Standing at God’s threshold: film viewing as dwelling in Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life*

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**ABSTRACT**

The viewer’s experience of Malick’s cinema can be arguably approached from the notion of dwelling. As Toles points out, the essence of this dwelling derives from the use of the medium’s capacities to reveal the world as something real. In contrast with earlier films, *The Tree of Life* (2011) opens up the possibility of transcendence by pushing the limits of the world revealed by the film medium: here the world is no more an absolute presence, but the visible sign of a further presence, that of its Creator. The chain of revelations is thus expanded: the filmic dwelling holds the world’s presence and, in turn, this screened world points towards God’s presence. In this vein, the image of Jack O’Brien standing at the enigmatic doorframe in the wilderness might well illustrate the experience of the viewer of *The Tree of Life*.

1. Introduction

Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* is a film about crossing thresholds. Gates, doorframes and thresholds are constantly present in this film, and play a symbolic role at a narrative level. The characters are always depicted standing at thresholds or crossing them. In this regard, perhaps the most powerful image is that of adult Jack O’Brien standing at what appears to be an isolated wooden doorframe in the middle of the desert. This image, briefly shown in the first minutes of the film and resumed towards the end of it, might be dramatizing Jack’s arrival to an existential turning point: a ‘liminal arrival to the possibility of God’ (2014, 89), as Handley states. We soon learn that this is not a mere doorframe, but rather the doorway to an invisible house – the house of God? – into which both Jack and the viewer are invited to enter.

When it comes to the viewer’s experience, the motif of the threshold can be interpreted as signifying her entrance into ‘the house of film’, which acts – according to Toles – as ‘a frame we long to enter in the spirit of homecoming’ (Toles 2001, 23). Discussing the self-reflexivity of this motif, Elsaesser and Hagener affirm that, through...
the portrayal of the threshold, ‘film is reflecting on itself as it highlights [...] the passage from one world to another which presupposes the coexistence of two worlds, separated as well as connected by the threshold’ (Elsaesser and Hagener 2015, 40). These authors are referring to the screened world – the house of film – and the viewer’s world.

In The Tree of Life, invisibility suggests that the house encountered by Jack does not belong to the material, tangible world captured by the camera – the world ‘of nature’, recalling Mrs. O’Brien’s voice-over1 – but perhaps to an intangible world – the world ‘of grace’ – that can only be grasped by a new way of looking at things. Drawing upon these symbolic images – threshold and house–, The Tree of Life could be pushing the cinematic language into Jack’s liminal situation: an encounter with the possibility of God. In the film’s narrative, Jack finally crosses the threshold, signifying a spiritual reconciliation that acknowledges God’s care over his creatures, including himself. Continuing with this analogy, one could ask whether this film parallels Jack’s movement towards God or simply stays at the threshold. If the former were true, the experience of the viewer would become a radically different one. The possibility of crossing the doorway to an invisible realm would imply that this film is revealing us something that the previous filmography of Malick does not reveal2.

From Badlands (1973) to The New World (2005), the major achievement of Malick’s poetics of film – i.e. ‘how films work [...] to shape the audience’s experience’ (Bordwell 2005, 10) – is the revelation of the world. In terms of film viewing, the world revealed by these films is presented as a place to dwell. Toles writes that ‘[t]he interior of the dwelling is everything that film can reveal to us by way of presence’ (Toles 2001, 23). In this vein, what Malick’s films reveal ‘by way of presence’ is, above all, the world’s reality; namely its presence as not merely subjective, but real.3 Furthermore, his films address the different aspects of the verb ‘to dwell’: spatial and temporal. The exploratory and roving camera does not stick the viewer’s gaze to a tight narrative structure, but rather allows her gaze to linger upon the landscapes, houses, rooms and various spaces captured by it; like a well-designed house, these films enable the viewer to use their many rooms in different ways (Gibbs and Pye 2005, 7). As for the temporal dimension, their slow pace and fragmented narrative progression encourage the viewer to ‘dwell upon’ the images, especially in some moments when the temporality of a scene or sequence becomes purely ‘ecstatic’ – suspended in a pure present–, in contrast to the more conventional ‘linear’ time of film narrative. The final celebratory sequence of The New World, but also the last minutes of The Thin Red Line (1998), are prominent examples of this temporality. In the latter, the three final still images of the Melanesians, birds and a sunken coconut shell express a lingering time, as if we were contemplating them through Private Witt’s calm gaze.

In short, the world revealed by Malick’s filmography – up to The New World – is what might be called an ‘absolute presence’: that is, the ultimate horizon of reality and, thus, of human experience. The infinite possibilities contained in this immanent realm turn the idea of transcendence into an unnecessary escape from reality, as Henry David Thoreau wrote in Walden: ‘We are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us’ ([1854] Thoreau 2008, 69).
On the contrary, *The Tree of Life* is considered to open up the possibility of transcendence by pushing the limits of the abovementioned notion of the world: here the world is no more the definitive horizon, but the tangible sign of a further presence, that of its Creator. The chain of revelations is thus expanded: the ‘house of film’ holds the world’s presence and, in turn, the screened world contains God’s presence. ‘This is the very essence of Malick’s [new] art: movie technique as revelation, cinematography as theophany’ (Sterritt 2011, 57), i.e. as revelation of the divine presence. As it will be shown in what follows, this revelation does not come as a conceptual concern artificially juxtaposed to the film medium, but as a ‘contained significance’, namely a ‘significance which we find within, rather than attached to, the form of film’ [Perkins (1972) 1993, 117]. In this sense, Malick’s previous filmography could be regarded as a long pathway leading both its cinematic language – the camerawork plus the use of voice-over, music, editing, etc. – and its viewer to a liminal situation, symbolized by the motif of the threshold in the wilderness.

This article is aimed at studying the viewer’s experience of *The Tree of Life*, in order to discern how it differs from the revelations disclosed by Malick’s earlier films. For this purpose, the first section of the text will summarize the main ideas of some relevant approaches regarding the experience elicited by this film, highlighting their strengths but also their inaccuracies. Subsequently, the second section will draw upon the notions of ‘prayer’ and ‘sacrament’ – understood in a Christian sense – to unfold an all-encompassing approach to the experience of this film as a whole, hence trying to clarify how the different elements of film language work together to instill the viewer with a sense of dwelling in the world captured by the film. Finally, the last section will introduce some remarks on the specific capacities and limitations of *The Tree of Life* – and thus of film medium – to immerse the viewer in an experience of a transcendent realm. In the end, the conclusion we draw is that the great achievement of this film is arguably to have articulated a non-discursive assertion – made through the film language – about transcendence in connection with the notion of the world as a place to dwell.

2. On the viewer’s experience of the Tree of Life

‘All our life should be baptism, and the fulfilling of the sign, or sacrament, of baptism’. Philosopher Stanley Cavell uses this quote from Martin Luther to address a religious desire that Romanticism would later transpose from religion to art. Luther is saying that our life should be completely transformed by Christian baptism, to the extent of us being dead to our previous life and raised to a new one; through this transformation, our life would become itself a sacrament, that is, a visible sign of God’s grace. Though stripped of religious content, this idea guided Romantic art and, according to Cavell, has somehow lasted until today: ‘his point is […] that categories which were originally developed within the religious realm are now applicable (if they are applicable at all) to the realm of esthetic production and reception’ (Mulhall 1994, 288). Cavell sustains that when religious forms can no longer summon the divine, art can elicit engagement with an immanent sublime that replaces religion [Cavell (1969) 2002, 229]. In a similar way, Thoreau was rekindling Luther’s desire when he referred to his
life in the woods of Walden as a restorative experience, a sacrament: ‘outward visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace’ (Thoreau 2008, 50).

Regarding the latter, the experience provoked in the viewer by Malick’s films previous to The Tree of Life could well be understood from this replacement of religion by art. These films enable the world to reveal itself to the viewer and, in so doing, prompt her to engage in an immanent experience that involves the loss and rediscovery of the world as a true dwelling place. In turn, The Tree of Life seems to claim that art can also transcend itself, providing an experience that goes beyond the worldly dwelling of the viewer, bringing her into the house of God. Hence, the key point is to discern what kind of experience this film elicits in the viewer and, furthermore, whether this experience alters the notion of dwelling articulated by Malick’s previous oeuvre. As Perkins states, ‘the real, that is effective, meaning of a film is contained in the total experience which it provides’ (Perkins [1972] 1993, 149).

In general terms, the authors that have written about the viewer’s experience of The Tree of Life can be divided upon two basic positions: on one hand, those who affirm that the film holds an immanent worldview and, therefore, prompts the viewer into a spiritual but at the same time immanent experience; on the other, those who stand for the film’s transcendent worldview and thus for a transcendent experience. In this regard, the subsequent lines will give a brief account of the arguments of some of these authors.

2.1. The immanent approach

‘Can the cinematic “apparatus” [...] offer its audience an experience equivalent to the kind of experience offered by religion itself?’ (Mules 2013, 133). The question concerning the experience provided by The Tree of Life is at the core of Mules’ article, overtly in favor of describing the film’s worldview as immanent. He presents a vision of religious experience inherited from the German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher. Drawing upon Schleiermacher’s ideas, Mules argues that ‘religious experience does not seek solace in doctrine or a transcendent God, but calls for a release from the blockage of being into divine life as an immediate experience of the finite in the infinite’ (Mules 2013, 159).

Thus, the horizon of religious experience is not a transcendent God, but that what Mules addresses – in a very Heideggerian fashion – as ‘being’. This notion refers to an otherness that does not transcend created beings but precedes them as an absolute possibility: ‘to account for diverse modes of being, there must be being irreducible to the being that things are. Being defines the being of things in their possibility as such’ (Mules 2013, 136). In this vein, Mules argues that The Tree of Life is a film that appeals ‘to an act of faith from its audiences. This act of faith is faith in the “otherness” catalyzed through a collapse (fall) in the continuum of the cinematic world; a collapse into the nothingness of absolute possibility’ (Mules 2013, 142). This collapse is brought on by certain techniques and cinematic gestures that break with the narrative and moral order specific to Hollywood melodramas. Following Mules, the narrative closure of the classic melodramatic plot is the cinematic equivalent for the Christian belief in divine providence.
Sinnerbrink’s (2012) article, focused on the notion of belief, poses a question that partly resembles Mules’ insight: ‘The question I wish to explore is whether cinema has the power to restore our belief in reality’ (Sinnerbrink 2012, 96), he writes. In this vein, his article presents *The Tree of Life* as an example of the esthetic power of film to elicit an experience of the sacred that is not confined to a specific system of belief, such as the Christian faith. Sinnerbrink defines this experience as ‘a sense of the numinous’ (Sinnerbrink 2012, 104), taking this notion from the German theologian Rudolf Otto: it consists of ‘a shattering but transformative encounter with something overwhelming or incomprehensible’ (Sinnerbrink 2012, 104).

*The Tree of Life* leads to this encounter through the intertwining of three narrative dimensions: ‘the familial melodrama, the historical-spiritual Fall or loss of the American Dream, and the cosmological creation myth combining spiritualism and naturalism’ (Sinnerbrink 2012, 105). The combination of these dimensions dwarfs the ordinary life of the O’Brien family and, at the same time, shows the unique place that the joys and sufferings of these people hold within the whole of creation. This tension between human smallness and cosmic grandeur evokes a sense of the sublime – or the numinous, using Otto’s expression – that results in a re-enchanted vision of the everyday world, seen as a realm where the natural and the spiritual dimensions constantly merge with each other.

The immanent positions unfolded by Mules’ and Sinnerbrink’s articles might look similar at first glance, but they are not. It is important to remark what differentiates their approaches, which has to do with their vision on the film’s capacity to reveal the world’s presence. On one hand, Mules refuses the ‘belief in the capacity of film to carry the ultimate meaning of the world’ (Mules 2013, 142). The ‘house of film’ cannot contain the revelation he ascribes to *The Tree of Life*, but rather this revelation becomes present insofar as the cinematic language fails to present it: it comes forth through the cracks and fractures in the walls of the filmic house. The film ‘opens itself to absolute otherness through a collapse in its own formal structure’ (Mules 2013, 142); that is, the ‘cinematic real’ has to collapse in order to disclose a ‘non-cinema real’. On the contrary, Sinnerbrink’s approach is chiefly indebted to Cavell’s *The World Viewed* (Cavell 1979), as he defends the medium’s capacities ‘to cultivate belief in this world, thereby challenging our endemic skepticism’ (Sinnerbrink 2012, 103).

### 2.2. The transcendent approach

Among the texts that study *The Tree of Life* as holding a transcendent view of the world and of human existence, this study will mention those that are focused on the viewer’s experience. In this regard, Manninen’s article (2013) focuses on how this film portrays the confrontation between God and human suffering and on how, ultimately, it attempts to shed some light on this conflict. This author argues that, ‘rather than trying to offer a theodicy (a justification for why God allows the innocent to suffer), Malick responds by placing the theistic argument from beauty in dialog with the problem of evil’ (Manninen 2013, 1). In this line, Malick’s cinematic answer to Mrs. O’Brien’s angst for the death of her son is a long creation sequence imbued by a powerful beauty that leads the viewer to contemplation and awe.
Paradox is at the core of Malick’s argument: ‘the beauty of creation […] is given to us by the same entity that, for reasons unbeknownst to us, allows immense suffering to occur’ (Manninen 2013, 11). In an overtly Kierkegaardian way, the film prompts the viewer to contemplate this paradox and, in doing so, realize the incapacity of human reason to grasp the truth that lies behind it. This experience invites the viewer to abandon rational solutions and be open to the paradox in an attitude of faith. Manninen observes that this attitude does not consist of a serene acceptance of that which is incomprehensible, but of a constant inner struggle with God: ‘Malick is telling us that the only way to achieve this […] is to dive right into God’s mysteries with questions, challenges, strife and wonder’ (Manninen 2013, 20).

In a similar way, Camacho bases his transcendent approach (Camacho 2016) to The Tree of Life on the role that perplexity plays in the lives of the members of the O’Brien family, but also in the viewer’s experience of the film. In its portrayal of human suffering, Malick’s film ‘does not offer us easy answers to these questions. If anything, these questions are rather intensified by the film’ (Camacho 2016, 139), he writes. The film does not urge the viewer to answer them, but to dwell upon them. Among these questions, Camacho focuses on one posed by Jack’s voice-over: ‘What was it You showed me?’ Jack utters this question when his younger brother responds to his maltreatment with a gesture of forgiveness. The brother’s forgiveness is shown ‘as somehow exceeding the finite determinacies of nature and self’ (Camacho 2016, 147). Since there is no rational answer for this gesture, Jack responds with an attitude of perplexity that will eventually lead him to the threshold of the divine, visually represented by the doorframe in the desert. Commenting on this attitude, Camacho affirms that ‘there is a perplexity that throws me beyond my own finitude, beyond even the totality of immanent finitude as such, and into a space of transcendent mystery’ (Camacho 2016, 151, note 1).

2.3. Limitations and biases: a critical evaluation on the foregoing approaches

Along with other similar approaches – such as the ones of Barnett (2013) and Leithart (2013) – these transcendent insights share a limitation: they carry out an analysis that mostly combines the narrative level with an isolated element of the cinematic language, such as the camerawork (Manninen), the voice-over (Camacho), or the symbolic imagery (Barnett and Leithart). As Mules remarks, there is a danger in reading the film in terms of ‘one of its elements rather than in terms of the film as a whole’ (Mules 2013, 149). The account of these texts of the viewer’s experience is partial and, consequently, it can barely support the general assertions they make about the film, such as Manninen’s – ‘Malick is […] focusing on the beauty that permeates every facet of our existence; for the same God that permits such suffering also gives us this beauty’ (Manninen 2013, 7) – or Barnett’s, when he writes that ‘a theological reading of The Tree of Life is demanded, and the film as such does nothing to dispel this approach’ (Manninen 2013, 1).

On the other side, Mules’ approach is also biased. It does not justify some of the theoretical premises underlying his text: they are just taken for granted. For example, he implicitly presents – following Schleiermacher – the Christian faith as a subjectified and dogmatic system of belief that obstructs access to genuine otherness, sustaining
that the ‘excess of feeling’ caused by a truly (immanent) religious experience ‘destroy[s] systems of belief’ (Mules 2013, 135). Furthermore, he builds his idea of the failure of the world to offer a religious experience on a misinterpretation of Pauline theology indebted to Simon Critchley (2013, 178; see 1 Corinthians 7:29–30), according to which the core of this experience is ‘the “not” of this current world’ (Mules 2013, 140). Therefore, Mule’s refusal of ‘the capacity of film to carry the ultimate meaning of the world’ (Mules 2013, 142) is hardly surprising, as he thinks that the world itself cannot even carry this meaning. Finally, this author rejects the possibility of a transcendent order by just saying that it is something imposed and artificial, similar to the machinations of the plot from a Hollywood melodrama, where the events lead to the affirmation of a higher moral order.

Besides this, Sinnerbrink’s article does not make an explicit assertion about its immanent approach, though it implicitly stands for a worldly, non-religious understanding of what it addresses as the experience of the ‘numinous’. The Tree of Life is presented as ‘a moral and esthetic profession of belief’ (Sinnerbrink 2012, 111) in cinema’s exceptional capacities to reveal the world anew, that is, to re-enchant our perception of it. Sinnerbrink manages to articulate a complex and thoughtful analysis of The Tree of Life that somehow stands at the threshold of transcendence – at the door of God’s house – but simply decides not to trespass this limit.

3. The Tree of Life’s prayerful and sacramental dwelling

The Tree of Life can be well interpreted as offering the viewer an immanent dwelling in the house of film, as implied in Sinnerbrink’s (2012) analysis. In the end, this dwelling would be akin to the one already offered by The Thin Red Line and The New World: an invitation for the viewer to rediscover the screened world as a real, external whole and thus (temporarily) dwell in it, as a way of learning how to dwell in the ordinary, existent world she already inhabits. Nevertheless, this immanent-spiritual understanding of the viewer’s dwelling fails to do justice to the true nature of this oeuvre – and, therefore, to the viewer’s experience – since it is a partial approach that passes over the poetic unity of the film as a whole, as well as over the film’s invitation for the viewer to engage in a completely new experience.

In this sense, the film’s complex interweaving of different elements of the cinematic tapestry – mainly voice, music and camerawork – points towards two religious notions that encompass the film as a whole (complementing each other) and help in discerning what kind of dwelling is the viewer invited to experience: namely the notion of ‘prayer’ and the notion of ‘sacrament’. The following analysis of the film will draw upon some ideas raised by the aforementioned authors, but it will also propose new insights regarding the correlation between prayer and sacrament in connection with the viewer’s dwelling in The Tree of Life.

3.1. Dwelling through prayer

Some authors, especially Candler (2016) and Camacho (2016), have compared The Tree of Life with prayer in a very similar way; both refer to Jack’s memories of his
childhood as a ‘confession’ that inherits the mood of the well-known work of Augustine: ‘As with the Confessions, much of the script of The Tree of Life is in the form of prayer, making the film a kind of conversation between God and human beings’ (Candler 2016, 206–207), writes Candler. On his part, Camacho takes this idea a little further:

In suggesting that we approach The Tree of Life as though witnessing a confession, I mean to put us in mind of Augustine and his restless heart. There is something especially Augustinian about Malick’s extensive use of voice-overs. It is significant that the whispered voice-overs we hear in The Tree of Life are almost always directed at a Thou. Words of anguish, wonder, perplexity, praise: all are con-fessed, that is, all are referred to an Other, spoken ‘together with’ an Other, in the presence of an Other. In these confessions, the radical interiority of each character is laid bare, in a manner reminiscent of Augustine’s own confession of his inmost self (Camacho 2016, 140).

The film is characterized as a memorial – chiefly Jack’s, but also his mother’s – from its very beginning, when we hear Jack’s first voice-over: ‘Brother, Mother. It was they who led me to your door’. This line recalls the image of the doorframe in the wilderness, from where Jack starts to recollect his entire life, ‘following the trail of precious memories that finally lead him back to God’s door’ (Rothman 2016, 41). This symbolic mise-en-scène shows the character’s arrival at an existential crossroads in his adult life: the encounter with the doorframe leads him to a singular way to remember his past, one that takes place through a prayerful dialog with an Other (God).

We realize this particularity due to the constant reference to a ‘You’ to whom the memories are addressed8. It seems clear, therefore, that the threshold at which Jack stands is ‘the threshold of the divine’ (Camacho 2016, 140), which implies the possibility of attaining a new perspective on his own past and, consequently, on his own present and future. As Rothman explains, only when the memories he is reliving come to an end, arriving at what he discovers to be their destination, they open the door for him to enter the house of God, which is but the same ordinary world though transfigured, created anew (Rothman 2016, 39–40).

In this regard, it is important to emphasize that some Biblical texts present prayer as a form of dwelling in a way similar as The Tree of Life does. The Gospels refer to Christ’s prolonged night prayers as a mode of dwelling in the presence of his Father9. The use of a preposition of place (‘in’) points to the particular nature of this dwelling: prayer does not only consist of dwelling ‘with’ an Other, but also of dwelling ‘in the presence of an Other’ (Camacho 2016, 140), as Camacho affirms. The latter sense is underlying the words addressed by Christ to the Twelve in the Last Supper: ‘Abide [i.e. dwell] in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me’ (John 15:4). The presence of God – unveiled through prayer – becomes a place to dwell. However, this prayerful dwelling is not limited to Jack’s character, nor to Mrs. O’Brien’s dialog with God in the midst of the woods, reminiscent of Christ’s anguished dwelling in the will of his Father in the garden of Gethsemane: the music and the camerawork are other two elements that merge with the voice-over to create a poetic dwelling for the viewer that can be most suitably approached from the notion of prayer.
With respect to music, Leithart states that the whole film takes the form of a mourning prayer: ‘funeral music fills the movie. Before we know that the movie is about a young man’s death, the music prepares us for mourning’ (Leithart 2013, 33). The film opens with John Taverner’s Funeral Canticle, followed soon after by the soprano solo of Zbigniew Preisner’s Lacrimosa. We also hear Taverner’s Resurrection in Hades and the Agnus Dei of Berlioz’s Grande Messe des Morts, among other musical pieces. Two of these pieces are placed at highly significant sequences of the film, giving way to a poetic unity that comes from the fusion of music with the voice-over and also with the visual track: first, Preisner’s Lacrimosa fuses with the first minutes of the creation sequence, while we hear the questions that Mrs. O’Brien directs to God, regarding the sudden death of one of her sons. The result is a sheer contrast between grief and sublime beauty that serves to intensify the mother’s prayer: ‘Lord, why? Where were you? Did you know what happened? Do you care?’ Ultimately, these questions entail a further question concerning how a human being can dwell in a world created by a seemingly unjust God.

Secondly, Berlioz’s Agnus Dei accompanies the scenes of final reunion set in the beach, imbuing the soundscape with a sense of reconciliation. The mournful and tormented prayer of the beginning now turns into a serene prayer of acceptance and praise: Mrs. O’Brien and Jack accept to dwell in God’s will, a peaceful dwelling that takes on the physical appearance of an endless stretch of white beach (akin to the ‘new earth’ portrayed in the Book of Revelation 21:1). As in all Christian prayers, there is a final ‘Amen’, coming from Berlioz’s piece. The choral voices singing the ‘Amen’ are paralleled by Mrs. O’Brien’s last words; these are, in fact, the last words we hear in the film: ‘I give him to you. I give you my son’. The words, which express the same meaning as the choir, are emphasized by an eloquent gesture of the mother, who raises her hands skyward with the help of two angelic women. The final ‘Amen’ completes Malick’s cinematic prayer and gives it a unity of meaning.

Moreover, in some scenes of the film the camerawork matches this prayerful attitude that stems from the interior of the characters and resonates in the music track. Among the numerous camera movements and placements, low-angle shots stand out as the most suggestive way through which the camera evokes prayer. The extreme low-angle shots of the treetops in the forest have often been described as ‘instances of cinematic plenitude’ that ‘seem to crystallize Malick’s vision of a transcendent reality’ (Michaels 2009, 98). Besides these shots, there are two salient moments where the camera adopts a low-angle position that emulates some explicit gesture made by a character aiming at God’s dwelling place: the first one is the brief scene where Mrs. O’Brien points towards the sky while she tells her little son Jack, ‘That’s where God lives!’ The second is the abovementioned scene of the same character giving her son to God. In both cases the camera follows the movement of the hands, searching for the place where the divine dwells.

To sum up, The Tree of Life presents a singular way of dwelling (or searching for a dwelling) through prayer, making use of an intertwining of voices, music and images. Prayer can be expressed in words, gestures or glances though, in the end, it finds its source and unity in the center of the person: the heart. Hence, it is the whole person who prays. In the Semitic or Biblical sense, the heart is the place where the person is,
where she dwells; the heart is the place ‘to which I withdraw’ (See Matthew 6:6). The Catholic tradition defines this notion in these terms:

The heart is our hidden center, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others [...]. The heart is the place of decision, deeper than our psychic drives. It is the place of truth, where we choose life or death. It is the place of encounter, because as image of God we live in relation: it is the place of covenant (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2563).

This inner unity is eloquently paralleled by Malick’s film in its constant interweaving of the three aforementioned textual levels (voice, music, image) in the cinematic tapestry: in this case, it is the whole film – the ‘film as film’, Perkins (1993) would say – that prays. However, the film does not present prayer as the starting point, but rather as a response to God’s initiative; that is, as a consequence of his calling of us into existence, following Paul’s first lines to the Ephesians (1:3–4). In this regard, the Christian notion of ‘sacrament’ complements that of ‘prayer’, the former seen as a divine action that precedes the latter and follows the opposite orientation: not from man towards God, but from God towards man.

3.2. The sacramental quality of the world

Though depriving this notion of its transcendent meaning, Thoreau’s aforesaid definition of sacrament in Walden – indebted to Augustine – is still valid for my approach: ‘outward visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace’ (Thoreau 2008, 50). Understood in a broad sense, a sacrament is a manifestation of God’s grace, namely of his helping action and presence: it is, thus, a palpable sign introduced by God and directed towards man. In this vein, The Tree of Life uses the cinematic language to reveal the world as having a sacramental quality, that is, as a sign of God’s presence and, therefore, as a place to dwell in the abovementioned Biblical sense10.

This film portrays the world as a finite whole that does not contain the reason for its existence and, as a consequence of its finitude, points implicitly towards the existence of its Creator. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote in his Tractatus that ‘[t]he sense of the world must lie outside the world’ (Wittgenstein 1922, 6.41). He said that to perceive the world as a limited whole was, in fact, the first step of what he addressed as the ‘mystical feeling’11: ‘the contemplation of the world sub specie aeterni is its contemplation as a limited whole. The feeling of the world as a limited whole is the mystical feeling’ (Wittgenstein 1922, 6.45). Commenting on these words, De Carolis mentions The Tree of Life as a suitable illustration of this idea:

Terrence Malick’s film The Tree of Life [...] interweaves the life of an ordinary 1950s’ Texas family with glimpses of the whole cosmic dimension, from dinosaurs to atomic explosions on the surface of the Sun. In this way Malick portrays pedestrian facts (two children playing with each other, a young mother washing her feet after working in the garden) as though they were miracles, displaying the world as a whole (De Carolis 2013, 140).

This view is radically opposed to Mules’ approach to this film, which describes spiritual experience as grasping ‘the finite [i.e. being] in the infinite [i.e. Being, understood as absolute possibility]’ (Mules 2013, 159). On the contrary, the transcendent approach asserts the opposite, namely that the infinite (God) can be mysteriously perceived in
the finite (the created world). At the same time, addressing God as ‘the infinite’ implies the risk to declare Him absolutely alien to creation, such as Mules characterizes absolute otherness – in line with the Heideggerian ‘Being’ – ‘as the “not” of this current world that ‘breaks with the order of being’ (Mules 2013, 140). But God is not alien to the world, since his presence can be discerned from it. In this sense, Paul’s Letter to the Romans can be read as a primeval synthesis of the idea posed by Wittgenstein and De Carolis, in a way that illuminates the sacramental condition of the world, as it is considered here:

For the invisible things of him [i.e. of God] from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead (Romans 1:20).

This capacity of the world to reveal God’s presence is not present in Malick’s films previous to The Tree of Life. Camacho affirms ‘that The Tree of Life marks a significant shift in Malick’s philosophical and theological outlook: […] Malick now offers us an exploration into a more original source that exceeds and funds finite nature’ (Camacho 2016, 152, note 13). In a similar way, Candler asserts that this film ‘gives back to nature the capacity for disclosure of the divine radiance’ (Candler 2016, 213). In other words, this film is revealing the world as a sacramental sign, i.e. as an effective sign of God’s presence among his creatures.

While the prayerful quality of the film comes mainly from its soundtrack – the voice-over and the music, though these are emphasized by the camerawork – its sacramental quality comes mainly from the visual track. In an attempt to reveal this quality, the camera plays a significant role, as it has the power to point towards that which is invisible. Hamilton notes how Malick’s camera ‘offers us the opportunity to engage the human struggle for meaning […] through sacramental framing, transfiguring moments through cinema’s expressive power’ (Hamilton 2016).

More specifically, Barnett’s article mentions the struggle of the camera to manifest God’s presence, observing that in The Tree of Life wind imagery is presented as a sign of the divine: ‘Malick’s wind […] is something natural, which, paradoxically, is capable of communicating the supernatural’ (Barnett 2013, 18). Wind recalls certain ideas about God as Spirit (e.g. John 3:8), but also points at the elusive nature of the divine. This author comments on one key scene of the film that anticipates adult Jack’s entering God’s invisible house in the desert: the scene where young Jack breaks into the house of a female neighbor to whom he feels attracted. As the character draws near the front door of the house,

The camera attends to the wind chimes on the front porch; they stir gently, their pleasant tune standing in contrast to Jack’s mindset. He enters the front door and begins tiptoeing through the house. He is alone. Or is he? A breeze enters through the open windows and billows the curtains. At one point, Jack even lets the fluttering fabric run across his hand. He pauses, thinking. Perhaps he is considering leaving; perhaps he senses the presence of another or, indeed, an Other (Barnett 2013, 14–15).

Besides wind imagery, light also plays a relevant role in the film’s endeavor to address the place where God dwells. Drawing upon Toles’ (2001) description of the house of film as ‘a house made of light’, Rothman argues – using the Biblical image of
God as light\textsuperscript{12} – that \textit{The Tree of Life} presents the light of the filmic house as a manifestation of God’s dwelling in the world:

God is thus the source, the cause, of the images of the film we are watching. Malick’s film accounts for its images not by acknowledging them as the work of a merely human author, but by presenting them as emanations, or manifestations, of God. In the film, God is light. Film images are written in light (Rothman 2016, 49).

The film was entirely shot with natural light, a strategy that gives the visual track a very spiritual quality that could not have been achieved by the use of artificial light. ‘Terry and the director of photography Chivo Lubezki believe in the power and beauty of natural light’ (Hinterman and Villa 2015, 298), states producer Sarah Green. All the objects shot – plants, trees, water, but also indoor spaces – present a particular radiance that invites the viewer to dwell upon them in a contemplative mood. This visual radiance is sometimes remarked by the voice-overs, mostly that of Mrs. O’Brien, a character that embodies this spiritual quality: ‘Love everyone. Every leaf. Every ray of light’, she says to her sons. The lesson she tries to teach them is ‘that the light of love that shines on all things emanates from the place where God lives’ (Rothman 2016, 47). In the end, light and wind are the most recurred visual motifs of \textit{The Tree of Life}: ‘It’s a movie about light and about wind, and about curtains in the wind’ (Hinterman and Villa 2015, 297), declares cameraman Joerg Widmer.

4. A new sense of things

\textit{The Tree of Life} manifests God’s presence as it can be inferred from the world’s presence, the latter being revealed by the film medium. This film recurs to different narrative, aural and visual strategies so as to emphasize the former presence, such as the voice-over, the music score, the camerawork and the wind and light imagery. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that \textit{The Tree of Life} can only point towards God; it cannot prove his existence nor identify it: the house of God lies before us, contained within the house of film, but it remains invisible. Barnett unfolds this idea in his comment to Malick’s oeuvre, arguing that ‘one cannot so much identify God as sense his presence, though, even in this sensing, ambiguity remains. […] In Malick’s films, as in life, God’s presence is also a kind of absence’ (Barnett 2013, 10).

The image of Jack O’Brien standing at the doorframe in the desert might well illustrate the experience of the viewer of \textit{The Tree of Life}. Through the mentioned visual and aural strategies – intertwined in a poetic unity that can be approached from the complementary notions of prayer and sacrament – the film faces the viewer with an existential threshold: that of ‘the possibility of God’ (Handley 2014, 89); however, it cannot make her cross the threshold without her approval. As Calhoun affirms: ‘any force Malick exerts in his films is persuasive rather than aggressive or coercive. That is to say, it is invitational’ (Calhoun 2016, 87). At the same time, the film prevents the viewer from taking a neutral stance, requiring her to strive so as to take a decision (i.e. to enter or not no enter the invisible house). It is a crossroads that recalls the words of the Gospel of Luke:

Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able (Luke 13:24).
The contradiction presented by *The Tree of Life* regarding the existence of a beautiful world created by a seemingly unjust God might restrain the viewer from entering this ‘strait gate’. How can human beings dwell in a world created by a cruel divinity? The above-mentioned analyses of the film argue – each in its own way – that this contradiction is, in fact, a paradox. The gate does not lead the viewer to a dead end, though it is strait and difficult to cross; apparently, it is a door to nowhere, there is ‘nothing but desert on the other side’ (Leithart 2013, 23), it can only be crossed in a spirit of faith. In his book on the ‘transcendental style’ in film, Schrader uses the term ‘disparity’ to address this paradox: ‘the spiritual existing within the physical’ (Schrader 1972, 82). The disparity presented by *The Tree of Life* reaches its climax when Jack arrives at the threshold of the divine: this is, in Schrader’s words, the ‘decisive action’ of the film.

This ‘action forces the viewer into the confrontation with the Wholly Other he [or she] would normally avoid’, requiring his or her ‘participation and approval’ (Schrader 1972, 81). The viewer of this film cannot elude answering the paradox: ‘to pretend not to choose is already to have made a choice’ (Calhoun 2016, 87), writes Calhoun in allusion to Pascal’s wager. The paradox must be inescapably accepted or rejected; if the viewer accepts it, this will open up for her the possibility of entering God’s invisible house. At that moment, all the images, music, voice-over, camerawork and sound effects merge in a poetic unity ‘to create a new screen, the one formed by the spectator’ (Schrader 1972, 82). The sequence following the decisive action is referred by Schrader as ‘stasis’ (Schrader 1972, 82–86), namely when the viewer sees the world (portrayed by the film) afresh, as a newfound dwelling where all things are reconciled in God:

This static view represents the ‘new’ world in which the spiritual and the physical can coexist, still in tension and unresolved, but as part of a larger scheme in which all phenomena are more or less expressive of a larger reality: the Transcendent (Schrader 1972, 83).

In *The Tree of Life*, the stasis sequence would be the one of the beach, immediately posterior to Jack’s crossing the doorframe. It is a moment of spiritual reconciliation for Jack and his mother; both seem to reach a further understanding of all the hardships and vicissitudes they have been through. Using Malick’s words in an interview, one might say that they attain a new ‘sense of things. It’s as though everything just falls into place’ (Linden 1975). In this respect, the film’s official trailer presents a voice-over that was not included in the final cut and that, presumably, matches with the scene of Jack falling to his knees when he arrives at the beach: ‘Someday we’ll fall down and weep. And we’ll understand it all, all things’14. This voice-over is modeled on a passage from Dostoevsky’s novel *Crime and Punishment* in which Marmeladov describes God’s mercy towards the worst sinners in the Day of Judgement: ‘And He will hold out His hands to us and we shall fall down before Him… and we shall weep… and we shall understand all things! Then we shall understand all!’ [Dostoevsky (1867) 1914, 20–21].

It can be inferred from these words that Malick, along with Dostoevsky, is defining the acknowledgment of the divine – that is faith – not only as a move of the human will towards God, as Schrader does, but also as a new way of understanding things that
does not depend on mere willpower. In his insightful text about Terrence Malick as a natural theologian, Calhoun asserts:

The call to believe is neither a demand to produce a belief out of sheer will nor a command to conjure evidence where there is none, but an invitation to see the available evidence in a particular way and in the light of a particular evidentiary framework. In its best form, it is an invitation to consider whether one’s experience [...] makes better sense in the light of a new interpretive framework (Calhoun 2016, 76).

Thus, The Tree of Life is inviting the viewer to a form of belief grounded on a way of seeing – in the light of a particular framework – rather than on a blind leap of the will (as put by Schrader). This new gaze ‘recasts relationships and meanings and reorders the system of values that exists for a person’ (Calhoun 2016, 76). This is the main reason why Malick’s film has elicited, ever since its release, such polarized reactions: because it is asking each viewer to put into question the interpretive stance she takes toward the world and toward her most personal experiences (love, grief, solitude, etc.). In other words, it is asking her ‘to be open to see in a way empowered by divine grace, which allows one to apprehend successfully [...] the shimmering beauty that points back to its author’ (Calhoun 2016, 80).

This new way of seeing is difficult to attain. The most we can make (as viewers) is an effort to remain open to the film’s revelations, in the same vein as Malick opens the film medium to the world’s revelatory condition; that is, we are invited to surrender ourselves before the film and let it challenge our ways of understanding the world and dwelling in it. Then the new gaze has to be awaited as a gift, though all expectation will be in vain if we have not previously opened ourselves to what might happen15. In his analysis of The Tree of Life, Candler emphasizes this characterization of the new gaze as an undeserved gift:

To effect such a transformation of vision is arguably the goal of all true art [...]. It takes, it is true, a certain kind of transformation of vision to see any old city [Waco, in this case] as a locus of divine glory, and one cannot simply will oneself to see in this way. This is perhaps why the ‘eyes of faith’ are ‘infused’, as it were, as a genuine gift of God, an act of undeserved grace that makes one capable of seeing the world as ‘charged with the grandeur of God’ (Candler 2016, 216).

This (feasible) new gaze of the viewer is paralleled by Jack’s new way of seeing the world. When Jack returns to his ordinary work after his symbolic eschatological vision, the ‘world looks exactly the same, only now Jack sees it with new eyes’ (Manninen 2013, 19). In the first draft of the film’s screenplay, this idea is clearly expressed by Malick:

We return to the present, to the noise and confusion of the everyday, to the place we set out from. We see it now as though for the first time. What seemed plain and familiar glows with a radiance it did not display before. We have found the infinite in the everyday, the commonplace. Jack looks about. Will the revelation be forgotten? (Malick 2007, 125).

Thus, the desires previously manifested by the words that young Jack addresses to God – ‘Where do You live? Are You watching me? I want to know what You are. I want to see what You see’– are finally fulfilled. He realizes that the world is the place where the divine dwells; it is God’s house, a house Jack already inhabited. However,
he does not gain this revelation through his bodily eyes (for which God’s house remains invisible), but rather through the infused eyes of faith. Similarly, the viewer that opens herself to the revelations of the film might gain a new way of looking at the real world she already inhabits and, therefore, a new way of dwelling in it.

5. Conclusion

The foregoing has shown to what extent the notion of dwelling is a valid approach to the viewer’s experience in Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life*. As noted in the introductory remarks to this article, equating film viewing with dwelling in Malick’s oeuvre is inextricably linked to his use of the cinematic language as a means for revealing the world’s presence anew. His use of the film medium – particularly in *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* – is aimed at inviting the viewer to see the world she inhabits as imbued with a real presence that turns it into a full-blown dwelling. For its part, *The Tree of Life* can be seen as complementing the preceding films with further disclosures: here the revealed presence is not only the world’s, but – more specifically – that of its Creator. Drawing upon the image of Jack O’Brien standing at the doorframe in the wilderness, it might well be argued that this film is facing the viewer with an analogous situation: that of the possibility of God.

Thus, in order to discern whether this film is really inviting the viewer to rediscover the world as a dwelling place open to transcendence, the first and second sections of this article have given an account of the experience elicited by Malick’s film. First, this experience has been studied in the light of the contributions of different authors, such as Sinnerbrink (2012), Mules (2013), Manninen (2013) and Camacho (2016), among others. After a critical evaluation of these approaches, it has been necessary to elaborate a new approach that might overcome the partialities of the previous ones and give an all-encompassing explanation of the experience of the film as a whole. For this purpose, the complementary notions of ‘prayer’ and ‘sacrament’ – understood in a Christian sense – have proven to be most suitable to address the viewer’s experience of *The Tree of Life*. On one hand, the film’s soundtrack – mostly its use of music and voice-overs – is significantly articulated as a prolonged prayer. On the other, the visual track – the camera’s emphasis on filming wind imagery and the radiance derived from natural light – presents its images as having a sacramental quality, that is, as visible manifestations of God’s invisible presence.

In the light of the above, the viewer’s experience of *The Tree of Life* can arguably be compared to that of adult Jack; both are standing at the door of a new dwelling: God’s invisible house. However, this doorway can only be crossed in a spirit of faith. Just like Jack, the viewer is invited ‘to be open to see in a way empowered by divine grace’ (Calhoun 2016, 80) that might enable her to see the world anew, as God’s house. In the end, the viewer’s return from the house of film to her ordinary world is called to mirror Jack’s return from his dreamlike vision to the real world in the last scenes of *The Tree of Life*. As put by the film’s draft screenplay: ‘What seemed plain and familiar glows with a radiance it did not display before. We have found the infinite in the everyday’ (Malick 2007, 125).
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Notes

1. The dialogues and voice-overs are taken from the DVD original English soundtrack. See The Tree of Life [DVD distributed in Spain by Tripictures (Spain), M-39010-2011].

2. The Tree of Life production designer Jack Fisk makes a significant comment on this idea: ‘I think that by completing this long-planned and personal film, Terry has passed through a gate. It has opened up the possibility of a new and experimental work – his post-Tree period’ (Hinterman and Villa 2015, 296).

3. Jones’ article on The New World argues that this revelatory condition is not unique to Malick, though he is the filmmaker who has turned it into a guiding principle of his oeuvre: ‘Malick is the only narrative filmmaker who devotes entire movies to the wonder of presence’ (Jones 2006, 25). His films present a notion of dwelling that is inextricably connected to that of presence. This connection is underlying the seventh sense given by the Oxford English Dictionary (Simpson and Weiner 1989, vol. V, 2–3) to the verb ‘to dwell’: ‘To remain as in a permanent residence.’ In the end, this correlation between dwelling and presence has its roots in the Old Testament theology of the Temple, as explained by Ratzinger in his text ‘Built from Living Stones’: ‘The building done by humans aims at the construction of a place to stay; it seeks security, a home, freedom. It is a declaration of war against death, against insecurity, against fear, against loneliness. For this reason the desire of men to build is fulfilled in the Temple, in that building into which they invite God. The Temple is the expression of the human longing to have God as a fellow occupant, the longing to be able to reside with God and thus to experience the perfect way of living’ ([Ratzinger 1975] 2014). As shown in The Tree of Life, the world is to become the new Temple, that is, God’s everlasting abode among men.

4. It might be argued that The New World addresses a somewhat transcendent presence, that of a spiritual ‘Mother’ who is repeatedly invoked by Pocahontas throughout the narrative. In this sense, this film contains a reference to the world as a created whole and, thus, to its Creator. To learn more, see Mottram’s chapter ‘All Things Shining: The Struggle for Wholeness, Redemption and Transcendence in the Films of Terrence Malick’ (Mottram 2007, 14–26). Nevertheless, I consider that the notions of creation and Creator posed by The Tree of Life are different from the foregoing ones: here the film is clearly addressing these (and other) notions in Biblical terms, thereby using images that are deeply rooted in the Christian tradition (such as the strait gate, the biblical idea of presence, the complementary notions of prayer and sacrament, the wind and the light, etc.) along with quotations from the Bible (e.g. Job 38:4,7) that help to disclose this specific meaning.

5. Cavell takes this quote from Luther’s A Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church ([Luther 1520] 1915) and uses it as epigraph for his essay The Senses of Walden
(Cavell 1981), though he had previously mentioned it in ‘A Matter of Meaning It’ ([Cavell 1969] 2002) with some alterations that underlined the relevance of experience: ‘All our experience of life should be baptismal in character’ (Cavell 2002, 229). Cavell considers that Luther was ‘criticizing one form in which the sacraments had become relics’ (Cavell 2002, 229), that is, deprived of vital meaning.

6. Schleiermacher unfolded his immanent notion of religious experience in his book On Religion: Speeches to its Cultural Despisers ([Schleiermacher 1799] 1958).

7. In an endnote to his text, Sinnerbrink explains the experience of the ‘numinous’ in more detail: ‘It describes a shattering encounter with a transcendent dimension beyond ordinary experience (the sacred as ‘wholly other’) that resists description and comprehension. As a religious experience it is characterised both by a sense of terror (a ‘fear and trembling’ or mysterium tremendum) eliciting dread or anxiety, as well as rapture or fascination evoking silent awe or wonder’ (Sinnerbrink 2012, 114, note 68). Rudolf Otto developed his notion of the ‘numinous’ in his book The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational ([Otto 1917] 1923).

8. It might be argued, as Harrison (2016) does, that the ‘You’ addressed by Jack is essentially ambiguous: it does not necessarily imply a reference to God. Nevertheless, the fact that Jack recalls moments of his life he was not conscious of (particularly his birth and early childhood) and includes them in the dialogue with that ‘You’ suggest he might be addressing someone that transcends his finite self: ‘memory can relate to the immemorial by confessing that the self is not its own measure, that there is a deeper origin that makes possible the self’ (Camacho 2016, 141).

9. ‘And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God’ (Luke 6:12).

10. Here the so called sacramental quality of film (derived from the sacramental quality of the world revealed) is not grounded on narrative strategies –as Fraser (1998) does in his book on the ‘sacramental mode’ in film, focused on various revivals of the Christian messianic narrative pattern– but rather on the film medium’s revelatory condition.

11. As De Carolis (2013) explains, Wittgenstein uses the word ‘mystical’ to make reference to those objects that cannot be said, since they are ‘beyond the bounds of language’ (De Carolis 2013, 130). The experience of the divine can be considered among these. In this connection, Elisabeth Walden adds: ‘Language directs us, in this [Wittgenstein’s] formulation, beyond language. Unlike many of his followers, Wittgenstein does not restrain himself from nonsense. For he recognizes that everything of value lies beyond the limit he has drawn in language’ (Walden 2011, 205).

12. See for example: ‘For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light’ (Psalm 36:9); ‘In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not’ (John 1:4-5); ‘Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto’ (1 Timothy 6:16); ‘God is light, and in him is no darkness at all’ (1 John 1:5).

13. Here are some of the expressions used by these analyses to address the viewer’s experience of the paradox: ‘a shattering but transformative encounter with something overwhelming or incomprehensible’ (Sinnerbrink 2012, 104); ‘an immediate experience of the finite in the infinite’ (Mules 2013, 159); God’s presence as ‘a kind of absence’ (Barnett 2013, 10); an invitation to ‘react against the inexplicable anguish in the world […] by focusing on the beauty that permeates every facet of our existence’ (Manninen 2013, 7); a move ‘into perplexity, as the very power that once showed itself to be creative and sustaining now reveals itself to be destructive’ (Camacho 2016, 144); an ‘esthetic caesura’ between the universal goodness of creation and the particularity of human suffering (Candler 2016, 207). All these insights point to the fact that The Tree of Life is confronting the viewer with a paradox: one that opposes God’s care over his creatures to the unjust suffering of many of these creatures, mostly of human beings. Ultimately, it is
the same paradox underlying Job’s story in the Bible, explicitly addressed at several points during the film (See Leithart 2013, 10–16).

14. See The Tree of Life official trailer (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2010): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrAz1YLh8nY

15. C. S. Lewis’ thoughts on the experience of the work of art in his essay An Experiment in Criticism are of great help to illuminate this idea: ‘We must use our eyes. We must look, and go on looking till we have certainly seen exactly what is there. We sit down before the picture in order to have something done to us, not that we may do things with it. The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. (There is no good asking first whether the work before you deserves such a surrender, for until you have surrendered you cannot possibly find out’) (Lewis 1961, 19).

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