Harding University
Scholar Works at Harding

Honors Theses Honors College

12-10-2021

A Leap into Communion: Kierkegaard and Spiritual Practices in _To the Wonder_

Madeleine Hall
Harding University, mhall7@harding.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.harding.edu/honors-theses

Part of the Ethics in Religion Commons, Film and Media Studies Commons, Literature in English, North America Commons, and the Metaphysics Commons

Recommended Citation
Hall, Madeleine, "A Leap into Communion: Kierkegaard and Spiritual Practices in _To the Wonder_" (2021). *Honors Theses*. 5.
https://scholarworks.harding.edu/honors-theses/5

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at Scholar Works at Harding. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholar Works at Harding. For more information, please contact scholarworks@harding.edu.

HARDING UNIVERSITY
HONORS COLLEGE
Undergraduate Thesis Certification

This form is to certify that the undergraduate thesis prepared

By Madeleine Hall

Entitled

A Leap into Communion: Kierkegaard and Spiritual Practices in _To the Wonder_

Is dually approved by the Harding University Honors College and the student's thesis advisor(s) with input from the entire thesis advisory committee.

Thesis Advisory Committee:

Heath Carpenter, Ph.D.	Kraig Martin, Ph.D.
Mac Sandlin, Ph.D.	
Amy Qualls, Ph.D.	

This thesis, to the best of our knowledge, was published with the highest standards of academic integrity as outlined in the Harding University Academic Integrity Policy and in the use of any materials that are copyrighted.

Thesis Advisor(s): Heath Carpenter, Ph.D.

Honors College Representative: James Miller, Ph.D.

Copyright © 2021 Madeleine Hall: The author assigns to Harding University a perpetual, non-exclusive, worldwide, royalty-free, sublicense agreement to 1) deposit and store electronic versions of your work in Scholar Works at Harding; 2) publish and make the work available to view and download for free and to use for non-commercial, research, educational or other academic purposes; 3) create back-up copies of the work for security and preservation purposes; and 4) Convert the work, without changing the content, to any other format or medium necessary for preservation, storage and use of the work.

Harding University

A Leap into Communion

Kierkegaard and Spiritual Practices in *To the Wonder*

Madeleine Hall

English 4520

Dr. Heath Carpenter

10 December 2021

Abstract

The study of metaethics contains the question of where value comes from. Different theories of goodness encourage tracing goodness back to God, saying that goodness is that which is like God (the resemblance thesis) or that which perfects nature (the perfection thesis). Kierkegaard participates in these questions of goodness, and in *Fear and Trembling* concludes that the moral absolute of the *akedah* reveals a good, Divine mystery. *Fear and Trembling* is a work of Christian existentialism that encourages an internal faith that embraces mystery rather than attempting to conquer it. Rather than trying to understand exactly who God is, Kierkegaard promotes reverence and faithfulness in light of a baffling absolute. Terrence Malick's film *To the Wonder* (2012) bears theological similarities to Kierkegaard's writing in that it honors the mystery of God and encourages reverence. However, *To the Wonder* stands in contrast to Kierkegaard's leap into internal faith, presenting instead a leap into communion with the Divine. The characters in the film leap into communion in two different ways--the woman Marina through play (self-forgetting), and the priest Father Quintana through service (self-giving). For these two, internal faith has proved inadequate to resolve their internal struggles. They look outside of themselves and find peace in communion with others and with God. Through the symbols of water and light, Malick directs his audience's attention to the presence of Divine love throughout the characters' lives. Though often polluted and diluted, love is always present. The film closes with uncertainty, but the characters have found peace through play and service as the goodness of God redeems their unknowing and turns it into wonder.

Acknowledgements

Any success or personal growth that I have experienced at Harding University has been a direct result of the mentorship of the school's faculty. Had it not been for Dr. James Huff's guidance, I would not have known where to begin or how to properly pose any meaningful research questions. He is brilliant and kind, and I look up to his work ethic and person. Without Dr. Heath Carpenter's encouragement and wisdom as my primary advisor for this project, I would have stumbled into more literary and rhetorical traps than I can really describe. Dr. Carpenter is creative, hilarious, and a genius, and it has been an honor to learn from him. The members of my thesis committee, Dr. Mac Sandlin; Dr. Amy Qualls; and Dr. Kraig Martin were instrumental in amending the mistakes of this paper's drafts. Dr. Sandlin's willingness to think alongside me and force me to find concrete grounding for my thoughts helped me to know where to begin. Dr. Qualls' eye for beauty and her mentorship in teaching me to think critically about the literature I consume has made me a better writer and better person. Dr. Martin's expertise in metaethics and existentialism is the reason for much of the confidence I mustered in those sections of my work. These people's knowledge and exhortation were completely necessary in finishing my work here; you have my sincerest thanks and utmost admiration. I hope to grow up to be more like all of you.

A Leap into Communion: Kierkegaard and Spiritual Practices in *To the Wonder*

Christian existentialism tends to fall short. In *Fear and Trembling,* Søren Kierkegaard asserts the incomprehensibility of God, which is the foundation for Christian existentialism, and his stance is helpful--but Kierkegaard uses that infinite unknown to guide the reader toward an internal leap into faith. Christian existentialism, for Kierkegaard, is a matter of self reflection. Terrence Malick's film *To the Wonder* (2012)*,* however, offers an alternative response that sets the audience free from that lonely abandon. Rather than looking inside themselves for faith, Malick's characters take a leap into communion with Divine love. That communion takes on two different forms throughout the film: the woman, Marina, in self-forgetting (play) and the priest, Father Quintana, in self-giving (service). Before their leap into communion, these characters are in a state of disintegration--introspection tempts them to despair. But as they play together and serve those around them, they see the character of God open up before them and their own characters become concrete. Through visual concretions, Malick puts a refracted form of love on screen in the symbols of water flowing over dirty land and light shining through suburban windows. The characters fall short, but by the end of the film, they have submitted to the director's alternative to Kierkegaard's leap of faith. Marina finds joy in play, and Father Quintana finds relief in service. Imperfect love guides these characters back to the perfect source. Communion reveals to them the Father's love--Marina's voice reflects, "If you love me, there's nothing else I need." The individual is swallowed up in communion and loses themselves in the body of Christ.

Malick's communion is most clearly defined as a relationship with Divine love. *To the Wonder* explores the loving nature of God, and contemplates how that love improves and redeems human lives. This love is not a far-off thing, but a presence surrounding and filling the

characters in the film. This communion also demands action from his audience. The defining difference between Malick and Kierkegaard is the looking outside of oneself rather than fixing one's eyes within. It would be inadequate to identify the need for communion without exploring the practical applications of it. Therefore, analysis of *To the Wonder* must include and be followed by reflection on how to step into self-forgetting and self-giving, or play and service, respectively.

Malick's transition from Kierkegaardian faith to Malickian communion best suits a Christian audience, because he asks the Christian to open her eyes to goodness beyond religious conventions. The narration in *To the Wonder* asks of God, "Where are you leading me? Teach us to seek you," and Malick's answer to this question will ask the Christian to maintain that, wherever there is good, there is God. Within the sphere of Christian religion, the goodness of God is often explained through delivered doctrine, but communion with the Divine leads the individual to see God in what their soul tells them is good. One must learn to discern goodness, and then attribute that goodness to a divine source. *To the Wonder*'s use of symbols, and examples of service and play, offer insight into how one might go about discerning that goodness. If one can find that goodness, he can find God himself.

Big answers do not come easily, and very rarely come with certainty or exact definition. The work of discerning the Divine goodness "belongs not to practical reasoning but to metaethics or metaphysics," (Charlton 341). Metaethics is the study of the origins of moral value and obligation, and issues of value bring about theories of goodness. Divinity itself cannot be written down on a page or logically fit into some box of goodness. Rather, it is a thread of light woven throughout many aspects of the human experience. According to classical ethicists, such as Aristotle and Aquinas, there is the perfection thesis, which ascribes goodness to that which

perfects a thing's nature. Along a more contemporary vein is the resemblance thesis, which states that that which is good is that which is like God.

We see good in friendship, in service, and in play. Joseph J. Kotva explores how theorizing about goodness is not sufficient to know what is good, and points to experience instead, writing, "Theory cannot reflect the complexity, specificity, and decisiveness of good moral reasoning. Nor can theory substitute for experience and practice in practical reasoning. Theory can provide an outline. The picture must be drawn in experience" (32). Something is good, then, if it is good in experience rather than just in theory. Knowing what is good and knowing how to pursue it is a result of living life and moving through it with eyes that want to see the good, that want to see God.

The direct connection between goodness and the character of God can be traced from classical theology up to Kierkegaard, and then clearly identified in *To the Wonder*. Plato's writings assert that "when we correctly perceive anything as valuable or good, as worthy of love or admiration, we are apprehending, albeit imperfectly, the Good itself; this points to an experiential ground of belief in a transcendent Good" (Adams 50-51). While classical theologians do not always agree on the exact nature of goodness, they do agree that God is truly good. Saint Aquinas, Aristotle, and Augustine guide their readers in seeing that goodness and tracing it back to its original source.

The writing of Saint Aquinas argues that in the things that humans decide are lovely, they find an innate loveliness that pulls them back to God himself. Craig Boyd writes of Aquinas' perspective on the goodness around us, "[nature] is a reflection of the goodness of God" (143). It is not just in ecclesiastical settings that a person interacts with pure goodness--it is in trees, in the wind, in gazing at the sky. It is in the love of a friend, in the experience of receiving wisdom or

being a part of a family. If one has eyes to see goodness, she has eyes to see God. Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* explores God's goodness,

> The divine essence itself is charity even as it is also wisdom and also goodness. Just as we are said to be good with the goodness which is God, and also wise with the wisdom which is God because the goodness by which we are good, and the wisdom by which we are wise is a participation in the divine wisdom. So it is also with charity by which we formally love our neighbor is a participation in divine charity. [...] Yet we are created for more than simply "Aristotelian goods": we are created for communion with God and with one another. Grace transforms and reorients the human affections in ways that "perfect" our created nature so that we can participate in the life of the Trinity and in the lives of our fellow creatures (Boyd 154, 157).

To know goodness, love, and wisdom is to *know God.* The classical foundational Christian teachings on these subjects guide Christians to the understanding that, if one wants to commune with God, one must seek to encounter goodness, love, and wisdom.

The looking for good as a search for God is not just the way of Aquinas--there are echoes of this metaethical thought in other foundational theologians, as well as in the work of Kierkegaard and Terrence Malick. In fact, much of Aquinas' theology is born from the philosophical work of Aristotle. William Charlton writes, "[Aquinas accepts] Aristotle's definition of goodness as 'what all things aim at' (Nicomachean Ethics 1 1094a3)" (334). Here

again there is an understanding that goodness is not a thing handed to humankind with a specific definition, but rather a thing that the wise learn to discern. By tracing the common thread of what the pursuits of humankind are aiming toward, one can start to consider what is good. When something beautiful happens to an individual, they can attain the wisdom to say, "This must be what God is like"-- for if there are things that humans typically deem honorable, or lovely, or brave, then there must be some basic good within them. Wouter Goris explains further that the desires of humans may lead them to the true good, writing, "[Aristotle] proclaimed the transgeneric and analogical character of the good and opened with an authoritative definition: 'the good is that which all desire' (Arist., Eth. Nic. I, c. 1, 1094a2-3)" (11). When there is something that all people long for, there must be something about it that is good. This belief is founded in the idea that the human heart is intentionally crafted with specific desires. If these desires are common, then these desires point to a common Creator. That basic goodness, according to Aquinas and in accordance with Aristotle, is connected to and, according to some theologians, the *very essence of* the Divine. Goris quotes Aristotle, "since a thing is desirable only insofar as it is perfect, and is only perfect insofar as it is in act, the goodness of a thing depends on the actuality of its being" (11). To really know if something is good, one must see it in action. So goodness must be something that is experienced and remains good throughout that experience. However, beyond being, this goodness exists outside of its concrete roots. Good must be encountered concretely, but that goodness points beyond the experience--it gestures to the Divine, which gives that goodness its very quality.

One of the clearest examples of what happens when someone learns to see the Divine good wherever it is, is in the writing of Saint Augustine in the first book of *Confessions*:

> You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. [...] But surely you may be called upon in prayer that you may be known. [...] They will praise the Lord who seek for him. [...] Who will enable me to find rest in you? Who will grant me that you come to my heart and intoxicate it, so that I forget my evils and embrace my one and only good, yourself (3, 5)?

Augustine has searched his heart and found what lies within it that longs for the Divine. He traces these desires back to God, suggesting that these latent longings are really just pathways that guide the human soul to find its Maker. He believes that there is no goodness, no rest, except within communion with the Father. To know the Father, however, is as simple as looking for him and asking to know him. In doing so, one removes herself from her own lack of goodness and dives into the good that runs through the universe, both physically and metaphysically.

The final step in discerning goodness as the character of God is to pull the concrete pieces into a larger, metaphysical understanding of God. Sandra Laugier writes of these concretions, “Here are the materials strewn along the ground--Emerson doubles and naturalizes ‘ground’ with ‘materials’ - the ground is not a base on which to construct philosophy, Culture, or revolution, but rather is the very materiality of the ground” (1052). Rather than making some theory of goodness based on these materials, the theory itself is just a collage of all of the goodness we know. There is a direct connection between the concrete and the untouchable good. The ordinary becomes lovely as one learns to recognize the good in it, and constructs his understanding of the Divine good based on the beautiful everyday. Laugier sees this glorification

of the everyday in *To the Wonder,* calling it “revolutionary” (1052). No one needs to say what exactly is good, because this way of discernment is a work of using the world around to know what is Divine. Laugier draws from Thoreau, “Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads” (1053). Somehow, the concrete that surrounds humankind guides them to the good above them. There is no direct theory or logical explanation, but rather an understanding that there is something beyond us that determines that there is a Divine good that surrounds all people and can be pulled from the world around them. The work of seeing good in the everyday is not “knowing the ‘ultimate reason’ of the phenomena of nature, but of establishing a connection to ordinary life and to its details, its particularities” (Laugier 1043). By communing with nature and with the loveliness that fills it, one can commune with the Divine goodness himself. In continuing to look for the good, we train ourselves to see better, and to know better who God is. But when it is impossible to know the whole nature of God for certain, Christians are faced with the predicament of God’s incomprehensibility. This is when Kierkegaard steps in, presenting Christian existentialism.

Typically, “-isms” are philosophical movements defined by sets of theories, but existentialism is different. There is no set of beliefs to define existentialism; rather, existentialism is a movement in response to modernity, created by people reacting to the meaninglessness of a mechanical and harsh world. Existentialism recognizes the ruthlessness of nature, and considers whether any meaning can be made or mined from this universe. Kierkegaard, as a Christian existentialist, explores the relationship between reason and faith, tinting his perception of a meaningless world with a belief in the God of Israel.

Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* is a foundational work of Christian existentialism that explores the theological and metaethical implications of the *akedah* (the binding of Isaac). In this

treatise on the teleological suspension of the ethical, Kierkegaard concludes that, to combat over-theorizing of the nature of God and embrace the unknowability of the Divine, is to make a leap into faith. This leap, for Kierkegaard, is largely internal. *Fear and Trembling* disapproves of the one who "is not content with doubting everything but goes further" (31). Kierkegaard laments the philosophical tendency to move beyond what is mysterious and incites wonder--he believes that dwelling within that incomprehensible cloud is the end goal of philosophy.

Much of Kierkegaard's argument for wondering at the Divine is rooted in his own relationship with God. He writes about his experience in considering the *akedah*, saying, "His enthusiasm became greater and greater, and yet he was less and less able to understand the story" (37). It is impossible to fully grasp the beauty and faith of a father who is willing to sacrifice his son out of obedience to God. There is something profoundly moving happening here in the story of Abraham, and Kierkegaard knows that it is impossible to explain exactly what the gravity of the situation is. As he moves deeper into the mystery, Kierkegaard is swallowed up by it instead of conquering it. He does not suddenly comprehend the *akedah,* but instead grows in reverence and appreciation for its complex beauty.

Within the greater context of Kierkegaardian scholarship, it is necessary to acknowledge that Kierkegaard does not see faith itself as wholly irrational. Rather, Kierkegaard views faith as something above and against reason (Evans 124). The human mind is not capable of understanding God, and it is misguided and sinful to assume that one would be able to comprehend the Divine. Evans writes that "the Kierkegaardian leap of faith is hardly a blind leap into the dark, as it is often portrayed. The believer both knows what he is leaping to, and why he is leaping" (129). The beauty of mystery is enough to draw the believer into faith, but

Kierkegaard is clear in expressing that faith is against reason due to the limitations of humankind in understanding the infinite God.

According to *Fear and Trembling,* no great thing exists beyond faith itself. Kierkegaard "was not a thinker, he felt no need of getting beyond faith; he deemed it the most glorious thing to be remembered as the father of it, an enviable lot to possess it, even though no one else were to know it" (Kierkegaard 38). He is not interested in making others aware of his faith, because for him, faith is intrapersonal. And this faith is better to him than certainty; this passion is better than knowledge. He writes, "Even though one were capable of converting the whole content of faith into the form of a concept, it does not follow that one has adequately conceived faith and understands how one got into it, or how it got into one" (34). Faith does not even look like knowing things with precision, or being able to explain everything that impacts the individual. Rather, one allows himself to be affected by the magnitude of Divine mysteries and raw holiness, and is fed and changed by it. And this growth is achieved alone; honoring the work of Descartes, Kierkegaard notes, "Descartes was a quiet and solitary thinker, not a bellowing night-watchman; he modestly admitted that his method had importance for him alone and was justified in part by the bungled knowledge of his earlier years" (32). Kierkegaard values individual discovery, not an announcement of fact or theory to a large group. He uses his experience and expertise to confidently devote himself to his own pursuit of faith, his own movement into the mystery of the Divine--just as Kierkegaard moves into the incomprehensibility of the *akedah.* This internal leap of faith is an action that belongs to what Kierkegaard calls the "knight of faith"--one who exemplifies the correct posture of fear and trembling. He writes, "The knight of faith is obliged to rely upon himself alone, he feels the pain of not being able to make himself intelligible to others, but he feels no vain desire to guide others" (150). The knight of faith is not exhibiting

allegiance to some order of other knights--he is responsible for his own pursuit of the Divine. His internal journey involves only his own efforts, only his own submission to mystery.

Fear and Trembling is not the only work of Kierkegaard that explores internal faith in response to Divine mystery. The prayers of Kierkegaard further reveal his love for God, as well as his theology of introspection and internal faith. It is not that Kierkegaard is uninterested in communion with the Divine, but simply that he has a method leaning toward one-on-one relationship rather than a community. In *The Prayers of Kierkegaard,* he says of God, “Thou art love of such a sort that Thou Thyself dost woo forth the love which loves Thee, dost foster it to love Thee much” (92). He equates the nature of the Divine to love itself, and claims that, as one experiences this love, she becomes more enamored with God. This dynamic is a circle of affection suggesting that to interact with God will be to fall deeper into him as one sees his goodness, is drawn into it, and sees it further. Furthermore, his love is the remedy to suffering. Kierkegaard asks, “Whither should we turn, if not to Thee, Lord Jesus Christ? Where might the sufferer find consolation, if not in Thee? Ah, and where the penitent, if not with Thee, Lord Jesus Christ?” (83). The God whom Kierkegaard loves and pursues is the Triune God of Israel, the Father who sends the Son as sacrifice and the Spirit as friend and helper. The work of this God is to relieve suffering; in fact, suffering is best alleviated by communion with this Trinity. But this communion is internal, though Christians are surrounded by the people of the church. Kierkegaard reflects on the holy communion, “How could we then but with faith render unto Thee praise and thanksgiving and adoration in Thy holy house where everything reminds us of this, and reminds especially those who today are assembled to receive the forgiveness of sins and to appropriate to themselves anew the reconciliation with Thee in Jesus Christ?” (121). This external, communal act of the physical communion guides Kierkegaard into an individual

consideration of his own relationship with the Father. Rather than looking around oneself or within others, the individual Christian "[appropriates] to themselves anew the reconciliation with [God] in Jesus Christ." For Kierkegaard, the ecclesiastical communion is a time of individual reflection and connection with God. His prayers continually focus on this personal relationship, asking, "O God, to each one severally whom Thou beholdest laboring and heavy laden with the consciousness of sin, do Thou give rest for his soul" (115). The conviction of the sinner lies personally on the heart, and God himself is asked to relieve this guilt. When the hurting or lament of the individual is directed solely toward the Father rather than to the whole church as well, the individual relationship is prioritized over the community's pursuit of righteousness. According to Kierkegaard, "One knows God through 'coming to oneself as nothing' such that one's own story, one's own testimony, is all that one has" (Simmons 242). Kierkegaardian theology points to individual thought, conviction, and growth. Within this mode of thought, the emphasis of spirituality is the communion of the individual with the Divine. What exactly this communion looks like, however, depends on Kierkegaard's posture toward the incomprehensible nature of God himself.

Kierkegaard's philosophy of Christian existentialism--that is, the acknowledgement that God cannot be understood in totality, and that his truth and greatness is ungraspable--disdains any standardized set of philosophy, for the existence of any collection of truths is antithetical to God's incomprehensibility. Kierkegaard declares, "I prostrate myself with the profoundest deference before every systematic 'bag-peerer' at the custom house, protesting, 'This is not the System, it has nothing whatever to do with the System'" (35). Kierkegaard is not interested in declaring truth--he is in the business of recognizing that truth as ungraspable, and of knowing that God is ultimately unknowable, unable to be shoved into a philosophical box. Truly, *Fear*

and Trembling "imitates the principles which, paradoxically, disdain the very concept of principles" (Walther 755). In his treatise on the *akedah,* Kierkegaard offers several narrative options for the states of mind of the acting characters in the story, and concludes that none of his narrative explorations really get at the weight of the binding of Isaac. All the versions listed of the *akedah* hold glimmers of truth yet fall short of the real thing--such is the journey of faith. The faithful person is not one who says, "This is what I think, and this is what I think is true," but instead explores all of the options and recognizes that none of our metaphors, storytelling techniques, or artistic endeavors will ever be able to fully encapsulate the Divine. However, we continue trying to tell the story.

Kierkegaard claims that, in the face of something convictingly beautiful and good, those who witness the story are compelled to pass it on. He writes, "As God created man and woman, so too He fashioned the hero and the poet or orator" (45). He paints Abraham as an ideal hero, and claims that those who are not heroes must be poets--there are the ones who do great things, and ones who sing of those great stories. For Kierkegaard, the story of the *akedah* is so compelling that all people must celebrate it. Its striking beauty and deep mystery pulls people in so heavily that they must tell the story again and again, must gaze into the wonder and allow themselves to be taken in by an internal faith, which is content to stop at and dwell within faith itself. Walther describes the Kierkegaardian experience, "The faculties of intellectual and conceptual knowledge turn into 'madness'; and if the human mind indeed has eyes and wishes to see, it becomes 'paralyzed' and 'blind'" (756). Kierkegaardian faith continually moves away from certainty and into wonder--into fear and trembling. Kierkegaard claims, "For if one makes faith everything, that is, makes it what it is, then, according to my way of thinking, one may speak of it without danger in our age, which hardly extravagates in the matter of faith, and it is

only by faith one attains likeness to Abraham" (67-68). There are glimmers of hero and poet within those who celebrate and pursue the faith of Abraham, for they see the good, speak of it, and even become it. However, one might ask whether Abraham is actually the highest hero--Christians certainly could consider Jesus of Nazareth as the perfect hero, and themselves as eternal poets, followers telling the story of Christ. Just as Emerson speaks of concrete materials of beauty, which can be combined into a collage pointing toward the Divine goodness, so too might Christians use their imperfect vision to piece together a faith that more accurately dives into the mystery of the Christ--a faith that sees the beauty of the hero, Jesus, and dwells within his goodness as they encounter it in the everyday.

The Kierkegaardian experience of fear and trembling, then, is the result of wonder in the face of Divinity. Walther describes this state of not knowing and yet believing, "To be naked and single before the eyes of the absolute and transcendent is very much like the ambivalent feeling of freedom and loss--the mark of anxiety" (757-758). It is a visceral experience to come face to face with what cannot be grasped--but this visceral experience is, according to Kierkegaard, where faith is born. The issue of knowing there is a universal good, and yet encountering it in an objective and incidental way, creates a tension within humankind; "The 'logic' of de Silentio's invocation of temporal syntax [...] needs its counterpart outside time which is Christ, and, at the same time, it falls back upon the silence or incomprehensibility of itself, which is the condition for the vocation in the first place" (Walther 764). The dichotomy of heaven below and heaven above, as seen in classical metaethics, is still present in Kierkegaard's work--Christ is outside of time and yet is present now. Here again is an incomprehensible mystery, and one that should be embraced rather than conquered or explained away.

Terrence Malick is unafraid of facing these great mysteries in his films--he is known for tackling metaphysical grandeur, and whether or not his efforts are celebrated ultimately depends on the audience. Eric Hynes has described another of his films, *Voyage of Time,* as "colossally hubristic;" his narrators speak of internal conflict while the screen explores the great wonders of the universe and the life that inhabits it (14). Malick's works maintain an emphasis on spirituality and a heavy use of poetic voiceover, but their cerebral nature somehow takes a bit of the spiritual and lays it at the audience's feet. His films are "comforting not in the way of packaged answers, but as a reminder that the world doesn't revolve around us, that we don't always have to bear the burden of meaning" (Hynes 1415). If an audience attempts to ascribe too definite of a meaning to Malick's films, or raises criticism at the difficulty of doing so, they run the risk of missing Malick's goal--that is, to offer aesthetic pleasure with a multitude of interpretations, and thereby inviting his audience into the philosophical work he is doing. Even before we look specifically at *To the Wonder,* the reception surrounding Malick has primed us for a Kierkegaardian disregard for "the system." There is a wealth of beauty and symbolism to reflect upon in Malick's films, but Malick himself is wholly uninterested in providing a definite statement on the way of things. If anything, Malick's assertion throughout his filmography is that we are only grasping at the goodness of the universe in which we dwell.

Direct analysis of *To the Wonder* requires an understanding of the language of Malick's films, which is consistent in this specific work. Approaching *To the Wonder* as if it were a direct, objective narrative will ultimately leave the audience feeling lost. Instead, it would do well to transition from the typical expectations of storytelling into a more impressionistic experience. Vivian Sobchack views the film less as a narrative and more as a poem, writing, "Instead of cognitive, reflective, and after-the-fact sense-making, [it makes] sense--if we let [it]--sensuously,

experientially, in the phenomenological 'now' of seeing, hearing, and touching (if always also at a distance)" (51). Rather than asking what the characters are doing, or what will happen next, the audience should be considering their own response to the work--*what am I feeling, what does this mean for me, what should I do next? What is beautiful about this? What is ugly? Why is it so?* But Malick is not concerned with answering these questions for his audience--he simply guides them into that state of unknown--guides them to the wonder. His film is "nothing if not earnest about [its] own reach for transcendence and some universal truth" (Sobchack 53). There is no one moment that hands out Malick's conclusion, but instead a multitude of beautiful things to pull from. The film opens with the question, "What is this love that loves us?" and after providing hundreds of possible answers, simply concludes with, "Love that loves us. Thank you." Malick is recognizing the desire for goodness and the longing to know what exactly that goodness is, and he invites the viewer to walk alongside him as he searches for it.

Malick grounds his search for meaning in concrete experience. As he attempts to take hold of the universal, his work looks like asking abstract questions in a cerebral voiceover while his characters directly engage with the world around them. Sobchack points out that "[*To the Wonder*'s] actual cinematic grasp of existence itself is insistently concrete and hyperbolically precise" (53). The narration is talking to God, but Father Quintana is holding the hands of the sick and visiting those in prison. Marina's partner, Neil, takes her daughter swimming, and Marina visits her neighbors. So here is the tension: where is the middle place between our concrete lives and our attempts at understanding the universal? Sobchack critiques *To the Wonder*'s abstract nature, asking, "How does one resolve the paradox of an experience that was both immersive and alienating?" (50). This moment of questioning is when it becomes necessary to recognize that Kierkegaardian introspection will not be enough to sustain the searching soul.

Big thoughts and bigger questions won't let us escape the ground beneath our feet. There are two options for the searcher--to stay inside of themselves, seeking an independent faith; or to move without, and look into the world and the hearts of those around them. Malick's dichotomy between the heavenly and the earth, the above and below, suggests that these two spheres might be more intertwined than we think--maybe the universal finds its footing in the concrete experience of communion. The opening soliloquy in *To the Wonder* presents this dichotomous drama as an action of light; we are born into darkness, we see a spark, and we "fall into the flame." The rest of the film attempts to provide a concrete example of what this might look like.

What does it mean to fall into the flame? *To the Wonder* acknowledges the ungraspable nature of the universal, but offers a response that sets the audience free from that lonely abandon. Marina narrates, "You brought me out of the shadows . . . brought me back to life." She may be talking about her romantic partner, Neil, but she may also be meditating on the Divine love, which she considers in her narration throughout the film. But the specifics matter less than what is being said about what love does to someone. In *To the Wonder,* love pulls someone out of darkness and into light--out of something bad, and into something good. The question remains, how do these characters come into contact with this love? By what means may a person fall into the flame?

Under the assumption provided by the metaethics of theologians and philosophers above that God is goodness, the communion in *To the Wonder* is being with God and becoming of God, through the act of becoming acquainted with goodness by external action. From the beginning of *To the Wonder,* Marina and Neil are surrounded by beautiful sights, but the film focuses on their love for one another and where it goes wrong. The true beauty here is the love that people share through self-forgetting and self-giving. The concrete leap into communion is reflected in the

layered meanings of a line at the beginning of the film; Marina and Neil approach an architectural structure named "the Wonder," and go up the stairs within and without it. Marina narrates, "We climbed the steps. To the Wonder." Marina calls attention here to the title of the film, but also to the semi-spiritual, semi-concrete journey of stepping into the incomprehensible. The couple's small trek becomes a microcosm of each person's individual journey into Divine love. In "Little Gidding," T.S. Eliot writes,

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.

Eliot is not aiming to know anything new--he echoes the goal of Kierkegaard, and predicts the work of Malick. Rather than coming upon some great new revelation, Eliot hopes to better understand what he is already a part of. Kierkegaard does the same in *Fear and Trembling* as he disavows the system and the endless clattering of philosophers who would pick apart the universal. In the same vein, Malick is not aiming to resolve the great unknown--he simply hopes to gain surer footing in discerning goodness and finding rest within Divine love.

Aiding his audience in understanding the significance of play and service, Malick provides symbols that guide the viewer to consider the human yearning for goodness itself. Marina narrates, "What is this love that loves us? That comes from nowhere. From all around. The sky. You, cloud. You love me, too." For Malick, humans do not just exchange love. When we love another, we participate in and receive the great Divine love that permeates the universe. That goodness fills the physical world just as it does the spiritual--the world around Marina

ministers to her alongside those who love her. The symbols in *To the Wonder* of light and water speak to this in-between of the spiritual good and the way it permeates the physical world.

Throughout *To the Wonder,* light acts as a symbol of love, as the characters reach for God, for pure goodness. The characters often stand by windows; there is always some natural light, some pure love washing over them. Typically, there is little to no artificial lighting within the room--the only way the audience has of seeing the people on screen is the light given directly by the sun. Yet despite this pure source, there remains a barrier between the character and the light. The pane of glass separates the warmth of the sun from the person who stands beneath it. Characters reach for these windows, moving in and out of shadows and pulling themselves toward the light. There is a physical gravity of light in *To the Wonder,* which seems to pull Marina and Father Quintana toward it in an irresistible dance.

As Father Quintana searches for the light of Divine love, he complains, “How long will you hide yourself? Let me come to you. Let me not pretend. Pretend to feelings I don’t have.” Rather than being overcome with passion like Marina (who spends much of the film dancing, laughing, and running around), Father Quintana does not know how to locate the feeling for God that he once possessed. Yet as he moves around the church building at which he ministers, a janitor stands beside a window and guides Father Quintana to join him in putting his hand to the stained-glass windows. The janitor looks to Father Quintana and says, “I can feel the warmth of the light, brother. That’s spiritual.” Quintana mimics him, and reaches for the light despite the barrier of glass that still remains. Here is the leap into communion: though there is still separation, this man reaches out and tries to physically touch the goodness he longs for. The janitor shows Father Quintana the way to finding genuine light.

Conversely, artificial light leaves Marina wanting. After leaving Neil and returning to Paris, she says, “I feel stripped bare. I don’t know where I’m going.” Marina is surrounded by false light in Paris; the subway, the cityscape, and the station illuminate her through fluorescence. But what is not pure does not feed the soul, and the false light of Paris fails to fill Marina up.

Yet there are moments that Marina portrays the most directly satisfying relationship to light in the film. She speaks to God:

> I feel so close to you that I could almost touch you. There is always this invisible something that I feel so strongly which ties us so tightly together. I love this feeling even if it makes me cry sometimes. It is so strong, this conviction that I belong to you.

There remains a solid, though nearly negligible, barrier between Marina and the Divine love that she pursues. But as she embraces this light, Marina embraces herself. Standing in front of the window light, both naked and both allowing themselves to be shined upon, Neil and Marina bask in their love for one another and the way that the love of light illuminates their beloved.

And yet, even as light illuminates goodness in these characters, it also highlights brokenness and reveals what could be loved and redeemed further. Father Quitnana, as he visits those in prison, touches people through glass. He is giving himself to service, but still sees others through a veil. As he ministers to a particular criminal, the man receiving a blessing remarks of the light coming through a window, “That sun is just right in my eyes.” There is a discomfort that comes with turning the lights on after sitting in a dark room, and there is a similar pain that accompanies the gift of love after dwelling in suffering. The criminal tells Father Quintana in a

yearning tone that *he just wants to be free.* He is surrounded by barriers that block him from interacting directly with this light that represents Divine love, and in this longing he parallels the struggle of Quintana. He longs for rest in Divine love, yet something stands between his physical being and the spiritual. All that is left for him is to leap into communion--to put his hand to the glass.

Malick's use of light reveals his understanding of love and what it does to people. We see each other best when we allow our perception of another to be informed by love--not an artificial, piecemeal attempt at affection, but the genuine kind that comes from God. But even in the purest efforts, there is still a separation between the Divine love himself and the people that try to imitate it. Yet these men and women, once they have given it a shot, cannot help but keep trying.

Beyond light, water is used as a symbol for love throughout *To the Wonder*, and the purity or impurity of water allows Malick to explore the consequences and implications of pure and impure love between human beings. One thing is certain--humans tend to fall short in loving each other. The beginning of the film shows Marina and Neil standing on the edge of the sea, watching the tide come in, barely dipping their toes into some great love. They will spend the rest of the film trying to move deeper in. When they relocate to the United States, the camera delves deeper into the water as Marina and Neil move deeper in love. Marina narrates, "My sweet love--at last."

The dichotomy of above and below, of good and evil, is clear in the symbol of water as well. However, it is not the water itself that is dirty, but the land over which it flows. This pure thing that holds no inherent imperfection becomes unsafe and undesirable because of where it is coming from, and where it resides. Marina's romantic partner and eventual husband, Neil,

repeatedly fails to love. Neil moves with Marina and her daughter, Tatiana, from France to the United States in order to complete a job analyzing pollution levels in water, which parallels and foreshadows his love becoming toxic in itself. Much of this failure to love is a result of Neil's self-focused motivations in engaging with his family. We see this reflected in his play, as he goes fishing, pulling life for himself from the water that symbolizes love. He uses the backyard hose to shower Marina and Tatiana in water--he covers them in love, but Tatiana remarks, "There's something missing." Rather than letting the love within him flow freely and unselfishly, he seeks his own gain and thereby constrains the goodness within him that he might otherwise give away. When Neil takes Tatiana swimming at a pool, he lusts after another woman there. The swimming pool is contained water, contained love--and this is where Neil's eyes begin to wander. He hoards and imprisons love, and thereby allows it to become imperfect.

Divine love is purer than human love--Father Quintana narrates, "There is a love that is like a spring coming out of the earth," that is, Divine love is notably better than what we have received from our fellow people. In the same way, the characters in *To the Wonder* wrestle with the reality of Divine love, how it rests upon their hearts, and how they are unable to replicate it perfectly. Marina laments, "My God, what a cruel war. I find two women inside me. One full of love for you. The other pulls me down towards the earth." Heaven above is where love lies--the earth is where it falls apart. Water springs from the Oklahoma earth, and as Neil examines it, he finds it unsafe to consume. The sound becomes busier and dialogue more overwhelming as Neil investigates the water quality of a community that seems to be of a drastically lower income. There is strife and pressure where water is impure. What is supposed to nourish and give life becomes a thing that is making the people of this community unwell. Marina asks of God, concerning his presence and perfect love, "Where are we when we're there? Why not always?

Which is the truth? What we know up there? Or down here?” The way that love is diluted, separate from the Divine source and experienced imperfectly leaves the characters grasping for who God might be. They look around themselves, and find him in the goodness of the ordinary and everyday.

In their own efforts to see goodness, and therefore see God, Malick’s characters participate in the spiritual practices of play and service. Marina’s particular strong suit is playing. *To the Wonder* does not show her in a state of service, but she is consistently playful. She plays with her daughter, with her lover, and even by herself. She forgets any pretense or faux maturity, and embraces the practice of silliness and experimentation with the world within her and around her. She uses her imagination and finds love through play. These little activities offer no professional advantage; in fact, they may be detrimental to the purpose of earning money.

The practice of playing is neglected by those who are supremely focused on monetary success. In Western culture, what doesn’t put one forward in money or power pulls him behind. But there is a different growth than what comes from monetary success; there is the nourishing of the soul, the uncaging of the spirit that it might flit about the room of its hollow skeleton. The question often posed to children, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” assumes that we finish growing, and that we become whatever job we will choose. Our whole being will then reside in the work we do. When we are kids, we do not labor. True, we have homework and daily chores and we go to school all day, but if you ask a kid what he does, he will not say, “I’m a student.” A little boy will tell you that he plays. With his friends, with his toys, with his family. If work is for the purpose of work, it folds into itself and sucks life of its richness. But play is an argument against this constant labor--humans were not made to provide a product. Humans were

meant to be creative, to live creatively. Play pulls us out of ourselves, into the silliness and humility of self-forgetting.

Play looks like board games, a deck of cards, a group sitting around a table playing Dungeons and Dragons, a board game, a video game, or sports. But play goes deeper than games--the work of play is the act of participating in a story that is bigger than oneself, or engaging in an activity with no monetary gain. It requires participation, and asks the player to pretend, to imagine, or to invest in something other than their personal success. Any level of play requires a foundation of being willing to set seriousness aside. In *To the Wonder,* we see Marina abandon solemnity for this joyful practice of playing.

Marina's practices for playing are clear. She jumps on beds in the different places she lives, and often invites her family into doing so with her. She plays with little items, finding entertainment in simple things. She makes a practice of appreciating nature--spending time outdoors, gardening, taking walks. There are often branches and flowers seen lying around her home. And many times, when Marina is playing, she is directing her joy at another person in the room. She becomes a clearer character on screen as she interacts with others. Play moves her into self-actualization through communion.

Neil himself, though often an example of failed love, still performs effective practices for play. He uses a camcorder to capture the beauty around him; his little device does not recreate beauty in fully accuracy, but his small efforts reflect a practice of recognizing beauty in the first place. He is seeing the beauty in the ordinary, the Divine in the everyday. Marina and Neil engage with their community; they interact with their neighbors and spend time with them in their homes and yards, eating and talking together. They allow the love they share together to permeate their community.

Marina and Neil's relationship exhibits many strong instances of play. Differently from Jane, another of Neil's love interests, binding herself before Neil and declaring that she trusts him, Neil invites Marina into trust as he allows her to repeatedly fall into his arms. Marina narrates, "Love makes us one. Two. One." Love is a dance of affection, where two people bleed into one another and become inseparable and at times, indistinguishable. "I in you. You in me." Neil loves Tatiana by taking her swimming, teaching her the names of the wildflowers, and calling her daughter. She responds by writing her thoughts on his back, and asking if he loves her. He says, "Of course." All of these instances of relationship, family, and community are tinted with a carefree, playful sort of love that encourages vulnerability and joy. The practice of play permeates this unit's ability to be honest with each other, and to thereby feel more cherished, more held.

Yet many of the ways that love might fall short in play are evident in Marina and Neil's relationship as well. Marina at times hides behind curtains; she and Neil love each other through veils, failing to see each other for who they truly are. As their love faces hardship, Marina asserts the issue as herself trying to limit what love can be. "I try to cradle you. To make you contain yourself. An avalanche of tenderness." Marina is in need of opening her mind to what love might be, what it might hold for her beyond what she already knows. She must look beyond herself--forget herself--and lean into the beauty around her that goes unrecognized. A lack of playfulness allows for a growing seriousness that ossifies what vulnerability could have brought Marina and Neil nearer to each other; a failure to play turns into a failure to love.

J. R. R. Tolkien is a wise guide as one considers the work of play. His poem "Mythopoeia" asserts the value of writing and reading myths:

> The heart of Man is not compound of lies,

> but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,
>
> and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,
>
> Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.

Tolkien claims that the work of telling good stories reminds people of goodness itself--in drawing from what one loves and creating something lovely, the creator and audience become more acquainted with the Good from which the art comes forth. Just as Kierkegaard tells of the hero and poet, Tolkien and Kierkegaard ask that the individual takes herself less seriously, looks into the goodness of God, and allows it to create within her a spirit of playfulness and joy. The practice of playing allows a person to pull directly from what is happy and pure, and in so doing, to more clearly understand the qualities of happiness and purity. Communion with God is found in a relationship with joy itself, nurtured by self-forgetting.

But all the while, joy is not the only route to the Father; *To the Wonder's* Father Quintana finds communion in self-giving. He laments his inability to connect with God, saying, "Intensely I seek you. My soul thirsts for you. Exhausted. Will you be like a stream that dries up?" He is full of despair and questioning toward God, yet he devotes himself to serving the suffering, sick, and needy. He grasps for light, both literally and symbolically, and in so doing becomes more familiar with the Divine love that lingers in the corners and windows of the film. Through service, Father Quintana finds relief as he falls into the flame of Divine love.

For Father Quintana, a journey of solely internal faith falls short. He prays, lamenting his dulling faith, "Everywhere you're present, and still I can't see you. You're within me. Around me. And I have no experience of you, not as I once did. Why don't I hold on to what I've found? My heart is cold. Hard." Quintana is wrestling with the tension between belief and feeling. Intellectually, this priest is eager to live within the Divine love. In reality, however, he finds his

heart empty and dissatisfied. He cannot see the work of God in his life, and his heart suffers because of it. And Father Quintana's response is clear--he spends the rest of the film looking outside of himself, and in so doing, encountering the light.

The practice of service forces one to interact with what is unappealing or unpleasant in a way that carries light into dark places. The purpose of service is the good of alleviating suffering, and as one pursues such work, he becomes more certain of what exactly that goodness looks like. Father Quintana visits impoverished neighborhoods, preaches at his church, ministers to Marina, and visits those in prison. He reaches into his community, and finds God within its hurting members. These acts of service are directly biblical, clearly mimicking the teaching of Christ and pulling him out of himself:

> Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:37-40 NRSV).

Father Quintana serves God by serving the lowly and hurting. His preaching pours life into Marina, providing wisdom and clarity to both her character and the audience, guiding them through the difficulties of love. By the end of the film, he has been reassigned to a different location to continue his service as a priest. It is not specified whether this is a joyful or unhappy

assignment, but this is a clear transition from the complacency and stagnation of the priest's faith at the beginning of the film. Service moves him into self-actualization through communion with the suffering around him--he is no longer standing still.

Even when love fails or falls short, *To the Wonder* offers hope. Father Quintana preaches, "You fear your love has died. It perhaps is waiting to be transformed into something higher." The film doesn't end with Marina and Neil happily married--Neil is with a new woman, and Marina is back in France. But Marina explores some liminal space, seeming to rejoice in dancing as she inhabits an open plain. She is romantically alone, but in communion with the Divine. The audience is left to consider where this emotional peace has come from, and where it might be found.

In allowing his audience to watch the spiritual practices of Marina and Father Quintana, Malick shows us the way. Communion with God comes with self-forgetting and self-giving, but how do we do so? We follow in the footsteps of these characters, who petition God, "Flood our souls with your spirit and life so completely that our lives may only be a reflection of yours. Shine through us. Show us how to seek you. We were made to see you." For Marina, this clarity is in her playing--in jumping on beds, running down grocery store aisles, and collecting treasures with those whom she loves. For Father Quintana, it is service--reaching out to the poor, ministering to the sorrowful, and visiting those in prison. And both of these sides of moving outside of oneself guide the audience away from Keirkegaard's leap of faith and toward Malick's leap into communion. It remains true that there is little certainty about God, at least as far as what can be put down on paper or delivered in creeds. But as these characters explore the good that the world contains, they find within it the goodness of God, the goodness that *is* God. They foster a relationship with the Divine. Father Quintana describes what it looks like when a

husband loves his wife like the Lord loves his people, “He does not find her lovely, he makes her lovely.” Marina responds to this sermon, speaking to Father Quintana, “I want to be a wife.” Marina is trapped in a false marriage, longing for the freedom to be bound to another in a pure and faithful way. So the priest introduces the story of Hosea: “We wish to live inside the safety of the laws. We fear to choose. Jesus insists on choice. The one thing he condemns utterly is avoiding the choice.” This choice is what the leap into communion hinges on--not right or wrong, and not knowing things with certainty, but stepping into love with decisive action. Father Quintana reminds those to whom he preaches, “Love is not only a feeling. Love is a duty. You shall love.” This confusion of feeling and action is where Neil becomes lost.

Neil is portrayed as faithless because he fails to make a decision. When Neil hesitates to propose to Marina, she leaves him, thinking, “If you’d asked me to stay, I would have. [...] You thought we had forever. That time didn’t exist.” And this is what guides her to leave. He fails to assert himself, and Marina moves back to France. Neil’s lack of faith in God is highlighted by his brief relationship with Jane, a devout Christian. Jane asks him, “Do you want this? Do you know what you want?” Jane is at a point of emotional bankruptcy whenever she begins her relationship with Neil, but the difference between the two of them is her faith--her determination to make something better for herself. It seems that Neil is simply following along. We watch Jane continually pour into Neil and receive nothing in return; she is sure of him, and he is sure of nothing. She laments, “I thought I knew you. Now I don’t think you ever were. What we had was nothing. You made it into nothing. Pleasure. Lust.” In Neil’s failure, Malick furthers his argument that love of substance is love of action. Physical satisfaction is not faithfulness, but to really love is to take steps in unity and vulnerability with another. Love cannot be an internal journey; it must step into the arms of the people around us. Correct, godly love makes the other

person better, and this kind of affection requires external action. It requires forgetting oneself, and giving oneself as well. The work of play and service is the heartbeat of a loving relationship.

Beyond Malick's claim that communion with Divine love is an action, he asserts that this action cannot be careless. Marina has a friend who, though she only appears once, acts as a character of temptation who attempts to lead Marina into a frivolous pursuit of satisfaction. She walks alongside Marina, saying, "Live and do what you want. Life's a dream. In a dream, you can't make mistakes." This friend encourages Marina to live freely and to abandon Neil, exploring the options that life has for her. She says that Marina is dead, and invites her into irresponsibility. Marina ends up listening to this temptation, and Malick is clear in his condemnation of her actions--she cheats on Neil, and their relationship greatly suffers because of it. It is not enough for these characters to explore the concrete possibilities that life has to offer; their external actions must still be good.

For the pursuit of goodness, *To the Wonder* delivers an exhortation from the mouth of Father Quintana:

> Awaken the love. The divine presence which sleeps in each man, each woman. You say, "Christ said this. Christ said that." What do you say? And what you say, does it come from God within? Answer that which is of God in every woman, every man. Know each other in that love that never changes.

Malick portrays love as a recognition of the Divine in another person, and loving God by loving that latent goodness. This is shown in the silliness of Marina, who pulls good from the world around her and plays with it joyfully. This is shown in the service of Father Quintana, who

honors the Divine in the people around him, loving them as he loves himself. To "know each other in that love that never changes" is to grow in discernment, to recognize the Divine by continually moving outside of oneself and into communion. Malick's way of a communal life partners well with Kierkegaard, who "[introduced] the possibility of a spirited reality, an enchanted creation, in which physical accounts and explanations remain in place but are not all that one can say--like David Foster Wallace, Smith and Kierkegaard both invite us to consider that things might be *more than they seem*" (Simmons 236). Though love on earth may be impure, just as the water that flows over dirty land becomes full of imperfections, those who desire it may still trace it back to the source. In "Mythopoeia," Tolkien traces all beauty back to the Divine, and claims that the way of humankind will always be to do so:

> Salvation changes not, nor yet destroys,
> garden not gardener, children nor their toys.
> [...] In Paradise they look no more awry;
> and though they make anew, they make no lie.
> Be sure they still will make, not being dead,
> and poets shall have flames upon their head,
> and harps whereon their faultless fingers fall:
> there each shall choose for ever from the All.

The expectation is not perfection. This is clear in Kierkegaard, in Tolkien, and especially in Malick. Marina and Father Quintana are deeply broken, and remain so to the very end of the film. But they continue trying--they look outside of their brokenness, outside of their own minds, and dare to courageously move into their communities. They tell new stories, give what they can, and find beauty throughout the world, even if it is tainted by the brokenness that fills it. We

might turn our eyes again to Augustine as we consider the imperfection of human attempts to know and honor God. He asks, “What has anyone achieved in word when he speaks about you? Yet woe to those who are silent about you because, though loquacious with verbosity, they have nothing to say” (5). It would be foolish to claim that one might know everything of God, but it would be even worse to never try to know anything at all. *To the Wonder* closes with uncertainty in most regards, but confidently acknowledges the goodness of God, which looms over the characters throughout their confusion, redeeming their unknowing and making it into wonder. Marina narrates these final moments. “Love that loves us. Thank you.”

Works Cited

Adams, Robert Merrihew. “The Transcendence of the Good.” *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*, Oxford UP, New York, NY, 1999, pp. 50–51.

Augustine, and Chadwick Henry. *Confessions*. Oxford UP, 1992.

Boyd, Craig A. “Aquinas on Sanctifying the Affections: Participating in the Life of the Spirit.” *The Spirit, the Affections, and the Christian Tradition*, edited by Dale M. Coulter and Amos Yong, U of Notre Dame P, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2016, pp. 143–160. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvpj7bgb.10. Accessed 2 Apr. 2021.

Charlton, William. “Natural Law, Aquinas and the Magisterium.” *New Blackfriars*, vol. 96, no. 1063, 2015, pp. 326–344., www.jstor.org/stable/24766301. Accessed 2 Apr. 2021.

Eliot, T. S. “Four Quartets.” 1974. *The Poetry Archive,* https://poetryarchive.org/poem/four-quartets-extract/. Accessed 2 Apr. 2021.

Evans, C. Stephen. “Is Kierkegaard an Irrationalist? Reason, Paradox, and Faith.” *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays*, Baylor UP, Waco, TX, 2006, pp. 117–132.

Goris, Wouter, and Jan Aertsen. “Medieval Theories of Transcendentals.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 27 June 2019, plato.stanford.edu/entries/transcendentals-medieval/#TraGoo.

Hynes, Eric. “Form and Void.” *Film Comment*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2017, pp. 14–15. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44990991. Accessed 2 Apr. 2021.

Kierkegaard, Søren, and Walter Lowrie. *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric* and *The Sickness Unto Death*. Princeton UP, 1941.

Kierkegaard, Søren, and Perry D. LeFevre. *The Prayers of Kierkegaard*. U of Chicago P, 1956.

Kotva, Joseph J. "The Priority of Being." *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics*, by Joseph J. Kotva, Georgetown UP, 1996, pp. 30–37.

Laugier, Sandra. "The Ordinary, Romanticism, and Democracy." *MLN*, vol. 130, no. 5, 2015, pp. 1040–1054., www.jstor.org/stable/43932910. Accessed 2 Apr. 2021.

Simmons, J. Aaron. "Kierkegaard and Pentecostal Philosophy." *Kierkegaard's God and the Good Life*, edited by J. Aaron Simmons et al., Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 2017, pp. 227–252. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1zxxxq2.17. Accessed 2 Apr. 2021.

Sobchack, Vivian. "Stop Making Sense." *Film Comment*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2014, pp. 50–53., www.jstor.org/stable/43459889. Accessed 2 Apr. 2021.

To the Wonder. Directed by Terrence Malick, Magnolia Pictures, 2012.

Tolkien, J.R.R. "Mythopoeia." *Tree and Leaf,* George Allen and Unwin, 1964.

Walther, Bo Kampmann. "Web of Shudders: Sublimity in Søren Kierkegaard's 'Fear and Trembling.'" *MLN*, vol. 112, no. 5, 1997, pp. 753–785. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3251419. Accessed 2 Apr. 2021.