

Etty Hillesum and the Flow of Presence: A Voegelinian Analysis

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ETTY HILLESUM AND THE FLOW OF PRESENCE: A VOEGELINIAN ANALYSIS. By Meins G. S. Coetsier. Eric Voegelin Institute Series in Political Philosophy: Studies in Religion and Politics. Columbia: University of Missouri, 2008. Pp. xiv 228. \$37.50.

Coetsier carefully studies the diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum, devoting special effort to a linguistic analysis of central Hillesum language symbols. Drawing extensively on the philosophy of Eric Voegelin--and particularly on his concept of "the flow of presence" (100) in the response of the human soul to the divine, C. seeks to better understand the "relationship between the life of Etty Hillesum and her writings" (193), proposing that Hillesum had an experience "that broke with the ordinary diary" (197, i.e., that pushed her beyond an ordinary form of diary writing), revealing a "symbolic form of transcendent address" (198). C. suggests that this interpretive insight can help us more fully understand Hillesum's encounter with the "transcendent Other" (197), an encounter that eventually emerged at the center of her extraordinary life, suffering, and relationships.

C. actually offers carefully detailed analysis of both Hillesum and Voegelin. Hillesum's writings and central Voegelinian ideas enter into creative dialogue, resulting in richer understandings of each. In places, however, the book progresses slowly, due mostly to its technical analysis and extensive quotations of Hillesum and Voegelin. This density may challenge some readers. Others might question the use of a comprehensive philosophical framework to examine diaries and letters that often break beyond linguistic analysis, at least in their spiritual and mystical dimensions.

These questions aside, C.'s analysis is original, carefully researched, and highly creative. His study of the original Dutch texts is a particularly valuable contribution, placing the volume among the best English, book-length studies of Hillesum. In the end, C.'s appeal to Voegelin's theory of "the flow of presence" succeeds in presenting more fully the depth and power of Hillesum's astounding prayer-filled experience during a period of horrendous violence, evil, and suffering--a time, but also an experience, that must never be forgotten.

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