

## **The Ascent of Eros in Terrence Malick's *To the Wonder***

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Critics and commentators have noted that Terrence Malick's characters are presented enigmatically enough to stand as archetypes. While Malick develops his characters with sufficient concrete detail that they are not bare universals, they serve in their concreteness as representations of competing outlooks or interpretive stances on human life. In *The Thin Red Line* (1998), for example, paired sets of characters—Tall and Staros, Witt and Welsh—represent respectively a hard, pragmatic, closedness and an ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual openness to “shining glory” outside of the self. Malick does not merely *present* the competing outlook between closedness and openness, however; his narrative, by exhibiting the consequences of these interpretive stances, makes a case for the superiority of one outlook over the other. In constructing his films in this way, Malick's offers what amounts to *arguments* in favor of interpretive stances toward the world.

Malick's most recent film, *To the Wonder* (2012), takes this approach to the question of human love, specifically in its erotic / romantic form. Taking cues from Aristophanes' tragic myth of the divided selves and the ladder of love in Plato's *Symposium*, Kierkegaard's analysis of the interpersonal and theological dimensions of love, and the “songs of ascent” in the Psalms, Malick explores a range of human stances toward eros, especially with respect to the role that eros and erotic relations play in human meaning and happiness. Neil (Ben Affleck) is open to the wondrous power of eros, as the scenes early in the film set in Paris and Mont Saint Michel illustrate. But everyday concerns—career and mundane daily routines—blind Neil to the power of love to enlighten and elevate, and he lives his life like a zombie, at Kierkegaard's lowest level of despair, barely aware of himself as a self. Jane (Rachel McAdams) is at least aware of the sense in which love points beyond itself, and so links her liaison with Neil with religion, through prayer and devotion. But her hope that with Neil all things will work together “for the good” are disappointed, insofar as she allows Neil's immediacy to conflate eros with sex. As she finds out, it is not what she wants, or not *all* that she wants, for through this love is reduced to lust. Jane is left, bereft, wandering the darkness of her home, and we last see her ascending a darkened staircase toward still more darkness.

The most richly drawn character in the film is the dancer Marina (Olga Kurylenko), who seems in her leaping and twirling to want to lift free of the world. Marina understands that her physical and psychological buoyancy are inextricably tied to the experience of being in love, and this drives her to pressure the reluctant Neil to allow her to return to Oklahoma and to marry, first in a civil ceremony and then in a religious ceremony. But none of these steps is sufficient for Marina. She knows that there is something more, and that ineffable something Neil cannot provide. Nor can an adulterous tryst provide it.

*To the Wonder* answers the question of how love and transcendence are related through the comment and concrete ministry of Father Quintana (Javier Bardem). We can open ourselves to the “love that loves us,” as Marina calls it, the love that is not mere emotion, fragile and transient as a cloud, and allow ourselves and our loves to be transformed. This requires that we choose grace, and pray, along with Father Quintana, “Show us how to seek you. We were made to see you.” This is the choice of love that is open to wonder, and that ascends, falteringly and partially, to the wonder.