and the *metaxological* senses of being. The equivocal accentuates radical diversity, unmediated difference, and oppositional otherness: recognizing the equivocal means wrestling with the recalcitrant ambiguities inherent in being itself. In *The Tree of Life*, the equivocal sense of being features in the creative/destructive power of nature, as well as in the interior paradox of the divided will. By “metaxological,” Desmond seeks to articulate a *logos* of the *metaxu*, an account of the between. A metaxological approach emphasizes the *inter*-mediation of

lives, and their occurrences raise the same perplexities for us as they do for Jack: Does the destructive power of nature have the last word in its betrayal of our original rapport with being? What does the shock of evil reveal about the unpredictability—perhaps indifference, perhaps malignity—of God’s power? And how has evil come to insinuate itself *in us*, such that we not only suffer, but also find ourselves implicated in the experience of temptation, and guilty in the act of transgression?

The Tree of Life does not offer us easy answers to these questions. If anything, these questions are rather intensified by the film. The very same perplexities at the heart of Jack’s young life return with overwhelming force in the staggering loss of his brother. Yet we are given to think that the words of Jack’s opening prayer are offered on the far side of his brother’s death. Something must have intervened between the rupture of Jack’s early encounter with evil and his subsequent confession at the threshold of the divine. In what follows, I want to suggest that the decisive moment in Jack’s life comes when his brother, R.L., offers Jack forgiveness for the betrayal of fraternal trust. Crucially, this forgiveness does not simply dissolve the perplexities of suffering or of sin. Rather, Jack enters into a hyperbolic perplexity: what is this gift that exceeds the equivocalities at work in nature and in himself? More profound than the perplexity of evil, Jack is led into the heart of a new question: “What was it You showed me?”

the self with what is genuinely other, rather than the totalizing *self*-mediation of dialectic. With the metaxological, Desmond calls attention to those happenings in the between that *exceed* the “closed whole” of a dialectical orientation to being. (2) The metaxological sense of being puts us in mind of what Desmond calls the “agapeic origin.” By this he means an origination that is a “giving of being to the other that lets that other-being be as other” (*Perplexity and Ultimacy: Metaphysical Thoughts from the Middle* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995], 218). Desmond does not hesitate to identify this agapeic origin with the Judeo-Christian idea of creation, but he does not abandon philosophy for an a priori or dogmatic theology. Rather, he calls our attention to the radical contingency of finite being, and asks us to consider the origin of that being in what is other to sheer finitude as such. (3) Finally, Desmond insists that we become aware of the agapeic origin, not through an abstracted and univocally articulated *proof*, but rather through a mindful attentiveness to those happenings in being that exceed our finite determinations, that are, so to speak, “saturated” or “overdetermined.” Desmond refers to these overdetermined signs of the divine at work in the world as *hyperboles of being*, which he describes as communicating in immanence “what exceeds exhaustive immanent determination or self-determination” (*God and the Between*, 4). The encounter with a hyperbole of being is marked by astonishment: there is a perplexity that throws me beyond my own finitude, beyond even the totality of immanent finitude as such, and into a space of transcendent mystery. Desmond’s meditations on the hyperboles of being offer a particularly fruitful way to interpret Malick’s films, as Christopher Ben Simpson has demonstrated in “All Things Shining: Desmond’s Metaxological Metaphysics and *The Thin Red Line*” (in *Between System and Poetics: William Desmond and Philosophy after Dialectic*, ed. Thomas A. F. Kelly [Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007], 239-260). In what follows I call particular attention to the hyperbole of forgiveness (See “‘It is Nothing’—Wording the Release of Forgiveness,” *Proceedings of the ACPA* 82[2009], 1-23).

In the experience of reconciliation, Jack is released into a renewed—and no longer naïve—faith.

“Life of my life, I search for You” — The Tree of Life as a confession

Before turning to consider the specifics of Jack’s *itinerarium*, I first want to offer a meditation upon the theme of *confession*. In suggesting that we approach *The Tree of Life* as though witnessing a confession, I mean to put us in mind of Augustine and his restless heart. There is something especially Augustinian about Malick’s extensive use of voiceovers.² It is significant that the whispered voiceovers we hear in *The Tree of Life* are almost always directed at a Thou. Words of anguish, wonder, perplexity, praise: all are *con-fessed*, that is, all are referred to an Other, spoken “together with” an Other, in the presence of an Other. In these confessions, the radical interiority of each character is laid bare, in a manner reminiscent of Augustine’s own confession of his inmost self.

Recall the two fundamental discoveries of Augustine’s turn to the inner self: first, the inmost self is characterized, not by serene and lucid comprehension, but rather by an astonishing array of equivocations and perplexed half-knowings (“I

² Many of the whispered prayers we hear in *The Tree of Life* echo prayers offered in the *Confessions*, such that one cannot help but think that Malick was borrowing consciously from Augustine. To name two of the more overt examples:

Mrs. O’Brien: “Life of my life, I search for you”;

Augustine: “When I love You, what do I love? ... My soul ... your God is for you the life of your life” (*Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], X.vi.8;10).

Jack: “I didn’t know how to name you then, but I see it was you. Always you were calling me.”;

Augustine: “You were with me, and I was not with you.... You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness” (X.xxvii.38).

I note also that the powerful sermon we hear in the middle of the film contains an allusion to Augustine’s *City of God*:

Preacher: “Is the body of the wise man, or the just, exempt from any pain? From any disquietude, from the deformity that might blight its beauty, from the weakness that might destroy its health?”;

Augustine: “For is there any pain, the opposite of pleasure, any disturbance, the contrary of repose, that cannot befall a wise man’s body? Certainly ... ugliness despoils his beauty, sickness his health; weakness subdues his strength, lassitude or lethargy his mobility. And is there any of these which may not assault the wise man’s physical frame?” (*City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson [London: Penguin Books, 1984], XIX.4).

had become to myself a vast problem,” writes Augustine on more than one occasion in his *Confessions*).³ Second, companioning the soul’s search for God is the very One who is sought, a God more intimate to me than I am to myself.⁴ Paradoxically, human interiority is constituted by this double de-centering of the self: on the one hand, I am “outside” myself as forever beyond complete self-comprehension; on the other hand, I am not even what is “most intimate” to myself, since there is always the prior immanence of my soul’s relation to the divine. For Augustine, confession issues from these two fundamental aspects of interiority. Thus confession is both an acknowledgement of *sin*, and an offering of *praise*.⁵ Confession of sin: a recognition and admission of the finite limitations, the anguishes and contradictions, the wanderings and perplexities of the human heart. Confession of praise: a placing of the self into the more originary source of all that is, a wonder that acknowledges all as *gift*, and a striving to return the gift to the giver in thanksgiving.

Jean-Luc Marion has recently argued that Augustine’s *Confessions*, as speaking to God in the mode of repentance and of praise, should not be read as an *autobiography* (contrary to dominant opinion), but rather should be taken as an effort to view one’s life as though “beside God.” Marion writes: “[a confession] is not an *auto-* but a *hetero-biography*, my life told by me and especially to me from the point of view of an other, from close to the privileged other, God. Saint Augustine tries to say himself and to see himself no longer from his own *side* but from *beside God*.”⁶ Of course, Augustine describes the details of his life-story in a running narrative. But he does so in a modality that seeks to abandon his point of view as an ego, and instead seeks out a new perspective of a self “decentered toward God.”⁷ In the twofold confession of sin and praise, the self is discovered (as though for the first time), realized, and received through the act of returning the self to God. And what is more, the discovery of the self in God is concomitant with the discovery of God at work in the events and relationships of one’s life. Am I right to see in Jack O’Brien an Augustinian type, and to interpret the whole of *The Tree of Life* as a confession, i.e., as a *hetero-biography* spoken by a self decentered toward God?

Consider the blue candle that the adult Jack lights close to the beginning of the movie. The flame is lit, we presume, in remembrance of his lost brother. A

³ See *Confessions* IV.iv.9, and again at X.xxxiii.50.

⁴ “You were more inward than my most inward part and higher than the highest element within me” (*Confessions* III.iv.11).

⁵ See *Expositions on the Psalms* 144, 13.

⁶ Jean-Luc Marion, *In The Self’s Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 45.

⁷ Marion, 45.

memorial of R.L.'s life, the flame also serves to memorialize *Jack's* life: Malick surrounds the central story of Jack's life with two tight shots of the blue candle, almost as if the luminary is placed liturgically to set apart Jack's recollection of his life. But if the candle is meant to mark the memory of Jack's life, then this is a strange memory indeed: for between the two blue flames we witness not only the details of Jack's adolescence, but also his very coming into being, and indeed the long becoming of the entire cosmos. Again, note the parallels with Augustine's *Confessions*: Augustine, too, sought the secret of his origin, probing not only how he was "formed in time" through the donation of his parent's flesh,⁸ but also how time itself was formed through the creation of the world as told in Genesis.⁹

Clearly, neither Augustine nor Jack *remembers* these happenings; and yet memory can preserve the stories that the self has been told about its origin. Even more, memory can relate to the immemorial by confessing that the self is not its own measure, that there is a deeper origin that makes possible the self. Could we say that memory is made sacred when it confesses what exceeds it, as time is made sacred when it is referred to eternity? Note, too, that memory is related to the immemorial not only in reference to beginnings, but also in reference to the end. *Memento mori*—remember that you will die. But how *remember* that which has not yet happened, and will not happen within time itself? I find it significant that Malick chose to place those final enigmatic scenes of eternity, not between the two blue candles, but rather outside them. Perhaps: creation and birth, although *before* the life-time of the individual self, nevertheless remain temporal happenings, and so can be approached by a memory properly disposed to contemplate what has made the finite self possible. But what lies *beyond* time in eternity—how remember this? It is not enough here to be mindful of an originary power still at work in the unfolding of one's life. If there is anything to be mindful of in what exceeds the time of life, it will have to be shown in what is more than life, more than time. The blue flames of human memorial can mark only the span of the temporal cosmos; there is need of an eternal flame to encompass the whole of time *and* what exceeds time

"All the world is shining" – Aesthetic unfolding, existence as play

We are asked to ponder this relation between time and eternity from the first moment of *The Tree of Life*: "Where were you when I laid the foundations

⁸ *Confessions* I.vi.7.

⁹ In Books XI-XIII of the *Confessions*.

of the earth? ... When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Job 38:4, 7.” This epigram is meant to evoke the suffering of Job, and the perplexity of how an innocent man can be allowed to suffer before a good God. And the verses are meant, too, to remind us of the difficult wisdom of the Book of Job: that our questioning of God is itself always called into question by God’s prior interrogation of us. These are certainly themes worthy for reflection, and they are themes that feature prominently throughout *The Tree of Life*. But I want to call attention to something that we might miss if we were to trod too-familiar paths, seeking in this reference to Job only an absolving theodicy.

Notice that the verses of the epigram speak of the sublime glory of creation’s beginning. *The morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy*—this is an image of a created order that returns the divinely spoken “It is good” with a corresponding shout of praise. Malick reinforces the biblical vision of the radical goodness of being by presenting nature’s unfolding with pure, overwhelming, aching beauty. The aesthetic power of the long cosmological scene leaves us breathless, awed at the dynamic interplay of those elemental forces with which the foundations of the earth were laid. As stars are born and galaxies unfurl, it is understandable that we might all but forget the O’Briens and their grief. We are staggered, stupefied by the raw display of creative power: the majesty and magnitude of the unfolding cosmos seem to dwarf the suffering of one family. I note that what is at issue here is not primarily the inscrutability of the divine will; nor is it the indifference of a cold and empty universe to the concerns of human beings. Rather, it is the very *goodness* of creation, the awesome beauty and enormity of its unfolding, that seemingly cannot countenance grief. The haunting music of the *Lacrimosa* is taken up, transfigured, made one with the aesthetic unfolding of the cosmos: no longer a song of grief, it becomes a song of glory.

The dynamic processes of the cosmos become focused, intent: organic life emerges, a qualitative leap in the goodness and beauty of being. There is fierce competition and even deadly strife, yet life is not reducible to a sheer struggle for survival: accompanying all striving is also a rudimentary delight in the fundamental goodness of being. Nature continues its aesthetic unfolding, covering the earth with astonishing diversity. Into the midst of this diversity, Jack is born. He is born out of beauty, he is born into beauty; he himself reflects beauty (recall the delicacy of his small feet, held and beheld with awe). He awakens into the astonishing unfolding of the world: it is as though the light shining through the long, creative process of nature’s unfolding has prepared a place especially for him. All the world is wonder, delight, play.

It is in play especially that Jack affirms the goodness of nature: the gratuity of play is a response to the gratuitous welcoming of the world; it is a reveling in the fundamental experience of being admitted into a community of being. Hidden in the delight of play is a double affirmation of goodness: on the one hand, there is the goodness of the world, created and sustained and still marvelously unfolding; on the other hand, there is the goodness of Jack's *own* existence, a goodness experienced and affirmed in the vitality of the body (crawling, walking, running), in the dawning of awareness (learning to name the animals), in the awakening to self-awareness ("It's *mine!*"). In and through play, life is experienced as an easy rapport with being. The goodness of nature, at work in the world and in the self, is affirmed with a spontaneous faith. Jack's early rapport with being is affirmed also by the play he shares in with his brothers: the gratuitous goodness is communicated back and forth between them, and becomes amplified in the shared delight of fraternal community.

Hans Urs von Balthasar draws our attention to the role that the mother plays in the child's original experience of being as welcoming. The child awakens in the mother's embrace, learning through his fundamental encounter with an original 'Thou' that he is "contained, affirmed and loved in a relationship which is incomprehensively encompassing, already actual, sheltering and nourishing."¹⁰ It is the original gift of welcoming love that makes possible Jack's early rapport with being, and his spontaneous faith in the goodness of nature. The experience of this gift makes possible the gratuity of play: "[the child] gives itself to play because the experience of being admitted is the very first thing which it knows in the realm of Being. It *is*, in so far as it is allowed to take part as an object of love."¹¹ Awakening into the love of a Thou, entering into an encompassing and sheltering world, the child experiences in an elemental way something of the love and goodness of God. "You spoke to me through her," Jack confesses. "Before I knew I loved You ... believed in You. When did you first touch my heart?" Loving admittance into the community of being, made possible through the gift of the mother, discloses the generous creativity of a divine power at work behind the aesthetic unfolding of nature.

¹⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Volume V: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 616.

¹¹ Von Balthasar, 616.

“Where were You?” – Rupturing encounter with nature’s equivocality

In the dynamic processes of aesthetic unfolding, nature is originally experienced as glorious, welcoming, embracing. Our initial rapport with being elicits exuberant joy, and we take delight in the glory of creation. We also feel the power of nature coursing through us, vitalizing our bodies, and we let loose in the gratuity of play. We run through grass, climb up trees, swim in water. Consider swimming as an image of our original rapport with being: we dive into a refreshing pool, and are immediately caressed and enfolded; water, that most elemental and life-giving force, admits us easy passage; our limbs are given free play—we dive, kick, roll, rise to the surface; now we float, our bodies buoyed, our eyes closed, drifting lazily in seeming oneness with the world.

Suddenly, violently, this oneness is wrenched: a wave washes over us, filling mouth and nostrils with water; we are caught in a whirlpool, dragged down to the deep. Water, that elemental force of life, becomes instead a force of death. Where we once wondered and played freely, we now are stunned by a power exceeding our measure. We are plunged into perplexity, as the very power that once showed itself to be creative and sustaining now reveals itself to be destructive. We come to understand that nature is equivocal: creation and destruction mingle together in the unfolding of elemental processes beyond our control or comprehension. We shudder before nature’s equivocality, and a rupture opens in our original rapport with being.¹²

Nature now shows itself to be two-faced: within the very gift of life that sustains us, death appears. In the drowning of his playmate, Jack comes to know nature’s equivocality. His original faith in the goodness of being is betrayed by this encounter with death. Play now takes place in the graveyard, a fitting image to express the intermingling of darkness with the shining glory of things. The perplexity of nature’s equivocality is not that it blots out the goodness of being. Rather, the perplexity is that creation and destruction, life and death, these are given *together* in the same process.¹³ And this perplexity about nature’s equivocal-

¹² See Desmond, *God and the Between*, 78.

¹³ Malick has explored this theme before, most poignantly in *The Thin Red Line*. The opening voice-over of that film expresses well the equivocality at work in nature: “What’s this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself? The land contend with the sea? Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power, but two?” I maintain that *The Tree of Life* marks a significant shift in Malick’s philosophical and theological outlook: seemingly unwilling to allow equivocality the final word, Malick now offers us an exploration into a more original source that exceeds and funds finite nature. A sign of this shift: in *The Tree of Life*, ‘glory’—that idea so relentlessly pursued by Malick in his earlier films, and so redolent with Heideggerian meaning—now becomes charged with religious significance. In *The Thin Red Line*, the glory of “all things shining” appeared as an aspect of the perpetual war in the heart of nature; in *The Tree of Life*, the

ty passes over into a perplexity about nature's origin: whereas Jack's original rapport with being intimated a loving source of things, this rupturing encounter with the darkness of nature now seems to indicate a darkness within the source as well. "Where were You?," Jack whispers in perplexed anguish. "You let a boy die. You'll let anything happen."

Jack's encounter with death precludes any simple return to his original, spontaneous rapport with being. Easy faith in the goodness of nature seems naïve now that he has awoken to the equivocity at work in the world. The gift of life seems also to be a curse. This is a troubling thought, for it suggests either an awful indifference in the Giver, or else a mocking laughter. Does God sport with us in our frailty and our finitude? (Recall the awful "consolation" offered to Mrs. O'Brien in her grief: "That's the way [God] is. He sends flies to wounds that He should heal"). Nature's destructive power now seems to be present everywhere. On a trip into town, the boys encounter a drunkard, stumbling in his walk; they mock and imitate, but are stopped short by the appearance of a man naturally crippled and limping. "Can it happen to anyone?" whispers Jack in stunned perplexity. "Nobody talks about it." A frightening realization dawns on Jack: *he too* lives under the shadow of nature's equivocal power. Jack watches in silence as the elemental forces of nature continue to ravage: a house burns, leaving behind the scarred flesh of a fellow playmate as a cruel, aching testament to the raw destructive power of nature's unfolding. "You'll let anything happen," Jack accuses God. "Why should I be good if You aren't?" Encountering the equivocity of nature, Jack is unsettled about what gives rise to that equivocity. How to comprehend divine power, unexpectedly generous in its gift of being, yet inexplicably permissive of immense suffering?

"I do what I hate" – Temptation and transgression

Traumatic encounter with nature's destructive power distances us from our elemental rapport with being. Our faith in the goodness of being is strained as this rupture alerts us to our ontological fragility: we now recoil from the embrace that we once welcomed, fearing to hand ourselves over into the creative/destructive play of powers beyond our measure. Faced with the equivocal showings of nature, Jack's father counsels him to distance himself from the world: "Your mother's naïve. It takes fierce will to get ahead in this world. If you're good, people take advantage of you.... The world lives by trickery. You

"glory all around" takes on a revelatory quality, signifying a generative power that exceeds the equivocity of nature as such.

want to succeed, you can't be too good." Thus we will our distance from deceptive equivocity, but we do so in a way that interiorizes the equivocity, and so we ourselves become deceivers in an effort to overcome deception.

Recall how the perplexity of outer evil becomes interiorized, as Jack awakens to the duality at work in himself. The goodness of vital energy no longer expresses itself in the innocent gratuity of play, but rather issues forth in destruction. Together with his friends, Jack finds himself actively participating in nature's destructive power: cans are smashed and windows broken; eggs are exploded and a frog suffers the cruel "experiment" of being launched by a toy rocket. These scenes of youthful vandalism bear a striking resemblance to that famous passage from the *Confessions* in which Augustine describes his theft of pears. Hovering around Jack's memory of his minor youthful trespasses, there is the deadly serious recognition that he is doing what is wrong for no other reason than that he delights in the wickedness of the act.¹⁴ And as was the case in Augustine's theft, so too in Jack's case the group must bear much of the blame for his reckless abandonment into sin.¹⁵ Yet there is this difference between Jack and Augustine: in Jack's case, there is at least one member of the group—his brother R.L.—who will not participate in the trespass, who silently shakes his head and walks away from the wrong. This is the beginning of a distancing between the brothers: longing to leave his childhood behind, wishing to know what "they" know, Jack abandons his early solidarity with R.L.'s innocent wonder.

This distance is increased by Jack's confused erotic awakening, and by his giving over to temptation in his trespass into a neighbor's house. The energies of Jack's body surge in a powerful longing for contact with beauty, and yet this longing is mingled with a premonition that to act on the desire would not be right. Jack is seduced, but the seduction is not primarily the promise of satiating a physical desire (a desire which, after all, remains unfocused and indeterminate in its inchoate adolescence). What seduces is rather the possibility of trespass itself. Jack is enchanted by the thought of entering, uninvited, into the intimate space reserved for a beauty beyond his grasp. The grief and guilt that follow upon his transgression are an expression of the recognition that he is now irrevocably in

¹⁴ Augustine describes his transgression as willing to become evil for no reason: "I had no motive for my wickedness except wickedness itself. It was foul, and I loved it. I loved the self-destruction, I loved my fall, not the object for which I had fallen but my fall itself" (*Confessions* II.iv.9).

¹⁵ "Had I been alone," writes Augustine in a passage that Jack could echo verbatim, "it would have given me absolutely no pleasure, nor would I have committed it.... Out of a game and a jest came an avid desire to do injury and an appetite to inflict loss on someone else without any motive on my part of personal gain, and no pleasure in settling a score. As soon as the words are spoken 'Let us go and do it', one is ashamed not to be shameless" (*Confessions* II.ix.17).

the possibility of evil. The determinate act of trespass makes manifest the prior insinuation of equivocity into the very heart of the self: the experience of temptation implicates him in evil, prior even to any determinate willing on his part. Jack confesses to an anguished perplexity at the abyss that he has opened within himself: "What have I started? What have I done?" He longs for a return to his early rapport with being, and is tortured by the distance between his own actions and his brothers' joyful play: "How do I get back where they are?"

The inner torment of Jack's complicity with evil now issues forth as a dominating power, bent on closing the distance between himself and the innocence of his brothers. He lords his comparative size over them, and seeks to convert the vitality of bodies at play into a contest of brute strength. In this new economy of power, Jack is threatened especially by R.L.'s artistic gifts, since these flow from a creative source that seems irrevocably lost to Jack himself. Significantly, Jack first flirts with seriously harming R.L. (asking him to stick his finger in a light socket) just after he beholds R.L. absorbed in aesthetic creation at the guitar. That Jack's mocking gesture of thinly veiled dominance is met with a simple, honest expression of fraternal love ("I trust you"): this only intensifies the torment of distance between them. What shines through R.L. is simply too much for the darkness in Jack to comprehend or to bear. Once again he encounters R.L.'s aesthetic creation (this time a painting), and once again the encounter leaves Jack envious and bitter. He lashes out with destructive force, asserting himself over and against any good gift. "I'm not gonna do everything you tell me to," he tells his Mother.¹⁶ "I'm gonna do what I want." Out of Jack's inner strife issues a proclamation of self that forsakes earlier glimpses of the glory shining in things.

Jack's self-asserting will to dominate is most fully expressed in his betrayal of fraternal trust. Recall the scene in which Jack shoots R.L.'s finger with a BB gun: Jack tells R.L. to put his finger over the opening of the gun, repeating the command he once gave to put a finger into the opening of a light socket. We are put in mind of R.L.'s words of fraternal love on that earlier occasion: "I trust you." Unwavering in the constancy of that trust, R.L. now extends his finger. The trust is betrayed as Jack pulls the trigger, and the pain of that betrayal is seared into flesh. The transgression results from Jack's desire to close the distance between his brother and himself: unable to recuperate his own original trust in the goodness of being, Jack opts instead to betray the trust that his brother has in him. But the reduplication of betrayal does not grant Jack the satisfaction he anticipated; his transgression accomplishes nothing but a double distancing, a perpetuation of evil that does not undo the first evil. It dawns on him that he is

¹⁶ Recall what Mrs. O'Brien told her sons to do: "Help each other. Love everyone. Every leaf. Every ray of light. Forgive."

unable by his own power to overcome the equivocity that has taken root in his heart: “What I wanna do I can’t do,” Jack whispers. “I do what I hate.”

In his relentless confession of sin, Augustine was especially attuned to the ways in which we bind ourselves through our own willing: we are free to will as we will, but paradoxically, what we freely will often binds us in habits that become crushing vices. Our will then wars with itself, ensnares itself in chains of its own making, such that we end up doing what we hate, rather than what we would freely do.¹⁷ This is the bind in which Jack finds himself. He has sought the freedom of his own self-determining power, but in this seeking he has become complicit with the destructive power of nature, and so has interiorized the very equivocities he would escape.

“What was it You showed me?” – Forgiveness as release

Faced with the double distancing of his transgression, perplexed by his radical inability to overcome inner equivocity, Jack awakens to what he has wrought in regret. How to undo what has been done, how to recover from his seemingly irrevocable betrayal of trust? Jack cannot *force* recuperation, any more than he can force a smile on the face of his brother. Instead he must wait in suspended remorse, unable to undo the curse without being blessed by the one whom he has cursed. He offers to take a similar evil upon his own flesh (“You can hit me if you want”), but he must know that this will come to no good, will offer only bitter retribution in place of genuine reconciliation. “I’m sorry,” he says at last. “You’re my brother.” R.L. responds, not with a return of violence, but rather with a gesture of forgiveness. In that gesture, what is communicated? A mysterious reversal seems to take place: having caused R.L. to suffer, Jack now suffers, awaiting the gesture of forgiveness. When the gesture comes, it is experienced as a compassionate release, an unshackling of the binds with which he has bound himself.

Jack experiences the gift of forgiveness as somehow exceeding the finite determinacies of nature and self. The perplexities of suffering and sin remain, but now there is an experience of *hyperbolic perplexity*: what does the happening of forgiveness reveal about the originating source that makes such happening possible? How does the gift of release exceed the equivocity at work in nature and in the self? Early rapport with being seemed to indicate a generosity at work

¹⁷ Desmond summarizes the Augustinian insight into the will’s self-imprisonment as follows: “The will is at odds with itself, divided within itself: I am what I have willed, and I will what I would be, but in willing what I would be, I become and am what I would not be: the willing is at war with itself, hence cannot just will itself to be what it would will to be” (“It is Nothing”, 18).

in the creating origin; rupturing encounter with nature as equivocal seemed to indicate some darkness in divine power. In this new happening of forgiveness, what is communicated is not a dialectical mediation of those earlier intimations of the divine origin; nor is any easy answer given to prior perplexities. Rather, the experience of forgiveness plunges Jack into a wonder *beyond* both naïve faith and perplexed equivocality. “What was it You showed me?” he asks, expressing amazement that is more akin to praise than it is to perplexity. “I didn’t know how to name you then. But I see it was You. Always You were calling me.”

Forgiveness releases Jack into a renewed—but no longer naïve—faith. The naïveté of original faith is no longer possible, because Jack has passed through the equivocal showings of nature: he has known evil, both in the world and in himself. Yet his faith is renewed in spite of this evil, because he has glimpsed something of the divine source that makes forgiveness and reconciliation possible.¹⁸ In the gift of his brother’s forgiveness, Jack is released from the narrowing circle of his own impotent willing. Forgiveness as a gift that *releases*—this is yet another Augustinian thought. Because the will has freely willed its own bondage, it cannot release itself. What is needed is a release that can free the will, allowing the flow of life again in its promise of the good. The happening of forgiveness comes to us as a power that exceeds our own self-willing, a more original source that can creatively undo what has been done.

Compared with the striving of the self-asserting will, the gift of forgiveness *does nothing*—but it is precisely *nothing* that needs to be accomplished, through a benevolent nihilation that undoes what has been done. In the release of forgiveness, what happens is an emptying of the self that cannot be accomplished through the self alone: one must *suffer* forgiveness, in the sense that one can only await the possibility of the gift, and gratefully accept what is offered when it is offered. Yet by undergoing the passion of this release, one is also freed to compassionately extend the gift. In *The Tree of Life*, the compassionate release of forgiveness is symbolized by that gesture in which R.L. places his hand upon Jack’s shoulder; in this gesture, what is wordlessly communicated is that the distance between them has been dissolved. We then witness a number of scenes in which this gesture is compassionately repeated: Jack extends his hand in acceptance to his friend who had been scarred by the house fire, as if to assure

¹⁸ Desmond calls our attention to the hyperbolic perplexity at work in thinking the ultimate source of forgiveness: “Can we finally forgive? ... Can only the absolute forgive? Can only a God truly absolve, offering without preconditions the ‘It is nothing’ that recreates—the ‘It is nothing’ that offers the hope that ‘It will be good,’ a hope that, even if it is not now good, ‘It will be good’? Echoing the first ‘Let be,’ this ‘It is nothing’ would be redoubled as a second ‘Let be’ that frees the clogged creation. It offers the flow of life again in its promise of good: the passing—the passion—the compassion that redeems” (“It is Nothing,” 19).

him of his worth despite his disfiguration; Jack embraces his father, confessing a solidarity of struggle (“I’m more like you than her”) that makes possible, if not a reconciliation, at least a rapprochement; and Jack comforts his younger brothers as the O’Brien family prepares to move away, compassionately suffering with them in the loss of their childhood home. In this last scene, Jack freely returns to R.L. the very gesture of compassionate release that he was offered, thereby completing the circle of reconciliation. We hear Mrs. O’Brien: “The only way to be happy is to love. Unless you love, your life will flash by. Do good to them. Wonder. Hope.” With this Jack’s confession ends, and we are returned to the present.

“Unless you love, your life will flash by” – Memory and the shore of eternity

There is a temptation, perhaps, to approach the enigmatic final scenes of *The Tree of Life* as though we are being offered a heavenly vantage from which the pains of this life appear as only a brief moment, ultimately to be absorbed into the long paradise of eternity. “All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well”—there can be a banal way of uttering this assurance, such that in our anticipation of wholeness in an eternal beyond, we end up renouncing the particularities of our lives, with their sin and sorrow. I am reminded of the epilogue of the Book of Job: on account of his long-suffering fidelity, God rewards Job with a return that is “greater” than what he suffered—his fortune is doubled, his livestock increased, his years of life are lengthened. And, too, he is given ten new children to take the place of those he lost. But is there not something terrible in this last gift? How could anything replace those innocents who were lost, even the good gift of further children? (Recall again the false comfort Mrs. O’Brien was offered in her grief: “You still have the other two.” As if the goodness of those others could somehow suffice for the irreplaceable loss of her son.) There can be an all-too-easy “wholeness” that does not truly heal, that in fact betrays the goodness of what was lost by simply hiding the wound; the wound then festers, spoiling the promised good of the whole.

I think that Malick is aware of this danger, and that he is offering us a much more profound and nuanced reflection upon eternity in those final scenes than a facile return of what was lost. I suggest that we can best understand the scenes that take place on the shore of eternity if we interpret them as flowing from Jack’s confessional memory of the release that happened in his experience of forgiveness. Recall that Jack’s confession began by striving to remember his life from the perspective of the unfolding of the cosmos; in this, Jack revered the more originary power at work in the gift of his being. Now at the end of his

confession, astonished by the shock of release that was communicated through R.L.'s forgiveness, Jack is thrown into a new relation with the God whom he seeks. In the asymmetric gift of this divine "letting be," he is shown something beyond the equivocalities of nature, beyond the self-circling strivings of his own narrowing will. This occasions a confession of praise: awakening to and acknowledging what exceeds merely finite determinations—especially the finitudes of self-striving will—he is released anew into a faith in the goodness of being, and a faith in the source of that goodness.

Perhaps when Jack crosses through the threshold of time and into a vision of the beyond, what we are being shown is not primarily a glimpse of some distant homeland, but rather a sign of how life can be redeemed when it is offered as praise through consecrated memory. In learning to answer evil and sorrow through a compassionate love honoring the goodness of being, Jack is drawn closer and closer to the eternal One who makes such love possible. When we witness Mrs. O'Brien raise her hands to the sky and pray, "I give him to you. I give you my son," are we not being asked to consider an ultimate act of self-emptying love? In this offering, she gives back to God the good gift that was given in her son, honoring thereby the glory of his life by transforming the pain of her loss into a sacrifice of praise. In a like manner, through the confession of his life, Jack comes to see that it was his brother who led him to the threshold of the divine: his brother's aesthetic creativity testified to the glory all around; his brother's constant fidelity refracted the love shining through all things; his brother's forgiveness offered a release into a wonder deeper than the perplexity of evil. Early in *The Tree of Life*, Jack addresses a fundamental question to God: "How did You come to me? In what shape? What disguise?" Reverently confessing his memory through grief and into the release of forgiveness, Jack is given his answer: "I see my brother. True. Kind."