



Exegesis of a Mystic's Experience

A book review by Macon Boczek

Meins G.S. Coetsier. *Etty Hillesum and the Flow of Presence: A Voegelinian Analysis*. Columbia: U. of Missouri Press, 2008. Bibliography, Index. 228 pp. Hardcover. \$37.50.

Meins G.S. Coetsier has written a book examining the life of Etty Hillesum in the light of Eric Voegelin's thought. The author brings to his task the advantages of being a trained philosopher and of being Dutch—like his subject. On one level, the book is a biographical introduction to the lives of two people who had been victimized by the Nazis. But at a deeper level it is an account of spiritual growth through resistance to totalitarianism.

The odyssey of Etty Hillesum is especially poignant for Voegelin readers who understand the importance to be afforded to the “the flow of presence.” The context for Hillesum's spiritual development was the degradation of Dutch Jewry by the ruthless eugenic apparatus of the Third Reich. She died with millions of other victims of the Nazis in extermination camps. Her writing, like Voegelin's, was “shaped by the Nazi regime.”

Coetsier devotes the opening chapter to Etty Hillesum's life. He follows this with a chapter on her letters and diaries. He then devotes a further chapter to the thought of Eric Voegelin and in the final chapter, shows the remarkable coincidence of her spiritual experiences with Voegelin's own.

Etty Hillesum's resistance was expressed in both her writings and in her growing identity with “her people,” the Dutch Jews who had, before their deportation, been forcibly segregated by the Nazis. She pursued her writing as “almost a holy vocation,” a resistance against dehumanizing anti-Semitism.



Similarly, in 1938 Eric Voegelin had literally avoided going to his home in Vienna where the Gestapo were waiting for him outside his front door. He escaped to Switzerland and emigrated to the United States where he eventually taught at the Louisiana State University. After twenty years there he began to divide his time between teaching in Munich and visiting professorships in the U.S. His teaching and writing on political science and philosophy were acts of resistance to intellectual dishonesty in both the academy and political life.

Etty Hillesum, as a young woman in Amsterdam, had been a secular, non-observant Jew from a troubled yet creative family. She entered adulthood in a state of psychological distress and was caught up in the twentieth century sexual revolution. Yet she was driven by a search for meaning in life. The people and events in her life, plus her rich educational and linguistic background, brought her to the “discovery of an existential interior openness to the divine.” “Here is a personal odyssey,” Coetsier writes, “a spiritual turnaround, an emotional healing, an emergence of representative consciousness, that is eminently worthy of study.” (p. 6)

Because Etty and her brothers were brought up in a secular, non-Jewish environment, subsequent scholars questioned how Jewish she really was. Her letters and diaries, extensively quoted by Coetsier, were received with mixed reactions by the Jewish community after the end of World War II. Despite her obscurity, a good deal has been written about her; Coetsier includes a bibliography with an extensive listing of the translations of her *Letters and Diaries* as well as a hundred biographical and analytical works about her. The bibliography also lists hundreds of

works by and about Eric Voegelin.

Coetsier is able to employ Voegelin's thought to analyze Hillesum for two reasons: first because Voegelin carried out extensive diagnoses of the spiritual disorder that grounds modernity as well as an exhaustive exegesis of the divine/human encounter as constitutive of human nature. And second, "the rich philosophical and religious symbolisms" in Hillesum's less technical and more poetic *Letters and Diaries* make them an excellent source that both illustrates and substantiates Voegelin's work as revealed in the "Drama of Humanity." The nature and definition of what it is to be human emerge in these symbols, i.e., reason as a *sensorium* of transcendence and the *metaxy* as the site of the "flow of presence" with its human and divine poles.

Voegelin's theoretical apparatus can shed light on the core development Hillesum underwent in the process of writing about her rich interior life. While Voegelin offered a systematic analysis of the Greek philosophers' insights into humanity, Coetsier demonstrates the remarkable adequacy of Voegelin's philosophy for interpreting Etty Hillesum's writings.

The Experience of Closed Existence

A central thesis in Voegelin's work is that of the inseparable connection of experience and symbolization as the carrier of meaning in history. The main section of Coetsier's book is an exploration of a multitude of symbols and the experiences to which they refer contained in Hillesum's writings. The author then illustrates how these symbols and experiences are equivalently expressed in the Greek philosophers, a fact that Voegelin has identified and clearly articulated in his masterful exegesis and interpretation of their legacy.

While there are so many rich and significant symbols explored to their experiential sources in this work, only a few can be considered here. In Chapter 2, on Hillesum's *Letters and Diaries*, Coetsier uses the important concepts of closed and open existence that Voegelin introduced in his very first book, *On the Form of the American Mind*, to analyze symbols used by Etty Hillesum in her diaries. Her use of these symbols not only reveal her developmental progress from that of a closed soul to an open one, but they also provide examples of closed and open souls in Amsterdam during the Nazi occupation of Holland.

One symbol Etty Hillesum employs is "chaos"; it speaks to her lack of self-confidence and "mortal fear in every fiber. Complete collapse." Her spiritual journey to openness begins with this recognition of chaos because she writes "chaos will have to make way for order."

Other symbols presented under the section of "Closed Existence" are "sadness" and "badness." During the period of her "breakthrough" the symbols of "heart" and "breath" and "wrestle with" turn up frequently in her writings. For example, Etty writes, "a strong straight pillar is growing in my heart, . . . and around it all the rest revolves: I myself, the world, everything." And finally she emerges into the full awareness of something timeless in her consciousness beyond its sad turmoil, and uses the symbols of "Center," "Source," "You," or "God." For example, she writes, "And talking to You, God. Is that all right?" "And now, deep inside me, there is a centre of strength which also radiates strength to the outside."

In Chapter 3, after a brief recounting of Voegelin's career, Coetsier explains Voegelin's central concepts, including "order," "history," "consciousness," the "equivalence of symbol and experience," reason as *nous*, and

“presence”—both as “divine presence” and as the “flow of presence.” This prepares the reader for his examination of Hillesum’s writings.

Coetsier brings everything together in Chapter 4, the final chapter, entitled “Hillesum in the Flow of Presence.” Here Hillesum is approached through Voegelin’s description of a movement from a closed to an open existence. Coetsier also contrasts Hillesum’s thought to Nazi ideology as she describes it in her writings.

For example, there is the Voegelinian symbol of *deformation* which refers to the destruction of the order of the soul. *Soul* for Hillesum is the “primary life principle in her existence” experienced through her attunement to its workings. Hillesum resisted the closing of her soul which might have resulted from the inhuman policies inflicted daily in the Westerbork prison camp. She writes, “[Against] every new outrage, . . . we shall put up one more piece of goodness . . . drawing strength from within ourselves.”

The Experience of Second Realities

She also recognized what Voegelin has called the “second realities” dominating German culture during this period which had in fact eclipsed the entire transcendent horizon of consciousness. Her “breakthrough” involved what Voegelin has called the “differentiation of consciousness” to the attuned awareness of reason (*nous*) as a “sensorium of transcendence.” Coetsier writes, “Hillesum’s writings brought her in touch with that noetic faculty in her soul (*ziel*) that helped her apperceive the ground (*arche*) of existence.”

The two central symbols developed by Voegelin that are presented in this chapter are the *metaxy* and “flow of presence.” Hillesum’s preferred symbol for the Voegelin “In-Between” was her “inner world.” “I slip through the grey Ocean of Eternity like a narrow boat,” she wrote. Coetsier explains that the *metaxy* for Hillesum was life lived between being alive and the looming death of Nazi extermination. It was also one between ignorance with its restive wondering and knowledge and finally between God and herself.

Hillesum built a wall of language symbols, Coetsier explains, between her inner life and the outside world, and withdrew into the safety of herself. But she found God there offering her answers to her questions and so she blossomed into the representative human being who lives by truth found within.

There is the character of an event in Voegelin’s description of the “flow of presence” and this character shows up in the Hillesum diaries: “God and I have been left behind alone . . . [which leaves] me rich and peaceful.” But this statement cannot be understood in a static manner. Rather it refers to the “flowing presence” that had become a reality to her, that brought order to her innermost being, and which radiated this peace to the immediate community in which she lived in the Westerbork camp. Her “Eternal Being” was experienced in its temporal flow, and her writings became an interpretation of the experience of her own consciousness as the site of the “nudges of the spirit” in what she called the flowing spring water of the life of God.

An Amazing and Remarkable Coalescing

In his closing discussion of Etty Hillesum, Coetsier brings Voegelin analysis to bear in a comprehensive

investigation of the meanings of the symbols and their engendering experiences in Hillesum's letters and diaries: he presents with great clarity the equivalence of these authors' mutual experiences and symbolization. Bringing together these two writers into a conversation over the mystic life of human beings in the *metaxy* of consciousness is well served by this comparative study. The book's project works; it provides a penetrating understanding of life lived in attunement to the flow of presence in one's innermost conscious being.

Why is this the case? First Voegelin's symbols are new technical ones, very comprehensive, and not easily understood just by reading. As he insists, they are incomprehensible without their "engendering experiences." Hillesum's *Letters and Diaries* provided a clear and specific instance of these engendering experience that she articulates to her consciousness in writing about her inner life. Coetsier provides many wonderful and rich, deeply spiritual quotations from Hillesum's writings that completely and meaningfully illustrate the divine/human encounter behind her maturation into full human being-ness.

There is an amazing and remarkable coalescing in the similarity of her encounter with the Divine "you" at the center of her being and the engendering experiences that produced the symbols of interdependency of human and divine order bequeathed to us by the Greek mystic philosophers. As a result, a principal thesis of Voegelin's is underscored in this book: the symbol cannot carry meaning unless it is united with its engendering experience. Coetsier fulfills exactly this task in this spiritual biographical study of a soul in the single, concrete, personal, historical, consciousness of young Jewish woman, serendipitously recorded and saved for all to read. We can understand Voegelin better through our reading of Etty Hillesum's less academic and more everyday life, poetic examples in her letters and diaries.

This reviewer believes, however, that it is Etty Hillesum's work, and its ability to be a concrete substantiation of the Voegelin exegesis of the Greek philosophical symbols, that is more successfully presented in this book. Voegelin's analysis of the "flow of presence" is not a completely differentiated symbol for the wealth of experiences of the divine presence and communication that Hillesum has recorded.

As Coetsier mentions, at first her symbol for God is "you," and then later she calls her interlocutor, "God." Hillesum's life, he writes, "became more and more one great, uninterrupted dialogue." And, secondly, these writings are religious in character, through and through. Another word for dialogue is prayer. They become on many occasions simple meditative prayers, a conversation of love with God, very much in the style of Augustine's *Confessions*. They reveal a total and mature religious surrender.

Coetsier writes about Etty's urge to kneel that came in "waves" to her. Etty fills her writings with praise for the beauty and meaning of life and she insists that the evil of National Socialism "is not God's fault." She makes an explicit decision to sacrifice herself every day in little ways in order to love those around her and to bring love into the depraved environment of the Westerbork Camp. Hence she exemplifies a mature, deep-seated religion of virtue.

Hillesum's writing deals with the "drama of humanity" and what must be constitutive in any definition of a human being parallel with the devastating degradation of human beings and the almost pure inhumanity of the Nazi regime. But there are symbols such as a Yahwist portrayal of lifeless clay quickening into being by the very breath of God, or the "fullness" of possibilities of grace in the symbol of Gabriel, or Christ springing up within one's soul as "living water," that carry a greater adequacy than Voegelin's more philosophical abstractions to symbolize Hillesum's experience of a return to the original grace that is the very definition of humanity.

Voegelin has made a case for the distinction between and the mutuality of two differentiations of consciousness: noetic and pneumatic. He has written extensively on both of these. So my final thoughts on this wonderful book

introducing readers to ETTY HILLESUM is that perhaps the author should write a second and companion volume employing a Voegelian analysis of pneumatic experiences and their symbolizations. This reviewer for one would be first in line to read it. 

Macon Boczek holds a Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from Duquesne University which she earned following the graduation of her children from college. She teaches philosophy, ethics, and religious studies at John Carroll University and Kent State University. She has presented papers at the Lonergan Conferences and the meetings of the Eric Voegelin Society.