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**“HEAVEN IN HELL”**  
**A Voegelinian Exploration of the life and writings of Etty Hillesum**

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The lives of Etty Hillesum and Eric Voegelin were an extraordinary adventure in reflection, a human, philosophical and courageous reaction to a uniquely barbaric period of history. Where Voegelin tried to find an answer to this central German experiential problem, the burning question: What went wrong, that Adolf Hitler could rise to power?<sup>1</sup> What were the reasons for it? How could we, as thinking human beings, allow these atrocities to take place? What are the consequences? Hillesum, who literally had been chased by anti-Semitism and Nazism through Europe, lived the consequences. Both Voegelin and Hillesum were painfully aware of Europe's need for radical spiritual reform. They were not interested in seeking an easy way out of their struggle, which was evoked in the midst of a social period of overwhelming collapse into lethal disorder. As I cast around for an image to describe what I think Etty Hillesum's and Voegelin's work represents, I am drawn back to Alexander Solzhenitsyn's haunting image of the filter. "We shall have to "rediscover our cultural treasures and values" not by erudition, not by scientific accomplishment, but by our *form of spiritual conduct*, by laying aside our material well-being and, if the worst comes to the worst, our life."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the life, writings and the deliberate voluntary sacrifice of Etty Hillesum to stay with "her people" in most horrific circumstances, is such an example of passing through a spiritual filter, by which a society, in Solzhenitsyn's words, could only be cured.

I say, this Jewish woman, who read so deeply the signs of her times, still has something to teach us about how to read the signs of ours. Her personal rediscovery of what true interior religious experience is, and how it says no to violence, is so timely. As a present-day mystic, Hillesum was living heaven in hell. As such she speaks to our age in a multitude of ways. Her Letters and Diaries<sup>3</sup> mirror current issues of epidemic family dysfunction, sexual revolution, emotional and interpersonal distress and disorientation, confusion and despair. Her writings give us a possible response to the ongoing modern, and now post-modern, crisis of values and identity in the West and elsewhere. Hillesum articulates persuasively the values of love and compassion on the basis of which it is possible for individuals, groups and communities with different values and backgrounds, different attitudes towards religion and a range of ethnic origins, to come together in mutual respect and form a functioning successful society and state.

## **1. ETTY HILLESUM**

Etty Hillesum was born in the Netherlands in 1914. Her short and interrupted life was lived across a dark and cruel chapter of modern history. It was a depressing and turbulent era, decisive for the history of Europe, for the fate of the Jews and for the economical and political stability of the World. As a Jew, Hillesum's fate was caught up in the unfolding of a systematic genocide that led her from being a young Dutch woman to a Jewish target for ideological mass murder. She was imprisoned in Camp Westerbork in the Netherlands, and sent from there on to death in Auschwitz, at 29 years of age.

Hillesum lived with a pen in her hand: she wrote many diaries and letters. In her writings, she tried to find a sense of meaning and order in her life and to come to terms with decisions to be made. Ten of Hillesum's diaries have survived. Others were lost, among them those she kept in Camp Westerbork. She also wrote numerous letters to friends and acquaintances. The Letters describe her daily experiences, activities, hopes and fears. Her writings, which fill almost six hundred pages of closely printed diary entries and more than one hundred pages of letters, expressed the history and her personal reflection on her life. In those we discover a "mysticism of connectedness," an awareness of the divine presence. Hillesum's human and artistic attempt to find order and meaning in her daily life, echo the words of the Russian filmmaker Andrey Tarkovsky: "When someone who doesn't know how to swim is thrown into the water, instinct tells his body what movements will save him. The artist, too, is driven by a kind of instinct, and his work furthers man's search for what is eternal, transcendent, divine – often in spite of the sinfulness of the poet himself."<sup>4</sup> Hillesum learned to kneel, prayed and dedicated her hand to "God" in order to write. It was this deep experience expressed in her writings that brought a significant change and order within herself and towards God.

To *read* Etty Hillesum, however, we need to acquire a perspective or framework that highlights the core development she underwent. Here, I believe, is where Eric Voegelin has something to offer us. Voegelin and Hillesum both made an attempt to communicate the Mystery experienced during a difficult period in history. Their writings were a search for order, a visible "form" revealed through the invisible movements of the spirit. As participants in the divine mystery, both thinkers entered the universal community of the Spirit.

Voegelin's philosophy of experience and symbolization, enables us, to re-enact Hillesum's writings imaginatively, to undergo something like the breakthrough that she achieved. Her experience, I would suggest, may have the potential to speak to a greater number of people precisely because it enfolds on a basic human level. It starts as a confused and troubled young modern woman's diary, reflecting on the turmoil and longings of her life, then suddenly, without warning, it shifts gear. Etty Hillesum entered into a dialogue with a Presence she found in the centre of her consciousness. Where she has gone first, I suspect, many likeminded others may follow.

## **2. HELL**

It is surely not an exaggeration to describe Etty Hillesum's life as living in hell. She moved from family dysfunction, through emotional, sexual and interpersonal struggles for healing, only to be engulfed in the waves of Nazi genocide sweeping across Europe. Hillesum's "Hell" had developed from a psychological, ethical and spiritual distress caused by the instability of her family environment. Etty like the whole Hillesum family was chaotic; they lived a secular, disordered and hectic life. Her struggle to overcome and heal this unbalanced life, was a primary motivation in her self-exploration.

As every new decree from the Nazis increased the exclusion of Jews, an ideological man-made-hell developed around her. Oscillating between high exaltation and the deep gloom of depression, Etty Hillesum felt the urge to do something and started a war on paper. She kept a diary in an attempt to overcome not only her depressions and other psychosomatic symptoms, but also the Hell created in the atmosphere of genocide.

Hillesum experienced, what Voegelin would symbolise as "deformed reality" or "deformation," the destruction of the order of the soul, or the order of society, which should be "formed" by (i.e., should receive its vital principle from) the love of the transcendent ground inherent in the fundamental tension (*taxis*) of existence. While struggling with the experience of political turmoil, fear and the inner and outer chaos of the War, Etty Hillesum fought against the "closure" of her soul ("*ziel*") through an ongoing writing ("*schrijven*") towards truth (*aletheia*). In the Diaries, she described her experiences as "Mortal fear in every fiber," a "Complete collapse," "lack of self-confidence," "Aversion," "Panic," "relapsing

into,” what she terms, as her own “Dark Ages” (EH, 148; EHe, 141). This “spiritual constipation” (EH, 6; EHe, 6) could have ended up in a form of “closed existence.” I am using Voegelin’s term “closed existence” to refer to the mode of “chaos” in Etty’s life (“*leven*”), in which there were internal impediments to a free flow of truth (*aletheia*) into consciousness and to the pull of the transcendent.

To understand Hillesum’s search we could recall Voegelin’s account of the origin of philosophy in an act of resistance by a strong, intellectual and spiritually sensitive soul to socially compelling untruth sensed as existentially deformative. Hillesum like Voegelin tried to rejuvenate the order that had been eclipsed and distorted by Nazi rule. Voegelin, who analyzed socially deformative processes in his essay “The Eclipse of Reality,”<sup>5</sup> set out a detailed analysis of the different ways in which man often shrinks or “contracts” himself into a “deformed” being out of touch with true humanity and the world. “Eclipse,” “eclipsed” or “closed existence” are Voegelin’s terms for the experience of an often voluntary, but often also, involuntarily absorbed perverse closure of consciousness against reality. Martin Buber, who also had experienced the Nazi rising in Germany in the early thirties, expressed this closure in equivalent symbols:

“Eclipse of the light of heaven, eclipse of God – such indeed is the character of the historic hour through which the world is passing. But it is not a process which can be adequately accounted for by instancing the changes that have taken place in man’s spirit. An eclipse of the sun is something that occurs between the sun and our eyes, not in the sun itself. Nor does philosophy consider us blind to God. Philosophy holds that we lack today only the spiritual orientation which can make possible a reappearance “of God and the gods,” a new procession of sublime images. But when, as in this instance, something is taking place between heaven and earth, one misses everything when one insists on discovering within earthly thought the power that unveils the mystery. He who refuses to submit himself to the effective reality of transcendence as such – our *vis-à-vis* – contributes to the human responsibility for the eclipse.”<sup>6</sup>

Like Voegelin and Buber, Etty Hillesum was moved by the confusion of the times and responded by entering into a search for order. Resisting the *Zeitgeist* of disorder, she looked for a way to deal with her internal chaos and to give new meaning to a life that was in danger of becoming totally meaningless. Hillesum actively tried to take the stance that one should abandon “hate” (“*haat*”) from one’s heart. She believed that we cannot fight (the Nazi-) hatred by means of hate. She especially reacted strongly to hatred, radiated by people around her, against the Germans: “But indiscriminate hatred is the worst thing there is. It is a sickness of the soul. Hatred does not lie in my nature. If things were to come to such a pass that I began to hate people, then I would know that my soul was sick and I should have to look for a cure as quickly as possible” (EH, 19; EHe, 18).

Voegelin, who utilized the Greek symbol *nosos* (*nosema*) as used by Aeschylus and Plato to symbolize the experience of “sickness,” “madness”; “*nosemates adikas*”: the “sickness of injustice,” saw that the cure for such disease lies in the rediscovery of the order of the soul. In Westerbork, Hillesum faced the “sickness of injustice,” a Nazi hatred with no remorse. She needed the fullness of language to accept the void and darkness that finally awaited her: “If I were to say that I was in hell that night, what would I really be telling you? I caught myself saying it aloud in the night, aloud to myself and quite soberly, “So that’s what hell is like”” (EH, 689; EHe, 646).

### 3. HEAVEN

Etty Hillesum’s experience of “closure” or “chaos” was in contrast with her experience of “open existence,” when she was living more “flowingly” (EHe, 6) or “*fließender*” (EH, 6) finding “order” and “form” in her chaos. For Voegelin, “open existence” symbolized the mode of existence in which consciousness was consistently and unreservedly oriented towards

truth (*aletheia*) and towards the transcendent pole of the tension of existence or in Hillesum's own terminology: when things would "melodiously" roll from "God's hand" (EH, 7; EHe, 7). She felt moved or drawn (*helkein*) not only by God and people, but by life ("*leven*") itself. She had a desire ("*verlangen*") to escape her ignorance (*agnoia*, *amathia*) by questioning ("*vragen*") her experience and using language to express it. For the many burning "questions" ("*vragen*") concerning the "suffering of Mankind," she endlessly searched for an answer:

I feel like a small battlefield, in which the problems, or some of the problems, of our time are being fought out. All one can hope to do is to keep oneself humbly available, to allow oneself to be a battlefield. After all, the problems must be accommodated, have somewhere to struggle and come to rest, and we, poor little humans, must put our inner space at their service and not run away. In that respect, I am probably very hospitable; mine is often an exceedingly bloody battlefield, and dreadful fatigue and splitting headaches are the toll I have to pay. Still, now I am myself once again Etty Hillesum, an industrious student in a friendly room with books and a vase full of oxeye daisies. I am flowing again in my own narrow riverbed, and my desperate involvement with "Mankind," "World History," and "Suffering" has subsided. And that's as it should be, otherwise one might go mad. One ought not to lose oneself forever in the great questions, one cannot always be a battlefield, one must, time and again, feel one's own small boundaries within which one goes on living one's own small life conscientiously and consciously, forever ripened and deepened by one's experiences during the almost "impersonal" moments of contact with mankind as a whole. (EH, 67, EHe, 63)

Having been robbed of her nationality, like her Dutch contemporary Anne Frank, Hillesum entered the land of writing, where she could grow and develop and freely express her inner feelings without being hemmed in by restrictive measures. What starts out as a diary of self-analysis undertaken for therapeutic reasons begins to break out into an interior conversation with a transcendent Other encountered as a Presence immanent within the Centre ("*Centrum*") of her inmost being. In shocking radiant pages, we witness the flowering of this transcendent dialogue into a remarkable, out of place serenity, altruism and even forgiveness. Together with an authoritative sharp representative consciousness of being an Everywoman, Hillesum discovered and lived out a paradigmatic response to the ideological mass-murder she could see was soon to devour her. She kept herself alive by writing and managed to transform her exile into a "nomadic consciousness," creating her "Heaven" wherever she was:

I am ready for everything, for anywhere on this earth, wherever God may send me, and I am ready to bear witness in any situation and unto death that life is beautiful and meaningful and that it is not God's fault that things are as they are at present, but our own. We have been granted every opportunity to enter every paradise, but we still have to learn to handle the opportunities. It is as if I shed further burdens from moment to moment, as if all the divisions there now are between men and nations are being removed for me. There are moments when I can see right through life and the human heart, when I understand more and more and become calmer and calmer and am filled with a faith in God that has grown so quickly inside me that it frightened me at first but has now become inseparable from me (EH, 508; EHe, 480-481).

Hillesum did not know what would happen to her in the next week or even the next afternoon. Instead of pretending to know what the future held she returned repeatedly to the source within herself of the encounter with "God." Gradually, this encounter with the divine transvalued the inner horizon from which she interpreted and responded to what was happening to and around her. In the Letters and Diaries we can follow Hillesum refusing to allow herself to become terrified and disoriented by the fate that was rushing towards her.

She was achingly conscious of what it meant to be a human person and at the same time, experiencing the polar opposite of that, a totalitarian ideology committed to extinguishing individuality. Yet, Etty Hillesum adopted a stance towards this that was atypical: she made a clear-eyed decision not to respond to this totalitarian system by seeking to escape from it or to oppose or resist it by force of arms. Although not “practicing” or even “believing” in any conventionally recognizable sense, she nonetheless chose to stay with “her people,” knowing that she was going to be murdered.

Hillesum maintained an equanimity, a sense of the goodness of life and being alive, and an attitude of other-centered support. She kept a solidarity that evokes wonder every time one reads her writings. Her inner peace and positive outlook, her concern for those around her, are the existence in truth, the new order in her life that radiated from the inner meetings between her soul and the presence she found there.

It still all comes down to the same thing: life is beautiful [*“het leven is mooi”*]. 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, 545-546)

In her experienced Hell, surprisingly enough, Etty Hillesum found her Heaven. Amidst atrocity she still discovered Beauty. Faced with a fearful, “Nazi-eclipsed,” reality, she fearlessly attuned herself to “the flow of life,” (“*stroom van leven*”) and was utterly alert to mystery. Living in hope, while the world around her was breaking down, she clung to a faith in the goodness of humanity. Hillesum, not wanting to drift away, did not retreat from the emerging breakthrough in her consciousness. The differentiation, evoked through the process of writing, gave structure to her personal history and was parallel to what Voegelin described as the “philosopher,” Plato’s spiritual human being (*daimonios aner*) or Aristotle’s mature human being. Etty Hillesum’s meditation and writing evoked a response in her to the divine appeal that made her reach out to others. This accomplishment with divine help, this gradual inward conversion, or *periagogé*, a cognitive and moral reorientation toward the True and the Good as such, literally turned her around to a life fully committed to love for her fellow human beings. Her act of writing and her silent meditation helped her to tap into an area within herself that in society had mainly vanished. Like Plato and Aristotle she realized intuitively that there was something within her, which the Greeks called *Nous* or reason that evoked in her a search for order and clarity. Hillesum received “a greater awareness” and hence easier access to her “inner sources” (“*innerlijke (oer-) bronnen*”).

The often sudden and significant “bursts” of personal development seem to have taken place in her at all levels over the short period covered in her writings. In this way the Writings of Etty Hillesum take their place alongside the other modern philosophies that seek the meaning of symbols in the experiences which motivated and engendered them, and which they were forged to articulate. It is hard indeed not to recognize Hillesum as a figure in her own way equivalent to those whom Voegelin calls mystic philosophers.

A key difference between Hillesum and many of her contemporaries, who had lived through the same terrible historical events, is her personal rediscovery of an existential interior openness to the divine. In only a few years, her writings chart a remarkable transformation. Exiled by the times she lived in, she testified to an experience of a “presence,” a “Heaven in Hell” which she discovered in the course of her search for a solid ground of existence.

She found herself in a new relation with “God” (“You”), discovering both her own psyche and transcendent divinity. The true order of Etty Hillesum’s soul (“*ziel*”) represented what in Voegelin is termed the truth (*aletheia*) of human existence in-between what Hillesum herself refers to as life (“*leven*”) and death (“*dood*”), on the border of transcendence. It was possible for Hillesum to measure both her human type of order and its social relevance. Abandoning all forms of hatred, she made it her principle that God was the measure and reference point. As she herself recognized, she was a measure of society only in so far as she was able to love (“*liefde*”). In this way she became the representative of the divine truth that streamed into her at the meditative centre (“*centrum*”) within her. The survival, publication and worldwide dissemination of *The Letters and Diaries* have ensured that just as Socrates’ dialogues survived his execution, so too Hillesum’s experiential truth has outlasted her murder and continues to speak to us from beyond.

Etty Hillesum, like Eric Voegelin, has something to offer the search for political order in our new millennium: a recovery of the lost foundations of society and the lost centre of the person. Hillesum inspires us to see that glimpse of heaven in our personal experiences, enabling us to hold onto our humanity in any man-made hell and take up the long work of resistance to it, through an attunement to the “divine presence,” Your Heaven!

<sup>1</sup> *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 31, *Hitler and the Germans*, trans. and ed. Brendan Purcell and Detlev Clemens (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 51-69.

For instance: “Central Experiential Problem: Hitler’s Rise to Power” and “The Experiential Occasion of the Lectures: Schramm’s “Anatomy of a Dictator.””

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, “The Smatterers,” in *From Under the Rubble*, 272-73.

<sup>3</sup> *Etty: De nagelaten geschriften van Etty Hillesum 1941-1943*, ed. Klaas A. D. Smelik (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans, 1986). And *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943*, ed. Klaas A. D. Smelik, Trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (Ottawa, Ontario: Novalis Saint Paul University - William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002). Abbreviations are: “EH” and “Ehe.”

<sup>4</sup> Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema (The Great Russian Filmmaker Discusses His Art)*, 239.

<sup>5</sup> “The Eclipse of Reality,” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 28, “*What is History?*” and *Other Late Unpublished Writings*, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 111.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Humanity Books, 1988).