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Not One Power, But Two

Dark Grounds and Twilit Paradises in Malick

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Eden Lies About Us Still: Malick’s Melancholy

One of the most persistent themes of Terrence Malick’s cinematic works, from *Badlands* to *A Hidden Life*, is the irruption of forces of chaos and destruction—aggression, violence, war, and armed conquest—into pristine settings of peace and harmony, typically the rural homestead or a native community, portrayed as fostering simple domestic bliss, familial love, and a delicate balance with the natural environment. Malick has never made an attempt to conceal the biblical dimensions of this theme. The Eve and Adam of *Badlands*, Holly (Sissy Spacek) and Kit (Martin Sheen), rebel violently against a domineering father figure and the spiral of violence thereby commenced banishes them from their Edenic refuge in the badlands of Montana. Similarly, in *Days of Heaven*, violent crime drives the lovers Abby (Brooke Adams) and Bill (Richard Gere) to the prairies of northern Texas where their pretense to be siblings and their plot to marry Abby to the wealthy farmer (Sam Shepard) reproduces

the triangle between Sarai, Abram, and Pharaoh (Gen. 12:10–20); even here, treachery and murder bring about a plague of locusts and further banishment. Both celebrations of idealized love and natural beauty take place against a bellicose background: Kit is a Korean War veteran; *Days of Heaven* ends with troops departing for World War I. In *The Thin Red Line*, it is war itself—the Guadalcanal campaign marking the decisive turning point in the Pacific theater of World War II—that makes a full-frontal intrusion into the idealized life of the native Solomon Islanders, at least as perceived by the daydreaming Private Witt (Jim Caviezel), convinced that he has “seen another world.” *The New World* recounts the first stages of the invasion of Virginia by the English colonists, convinced (in the words of Captain Newport) they are an “advance guard” sent to conquer the “Eden [that] lies about still” as a “great inheritance” handed to them by God. In *The Tree of Life*, the innocence of a 1950s childhood in small-town Texas summoned up in flashbacks is breached by the harshness of the protagonist’s father, fleeting experiences of terrible accidents and marginalized members of the community, the protagonist’s own occasional violent impulses, and finally the traumatic loss of a brother, contrasted with an alienated adult life amid the urban desert of contemporary capitalism. In Malick’s romantic interlude trilogy—*To the Wonder*, *Knight of Cups*, and *Song to Song*—the focus is on the tensions between selflessness and self-centeredness, loving commitment and fleeting passions, and spiritual simplicity and worldly temptations. Finally, in *A Hidden Life*, it is the Nazi military machine that encroaches upon the simple, close-knit, and devout rural life of the Upper Austrian village, threatening Franz Jägerstätter (August Diehl) and his family with conscription.

Malickian cinema is thus permeated by a deep-seated melancholy, a tragic sense of conflict between harmony and chaos. Malick’s variations of the expulsion from Eden narrative also involve a tangible sense of loss; in these films, the most lyrical visions of beauty invariably have the feeling of flashbacks from something long past. Yet it would be simplistic to conclude—as many will be quick to do—that what is expressed here is nostalgia, an elegiac longing for the unspoiled American

Midwest, the “natural” way of life of Pacific islanders or Native Americans, or the middle-class small-town suburbia of the 1950s as pasts that have once actually been present as such. Precisely the palpably stylized, even schematic aesthetics of Malick’s scenery, bemoaned by some as artificial or shallow, should act as a pointer to the fact that what we are being shown are not so much recollections as idealized (re)constructions—sublimity, serenity, and joy in abstraction extracted from their ordinary everyday intertwining with banality, anguish, and suffering. Malick’s most exalted visualizations are intermittently interrupted and punctuated by fleeting and abortive traumatic moments, such as the explosions of warfare, suffering, death, and heartbreak interspersed among the breathtaking and meditative Pacific scenery in *The Thin Red Line* or the brief glimpses of domestic strife, illness, exclusion, and malice with an abrupt, abortive, even suppressed or censored feel that interlace the blissful childhood images of *The Tree of Life*. It is essential to note that without the contrast provided by these rupturing intrusions of, let us say simply, evil—but in its widest sense that includes the metaphysical (imperfection), physical (suffering), and moral (sin) dimensions distinguished by Leibniz¹—the Malickian visions of goodness and beauty—again in the widest sense of the classical *agathon* and *kalon* as “appropriate” and “perfect”—would appear vacuous and pointless indeed.

In what follows, I will look at the profound philosophical and theological dimensions of this core Malickian topic. I will first briefly recapitulate the main strategies through which the Western intellectual tradition has sought to tackle the problem of the presence of evil in its various forms in nature, understood as the work of a metaphysically perfect, omnipotent, and benevolent creator—a problem generally referred to since Leibniz as the problem of theodicy. I argue that if there is a consistent philosopheme running through Malick’s work—omitting here the thorny wider discussion of whether this is really the proper way to read cinema philosophically—it is most akin to the radical approach to evil adopted by F. W. J. Schelling in his essay on human freedom: the possibility of evil is not to be understood in terms of a privation or lack but as a positive and inescapable consequence

of a dark and chaotic “ground” of creation against which perfection, harmony, and light can first appear as such.² Detached from its traditional theological framing, the Schellingian idea of ground subsequently resonates in Heidegger’s phenomenological and hermeneutic model of an irreducible background dimension involved in all meaningful and intelligible givenness, a notion by which Malick is known to have been directly influenced. I will then return to examine more closely instances of this relational dynamic of foreground and background, of light/harmony/goodness in its intertwining with darkness/chaos/evil, in Malick’s central cinematic works.

Dark Grounds: Evil in the Tradition and Its Schellingian Transformation

As Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals* reminds us, evil as we tend to understand it today is primarily a Judeo-Christian concept.³ Classical antiquity was mainly concerned with what Leibniz labels the “metaphysical” aspect of evil—or rather, badness or baseness (*to kakon*)—with regard to which moral vice (*kakia*) as a base disposition of the soul is only derivative. Evil in this sense is the ontological deficiency that constitutes the gap between the ideal and the real; for the Neoplatonic synthesis of the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions, evil hinges on the role of materiality (*hylē*) as the measureless (*ametros*) element, as darkness (*to skotos*) lacking the intelligible structure and articulation bestowed by the pure light of the Ideas. Evil is the mute and chaotic dimension of being.⁴ It is only within the theological framework of creation that the existence of evil—moral and physical as well as metaphysical—becomes the fundamental problem of why a perfect and omnipotent being would bring about an imperfect world. The main resources for tackling this issue provided by scripture itself are the narrative of the Fall in Genesis 3 to account for the origin of moral evil (and of morality itself) in terms of human freedom of choice and self-will and the book of Job to account for physical evil, inexplicable and unjust misfortune, and suffering through the inscrutability of divine designs.

The Gnostic movements of the first two centuries CE simply disconnected the transcendent redeeming divinity entirely from the sordidness of the material cosmos, seen in Neoplatonic terms as a distant emanation, given shape by an inferior Demiurge, of the initial and absolute divine unity. The Manichaean religion, which influenced certain Christian sects, taught a more radical dualism between a spiritual sphere of good and light and a material sphere of evil and darkness. Battling these heretical orientations, both of which were deemed profoundly incompatible with scripture, gave the fundamental impetus for the theological agenda of the early Christian Church Fathers. Anti-Gnostic and anti-Manichaean efforts also brought about the radicalized doctrine of a creation *ex nihilo*: matter itself was created in an act preceded by absolute nothingness.⁵ When evil can no longer be relegated to the realm of materiality, it can no longer be a positive feature of nature at all; instead, evil must be accounted for as a mere privation of goodness and perfection, *privatio boni*, due to the necessarily finite character of created nature and the created will, which had become permanently corrupted and predisposed to evil as a consequence of original sin.

The account of evil as mere negativity, privation, and corruption without a positive substance is the traditional approach of Christian theology, most influentially elaborated by Augustine.⁶ Human sinfulness is also ultimately based on lack and finitude: in contrast to the divine will, the finite human will does not naturally will the universal good—which, in late medieval voluntarism, is increasingly understood to be good *because* God wills it⁷—but is tempted to choose a particular and individual good over the universal. This derivation of moral imperfection from metaphysical finitude still orients Kant’s doctrine of “radical” evil as the human inclination to exempt oneself from the universal requirements of the moral law.⁸

Another central strategy, in many ways a systematic reconstruction of the traditional theological teaching, is found in certain early modern rationalistic systems in which evil is reduced to an epiphenomenon or aspect of a systematic totality that, considered as a whole, is completely

harmonious. The most influential version of this approach is the metaphysical “optimism” elaborated in Leibniz’s 1710 essay on theodicy and famously ridiculed in Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759). Out of all possible finite worlds, Leibniz argues, the perfectly good creator will choose the one that is maximally good, but even this world cannot be perfect, since God alone is perfect. Even the best of all possible worlds will thus include aspects of deficiency, not as positive and substantial features but rather as epiphenomena. Were sin and suffering removed from the world we actually inhabit, it could not thereby be a better world for it would not be the world that God has in fact chosen and that, by that very token, must be optimal.⁹

In brief, the Western speculative tradition, while compelled to face the reality of evil in the sense of imperfection, suffering, and moral depravity, consistently denied these phenomena positive substance. The gradual rejection, in the nineteenth century, of the systems of German idealism as the last great heirs of this tradition, finally opened the door to the complete trivialization of evil. In Nietzsche’s genealogical reading, the very concepts of good and evil arose in a specific historical constellation of power, in the great moral “slave revolt” against the ancient “aristocratic” value-system of nobility and baseness; like all values and countervalues, “evil” is simply a perspectival construction subservient to certain power interests and one that has now outlived its usefulness.¹⁰ Post-Nietzschean thought has, accordingly, largely disavowed the concept of evil along with the concept of sin as superfluous. “Evil” has become a largely metaphorical psychological expression for extreme instances of disregard for shared moral norms or the dictates of fundamental empathy, evoked in the context of genocides, serial killers, and true crime documentaries. Hannah Arendt’s concept of banal evil remains among the rare attempts to update the predominantly Kantian framework of contemporary ethics to accommodate the novel totalitarian forms of destruction and terror encountered by the twentieth century.¹¹

However, at the threshold of this post-evil era lies an entirely exceptional phase in the philosophical history of evil: an extraordinary and often overlooked intensification of evil as an inherently positive metaphysical concept. This we find in the work of Schelling, in many ways the last of the German idealists and a prequel to Nietzsche. Schelling's first work, his 1792 master's thesis, was devoted to a study of the origin and nature of evil, imbued with the German idealist faith in the rational and moral progress and development of the human spirit,¹² and he continued to address the issue in his later philosophy of nature. His principal work on the topic, and one of his most influential works overall, is his 1809 treatise *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, colloquially known as the *Freiheitsschrift*, the freedom essay. The basic problem for Schelling here is whether and to what extent the system philosophy of idealism is compatible with freedom. In principle, it is, in an idealist system for which the primal and absolute form of spiritual being is *will*.¹³ Such a system, for Schelling, can simultaneously be characterized as a pantheism, in the sense that it sees all being as comprised within an absolute being, a primal will.¹⁴ The key problem is the fact that freedom cannot be understood as mere formal lack of determination or compulsion; "the real and vital concept" of freedom is a positive capacity for both good and evil.¹⁵ A real system of freedom would thus have to accommodate evil within the primal will itself, within the absolute or "divine" substance. None of the traditional strategies that present evil as mere deficiency or privation are truly capable of accounting for a free choice between good and evil as two positive alternatives. In a true system of freedom, there must thus be a certain split, difference, or distinction within the primal and absolute being itself.

In the dynamic system that Schelling is proposing, the primal and absolute being is will, but there is no will without becoming, as willing necessarily involves a striving from somewhere toward something.¹⁶ There must thus be a difference between the actuality that is strived for and the ground (*Grund*) from out of which it emerges, in Schelling's terms, between existence (*Existenz*) and the ground of existence, yet both must somehow also be comprised within the being of the absolute

substance. The ground of God's existence must be within God, yet "it is not God considered absolutely, that is, in so far as he exists"; it is "inseparable [*unabtrennliches*], yet still distinct [*unterschiedenes*], from him."¹⁷ In Schelling's tortuous phrasing, the ground is "that which in God himself is not *He Himself*,"¹⁸ in other words, that which God's existence inseparably involves but which is not identical with it. In Schelling's romantic nature-philosophy (*Naturphilosophie*), which seeks to combine idealism and realism in having the ideal emerge from the real rather than reducing the real to the ideal, nature is the dark, chaotic, and material ground from which and against which light, harmony, and ideal order are differentiated in an organic teleological development. "Nature in general is everything that lies beyond the absolute being [*Seyns*] of absolute identity."¹⁹ Nature is the dimension involved by divine being that is not divinity *qua* divinity—the ground from out which the primal will strives toward the actualization of an ideal existence and against which light and harmony can manifest themselves. "Without this preceding darkness creatures have no reality; darkness is their necessary inheritance."²⁰

The distinction between God's existence and the ground of this existence is the key to Schelling's distinction between good and evil. Just as light and harmony can only reveal themselves against darkness and chaos, goodness as the orientation of the divine will can only manifest itself against the possibility of an evil will,²¹ that is, against the existence of particular and individual wills that are not driven by a mere instinctual striving from darkness to light but have an understanding and consciousness that enables them to distinguish between divine existence and its ground, between light and dark, and thus to make a free choice between them. The individual human "self-will" (*Selbstwille*) is capable of inverting and perverting the order between ground and existence and of willing the ground in its own right, the material and sensual particularities of nature in themselves rather than the divine universal harmony, which they merely background.²² That there are evil acts of willing is a necessary condition for goodness to reveal itself,²³ yet individual wills are never compelled to either evil or good; they choose freely. Evil is a dark canvas against which goodness can appear. Because, in

Schelling's system of freedom, "God is a life, not merely a being [*Seyn*]"²⁴—darkness, chaos, and evil are indispensable dimensions, conditions, and effects of light, harmony, and goodness and inextricably intertwined with them. To use the scriptural metaphor, it is only after losing the state of innocence and attaining knowledge of the difference between good and evil that Eve and Adam can truly become conscious of God's goodness. "This is the sadness [*Traurigkeit*] that clings to all finite life: and, even if there is in God at least a relatively independent condition, there is a source of sadness in him that can, however, never come into actuality, but rather serves only the eternal joy of overcoming. Hence, the veil of dejection [*Schwermutb*] that is spread over all nature, the deep indestructible melancholy [*Melancholie*] of all life. Joy must have suffering, suffering must be transfigured in joy."²⁵

Schelling, the last of the German Idealists, not only provided us with one of the most radical accounts of evil but was also one of the last great Western philosophers to tackle the problems of evil and theodicy within their traditional theological framework. Even during his lifetime, Schelling had the opportunity to witness how this framework and these problems gradually became obsolete and he himself turned into a living monument of a bygone age of speculative metaphysics. Heidegger, one of the few twentieth-century thinkers to give Schelling a decisive role in modern thought, makes the surprising statement that "Schelling is the truly creative and boldest thinker of this whole age of German philosophy . . . to *such* an extent that he drives German Idealism from within right beyond its own fundamental position."²⁶ Only two years after the apex of German idealism in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Schelling's freedom essay bursts the whole project apart: the distinction between the existence of God and its ground ultimately makes the kind of system sought by German idealism—an order that would refer all of being, reality as a whole, back to self-consciousness as a unifying absolute point of reference—impossible.²⁷ When the absolute becomes dependent on a background that is not simply identical with the absolute, the absolute can no longer be absolute, in

the literal sense of being “absolved” of any constitutive dependencies upon anything beyond itself—it precisely becomes inextricably embedded in a context that stretches beyond it.

For Heidegger, this account of the irreducible context-embeddedness of all being was precisely the decisive moment in Schelling’s thought, a discovery that, although Schelling himself never realized it, transgresses the fundamental premises not only of German idealism but of the entire Western metaphysical search for absolute points of reference as a whole. Already in his early work, Heidegger himself appropriates the Schellingian concept of ground as a pathway for approaching the radical contextuality and relationality of being, particularly in his 1929 essay “On the Essence of Ground.” Here, expanding on the project of *Being and Time*, he articulates, in heavily Schellingian terms,²⁸ the human Dasein’s manner of making sense of beings through “transcending” the immediately given toward a temporally dimensional background-context of meaning as “freedom for ground.”²⁹ Dasein understands things by “grounding” them, in the sense of placing them into a wider context, a network of references that always transcends that which is immediately present, and this contextualization is precisely the essence of human freedom. Heidegger thus detaches Schelling’s account of human freedom as the capacity to orient oneself toward the “dark ground” of existence from its theological framework and presents this freedom as constitutive for all human access to meaningfulness in general.³⁰

Leviathan in Paradise: Malick and Evil

It is a well-known biographical fact that Terrence Malick studied philosophy at Harvard with Stanley Cavell in the early 1960s; after a successful bachelor’s thesis on Husserl and Heidegger and a personal interview with Heidegger during a visit to Germany, Malick embarked on graduate studies at Magdalen College, Oxford. However, due in part to disagreements with his advisor, Gilbert Ryle, over the

proposed topic of his thesis—the concept of world in Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein—he did not complete his Bachelor of Philosophy degree, and ultimately he abandoned the prospect of an academic career. He nonetheless continued to teach philosophy for some time at MIT as a stand-in for Hubert Dreyfus, and during this period he completed the first English translation of Heidegger’s “Vom Wesen des Grundes,” published in 1969 by Northwestern University Press in a bilingual edition of the text under the title *The Essence of Reasons*.

Because of this background, Malick’s cinema is often seen as in some sense “Heideggerian,” as incorporating overarching reflections on being or Heideggerian themes such as finitude or mortality.³¹ There is no denying that the engagement with Heidegger’s thought left clearly detectable marks on Malick’s work; we may suppose that his translation effort reflects a particular significance for him of the themes of ground and freedom. Here, however, I propose a more mediating role of Heideggerian thought as a pathway for approaching fundamental questions inherent to the entire tradition; indeed, Malick seems, to a certain extent, to transpose the theme of ground back to its more traditional theological framework, thus approaching the Schellingian context from which Heidegger himself drew influence. With this, I am not suggesting that Malick has ever seriously engaged the work of Schelling, of which there is no evidence, or that his works should be seen as Schellingian on any level more profound than that of connotations.³² Still, Schelling’s freedom essay, with its insistence—against the traditional view of evil as mere privation and corruption—on the positivity of evil and its indispensability as the dark background of the good, seems to me to provide particularly apt conceptual tools for interpreting the specific images of the interaction between good and evil, light and darkness, conveyed to us by Malick’s core works.

The prominence of the problems of evil and theodicy in Malick, perhaps most explicit in *The Tree of Life*, has not escaped commentators.³³ Yet Malick’s treatment of good and evil has often been read as a straightforward nostalgia for paradise lost, as “an Edenic yearning to recapture a lost

wholeness of being, an idyllic state of integration with the natural and good,”³⁴ as a “reinvented myth of the Fall, filtered through a Vietnam-era political consciousness,”³⁵ or in terms of a reestablished “opposition between the world of nature as paradise and the world of modern human society as paradise lost”³⁶—or simply as giving poetic expression to the inexplicable mystery of evil and suffering.³⁷ I prefer here to highlight the “war in the heart of nature” evoked by the opening voiceover of *The Thin Red Line*, attributed to Private Train, precisely as the constitutive and original conflictual interplay between good and evil, light and darkness, harmony and chaos. Nature is here not an immaculate Garden of Eden, but rather already “vies with itself” precisely because the “avenging power” in nature is, from the outset, “not one power, but two”—in Schellingian terms, on the one hand, nature as the dark chaotic ground, and on the other, the light, harmony, and unity ever striving to differentiate itself from this background.

The first thing we are shown in *The Thin Red Line* is, significantly, a crocodile—one possible translation of the biblical Leviathan, the “king over all that are proud” (Job 41:34), which God in his reply to Job holds out as an emblem of the humanly insuperable majesty of creation but also of its dark and blind brutality and monstrosity. The crocodile is also a descendant of the serpent that was already in Eden, cursed after the Fall and condemned to thereafter go upon its belly (Gen. 3:14). After that we see light sifting from above into the perpetual twilight of the tropical rainforest and also the vines, serpent-like, twining around the trees and “swallowing everything” as Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte) later points out to Captain Staros (Elias Koteas) to illustrate his crude point: “Nature’s cruel,” not intrinsically different from the human-made slaughter they are themselves engaged in. The following images showing the joyous and peaceful play of the Melanesian children on the beach and in the ocean—seen, as we are immediately made aware, through the adoring eyes of Private Witt, for whom they doubtless manifest “another world” transcendent to the bellicose one he is momentarily fleeing—should not deceive us as to the proper scriptural subtext. We are in an Eden that is already

postlapsarian, one in which the serpent, the Leviathan, holds sway. Even Witt's ecstatic vision begins to falter at the moment his idealized conjecture—"Kids around here never fight"—is gently discredited by the native mother (Polyn Leona) (who admits to being afraid of Witt's "army" look): "Sometimes. Sometimes when you see them playing, they always fight."

A patrol boat arrives to snatch Witt from his AWOL cloud cuckoo land "where everything's gonna be ok" back to "this rock" that is "blowin' itself to hell as fast as everybody can arrange it" (Sergeant Welsh [Sean Penn]). The men of C Company—each driven, like the stock characters of a medieval morality play, by a single fundamental motive, Witt by his exalted longing, Tall by his Faustian personal ambition, Staros by his compassion for his men, Private Bell by his love for his wife—are promptly shipped off to the inferno of Guadalcanal to capture Henderson Airfield. The ensuing bloody scramble for the Japanese strongpoint at Hill 210 brings death for many and disillusionment for the rest: Staros is powerless to prevent the destruction of his company and is ultimately sent away by Tall as being "too soft." Bell is shattered by his wife's unexpected request for divorce. Witt returns from battle to see the native community in a transformed light, as marred by distrust, fear, aggression, and disease, before having his own "spark" put out in an ambush.

The everyman of *The Thin Red Line*—the representative of humanity as a whole, embodying Witt's reflection that "all men got one big soul who everybody's part of; all faces of the same man, one big self"—is the unremarkable and unassuming Private Train (John Dee Smith), a youth from the South whose only concerns are "dyin' and the Lord." It is Train's voice that is used in Malick's emblematic lingering voiceovers to convey the abstract universal questions at play in the human condition—essentially Job's questions to his creator—concerning the origin of evil ("This great evil. Where's it come from? How'd it steal into the world? What seed, what root did it grow from?"), its persistence ("Who's doing this? Who's killing us? Robbing us of life and light. Mocking us with the sight of what we might have known"), its purpose ("Does our ruin benefit the earth? Does it help the

grass to grow or the sun to shine?”), and, finally, its compatibility with the absolute (“Is this darkness in you, too? Have you passed through this night?”). A Schellingian synthesis is attained in Train’s concluding voiceover, in which “darkness and light, strife and love” are seen as inextricably intertwined “workings of one mind” or primal will to which individual human minds appear to be related, in Witt’s expression, as “coals thrown from the fire.” From this absolute viewpoint, it is the dark background itself that permits creation to shine forth: “Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining.” In the unadorned parlance put into the mouth of the actual character Train, this is captured perhaps even more efficiently: “It’s gonna get a lot worse before it gets better.”

Variations of these themes abound throughout Malick’s mature work. In *The New World*, King James’s colonists, like Columbus before them, find themselves in terrestrial paradise, primarily seen through the eyes of Witt’s kindred spirit, the romanticizing professional adventurer John Smith (Colin Farrell), for whom the native Powhatan people—the “naturals”—are “gentle, loving, faithful, lacking in all guile and trickery.” In this unspoiled wilderness, expropriated from these Rousseauian noble savages who, we are told, have “no jealousy, no sense of possession,” the Jamestown pioneers are going to prepare the “new kingdom of the spirit” preached by Captain Newport (Christopher Plummer), “a land where man may rise to his true stature.” These sentiments of wonder are reciprocated by the native Americans, in awe of the Europeans’ ships and gunpowder. “A god he seems to me,” says the adolescent Pocahontas (Q’orianka Kilcher) of John Smith, her first love. “There is no evil in you.” In a magnificently evocative scene, her uncle Opechancanough (Wes Studi), brought to the Old World, wanders among the perfect geometrical order and harmony of Hampton Court gardens, speechlessly witnessing the Europeans’ professed victory over nature and their human-made completion of creation yet failing to find in Europe “this ‘God’ they speak so much about.” Mutual disillusionment is inevitable; Eden grows darker as the Jamestown colonists are beset by

hunger and hardship, with the explosion of conflict the gentle and loving naturals soon come to be perceived as “naked devils,” and the “true stature” of European humanity in the New World turns out to be violent conquest driven by the desire for gold. John Smith’s love is treacherous; his consuming quest for paradise on earth ultimately drives him to abandon Pocahontas and “sail past his Indies,” “killing the god” in Pocahontas who, in the end, finds happiness only in her mundane married life with Thomas Rolfe (Christian Bale).

What is tragically put to test in *The Tree of Life* is the protagonist’s mother’s (Jessica Chastain) naive faith that no one who loves “the way of grace,” the way of humble and selfless love, “ever comes to a bad end”—but equal disappointment is met by his father’s (Brad Pitt) tough-minded pursuit of “the way of nature” with its self-centered ambitions, as both of them are devastated by the loss of a son. What is fundamentally challenged here is the idea that nature and grace, distinguished since the early Church Fathers, are really two separate ways that can be kept apart.³⁸ The dark, chaotic, and blind forces of “nature”—inevitably involving destruction and suffering—and flickering moments of beauty, love, and purpose—unexpected and unwarranted “grace”—are shown to penetrate and intersperse each other both in the personal history of protagonist Jack O’Brien (Michael Koeth/Finnegan William/Hunter McCracken/Sean Penn) (violent and aggressive impulses and callous selfishness alternating with love, reconciliation, and forgiveness) and in the cosmic history of the universe (the brutal instincts of the animal kingdom balanced with the harmony of the celestial bodies). The hand that gives is the hand that takes away, and both movements are meaningful only in this reciprocity.

The brutal summary of the core issue at stake is finally given to us in *A Hidden Life*: “He who created us, he created evil.” But this line is pronounced by the devil’s advocate, the attorney Herder (Matthias Schoenaerts), who quotes *Hamlet*: “Conscience makes cowards of us all.” And yet this is the story of an entirely ordinary man, a simple and unassuming farmer whose life as a whole was by no

means an unambiguous archetype of pure virtue—a conscientious objector who became remarkable solely by relying on his conscience alone, on the Socratic conviction that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it, at a time when individual conscience had all but become irrelevant. In normal times, Jägerstätter’s life would indeed have remained entirely hidden and was distinguished up to the point of sainthood simply because its momentary spark of unrelenting personal rigor shone so brightly against the profound darkness, evil, and mass conformity of its day.

Conclusion: Twilit Paradises

In summary, what Malick’s films present, when read from the Schellingian perspective I have proposed here, is not the traditional theological narrative of the Fall in the sense of a lapse from an original immaculate and paradisiacal state of nature through subsequent corruption and contamination by extrinsic evil. Eden lies about us still, but it is an Eden where the serpent, figuratively speaking, is always already present, where primeval innocence has always already been contaminated by the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—which, in one exegetical tradition, is just another name or aspect of the tree of life, situated in the very midst of Eden.³⁹ Life as portrayed by Malick does not take place in the clarity of a noon without shadows but rather, in the words of Danforth in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, “in the dusky afternoon when evil mixed itself with good and befuddled the world.”⁴⁰ It is only in such a twilit paradise that harmony, light, and goodness can ever appear against a murky background of chaos, darkness, and evil—and what Malick’s cinema shows us is precisely this chiaroscuro, this interplay, this endless dialectic without synthesis. The deep-seated melancholy of Malickian cinema invoked above turns out to be “the deep indestructible melancholy of all life” described by Schelling: joy must have suffering, suffering must be transfigured in joy.⁴¹

Notes

1. Leibniz, *Œuvres philosophiques*, vol. 2, 97; Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 136.
2. I am thankful to Dr. Olli Pitkänen for the opportunity to supervise his magnificent doctoral dissertation, *The Possibility of a Metaphysical Conception of Evil in Contemporary Philosophy* (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2020), which decisively deepened my understanding of Schelling's radical approach to the problem of evil.
3. Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 780–81; Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 19–20. For a comprehensive overview of the conceptual history of evil, see Marquard, “Malum I”; Schottlaender, “Malum II”; Arndt, “Malum III”; Schneider, “Malum IV”; Riesenhuber, “Malum V”; and Hügli, “Malum VI.”
4. See Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.8.8.
5. Creation ex nihilo was first taught by the second-century theologian Tatian of Adiabene, and soon after him by Theophilus of Antioch and Irenaeus; see Köhler, “Schöpfung III.”
6. See Augustine, *Enchiridion ad Laurentium*, 236; Augustine, *The Augustine Catechism*, 40–41.
7. See William of Ockham, *In librum primum Sententiarum ordinatio* d48.q1; cf. Riesenhuber, “Malum V,” 674–81.
8. For Kant on radical evil, see Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, 17–53; Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, 45–73.
9. Leibniz, *Œuvres philosophiques*, vol. 2, 88–89; *Theodicy*, 128–29.
10. Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 771–98; Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 11–38.
11. See Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.
12. Schelling, *Antiquissimi de prima malorum humanorum origine philosophematis Genes. III explicandi tentamen criticum et philosophicum*.
13. “In the final and highest judgment, there is no other being [*Seyn*] than will [*Wollen*]. Will is primal being [*Urseyn*] to which alone all predicates of being apply: groundlessness, eternality, independence from time, self-affirmation. . . . In our times philosophy has been raised up to this point by idealism.” Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängen Gegenstände*, 350–51; and Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, 21 (translation modified).
14. Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 409–11; Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 71–72.
15. Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 352; Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 23.
16. Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 358–60; Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 28–29.

17. Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 358; Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 27.
18. Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 359; Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 28.
19. Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 358; Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 28 (translation modified).
20. Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 360; Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 29.
21. Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 373–76; Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 40–42.
22. Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 362–64, 389–94; Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 31–33, 54–58.
23. Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 377–78; Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 44.
24. Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 403; Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 66 (translation modified).
25. Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 399; Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 62–63.
26. Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 42, 6; and Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, 4 (translation modified).
27. Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 42, 278–79; *Schelling's Treatise*, 161.
28. In “On the Essence of Ground,” Heidegger does not discuss Schelling at length but points out the central importance of Schelling’s freedom essay for the conceptual history of the problem of ground (*Grund*); Heidegger, “Vom Wesen des Grundes,” 125; Heidegger, “On the Essence of Ground,” 99. Heidegger taught his first seminar on Schelling’s freedom essay during the preceding winter semester of 1927–28; Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 86, 49–54, 529–48.
29. Heidegger, “Vom Wesen des Grundes,” 163–75; Heidegger, “On the Essence of Ground,” 125–35.
30. On this, see Backman, “Radical Contextuality in Heidegger’s Postmetaphysics.”
31. For discussions of the “Heideggerian” features of Malick’s cinema, see Cavell, *The World Viewed*, xiv–xvi; Sinnerbrink, “A Heideggerian Cinema?” ; and Sinnerbrink, *Terrence Malick*, 9–13, 40–44, 56, 65, 68, 70–71; Furstenau and MacAvoy, “Terrence Malick’s Heideggerian Cinema” ; Rhym, “The Paradigmatic Shift in the Critical Reception of Terrence Malick’s *Badlands* and the Emergence of a Heideggerian Cinema”; Woessner, “What Is Heideggerian Cinema?”; Pattison, “In the Theater of Light”; and Barnett, “*Gelassenheit*.”
32. A connection between Malick and Schelling has very rarely been brought up in commentaries; a notable exception is Warwick Mules’s remark concerning the Schellingian dimensions of *The Thin Red Line*, namely, the insight that “nature grounds the possibility of both good and evil by withdrawing from them (as indifferent nature).” Mules, *With Nature*, 171–73.
33. See Mottram, “All Things Shining”; Leithart, *Shining Glory*, 10–16, 73–81; Manninen, “The Problem of Evil and Humans’ Relationship with God in Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life*”; and Scott, “Light in the Darkness.”

34. Mottram, “All Things Shining,” 15.
35. Streamas, “The Greatest Generation Steps Over *The Thin Red Line*,” 143.
36. Silberman, “Terrence Malick, Landscape and ‘What Is This War in the Heart of Nature?’” 166.
37. Leithart, *Shining Glory*, 16.
38. On this, see Cisney, “All the World Is Shining, and Love Is Smiling through All Things.” On the history of the theological opposition between nature and grace, see Peters, “Gnade.”
39. On the trees of life and of the knowledge of good and evil, see Makowiecki, “Untangled Branches.”
40. Miller, *The Crucible*, 76.
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