



Etty Hillesum and the Flow of Presence - PART 2

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The Event Character of the Flow

Voegelin uses the phrase "the event character of the flow" to express the fact that encounters with the Divine take place on particular occasions and find expression in the different symbols that emerge in each encounter. With this phrase, Voegelin puts us on our guard against assuming that the symbols can be understood and interpreted without referring to the spiritual events that gave birth to them.

There is *flowing presence* because while the same divine ground is met on each occasion, its impact on the human soul differs from one occasion to another. Recognition of this event character helps significantly in our understanding of *The Letters and Diaries*.

What is taking place in them has many dimensions. On the surface, the writing is a chronological record of events over a number of years. On a deeper level, it is a story of a struggle for emotional healing. On another level, it tells the story of Hillesum's coming to terms with the fate that awaited her.



Underlying these levels, however, and increasingly driving them, is the sequence of encounters with *the presence*. In each of these encounters, Hillesum grew in spiritual stature, and it is this spiritual growth that enabled her to carry through the remarkable developments on each of these levels. The history of her own personal order emerged from the *flowing presence*.

The Letters and Diaries symbolizes the event character of the flow as well as Hillesum's reflective experience. Considering her life as an event, Hillesum recognized her existence as a "field" of historical tensions. As a reflective person, she cannot help exploring and articulating the meaning of her existence. The structures that became visible in *The Letters and Diaries* mirror the two main tensions in Hillesum's soul. First, she lived the tension in her soul between its chaos and order before and after the event of writing. Second, she experienced the tension of her soul between time and eternity. Her soul was, not an object, but rather the sensorium of the tensions of her being, particularly of transcendence:

Later on I shall have a notebook in which I shall try to write. It will be something I shall have to come to terms with alone, my private front line, and it will at times be a desperate struggle. It will be like a bloody battlefield of words fighting and struggling with one another in that notebook. And then, here and there, something may perhaps rise over that battlefield, pure as the moon, a little short story that will occasionally hover over a troubled life like a soothing smile. (EH, 553; EHe, 523)

"To be alone" with that "battlefield of words" and to come to terms with things alone was a characteristic of Hillesum throughout her life (AAZZ, 39-44). She drew a parallel between "to be alone" and "loneliness" or "solitude." Both have positive and negative connotations in *The Letters and Diaries*. Toward the end, however,

she experienced her aloneness as something positive and integrated it in her daily life: "God and I have been left behind alone, and there is no one else left to help me It doesn't make me feel impoverished at all, rather quite rich and peaceful: God and I have been left behind all alone" (*EHe*, 545).

Hillesum was deeply conscious of this immediate experience of "alone-ness" with God. The content of her experience was a loving urge and a graceful call to write and surrender to life. From the pole of the experience of temporal being within herself, she experienced the tension as a loving and hopeful urge toward the divine eternity. From the pole of eternal being, she experienced the tension as a call and irruption of the divine pull. For Hillesum, the experience itself was not a psychologization of the divine as a projection of her soul. The poles of temporal and eternal being were represented by the people in her life and the one God. The relations and interconnectedness among them all were mediated by *Eros*, the spirit of the in-between (*metaxy*).

The Platonic "Spiritual Woman"

In Plato's terms, Hillesum would have been "the mortal," "the spiritual woman," and from time to time perhaps "the spiritually dull woman." The sequence of these different types within Hillesum revealed the field of her personal history, which was constituted by the events of writing. After the experience of a gradual breakthrough, of dedicating herself to God, there was no way for Hillesum to return to the more "limited" experience of being an unaware "mortal." Should she have closed herself to this new order in her life, she would have become "spiritually dull" and disillusioned. By becoming a spiritual woman (*spirituele vrouw*) in the classical sense, she gained the criteria for judging and interpreting all that went on under the Presence.

The tensions were in the structure of her being, not in God. The divine was not an object to Hillesum but a "personal connection" or pole of conscious response. However, she did not project her *psyche* beyond concrete human beings. She kept her feet on the ground. The field of her personal and historical tensions lay within her soul. She had a personal experience of being immersed in the flow of presence. In those moments, the immanence of the world and its temporality were not her primary experiences. They became evident when, through reflection and writing, she recognized the tension between time and eternity.

Only when these poles are made into objects is there a problem of reconciling them. But as Hillesum experienced them, they did not exist as objects; rather, she experienced the tension in her being as a bi-polar process, which she creatively expressed in words. This process occurred in the *metaxy*. Since Hillesum, a human person, also existed in the world, she could relate mundane events to that process.

For Hillesum, eternal being was not an object in time, and her temporal being was not transposable into eternity. What Voegelin called *flowing presence* became a reality to her. She experienced "Eternal Being" in the temporal flow. Her experience of the temporal flow, in which eternity was made present in the *metaxy*, was what Voegelin calls the event of philosophy, or *flowing presence*. The permanent tension of *flowing presence* in Hillesum's consciousness constituted her "history," as symbolized in *The Letters and Diaries*. As noted, the tension of her being was not reduced in her diaries to mere abstraction. It remained alive as Hillesum's personal experience, and thus it influenced her outlook. This tension did not express itself in a disordered multiplicity of symbols but manifested itself by traits of order. The tensions within the flow exhibit a firm direction: Hillesum speaks of surrendering to life. In weakness she found her strength:

It still all comes down to the same thing: life is beautiful. And I believe in God. And I want to be there right in the thick of what people call "horror" and still be able to say: life is beautiful.

And now here I lie in some corner, dizzy and feverish and unable to do a thing. When I woke up just now I was parched, reached for my glass of water, and, grateful for that one sip, thought to

myself, "If I could only be there to give some of those parched thousands just one sip of water"

Sometimes I might sit down beside someone, put an arm round a shoulder, say very little and just look into their eyes. Nothing was alien to me, not one single expression of human sorrow. Everything seemed so familiar, as if I knew it all and had gone through it all before. People said to me, "You must have nerves of steel to stand up to it." I don't think I have nerves of steel, far from it, but I can certainly "stand up to things." I am not afraid to look suffering straight in the eyes.

And at the end of each day, there was always the feeling: I love people so much. Never any bitterness about what was done to them, but always love for those who knew how to bear so much although nothing had prepared them for such burdens. (*EH*, 578; *EHe*, 545-46)

The Diaries as a Means to Clarity

The focus by which Hillesum historically constituted her life's purpose was her diary and its reflective experience. It was here that her eternal and temporal being encountered each other. This particular experience of writing was one among others that guided her in the field of *flowing presence*. She discovered, not new "objects," but new ways of relating and ordering an already-known, distorted reality. What was known was the chaotic experience of her family and society. The context of writing replaced the older chaos with new clarity. She discovered "God" in the context of the new order dissociated from the chaos within. She developed an abiding concern with the transcendence of God, finding reassurance in reading Augustine and in the physical act of kneeling:

I am going to read Saint Augustine again. He is so austere and so fervent. And so full of simple devotion in his love letters to God. Truly those are the only love letters one ought to write: love letters to God I fold my hands in a gesture that I have come to love, and in the dark I tell you silly and serious things and implore blessings upon your honest sweet head. Yes, I pray for you. Goodnight, beloved

I think that I can bear everything life and these times have in store for me. And when the turmoil becomes too great and I am completely at my wits' end, then I still have my folded hands and bended knee. A posture that is not handed down from generation to generation with us Jews. I have had to learn it the hard way

What a strange story it really is, my story: the girl who could not kneel. Or its variation: the girl who learned to pray. That is my most intimate gesture, more intimate even than being with a man. After all, one can't pour the whole of one's love out over a single man, can one? (*EH*, 579-80; *EHe*, 546-47)

Hillesum's philosophical investigation received its impetus from the struggle with Nazi ideology. Her writing was not a one-time event but rather a continuing process of actualizing reflective potentialities for the investigation of events in her personal history. Barriers to this development did fall from time to time. Hillesum's experience of the *metaxy* could not dwell exclusively on either the human or the divine pole. It would be a mistake to overemphasize the human pole of the divine-human tension (*tasis*) in *The Letters and Diaries* or to over-concentrate on her mystical side, as some have done by speaking of her "sainthood."

Hillesum and *The Letters and Diaries* have now and then been raised to the level of "sanctity." Hillesum, however, had her feet firmly on the ground and did not claim any such notion for herself. She did mention Augustine as a saint (*de Heilige Augustinus*), but about herself she wrote: "You would actually be far better off as an out-and-out whore [*straathoer*; literally, 'street prostitute'] or a real saint. You'd be at peace with yourself then because you'd know exactly what you were up to. My ambivalence is shocking" (*EH*, 51; *EHe*, 49).

I believe that the truth is found in balancing the variety of passages to reach a portrait that catches the struggle between light and darkness that continued throughout her life. Making either attitude into an absolute does Hillesum an injustice and hinders the investigation of her uniquely personal history of interaction with *flowing presence*.

The "In-Between" Experienced by Etty

Current research on Hillesum's life seems on the way to removing these obstacles. In my view, Plato's symbol *metaxy*, the In-Between, is a suitable symbol to act as a tool of analysis of Hillesum's writings. This In-Between conflict between the human and divine aspects in *The Letters and Diaries* is equivalently represented in the research work of Denise de Costa. She pays particular attention to the tension between time and eternity in terms of "inscribing spirituality and sexuality. "

The center of Hillesum's consciousness was the experience of participation (*metalepsis*). She was in contact with reality outside of herself, with which she was "consubstantial," as Voegelin expresses it, but was also turned inward. Her experience of the flow of presence was In-Between the poles of her own being and the reality she experienced. The movements of divine presence were experienced in this In-Between as nudges of the spirit. Hillesum's experience focused on the reality of both the divine and her own human presence. It is a fallacy to say that either pole of the participatory experience was self-contained. Reality became luminous (intelligible) to itself in Hillesum's human consciousness. On Monday, October 12, 1942, she reflects with greater awareness on the order of the soul:

The soul has a different age from that recorded in the register of births and deaths. At your birth, the soul already has an age that never changes. One can be born with a twelve-year-old soul, and when one is eighty, that soul is still twelve years old and no older. One can also be born with a thousand-year-old soul, and one can tell that some twelve-year-old children have thousand-year-old souls. I believe the soul is that part of man that he is least aware of, particularly the West European, for I think that Orientals "live" their souls much more fully. We Westerners do not really know what to do with them; indeed, we are ashamed of our souls as if they were something immoral. "Soul" is quite different from what we call "heart." There are plenty of people who have lot of "heart" but very little soul. (*EH*, 581; *EHe*, 548)


For Hillesum, the discovery of "order" meant the attainment of insight into the overall ordered structure of reality as experienced through her writing and through her attunement to that wider "cosmic" order. Her knowledge of order went back to her early life history, as did the experiences of disorder and chaos (both in the family and later in the breakdown of society), which produced moments of extreme alienation. Her interior encounters with *the flowing presence* taught her to see the elements of disorder in herself as resulting from withdrawal from the tension toward the divine ground, a turning away from her reasonableness.

Hillesum did not use her reasoning powers to justify those moments of alienation but tried to deal with them as they occurred. She avoided the possibility of taking her state of alienation as the basis for understanding her reality and kept away from such "creations" of the mind that could have usurped the place of the divine. Hillesum did not arrive at Nietzsche's "death of God." Her interpretations were no longer "despair" but were open to the reality of the ground (*arche*). She did not try to create a justifying system to falsify reality, as the Nazis did with their creed of National Socialism.

Hillesum did not produce a set of doctrines that entailed the deformation of existence but instead compiled a collection of letters and diaries that expressed her experience. She did not lose contact with her surrounding reality, including the divine reality, nor as a writer did she become a victim of the degeneration of language.

Longing for a Simple Life

Hillesum had a basic urge to live simply (AAZZ, 136-40). Although the attractions toward a simple life and "simplicity" were wildly contradicted by her strong feelings and moods, she fought and struggled hard to fulfill her desire for "simplicity." She would love "just to be alone, to live and breathe lying snugly in eternity, in total simplicity" (EHe, 120). To reach "simplicity," she had to maneuver through all the gray areas and complications she found within herself.

"To live simply" for her was to finally let go of words by going beyond them. According to her, we must forget our "big words," beginning with "God" and ending with "Death." Instead of talking too much about "God" with words, she desired to be immersed in the life of God, what she termed flowing "spring water:" "We must become as simple as pure spring water. Above all, a little less wordy" (EHe, 488). 

[\[This is part 2 of a two part article. Part 1 may be read HERE.\]](#)

NOTE

(for fuller citations see the bibliography in Professor Coetsier's book)

VOEGELINVIEW EDITORIAL FOOTNOTE

Bibliographic references:

EH: Etty: De nagelaten geschriften van Etty Hillesum 1941-1943, ed. Klaas A. D. Smelik

EHe: Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943, ed. Klaas A. D. Smelik, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans

AAZZ: Van Aandacht en Adem tot Ziel en Zin: Honderd woorden uit het levenbeschouwend idioom van Etty Hillesum, by Ton Jorna and Denise de Costa

Dutch terms appearing with the original text and removed here to a glossary:

To be alone ("alleenzijn")	new epoch ("nieuwe tijd-perk")
carry, carried ("dragen," "draagt")	the now ("het nu")
center ("centrum")	the past ("het verleden")
community ("gemeenschap")	path ("weg")
death ("dood")	self-centredness ("Ich-haftigheid")
desire, desired ("verlangen," "verlangde")	solitude ("eenzaamheid")
the experience ("belevenis")	soul ("ziel")
the future ("de toekomst")	a spiritual woman ("spirituele vrouw")
go through ("beleven")	strength ("kracht")
hate ("haat")	the struggle ("strijd")
To help, help ("helpen," "hulp")	suffering ("lijden")
history of suffering ("lijdensgeschiedeis")	through life ("het leven")
honesty ("eerlijkheid")	undercurrent ("onderstroom")
kneeling ("knielen")	values ("waarde[n]")
knowledge ("kennis")	whore ("straathoer;" literally, "street prostitute")
life is beautiful ("het leven is mooi")	wisdom ("wijsheid")
to live simply, simplicity ("eenvoudig," "de eenvoud")	women ("vrouwen")

love ("liefde")
meaning ("zin")
men ("mannen")

world soul ("Welten Seele")
writing ("schrijven")