



BRILL

RELIGION AND THE ARTS 19 (2015) 552–582

RELIGION
and the ARTS

brill.com/rart

Codas of Creation

Emanation Mysticism and Alchemical Regeneration in Terrence Malick's The Tree of Life

John Michael Corrigan

National Chengchi University

Abstract

This article gives a mystical interpretation of Terrence Malick's award-winning film, *The Tree of Life* (2011), arguing that Malick carefully develops two esoteric patterns to structure his visual language: first, a triadic symbolism of divine emanation and return, and second, a complementary alchemical pattern of ascent and descent portraying the process of regeneration. Far from being a doctrinal presentation of Christianity, as some critics suppose, *The Tree of Life* engages little known but highly influential bodies of esoteric knowledge to offer a visually complex and symmetrical representation of genesis and alchemical transmutation. With the tree of life presented as an initiatory symbol of the *axis mundi*, Malick's film portrays creation as a chiastic process, one point of view staging a triadic structure of emanation mysticism and the other offering a magical variation of this pattern in the human struggle for renewal in time.

Keywords

Neoplatonism – Kabbalah – Hermeticism – alchemy – renaissance – film – Terrence Malick – mysticism

Often considered to be one of the great American filmmakers, Terrence Malick remains a mystery to the public—an enigmatic auteur whose cinematic vision has been both celebrated and dismissed. The critical reception of *The Tree of Life* (2011) reveals the kind of polarization that Malick's work tends to provoke. At once booed and applauded in its debut at the Cannes Film Festival, the film went on to win the Palme d'Or. This highly prestigious award notwithstanding, critics have continued to be divided, some praising *The Tree of Life* as a masterpiece and others disparaging its religious dogmatism (Denby), “discon-

nected poetic vision,” and all but absent “narrative structure” (R. Reed). This article challenges these critical perceptions and provides an esoteric interpretation of the film, arguing that Malick links the postwar American experience to an intercultural religious vision expressing the processes of self-transformation and renewal. To this end, Malick carefully develops two esoteric patterns to structure his visual language: first, a triadic symbolism of divine emanation and return, and second, a complementary alchemical pattern of ascent and descent portraying the process of regeneration. Far from being a doctrinal presentation of Christianity, *The Tree of Life* engages little known but highly influential bodies of esoteric knowledge to offer a visually complex and symmetrical representation of genesis and alchemical transmutation. With the tree of life presented as an initiatory symbol of the *axis mundi*, Malick’s film thus offers a chiasmic portrayal of creation, one point of view staging a three-part coda of creation and the other offering a magical variation of this pattern in the human struggle for renewal in time.

I Emanation and the Anagogic Tree

Even when acknowledging Malick’s achievements, film criticism has tended to ignore the mystical underpinnings of his visual language. Writing in *The New Yorker*, David Denby called *The Tree of Life* an “insufferable masterpiece,” dismissing its “doctrinal view of Christianity,” while praising its “floating camera” perspective as “revolutionary.” Denby’s attitude is representative of a broader tendency to champion the technical innovation of Malick’s films, but to overlook almost entirely the religious dimension of his artistic vision. The existing small body of scholarly criticism on the film operates according to a corresponding assumption, disregarding the rich religious and philosophical symbolism of the tree of life, the central image of the film. S. Brent Plate, for instance, provides Darwin’s biological tree as a primary figure with which to view Malick’s cinematic depictions of evolution (527–536). M. Gail Hamner similarly emphasizes the “embodied and terrestrial” character of “the fluid tactility of Malick’s camera consciousness,” concluding that the “juxtaposition of trees and water exemplify the chiasm of visibility and tactility, the shared ‘flesh’ of the world” (28). Both readings offer a theoretical avowal of the material body, readily conforming to contemporary criticism’s relative unease with older spiritual conceptions of embodiment.

While biological evolution undoubtedly plays an important role in the film, it is the image of the tree itself that allows Malick to draw upon a vast religious and cultural history and to evoke in the process an intercultural perennial phi-

losophy. As a result, the Utah desert sands, images of moving water, and a lone tree in the wilderness suggest a primordial setting, which is appropriately contextualized with one of the oldest symbols of ancient worship from prehistoric times. This wide range of symbolic references is so pervasive in the film that it needs to be unpacked at the outset. Indeed, sacred trees figured prominently in the religious practice of the Middle East during the Neolithic period beginning sometime around 9000 BCE according to standard archeology. In the Levant, for instance, the early Israelites worshipped a fertility goddess named Asherah who was associated with life-giving waters and whose “cultic symbol [was] the trunk of a tree with the branches lopped off.”¹ For the ancient peoples of the Fertile Crescent, who were similarly transitioning from semi-nomadic culture to permanent settlement, life-giving waters, sacred trees, and pillars were deeply embedded in their rituals of fertility and regeneration.

The later manifestations of the hieratic Heliopolitan metaphysics that developed over the course of thousands of years in dynastic Egypt are powerful testaments to this prehistory. Excavations in Minoan Crete and the Mycenaean mainland also suggest a history of influence or cross-pollination, for water, trees, and pillars are among the most prominent features of their shrines.² The connection between divination and trees was particularly well-established in the South Aegean from 2700 to 1450 BCE, where Minoan rings and seals depict ecstatic visions connected to the shaking or touching of a sacred tree, variations of which appear in numerous Near Eastern rituals (Marinatos 91). On the Greek mainland, before Zeus had assumed his traditional Hellenic form as the god of lightning and the king of the Greek pantheon, he was venerated in the figure of an oak tree. According to Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, “the words of the oak in the holy place of Zeus at Dodona were the first prophetic utterances” (275b).

The Judeo-Christian tree of life offers well-known variations of this *topos*. Mentioned in *Genesis* 2: 9 and 3: 22, the tree developed into “a special branch of Biblical exegesis from late antiquity onward,” coming to represent the cross, a source of eternal life, and “an all-powerful alchemical medicine” (Hedesan 342). In medieval Kabbalah, the tree of the *sephiroth* provides another significant expression of this motif, forming a major element of the Renaissance ancient wisdom narrative. Then, with the rise of modern comparative approaches to religion, the tree of life was interpreted as a perennial symbol. It is in this sense that Gerald Massey’s analysis of the tree as a universal figure of ascent is paradigmatic of comparative religious methodologies at the turn of the

1 James 17. See also Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah* 188–196.

2 James 3–32. See also Witcombe, “Sacred Places: Trees and the Sacred.”

twentieth century. “There is no race so primitive but has a tree-type of the ascent to heaven,” the British poet and activist writes, arguing that the tree-type is virtually synonymous with a host of other sacred images of ascent, most prominent among them being the reed, lotus, pillar, column, ladder, and staircase (388–389). In 1955, Erich Neumann developed these esoteric readings from the perspective of Jungian philosophy, emphasizing “a hermaphroditic symbolism [that] preserves an undifferentiated uroboric character” at the core of the archetypal tree. The symbol thus unites opposites—earth and sky, life and death, womb and phallus—even while “surpassing” the “original principle of opposites” with the “most numinous of all transformation mysteries: growth” (48–49, 51).

Malick’s cinematic interpretation of the sacred tree relates to this well-established esoteric conception of the tree as the *axis mundi*, which is the world pillar or the column that connects heaven to earth and mediates the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm—a medium, in other terms, constituted by the emanation of the Divine into being and through being’s anagogic return to its source. Even before making *The Tree of Life*, Malick was significantly invested in formulating such an anagogic visual language for the image of the sacred tree. In the final shot of *The New World* (2005), a film released six years before *The Tree of Life*, the camera tilts upward, looking from below along the great swaying bodies of pines towards the sky. Malick has prepared for this closing shot from the first scenes of the film with a corresponding imagery of Native American peoples submerged, swimming in the waters of pre-colonial Virginia. In these opening and closing scenes, *The New World* establishes a dialectical relationship of vertical correspondences between watery womb and transcendent treetops, which is further intensified by Wagner’s “Vorspiel” from *Das Rheingold*. In Wagner’s prelude, three daughters ascend from the depths of the Rhine and, as they move upward, the orchestra plays an e flat major, gradually building with swells of power toward a polyphony of majestic sound. Wagner’s musical masterpiece, as well as its conceptual frame of the ring cycles, intensifies the film’s thematic coda of ascent so that the movement upward from womb to sky forms a pattern whereby beginning and end, below and above, flow into each other.

The New World situates this anagogic, circular pattern within the historical narrative of Pocahontas of the Powhatan Confederacy. Without ever being named, Pocahontas is placed as a mediating figure, occupying an intermediate position between birth and death, new and old, nature and civilization, etc., a pattern culminating in (but not resolved by) the final shot of tall pines, with the camera looking directly up along their massive bodies even while an acorn breaks off to fall below. In this final shot, Malick reinforces the circular

conception of history that he has been developing all along, the new world—that promised land into which the European colonists enter only briefly—serving as the transcendent vision at the top of the sacred tree. Although out of reach, this transcendent vision nonetheless expresses itself in matter, seeding itself, as it were, through the image of the falling acorn. Accordingly, the new world is both origin and end—and history itself, constituted in the imagery of life-giving waters and ascending pine trees, is the column or *axis mundi* that connects these correspondences.

In *The Tree of Life*, Malick develops his visual language for the sacred tree beyond the dialectical Romanticism that he employed in *The New World*. Here, he expands his symbolic repertoire by presenting mystical emanation and return in a triadic sequence of images that begins with a pre-emanated substance, develops in the process of emanation flowing downward, and concludes with conversion or ascent. Re-employing the camera perspective used for the pine tree from *The New World*, Malick brings to visual culmination a three-decade-long project that began under the title *Q* and was originally planned as a cosmic history opening in a “dark underwater world” where “a god with head of Minotaur” lies “sleeping” (Ebiri). In 1979, after the critical success of *Days of Heaven*, Malick and his team set out to realize this ambitious plan to portray “the history of the cosmos up through formation of the Earth [to] the beginnings of life,” but their efforts gradually unraveled as Paramount’s support for the project wavered and Malick retreated from the industry (Ebiri). Thirty-three years later, *The Tree of Life* preserves the themes of these early efforts, articulating a mystical, cosmic history with the now well-developed imagery of emanation and return represented in the symbolism of the sacred tree.

With a quotation from the Hebrew Bible, the film’s epigraph provides an immediate context for the imagery of divine creation: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? [...] When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” (*Job* 38: 4, 7). In the Bible, it is Job’s despair that solicits this divine reply—and quoting Yahweh’s response, Malick introduces the first shot of the film: a nebula-like image of fluid fire hovering in darkness. This image evokes Yahweh creating light over the face of the deep in *Genesis*: “Now the earth was unformed and void, and the darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (1: 2–3). From the traditions of Second Temple Judaism through to the Kabbalistic literature of medieval Europe, the spirit of God was often visualized as a type of spiritual fire hovering in darkness. In “The Mystical Torah,” an early Kabbalist text, for instance, the spirit of God in the opening of *Genesis* is imagined in terms of fiery emanation, manifesting, first, in the invisible, pre-emanated figures of the Written Torah



FIGURE 1 *Fiery nebula; abiding or moné*
THE TREE OF LIFE

and the Oral Torah, a “black fire” overlaid upon a “white-hot fire,” which when stirred takes the image of a “burning ember” and the “force of their emanation [becomes] a brilliant and burning fire” (Dan 73–77). *Exodus* 3: 2 provides yet another major instance of the spirit of God manifesting in the figure of a burning bush or tree.

Malick at once echoes this sacred symbolism and offers his own reading of the genesis narrative. As the self-contained, pre-emanated substance moves in itself, the main character of the film, Jack O’Brien, speaks through voiceover: “Brother ... Mother, it was they who led me to your door.” Jack addresses this pre-emanated substance not with the traditional evocation of God as “Father,” but first as “brother,” the brother that we will shortly find has died, and next as “Mother” in the figure of a fluid, fiery cosmic origin, a designation that echoes the reverence for the Mother goddess throughout *The New World*. With this pre-emanated imagery for the creator established, Malick begins to articulate the following stages of emanation in its descent and ascent by adopting the perspective of the mother as she appears in time, as a young girl and then as mother and wife. The mother of the O’Brien family, played by Jessica Chastain, now tells the audience: “the nuns taught us that there are two ways through life, the way of nature and the way of grace. You will have to choose which one to follow.” The mother’s voiceover is accompanied by a quick succession of images that undercuts this ostensible dualism between nature and grace, structuring the visual language of emanation and return with a more intricate series of correspondences.



FIGURE 2 *Procession*
THE TREE OF LIFE



FIGURE 3 *Conversion*
THE TREE OF LIFE

At first, we see the mother as a young girl looking out of an open window and smiling in wonder at the sun-lit world. As she embraces a baby goat, she is one with the natural world. Suddenly, the scene shifts, the camera turning upward to the sun shining brilliantly in the sky and then pointing below to an intimate close-up of sunflowers. Malick reinforces this vertical correspondence between the sun as an emanating power and the sunflowers as a responding,



FIGURE 4 *Correspondences: above*
THE TREE OF LIFE



FIGURE 5 *Correspondences: below*
THE TREE OF LIFE

organic self-constitution as he foregrounds the young girl watching cattle. In her care for the grazing animals, she enacts a symbolic representation of correspondences by a repeated gesture: in quick succession, she turns her palm upward toward the sky and downward toward the earth. In these brief, initial interactions with the world of natural beings, the young girl celebrates a flowing creation, above and below, grace and nature, emanation and return,



FIGURE 6 *Supernal water emanating downward*
THE TREE OF LIFE

intimately linked both in what she perceives and in her own expressive hand movements.

Within the first two minutes of the film, Malick thus establishes the mystical triad of pre-emanation, emanation, and return by the following imagery: 1) a fluid flame hovering in darkness; 2) a spiritual power descending from above in the figure of the sun's rays; and 3) organic nature responding in kind and growing from below in the imagery of sunflowers. The mother continues her descriptions of grace and nature, telling the audience that "grace does not try to please itself, accepts insults and injuries"—and as the narrative jumps ahead some three decades in time, the mother observes: "nature only wants to please itself, to get others to please it too, likes to lord it over them, to get its own way." Malick transitions from the young girl engaged in her ritual hand movements to a new visual correspondence: namely, the adult mother moving up and down on a swing attached to a bough above, the motif of descent and ascent reappearing but now with emphatic emphasis upon the swaying shadow underneath. The camera dips toward the earth; we can still see her body, but this turn downward intensifies the growing mimetic power of this stage of creation. Suddenly, the family table is set, and the mother serves dinner to her young family, the animals that she once embraced and admired presumably the sustenance upon which her family presently feeds, accentuating, on a more visceral level, what nature entails in its corresponding self-constitution.

Malick thus develops the correspondences of creation from above and below, the sun as emanating source and nature's mimetic self-constitution por-



FIGURE 7 *Anagogic tree*
THE TREE OF LIFE

trayed in the imagery of shadows, feeding, and gaming. The scene shifts again to portray the father, Mr. O'Brien, played by Brad Pitt, engaged with their children, spinning a football around him as his three boys chase it. Malick now re-emphasizes descent and ascent in a way that will, with some variations, repeat in the coupling of water and tree imagery throughout the film: first, the camera arched just above the precipice of a powerful waterfall that cascades downward, and second, a scene shot from below, panning upward along the limbs of an oak tree as the young boys climb into the sun. With this visual pattern of emanation and return coalescing in the imagery of descending waters and the ascendant tree, Malick provides an initial template of creation for the narrative movement of his film. The protagonist, Jack O'Brien, played in childhood by Hunter McCracken and in middle age by Sean Penn, must learn to access this structure of correspondences so as to reunite the dead brother and his family. Significantly, Malick appends a number of inter-related images to the image of the tree, emphasizing their interconnection by utilizing the same upward-moving camera technique. In the first ten minutes of the film, the camera pans up along the wooden rungs of a ladder tacked into the body of the anagogic oak. In a later section that follows a middle-aged Jack, the tree of life is re-figured as a young oak set among the reflective skyscrapers of Houston. As vertical mirrors reflecting the sky above, these architectural structures not only serve as supplements or substitutions but also serve an express purpose, allowing the audience to visualize Jack's ascending journey in an elevator, as he reaches the "door" or threshold that leads to the pre-emanated substance



FIGURE 8 *Anagogic architecture*
THE TREE OF LIFE

of creation. In the climax of the film, Jack finally passes through this doorway, entering into a timeless realm where everything at once pre-exists and is simultaneously reconstituted by the sacred heavenly waters flowing from above.

With this imagery of emanation mysticism, Malick presents a far-reaching esoteric symbolism that situates the film's visual language within a broad intercultural spectrum of religious and philosophical thought. The religious origins of this emanation imagery are ancient, moreover, and predate Hellenic civilization by thousands of years. The water of life and the sacred tree were certainly present in the oldest cultures of the Levant, in the figure of the ancient Israelite goddess Asherah as we saw earlier, and they were also incorporated into the religious culture of Mesopotamian civilization. It is in ancient Egypt that these two were most recognizably formulated within a creation and anagogic metaphysics that influenced the development of Hellenic philosophy, especially the formulation of emanation mysticism in late antiquity. While the Neoplatonic triad of abiding, procession, and conversion (*moné, próodos, and epistrophé*) maps onto Malick's triadic symbolism, Neoplatonism is only one of the contemplative expressions of a far older anagogic paradigm. The Heliopolitan metaphysics provided, as Algis Uždavinys observes, not only the "primeval hieratic model of all subsequent 'anagogic' philosophy," but also "an esoteric paradigm of 'theurgic Platonism', established at least two thousand years before Plato" (*Philosophy & Theurgy* 46).

The intercultural roots of Malick's esoteric coupling of water and tree imagery thereby extend to what is believed to be the oldest religious writings on

earth, the Egyptian *Pyramid Texts* that present “two opposing systems of theological thought, that of Re of Heliopolis and that of Osiris” (Mercer 3). These two systems coalesced in later dynastic Egypt, but in the texts themselves the solar theology of Heliopolis tends to dominate.³ Despite these varying cosmologies, the water of life remains a primary element throughout, representing the life-giving water of the Nile in mythological form as the original waters of chaos (*Nu* or *Nun*). From these waters arose the primeval mound of the world with its cycles of fertility—and, in Utterance 600 of the texts, the divine figure of Atum who ascends from the waters to complete his circuit in the solar heavens: “O Atum! When you came into being you rose up as a high hill, You shone as the *Benben* stone in the temple of the Phoenix in Heliopolis” (qtd. in Iamblichus xxxix).

The tree of life was similarly an important regenerative symbol, connected with Isis, the female mother goddess, and the Osirian afterlife (Neumann 48–53). It eventually took on a further significance in the ritualistic raising of the *djed* pillar, representing the *axis mundi* in the figure of a column interlinking the various levels of the cosmos, from the underworld to the fertile rhythms of the earth to the solar heaven above (James 94–95). In the Old Kingdom, the iconography of Osiris and the cult of pharaonic regeneration were also associated with the tree of life. In the ancient Egyptian texts, for instance, “the sycamore of the tomb of Osiris was addressed and personified as the divine hero” himself and “under it were the gods of the underworld” (209–210). The myth of Osiris, preserved eventually by Plutarch, replays principal elements of Egyptian creation mythology with the imagery of life-giving waters, the coffin-chest as the mound of the world, and the tree of life as the fertile stalk growing out of it and becoming the pillar upon which creation and civilization is completed. Set adrift, the floating coffin of Osiris was gently cast upon land and became the site upon which “a very beautiful and massive stock enfolded and embraced the chest with its growth and concealed it within its trunk” (Meyer 163). The king of that land so “admired the great size of the tree” that he “cut off the portion that enfolded the chest, which was now hidden from sight, and used it as a pillar to support the roof of his house.” Long after the Old Kingdom, the figure of Osiris’s *djed* pillar remained deeply embedded in Egyptian conceptions of regeneration. In the late period after 600 BCE, the *djed* pillar amulet “was one of the most common of all those placed on the mummy” (Andrews 44). As the sacred tree had entombed, and grown out of, the dead body of Osiris, so his amulet had the power of regeneration. In the *Book of the*

3 Mercer 3–4. See also Clark, *The Multiple Natural Origins of Religion* 233.

Dead, for instance, “a spell activates such an amulet, saying ‘Raise yourself up Osiris! You have your backbone once more, O weary-hearted One; you have your vertebrae!’” (44).

These elements explain to some degree the regenerative anagogic paradigm that was the basis for the ritualistic interlinking of the cosmos through the raising of the *djed* pillar. According to Algis Uždavinys, “the attaining of wisdom, salvation, and enlightenment is accomplished not through discursive reasoning and cultivation of sciences, but through the inner passage (philosophical ascent) leading upwards to the royal crown mounted on the sacred pillar, that is the central cosmic column or *axis mundi*” (*Philosophy as a Rite of Rebirth* 30). From this esoteric perspective, the sacred tree could be variably represented in the ancient world, so that pillar, body and ladder provide a kindred symbolism through which the ascent from earth to heaven could be conceived. As Uždavinys concludes, “this essentially invisible macrocosmic and microcosmic axis is represented by the sacred tree, the spinal column of Osiris (*djed* erect pillar), the body of the goddess Nut (Heaven) or the theurgic ladder constructed by the rays of divine light” (30).

In this context, Malick’s symbolism of the emanating waters and the ascending tree echoes the iconography and varied religious belief of Egyptian regeneration, but his spatial construction of the *axis mundi* corresponds even more fully with the Platonic heritage that succeeded it and played no small part in the formation of the ascent mysticism of the early Church. Diotima’s ladder of ascent from Plato’s *Symposium* at once retains the older regenerative symbolism of Egypt and presents the most famous Hellenic example of how this conception of renewal may appear in contemplative ascent. In the *Symposium*, Diotima teaches her student a method of contemplation so as to gain, as if by steps on a ladder, the perception of a greater unity. The great sea of beauty disclosed at the top of this ladder is an initiation into the highest of visions, for the adept gains a procreative power to birth forms of beauty (Plato 210d–e). Until this final vision, the student of love has had to experience self-knowledge only by degrees; at the top of the ladder, however, he is transformed, capable of regeneration. Here, the associations are potentially myriad, the sea of beauty providing a complex imagery for a unified, original substance, a cosmic womb, and a noetic source that, once accessed or channeled, bestows a godlike power to produce life anew. Located high above the various levels of the emanated cosmos, figured by the rungs of the ladder, the waters of regeneration are aspects of the One that, once perceived, bestows a creative, productive power.

Malick’s portrayal of the divine waters emanating and flowing downward into being and the tree of life ascending from below captures this complex spatial symbolism common to a great number of traditions, including the Platonic

ascent along the ladder into the emanating sea of beauty above. Centuries later, Plotinus provides a further symbology, portraying the divine waters of the One in terms of a mighty tree (*phuton*) that is constituted through a triadic conception of emanation and return. In *Ennead* 3.8.10, the “productive power of all things” at once abides in itself, proceeds downward through emanation, and constitutes itself organically:

What is it, then? The productive power of all things; if it did not exist, neither would all things, nor would Intellect be the first and universal life. But what is above life is cause of life [...] For think of a spring which has no other origin, but gives the whole of itself to rivers, and is not used up by the rivers but remains itself at rest, but the rivers that rise from it, before each of them flows in a different direction, remain for a while all together, though each of them knows, in a way, the direction in which it is going to let its stream flow; or of the life of a mighty tree which goes through the whole of it while its origin remains and is not dispersed over the whole, since it is, as it were, firmly settled in the root. So this origin gives to the plant its whole life in its multiplicity, but remains itself no multiple but the origin of the multiple life.

adapted from BUSSANICH 73–74

Here, Plotinus places the two images of divine water and the sacred tree together, emphasizing the divine source in terms of correspondences—that which is “above life” and that which is at the “root”—a source that generates the structure of Intellect and cosmos. As with Plato’s sea of beauty, Plotinus’s imagery preserves aspects of the older Egyptian prototype, the immortal waters or alchemical elixir holding the key to transmutation, for the spring both abides in itself and is “the productive power of all things.” Plotinus’s comparative analogy of *phuton*, alternatively translated as mighty tree or plant, presents a complementary perspective to the emanation downward of divine waters, a principle simultaneously constituting itself from below.

In the European Middle Ages, a kindred form of emanation mysticism flowered in the literature of the Jewish Kabbalah. While in the Platonic heritage the abiding sea of beauty or spring emanates forth through the medium of the *axis mundi* to find self-expression and correspondence in the material world, in Kabbalist literature this process takes a familiar and variable form in the separation of the primordial waters and the springing up of the tree of life in their midst. Considered to be the height of the medieval Kabbalist tradition, *The Zohar* describes the creation of the world in a manner that portrays the developing interconnectivity of the Divine through creation: “When the blessed Holy

One created the world, He brought it forth from water and arranged it upon water. [...] He divided the waters in two, half below and half above, and from them generated creations. [...] Between these two halves, He made a firmament" (Matt, *The Zohar* 189–190). The tree of life that then springs out of the firmament is not simply a symbolic representation of God's emanation; more properly, it can be understood as the formation of the *axis mundi* springing up in the midst of emanation, at once seeded from above and below and simultaneously joining each *sefirot* or emanation to each other.

The Zohar thus expresses the original emanation of the *sefirotic* structure of the cosmos not simply as a serial process, but more precisely as a growing interconnectivity that manifests the first triad of its becoming, from *Keter*, the crown, flowing downward to the right in *Hokhmah* and then to the left in *Binah*. As the first triad is completed and begins to generate the lower *sefirot*, this emanating process is imagined in different ways, but the imagery is unmistakably one of interconnectivity rather than simply serial progression: "For with You is the fountain of life—the blessed Holy One, who is a lofty tree in the midst of the Garden, grasping all sides. How so? Because that *fountain of life* embraces Him, adorning Him with supernal crowns all around the Garden, like a mother crowning her son over all" (196–197). In this way, genesis can be understood as a form of self-embodiment, rather than as a linear progression in which one becomes two and so on until the ten *sefirot* have emanated. Throughout *The Zohar*, one finds this type of emphasis upon the creative unfolding of *Ein Soph's* emanation into the ten *sefirot* as a type of connectivity, the emergent interconnection or correspondence within the form of a single living being: "The highest crown, *Keter Elyon*, is the royal crown, the skull, inside of which is: yod he vav he, path of emanation, sap of the tree, spreading through its arms and branches—like water drenching a tree, which then flourishes" (Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah* 50). Here, emanation expresses itself in a number of inter-related images, manifesting in the crown of consciousness and reaching more deeply within through a network that interlinks the crown to all the other parts of the flourishing body.

As with Plotinus in *Ennead* 3.8.10, the emanation mysticism of Kabbalah emphasizes a triadic structure through the simultaneous abiding of the One, its emanation into embodiment, and the participation of the multiple life in that becoming. This Kabbalist interpretation of ancient emanation mysticism powerfully illuminates Malick's depiction of how the plurality of the cosmos—not only the mutuality and love that exists between beings, but also the discordance and enmity—can be unified in the recurrent image of the fluid fire of creation hovering in darkness. On a basic level, Malick's main character, Jack O'Brien, is the *axis mundi* itself, for the tree of life and the various other

pillar-like tropes such as sunflowers and Houston skyscrapers stage his interior transformation. In this respect, the voices of the narrative, all the voices speaking to each other across time and to a greater unity above the various levels of emanation—they are all facets of one consciousness. “Father. Mother. Always you wrestle inside of me. Always you will,” O’Brien declares toward the end of the film. This is a significant admission, placing the great cosmic becoming of the One within individual consciousness and experience, affirming individual agency and choice. It also resolves the dualism that plagues the unfolding of the One on a certain, determinate level of reality, for the conflict of opposites, the male and female struggling within the self through the perspective of time, are reconciled to each other in the ascent, their higher union achieved not only through the down-pouring of the emanating mind, but also through the human being’s effort to interlink the various potentialities that he or she finds to be discordant in time.

II The Salt Union and the Alchemical Restoration of the Divine Body

While essential to the structure of the film, Malick’s triadic symbolism forms only one half of the film’s representation of creation. Appearing five times throughout the film, the primordial fluid fire hovering in darkness serves as both the first and final shot, uniting the beginning and end and emphasizing an image of *moné* or abiding. From this point of view, everything in the cosmos is manifest, at once abiding in itself and returning to itself through its own circular labor. Where Malick presents the triadic emanation structure as the film’s initial visual symbolism, he also evokes a magical variation, which mirrors the processes of emanation downward and return. From the perspective of human consciousness in time, the regenerative art must be discovered and practiced; in other words, it must be constituted in time and thus requires an agent. In accordance with this view, Malick presents this magical *topos* as the second half of the chiasmic figure of creation, the original pattern of emanation flowing downward and re-ascending thereby inverted and completed in the alchemical ascent and descent so prevalent in the film’s emphasis upon resurrection and embodiment in the closing scenes.

Malick’s previous film, *The New World*, expresses, as we have seen, a very similar structure with its circular conception of history and the death of Pocahontas situated between the corresponding imagery of sacred waters and transcendent treetops. In *The Tree of Life*, death is not so effortlessly sublated by the circularity of cosmic self-becoming; on the contrary, Malick powerfully evokes the figure of the dead body as the central dilemma of the film, and he devel-



FIGURE 9 *Circular stasis*
THE TREE OF LIFE

ops this pattern with a much more autobiographical dimension than any of his previous films. Filmed largely in Smithville, the film captures aspects of Malick's own rural postwar upbringing in Waco, Texas, presenting the life of a close-knit family and concentrating particularly on the turbulent relationship between the eldest son and his domineering father. The touchstone of the film, however, is undoubtedly the death of the second son, which many have tied to the tragic events surrounding the death of Malick's younger brother, Larry, who reportedly committed suicide in 1968 while studying classical guitar with Andrés Segovia in Spain (Wickman). Much of this personal background is hidden, but can be inferred from the film's context and imagery. In the first section, immediately after Malick has established his initial visual coda of abiding, emanation, and return, the mother receives a Western Union telegraph informing her of her son's death. The next scene provides imagistic clues: the camera sweeps through the family home, resting upon a classical guitar and indicating that the young blond boy, introduced mere minutes before, is dead.

With John Tavener's "Funeral Canticle" as the opening score, *The Tree of Life* thereby presents the problem of the un-resurrected body, the son becoming just a series of fond "memories," as one family friend tells the mother. Instead of continuing to visualize a flowing creation in which correspondences establish creative emanation and anagogic return, Malick now portrays the circularity of correspondences without the express privilege of an emanating principle. With the setting sun behind him, the father learns of his son's death in a telephone booth. Here, at this level of death and material stasis, correspondences begin to



FIGURE 10 *Death*
THE TREE OF LIFE

breakdown: the father cannot properly hear his wife's voice over the receiver; meters away the whirling propeller of a plane drowns out the possibility of clear communication. The camera stops, the setting sun imagistically paralleled by this spinning image of mechanistic circularity. In a film in which the camera is always moving, this long dramatic pause on the spinning object clearly emphasizes just how powerful this stage of material death and stasis can be. At this juncture, moreover, it is not simply communication that breaks down, but the very possibility of correspondences themselves that is jeopardized.

In these final minutes of the film's first section, Malick explicitly accentuates this theme of material death as the diminishment of the *axis mundi* at a certain stage in cosmic creation. While the whirling propeller of the plane drowns out the father's voice, his wife faces a similar predicament on the other end of the receiver. She stands by a shuttered window in the family home. Unlike her childhood self that embraced correspondences by repeatedly turning her palm up toward the sky and down toward earth, this adult self has tasted the bitterness of death. She no longer looks outside with the vantage of the open window, for the window of the family home is shuttered, in turn implying that the *axis mundi*—the medium linking above and below, inside and outside—is imperiled or potentially mediated. Malick intensifies this dilemma with the camera looking directly up at a stained-glass spiral on the dome of the family's church and, in striking inversion of this, he turns the perspective upside down, capturing the memory of children playing football, their shadows dancing on the sunlit ground. By turning the perspective upside down, so that the



FIGURE 11 *Dominance of mimesis*
THE TREE OF LIFE

shadows appear above and the sky below, Malick inverts the initial pattern of correspondences, indicating that, from the point of view of material death, the mimetic weight of matter has gained dominance over the emanating power from above. As the camera retraces its now familiar upward movement along the body of the family oak, the branches are barren, the only sign remaining of its former life being the ladder nailed into its body, subtly suggesting on another level of signification the un-resurrected body on the cross.

If the *axis mundi* no longer coherently operates on this level of material reality, then the principal task of the film consists in restoring its power and reestablishing correspondences. As we will see, this goal of regeneration through correspondences powerfully underscores a Hermetic and alchemical subtext to Malick's film, and it is here that we return to the hieratic and sacramental magic of ancient Egypt that, according to a number of esoteric interpretations, was transformed into a contemplative philosophy by the Greeks and survived in the theurgic practice of the late Neoplatonists. Although suppressed by the Catholic Church, this tradition was never fully stamped out, surviving in the Arab world, emerging piecemeal in medieval Europe and flowering in the Renaissance with various manifestations of *prisca theologia* or "the ancient wisdom narrative" (Hanegraaff 67–68). From the Florentine Academy to the spread of Platonic Orientalism and the ancient wisdom narrative throughout Europe, various interpretations of a lost or secret tradition of *prisca theologia* developed, a tradition whose origins could be found alternatively in Zoroaster in the cases of Plethon and Marsilio Ficino, in Hermes Trismegistus in the case



FIGURE 12 *Crucifixion*
THE TREE OF LIFE

of Lodovico Lazzarelli, or in Moses in the case of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (58). In much of the Western alchemical tradition, the *Emerald Tablet* or *Tabula Smaragdina* was one of the principal sources for this *prisca theologia*, instructing the adept on how to establish the correspondence of the microcosm and the macrocosm, the below and the above and, in the process of this transmutation, how to elicit the *prima materia* so as to produce the philosopher's stone or elixir of life. As Hermes Trismegistus instructs in the text, "that which is below is like that which is above, and that which is above is like that which is below; by these things are made the miracles of one thing."⁴ This poetic imagery has been variously interpreted as a symbolic rendering of laboratory distillation or a spiritual method of illumination and healing. In all of these trajectories, the express aim is for the adept to draw power from the correspondences that operate in the cosmos.

In Malick's film, the narrative arc similarly involves the task of reestablishing correspondences in order to achieve regeneration. As the second section of the film begins, the fluid flame hovering in the darkness reappears, and Jack O'Brien once again addresses it through voiceover: "How did you come to me. In what shape, what disguise?" The flame begins to transform into the flashing multi-colored lights of the city perceived from the side of a moving

4 For various translations of the *Emerald Tablet of Hermes*: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/alc/emerald.htm>.

vehicle. The camera then approaches a half-open doorway and cuts to Jack on the other side, the perspective of the camera half-turned toward the opening, but moving ahead nonetheless. With this visual technique of thresholding, Malick connects the eldest son in the O'Brien family, introduced in the opening minutes of the film, to the middle-aged man who suddenly appears on the other side of the threshold. This movement suggests, however subtly, that the process of reestablishing correspondences—those that exist on either side of the threshold as well as those that exist at the bottom and top of the *axis mundi*—involves a dynamic, even radical form of self-transformation or transmutation.

In this context, the “shape” and “disguise” to which the speaker refers are more than simply external aspects of the emanation of the divine; more properly, they *are* the material becoming of the One. From this point of view, Malick both appropriates the contemplative symbolism of the Platonic heritage and simultaneously incorporates a magical view of emanation that survived in the Hermetic tradition. One explicit indication of Malick's connection to Hermetic philosophy is his depiction of the snake in this process of cosmic creation. Unlike the serpent in traditional Judeo-Christian narratives, Malick's snake is not a liar or deceiver; rather, as Jack's search for his brother takes the form of a vast cosmic journey from the big bang to the emergence and evolution of sentient life, the snake swims out across the waters of creation. Malick visually maps the body of the snake onto that of the anagogic tree, utilizing the upward-looking camera technique that he repeatedly employs with the tree. In numerous sequences, the camera ascends along the body of the family tree, capturing the sun shining through its branches. Here again, the camera looks upward to the coiling body of the snake as it moves in the sun-lit water, a decidedly positive feature of cosmic self-becoming.

In the long middle section of the film, Malick reinforces this image of the snake as a figure of self-transformation with the O'Brien children in bed listening to their mother read from Rudyard Kipling's *Adventures of Mowgli*: “They went off to look for Kaa the Rock Python. They found him stretched out on a warm ledge in the afternoon sun, admiring his beautiful new coat” (39). Malick's inclusion of this passage at once undercuts the traditional Catholic portrayal of the serpent and evokes the esoteric *ouroboros* and its circular labor of self-transformation. In Kipling's passage, the emphasis lies upon Kaa's ancient age and, most importantly, the self-production of a beautiful new skin: “He had been in retirement for the last ten days changing his skin and now he was very splendid—darting his big blunt-nosed head along the ground, and twisting the thirty feet of his body into fantastic knots and curves, and licking his lips as he thought of his dinner to come” (40). Kipling's own esoteric interests,



FIGURE 13 *Anagogic serpent*
THE TREE OF LIFE

his active involvement in Freemasonry and its influence upon his writings are well established, but what Malick's inclusion of this passage underscores is the magical impetus of self-transformation that imbues the complex interlinking of images following the film's initial triadic pattern of abiding, emanation and return. Jack's circular path—his ascent of the *axis mundi* and his descent back into being at the film's close—is precisely the Hermetic and alchemical pattern that the film engages and celebrates.

Malick's depiction of the snake swimming across the waters of creation also echoes a common ancient Egyptian motif in which the primordial waters of chaos took the shape of a coiling serpent (Salaman 123). In the Hermetic tradition, the snake or its other variant, the dragon, is a sacred symbol of creation and regeneration, figured most prominently in the ancient figure of the *ouroboros* and appearing in the *Poimandres*, often considered to be the foundational text of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. For much of the twentieth century, the Egyptian background of the Greek texts was minimized, but in recent decades many scholars have argued that these texts are an explicit Hellenic adaptation of the solar theology of ancient Egypt. Peter Kingsley, for instance, makes the case that the irregular Greek spelling of the name of the Hermetic God Poimandres was translated for centuries to mean the "Shepherd of Men," when the more accurate Egyptian etymology means "the understanding of Re" (1–24). In the dialogue, we potentially encounter a very old conception of divine emanation that takes the form of a coiling snake before transforming into the anagogic *logos*:

I saw an endless vision in which everything became light—clear and joyful—and in seeing the vision I came to love it. After a little while, darkness arose separately and descended—fearful and gloomy—coiling sinuously so that it looked to me like a snake. Then the darkness changed into something of a watery nature, indescribably agitated and smoking like a fire; it produced an unspeakable wailing roar. Then an inarticulate cry like the voice of fire came forth from it. But from the light ... a holy word mounted upon the watery nature, and untempered fire leapt up from the watery nature to the height above.

COPENHAVER 1

Poimandres reveals his unlimited nature to Hermes Trismegistus through a triadic structure that should be now familiar to the reader: 1) “the pre-principle that exists before a beginning without end”; 2) its downward emanation into being; 3) and its ascent. In relation to the anagogic paradigm of Hellenic contemplative philosophy, the symbolism of the spiral snake is an important aspect of the emanation of the One and its fluidic transformation through the primordial waters of chaos. As George Mead, a prominent practitioner and scholar of esotericism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, explains, the “darkness comes forth from within outward” and “spreads downwards in sinuous folds like a Great Snake, symbolizing, presumably, the unknown, and to him unknowable, mysteries of the differentiation of the root of matter of the cosmos that is to be. Its motion is spiral, sinuous, unending vibrations—not yet confined into a sphere; not yet ordered—but chaotic, in unceasing turmoil” (Mead, “Commentary on the Pyramander”).

Importantly, this spiral movement promises alchemical regeneration, which over the centuries took on a number of prominent forms appearing, for instance, as the philosopher’s stone, mercury, salt, fiery or oily water, and gold—substances and symbols that were believed to embody or represent matter purified through either contemplative practice or laboratory experimentation.⁵ The close of the dialogue emphasizes the impetus of the regenerative process to be more than a contemplative paradigm, more than the individual holding the emanation process in his mind. In accepting the “holy word,” Hermes himself becomes godlike, providing, in turn, the watery elixir to others: “I sowed the words of wisdom among them, and they were nourished from the ambrosial water” (Copenhaver 6). Here, we find expressed the magical variant of the tri-

5 See *prima materia* in Haeffner, *Dictionary of Alchemy* 208–211; and Rulandus, *The Alchemy Collection* 192–193.

adic emanation process, one that is concerned not simply with the contemplative noetic ascent of the individual, but with the process afterwards, the descent by means of which the individual provides spiritual enlightenment to the whole tribe. The *Emerald Tablet* explicitly outlines this pattern spatially: "it rises from earth to heaven, so as to draw the lights of the heights to itself, and descends to the earth; thus within it are the forces of the above and the below."⁶ In his last major work, Carl Jung now fully devoted to his psychological inquiry into alchemical images helpfully distinguishes this magical pattern from traditional contemplative forms of ascent: "In contrast to the Gnostic-Christian prototype that depicts first the descent and then the ascent, in alchemy the ascent comes first and then the descent" (219).

Moshe Idel describes the operation of a similar magical model in the Hekhalot literature of late antiquity as "ascending on high and bringing down some form of esoteric knowledge, either in the form of magical names, of remedies or of a magical reading of the Torah" (31). In the treatise named *Shimmushei Torah*, "Moses is described as ascending on high and, after a contest with various angels, not only the Torah is revealed to him but also the way to read it as a magical document [...] through the divine names" (31). This magical model of ascent and descent similarly maps onto the spatial dimensions of alchemical laboratory experimentation of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. As is well documented, alchemical distillation "was often depicted as a two-fold process, consisting of 'ascension' and 'descension,' symbolized by birds in upward or downward flight" (J. Reed 33). One of the primary alchemical distilleries of the Rosicrucian Enlightenment was the Pelican into whose base the alchemist placed his materials. Once inside, these materials were heated so that a transformation could occur through the spatial trajectories of ascent and descent. Terence McKenna provides one of the best descriptions of this process in his well-known documentary on the Rosicrucian Enlightenment: the material "rises into the higher imperium of the vessel, there rarified it condenses, liquefies and flows down into the cooler domain of the child of the pelican. Here the essence is collected, the quintessence, and always the hope that the next experiment, the next combination of materials would yield the *elixir vitae*, the *lapis philosophorum*, the completion that the alchemist sought" (qtd. in Rocklin).

Malick incorporates this mystical structure of ascent and descent both with his score, particularly "Ascending and Descending," a piece composed by David Hykes and performed by the Harmonic Choir, and with the spatial movements

6 See the *Emerald Tablet of Hermes*: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/alc/emerald.htm>.

of his protagonist. As we have seen, Jack's ascent in the Houston skyscraper is much more than a solitary contemplative practice; his ascent to the supernal heights at the top of the *axis mundi*, figured, as we saw earlier, in the coupling of tree and skyscraper imagery, not only allows his brother to achieve resurrection, but also consists in Jack's own regeneration as he takes the descending path back into being. Malick liberally employs practices and motifs from a number of mystical traditions to portray this process of ascent and descent. In the first half of the film, we initially see Jack marking the memorial of his brother's death by lighting a blue *Yahrzeit* candle. In Kabbalist teaching, the observance of the twenty-four-hour memorial flame plays a special role in the family and community helping the spirit of the departed loved one achieve his or her own ascent or *aliyah*.⁷

After well over an hour of this intermingling of cosmic and familial history, Jack thus ascends the *axis mundi*, his own ascent or *aliyah* paralleling Moses' *visio Dei* that has been long interpreted as an ascending path leading to the actualization of God's holy covenant in the Torah (Mackie 165). In Malick, we find this perennial imagery of return, ascent or *aliyah*, the wanderer in the desert entering at last into the Promised Land to be among the community of souls who are gathered along and within the waters of life. In this place of eternal abiding and simultaneity, Jack embraces his youthful mother; he walks alongside his father who also appears younger than him, and his brother is restored to his childhood self whom Jack picks up and embraces. With the reestablishment of correspondences, the triad of abiding, procession and conversion is also reinstated: the waves of a great body of water rolling neither upwards nor downwards, even while the waterfall cascades downward and the anagogic tree blooms once more.

In these supernal watery heights, the "disguise" or external "shape" falls away, a stage of uncovering symbolized by a dramatic mask sinking in the water. Jack has partaken in the magical practice of divine naming, for at various stages throughout the film, he calls the fluid cosmic fire by the names of his family; these are the names that have led him to the noetic threshold; "it was they that led me to your door," as he articulates in the first utterance of the film. In his combative relationship with his father and his abuse of his younger brother, he had not understood their underlying divinity. "I didn't know how to name you then. But now I see it was you," he says through voiceover, initiating the final stage of ascent which concludes in the resurrection or alchemical regeneration of the dead body. Malick provides a dizzying array of images to portray this

7 See Baal Shem Tov, "3: 2 A Book of Remembrance."



FIGURE 14 *The salt union*
THE TREE OF LIFE

final feat, the ladder of ascent reaching into the sky, bodies lying wrapped in a field as the camera tilts upward, and the hand of the dead body reaching out of the grave. Here, the suicide, if indeed contemporary reviewers and scholars are correct in relating the dead brother in the film to the suicide of Larry Malick, is restored to eternal life, his *aliyah* magically performed by the mother, who strides gracefully in the sunlight that gleams across a vast field of salt.

Malick's selection of the Utah salt flats as the location for the restoration of the dead body possesses the most explicit alchemical significance of the entire film. Indeed, salt was seen as a mercurial substance, "a magical preservative elixir." Paracelsus taught, for instance, "the theory of a natural balsam, which he conceived as a salty preservative which shields the body from corruption, decay and old age" (Haeffner 22). A well-known sixteenth-century alchemical prayer powerfully expresses this complex of images: "O holy and hallowed Trinity, Thou undivided and triple Unity! Cause me to sink into the abyss of Thy limitless eternal Fire, for only in that Fire can the mortal nature of man be changed into humble dust, while the new body of the salt union lies in the light" (Stavish 130–131). In the film, the mother is at once unified in the salt and simultaneously represented in triadic form, her three various selves in time (the child, young girl and woman depicted at the beginning of the film) enacting the task of resurrection. The "salt union"—the albedo or whiteness of the sun and the salt—achieved through the triadic mother concludes the ascent, and as the film approaches its close, the emanating power of the sun above is now (re)incarnated into a field of sunflowers. By reinstating this initial

imagery in the final minute of the film, Malick thereby initiates the movement back into life, the elevator in the skyscraper also descending toward the earth and Jack walking out smiling, his annual day of mourning and remembrance now transformed by wonder as a newly planted oak opens its leaves among the mirroring skyscrapers.

This second magical pattern of ascent and descent conveys not only the mystical symbolism of Christianity, the tree of life as the nexus of crucifixion and resurrection, but also a complex of primordial images that were variably developed in the ancient religious practices of Egypt and the contemplative philosophy of the Greeks, two traditions that found an influential, if not uneasy mixture in later Alexandrian and Middle Eastern Neoplatonism. With the emergence and development of Hermetic and alchemical forms of knowledge in medieval Europe and the Renaissance nearly a millennia later, this *prisca theologia* promised to bestow the knowledge of the past, the possibility of a face-to-face engagement with the divine life, believed by many to have been experienced by Moses when he ascended the mountain to bring down the covenant to the wandering Israelites or, again, by his contemporary the Egyptian Hermes who bestowed the ambrosial waters upon those who would participate in the divine life. Malick maps out this pattern spatially as an ascent to the supernal waters above and a corresponding descent in which the alchemical restoration of the divine body is achieved and the power of the *axis mundi* reestablished.

Departing from the various settings he has used thus far, Malick strengthens the *axis mundi* with one last image and provides an explicit American frame of context for his visual epic. In the penultimate frame before the final reemergence of the abiding nebula flame, the camera lingers on the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. Where in the ancient world, the sacred tree connected the various dimensions of the cosmos vertically, from the underworld to the solar heavens, here, Malick re-imagines this relationship of correspondences with a more contemporary, American symbolism in the figure of the bridge, which when it first opened in 1964, “boasted the longest suspended span in the world” (Adler). Envisioned by its engineers as a “gateway to the New World,” the bridge is also a reminder of the age of discovery and its Renaissance context, for its namesake is the great sixteenth-century Florentine explorer Giovanni da Verrazano who explored large portions of the North American coastline from Newfoundland to Florida, claimed and named New France for his patron Francis I, and is credited with first exploring New York Bay and Narragansett Bay. While very little is known of Verrazano today, he has enjoyed a rather fantastical afterlife as the subject of alternative historical speculations about the rediscovery of a pre-Columbus Templar colony and clandestine Catharian mis-



FIGURE 15 *Verrazano-Narrows Bridge*
THE TREE OF LIFE

sions to the New World.⁸ In Malick's film, the bridge does not require further mythologization; in the visual context of the film itself, its very architectural majesty reinforces the resurgent power of the *axis mundi* as a bridge between worlds, whether those worlds are spiritual or material.

At the film's close, moreover, Malick seeks to bridge the modern divide between religion and science, evoking the earlier Renaissance belief in a secret science capable of restoring the human being to grace. For the great figures of the Renaissance and equally for many of their Enlightenment successors, spiritual questions were not divorced from earthly affairs. To be sure, the alchemical desire to achieve regeneration in this life or to discover the secrets of matter through laboratory experimentation—these were not mutually exclusive preoccupations, but part of the same project. Similarly, the material body that Malick champions at the film's close is more than a figure of rationalist ontology, as some critics suppose; rather, this purified body is both a nexus of correspondences and an evolving, self-transforming pattern in deep time. *The Tree of Life* is steeped in these two overlapping insights, even while offering a unique, even idiosyncratic vision of the modern world from the postwar period to our own, from the hierarchal Christianity of rural America, represented by the austere violence of the father, to the advanced technological industrialization of the twenty-first century figured in the gleaming, reflective skyscrapers of Hous-

⁸ See, for instance, Steven Sora's *The Lost Colony of the Templars* (2004).

ton. Whether the principle that ties our shared existence together may bloom once more appears to be in our own hands, Malick implies, for transformation requires agency and may be practiced through the correspondences that connect our daily lives to the creative life that abides in each moment of becoming.

Works Cited

- Andrews, Carol. *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*. Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1994.
- Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Israel. "3:2 A Book of Remembrance." *Kabbalah Online*. http://www.kabbalaonline.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/2561220/jewish/32-A-Book-of-Remembrance.html.
- Bussanich, John. *Philosophia Antiqua: The One and its Relation to Intellect in Plotinus*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Publishing, 1988.
- Clark, Richard. *The Multiple Natural Origins of Religion*. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2006.
- Copenhaver, Brian P., ed. *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Dan, Joseph, ed. *Early Kabbalah*. Trans. Ronald C. Keiner, preface by Moshe Idel. New York: Paulist Press, 1986.
- Denby, David. "Terrence Malick's Insufferable Masterpiece." *The New Yorker*, May 21, 2011. <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/terrence-malicks-insufferable-masterpiece>.
- Ebiri, Bilge. "Thirty-Three Years of Principal Filming." *New York Magazine*, May 16, 2011. <http://nymag.com/movies/features/terrence-malick-2011-5/>.
- Haeffner, Mark. *Dictionary of Alchemy: From Maria Prophetessa to Issac Newton*. London: Karnac Books, 2004.
- Hadley, Judith M. *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2000.
- Hamner, M. Gail. "Filming Reconciliation: Affect and Nostalgia in The Tree of Life." *Journal of Religion & Film* 18. 1 (2014): 1–29.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Hedesan, Georgiana D. "Reproducing the Tree of Life: Radical prolongation of Life and Biblical Interpretation in Seventeenth-Century Medical Alchemy." *Ambix* 60. 4 (2013): 341–360.
- Iamblichus. *On the Mysteries*. Ed. and trans. Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jack P. Herschbell. Atlanta GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.
- Idel, Moshe. *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders*. Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2005.

- Jaffa, Richard. *Man and Mason—Rudyard Kipling*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2011.
- James, Edwin Oliver. *The Tree of Life: An Archaeological Study*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Publishing, 1966.
- Jung, C. G. *Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 14: Mysterium Coniunctionis*. Ed. and trans. Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014.
- Kingsley, Peter. "Poimandres: The Etymology of the Name and the Origins of the Hermetica." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 56 (1993): 1–24.
- Kipling, Rudyard. *Puffin Classics: Adventures of Mowgli*. New Delhi, India: Penguin Books India, 2009.
- Mackie, S. D. "Seeing God in Philo of Alexandria: Means, Methods, and Mysticism." *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 43. 2 (2012): 147–179.
- Malick, Terrence. *The New World*. Burbank CA: Warner Brothers, 2005.
- . *The Tree of Life*. Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2011.
- Marinatos, Nanno. *Minoan Kingship and the Solar Goddess*. Champaign IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013.
- Massey, Gerald. *Ancient Egypt: The Light of the World*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Matt, Daniel C. *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995.
- , trans. *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, Volume 7*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.
- Mead, G. R. S. "Commentary on the Pymander (*Poemandres*)." *Thrice Greatest Hermes, Vol. 11. The Gnostic Society Library*. gnosis.org/library/grs-mead/grsm_pymander_commentary.html.
- Mercer, Samuel A. B., trans. *The Pyramid Texts*. New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1952.
- Meyer, Marvin W., Ed. *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
- Neumann, Erich. *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974.
- Plate, S. Brent. "Visualizing the Cosmos: Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life* and Other Visions of Life in the Universe." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80. 2 (2012): 527–536.
- Plato. *The Collected Works of Plato*. Eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. New York: Pantheon Books, 1966.
- Reed, John. *From Alchemy to Chemistry*. Mineola NY: Dover Publications, 1995.
- Reed, Rex. "Evolution, In Real Time! Terrence Malick's Ponderous 'The Tree of Life' Ponders the Meaning of Existence." *New York Observer*, May 24, 2011. Web.
- Rocklin, Sheldon, Maxine Rocklin, and Morgan Harris. *The Alchemical Dream: Rebirth of the Great Work with Terence McKenna*. Prague: Mystic Fire Productions, 2008.
- Rulandus, Martin. *The Alchemy Collection: A Lexicon of Alchemy*. Ed. Adam Goldsmith. Vitriol Publishing, 2012.

- Salaman, Clement. "Echoes of Egypt in Hermes and Ficino." *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*. Eds. Michael J. B. Allen and Valery Rees, with Martin Davies. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Publishing, 2002.
- Sora, Steven. *The Lost Colony of the Templars: Verrazanno's Secret Mission to America*. Rochester VT: Inner Traditions, Bear and Co., 2004.
- Stavish, Mark. *The Path of Alchemy: Energetic Healing and the World of Natural Magic*. Woodbury MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2006.
- Uždavinys, Algis. *Philosophy & Theurgy in Late Antiquity*. Foreword by John F. Finamore. Kettering OH: Angelico Press/Sophia Perennis, 2014.
- . *Philosophy as a Rite of Rebirth from Ancient Egypt to Neoplatonism*. Westbury, UK: The Prometheus Trust, 2004.
- Wickman, Forest. "Terrence Malick's Personal Period." *Slate Magazine*, April 13, 2013. Web.
- Witcombe, Christopher. *Sacred Places: Trees and the Sacred*. <http://witcombe.sbc.edu/sacredplaces/trees.html>.