

PENNING PATTERNS OF TRANSFORMATION:

Etty Hillesum &
Thomas Merton

by **Michael Downey**

Who is the most significant Christian spiritual writer of the twentieth century? When this question was put to me in the course of my doctoral examination it did not occur to me to advance any other name than that of Gethsemani's most celebrated son. I would stand by my judgment today, even though I see more clearly that Thomas Merton has not been nearly so influential or as widely read in other countries as his American readers are inclined to think.

Merton has no rival among Christians in this century when it comes to writing in an engaging and effective fashion about the personal response to the divine initiative. Some may argue that there are others such as the German Jesuit systematic theologian Karl Rahner, or French Dominicans Yves Congar and Marie-Dominique Chenu, or the Swiss Hans Urs von Balthasar, who are far more significant in the domain of Christian spirituality. But the work of Rahner, Congar, Chenu, and von Balthasar is representative of a more systematic mode of reflection and expression. They have adopted an idiom which writers in the field of spirituality are often hesitant to use.

Merton was not a systematic theologian nor was he given to reflection on the spiritual life in a systematic fashion.¹ He was a "spiritual writer"

1. See Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

primarily concerned with the reality named by that ever-so-slippery term "spirituality."² His attention was given to writing about religious experience as such, i.e., as religious, and as experience. This he did as a Christian. He wrote from the perspective of one who perceived that the highest ideal and ultimate value is the God revealed in Jesus Christ and experienced through the gift of the Holy Spirit in the church. Even in his later years, Merton's reflections on other religious traditions took the form of extending Christian insights to them, or comparing truths found in other traditions with what he held to be true in light of Christian revelation. Merton's insights, no matter how appreciative of the claims of other religious traditions, were never untethered from his christological convictions.

Merton's legacy represents the high watermark of Christian spiritual writing in the twentieth century because of his ability to record the process of human transformation which occurs in response to the divine initiative. His writings are descriptive, rather than analytical, attentive to the experience of God and the process of human transformation which results from this. When he attempted to engage in theological analysis or formulation, he got himself into trouble.³ He recognized that theological discourse, properly speaking, was foreign to his own existential voice.

Merton's acclaim cannot be attributed primarily to the quality of his writing, or to the clarity with which he addresses this or that issue to which he puts his pen. Undoubtedly his attraction does not lie in his abilities as a theologian, as this term has come to be understood. The appeal of, indeed fascination with, the bohemian-become-teacher-become-monk-become-hermit-become-social critic, is due, I submit, to the fact that Merton's story is a *paradigmatic story of human transformation* which results from the experience of God — particularly appropriate for our time. He charts the journey, or provides "a map of both spiritual and literary development," toward union with God through self-transcending knowledge, love and freedom in a way that is both appealing and comprehensible in light of contemporary modes of perceiving and being.⁴ The reader recognizes in Merton's descriptions the traces of his or her own process of transformation in response to the divine initiative.

2. For a fine treatment of the precise nature of spirituality, see Sandra M. Schneiders, "Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners," *Horizons* 13: 2 (1986), pp. 253-274. See also Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy," *Theological Studies* 50: 4 (1989), pp. 676-697.

3. *The Ascent to Truth*, an attempt to synthesize the teaching of Thomas Aquinas and John of the Cross on the relationship between knowledge and love, intelligence and will in the quest for God, was ranked by Merton himself as "less good" on scale from "awful" to "best." See chart in appendix of Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work*; ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

4. Victor A. Kramer, *Thomas Merton: Monk & Artist* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), preface.

In recent years the writings of another twentieth century figure have drawn considerable attention among Christians and Jews, both in the United States and abroad. Etty Hillesum's writings have been hailed by one reviewer as "the most spiritually significant document of our age."⁵ It is noteworthy that not a few Catholic theologians, among them at least one Merton scholar, have drawn attention to the importance of her writings.⁶ Although she does not speak of a specifically Christian spirituality, and while the quantity of her writings is a mere fraction when considered alongside the Merton corpus, the writings of the Dutch Jew exterminated at Auschwitz chart the transformation of the human spirit with a clarity and poignancy which is at times staggering.

It would be foolish to audition a quick and facile comparison between Thomas Merton and Etty Hillesum, and I shall not attempt to do so. Whatever similarities there may be, the differences between Merton and Hillesum are considerable, and these cannot be overlooked or underestimated in any discourse about them. He was a practicing Catholic. She was a "secular" Jew with very little interest in organized religion or conventional religious practice. He was a Cistercian-become-hermit tucked away in the knobs of Nelson County, Kentucky. She was a modern, well-educated, cultured young woman who walked the streets of Amsterdam *en route* to library and symphony hall, who later nursed the infirm and dying in the muddy barracks of the prison camp at Westerbork as she awaited deportation to Auschwitz. Merton knew the sights, sounds and smells of the French countryside, the excitement of university life at Clare College, Cambridge, the quick pace of American city life, the glories of Rome, the quiet of the cloister. It is likely that Hillesum never left Holland, except to accompany her parents and her brother to the camp at Auschwitz. Many of the details of Thomas Merton's early years and pre-monastic life are well known. We know very little about Etty Hillesum's childhood and personal life prior to her late twenties, the period during which she kept her diaries. Finally, Hillesum writes of her accomplishments in bed and her abilities as a lover. Merton was a vowed monk. But this difference is not as clear as it may seem at first. It must be noted that Merton wrote, at least by innuendo, of his own erotic prowess. While this has been largely omitted from *The Seven Storey Mountain*, it is the matrix of the early novel posthumously published as *My*

5. Elizabeth O'Connor, "The Thinking Heart," *Sojourners* (October 1985), pp. 40-42.

6. Elena Malits, C.S.C., has been exploring the significance of Etty Hillesum. Her paper — "Thinking Hearts: Thomas Merton and Etty Hillesum" — was read *in absentia* at the Second General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, 14 June 1991.

Argument with the Gestapo.⁷ It is also amply chronicled in Merton's own words of passion for the nurse in his private journals,⁸ as well as in the so-called "love poems."⁹

What is most striking about these two figures is that, despite vast differences, they both describe a similar pattern of transformation rooted in the experience of God. And their appeal to so many interested in the "spiritual life" lies in their ability to describe the process of transformation in such a way that it is recognizable as a path which has been followed throughout the ages, but which is at the same time particularly appropriate for our time. That is to say that they both chronicle the journey of spiritual transformation in the face of the ravages of violence and war, the innocent suffering of millions, large-scale depersonalization and, perhaps above all, the horror of technological dehumanization. Be it because of bombs or gas chambers, Thomas Merton and Etty Hillesum wrote with crystal clarity of the transformation of the human spirit in the face of death on a scale heretofore unimaginable.

There is no need to rehearse the life and spiritual legacy of Merton here, but an account of the life of Etty Hillesum may be useful as a foundation for a description of some notable similarities between her and Merton, giving the balance to Hillesum's descriptions of spiritual transformation.¹⁰

Our knowledge of Etty Hillesum is based primarily on eight notebooks which are now kept in the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam. In them she penned her diaries in a small, hard-to-decipher hand between 9 March 1941 and 13 October 1942.¹¹ A visit to the Museum provides the sole means of access to the original notebooks, some pages of which are wonderfully embellished with ink drawings and marginal doodlings. In the first entry she tells of her abilities in bed, claiming that she is fairly well seasoned as a lover (*Diaries*, p. 1). In the final entry she contends: "We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds" (*Diaries*, p. 196). There are also several letters mailed from Amsterdam while she was there on sick leave from Westerbork, a transit camp from which the bulk of the pub-

7. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969). There is also a paperback edition of *My Argument with the Gestapo* published in New York as a New Directions Paperbook in 1975.

8. See Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), pp. 435-454, 456-458, 461-462, 464, 478, 483, 533, 569.

9. Thomas Merton, *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985).

10. For a fuller description of Hillesum's life, see Michael Downey, "A Balm for All Wounds: The Spiritual Legacy of Etty Hillesum," *Spirituality Today* 40: 1 (1988), pp. 18-35.

11. Published as *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943*; trans. Arnold Pomerans (New York: Pantheon, 1983). Hereafter referred to in the text as *Diaries*.

lished letters were written.¹² Hillesum's letters from Westerbork describe daily life in a camp which was the last stop for Dutch Jews en route to Auschwitz and other Nazi death camps.

The complete Hillesum corpus is as yet unavailable in English. Although the complete diaries and all available letters have been published in Dutch, *An Interrupted Life* contains only selections from Hillesum's 400 page diary. The Dutch publisher, Jan G. Gaarlandt, makes this point in the introduction to *An Interrupted Life*, but it has sometimes been overlooked by readers of the diaries, resulting in the impression that Hillesum's maturation and transformation occurs so quickly as to be beyond credibility.

Gaarlandt notes in the introduction to the English translation of *Letters from Westerbork* that it is possible that still more letters will come to light. He estimates that Hillesum wrote over 100 during the last months of her life. But there are no more diaries. Etty Hillesum took her last notebook with her on the train to Auschwitz. At this writing it does not seem likely that the remainder of the diaries and whatever other letters may have been found since the appearance of *Letters from Westerbork* will be published in English. Gaarlandt has met with little success thus far in his attempt to find a publisher for an English translation of the entire Hillesum corpus.

There is one more source of information from her own hand which is instructive about Etty Hillesum. On 7 September 1943, Etty Hillesum, her father, mother, and brother Mischa were put on a train in Westerbork destined for Auschwitz. From the window Etty threw a postcard addressed to her friend, Christine van Nooten, which was found by some farmers outside the Westerbork camp and posted by them. On it she had scribbled: "We left the camp singing" (*Letters*, p. 146). On 30 November 1943 the Red Cross reported the death of Etty Hillesum at Auschwitz. Her parents died there too. With Etty, we can assume burned or buried, went the last of her diaries. Mischa died on 31 March 1944. Etty's younger brother, Jaap, was finally sent to Westerbork at the beginning of 1944. He too did not survive the war.

Esther Hillesum was born on 15 January 1914 (for our purposes more than a year before Merton's birth during the first winter of World War I) in Middleburg, the Netherlands, where her father, Dr. Louis Hillesum, taught classical languages. Her mother, Rebecca (nee Bernstein) was a Russian Jew. Dr. Hillesum was an excellent, disciplined scholar; his wife was passionate and chaotic. The marriage was stormy. Esther, or Etty, was the middle child. Mischa, the eldest, was a brilliant musician. Jaap, the youngest,

12. Etty Hillesum, *Letters from Westerbork*; trans. Arnold Pomerans (New York: Pantheon, 1986). Hereafter referred to in the text as *Letters*.

became a doctor. About Etty's siblings, little more is readily available. What is certain is that all three were extremely gifted.

In 1924, the family moved to Deventer, where Dr. Hillesum assumed the post of headmaster of the Municipal Gymnasium. Etty left the school where her father was headmaster in 1932. She took her first degree in law from the university in Amsterdam and then studied Slavonic languages. By the time she began studying psychology, World War II was underway. In April 1942, Dutch Jews were required to wear the Star of David. Deportations began that spring, but the restrictions and interruptions of Jewish life had begun earlier, and it is in the face of these that Hillesum wrote.

While in her late twenties, the period of the journals, Etty occupied a room in the home of Han Wegerif, a sixty-two year old widower with whom she developed an intimate relationship. She earned her living as a quasi-housekeeper and as a tutor in languages. From her room she could look out over Amsterdam's Museum Square. At her desk, which she described as the most beloved place on earth, she recorded the ins and outs of her day frankly, clearly, passionately. Also living in the Wegerif home were the owner's twenty-one-year old son, Hans, and Kathe, the German cook. Bernard, and Maria Tuinzig, the latter a close personal friend of Hillesum's, rented rooms in the house. The diaries recount the reactions of this diverse group to the restrictions and limitations being imposed daily in their midst. The diary also gives us a glimpse of Etty's conflicting feelings about her relationship with the elder Wegerif, to whom she refers as Father Han. It is to this group that the letter dated 6-7 September 1943 was written containing the news that Etty had been put on transport from Westerbork to Auschwitz where she would meet her death.

In addition to those living in the Wegerif home, there is a group which gathered around Julius Spier, the "S" of the diaries. Spier studied under Carl Jung and is credited with founding psychochirology — the study and classification of palm prints. He was the father of two, divorced from his gentile wife. He was also involved with another woman besides Etty. Spier was an intriguing, indeed magical personality. The members of the Spier circle would gather around him. He read their palms and interpreted the results with extraordinary clarity. He became a therapist to each. Etty became his assistant, intellectual partner, and lover.

Hillesum began her relationship with Spier in January or February of 1941. Through her affair with "S," she undertook a quest for the essential, the fully human, which gave rise to a startling religious sensibility, imbuing her writings with an all-pervasive spiritual, indeed a shimmering mystical character. "S" taught her to speak the name of God without embarrass-

ment, and it was he who invited her to the depths of human intimacy and solitude within which her awareness of the presence of God was awakened. Gradually, Etty moved toward an ever more consistent and intense conversation with the divine. Later, she wrote from the transit camp at Westerbork on 18 August 1943: "My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with you, oh God, one great dialogue" (*Letters*, p. 116).

Separated from "S" by three streets, a canal, and a little bridge, Etty continued to make the journey to his living quarters, even as the restrictions grew more formidable. There she would join the members of the circle gathered around their mentor. When the others were gone, Spier's room became the forum for Hillesum's therapy, their admittedly bizarre wrestling matches, and eventually for their amorous exchanges. Some of the most breathtaking of her insights and meditations occurred as she journeyed on bicycle back to the Wegerif home.

Hillesum's daily life in Amsterdam changed dramatically, however, when she took a job as a typist for the Jewish Council, a group of twenty important Jews with a staff of several hundred. The function of the Jewish Council was to mediate between the Nazis and the Jews. Established by the Nazis, the Council was under the illusion that, through negotiation, it could spare some Jews from the worst fate. The Council soon became a weapon in the hands of the Nazis.

Her work at the Jewish Council exempted her from internment at Westerbork, but after just fourteen days at the Council, Etty volunteered to go to the camp as a social worker. Her diaries indicate that Hillesum was convinced that she could be true to herself only if she did not abandon those in danger, and if she used her energy to bring life into the lives of others; to be balm for their wounds.

Hillesum arrived at the camp just as the relentless deportations were beginning. For more than one hundred thousand Dutch Jews, Westerbork was the last stop before Auschwitz. Between August 1942 and September 1943, Etty Hillesum spent her time keeping her diary, writing letters to friends in Amsterdam, and nursing the sick and dying in the hospital barracks. During this period she traveled by permit to Amsterdam approximately a dozen times, carrying letters, securing medicines, and bringing messages. Most of her days in Amsterdam at this time were spent sick in bed. The last part of her diary was written in Amsterdam after her first month in Westerbork, and tells of the sudden illness and death of "S." She went back to Westerbork, but returned again to Amsterdam to be hospitalized. Finally, early in June 1943, she left Amsterdam for Westerbork for the last time. Her lover had died, and she parted with her dear friends, one of

whom was Father Han, whose relationship with Ety seems to have reached no formal resolution. The strength of her soul in the face of the final interruption of her life leaves some in awe, others merely perplexed. She faced her deportation from Westerbork and from those she served there, as well as her anticipated extermination at the hands of the Nazis, with honesty and serene acceptance. On 30 November 1943 the life of Ety Hillesum was poured out in the ovens of Auschwitz.

Whether she writes from Amsterdam or from the camp, Westerbork is the consuming subject of Ety's letters. She became the "thinking heart of these barracks . . . the thinking heart of a whole concentration camp" (*Diaries*, p. 191). In Westerbork, "a plaything that had slipped from God's preoccupied hand," her soul found its deepest expression (*Diaries*, p. 180). She gave herself without reserve to the service of her people. "I have broken my body like bread and shared it And why not, they were hungry and had gone without for so long" (*Diaries*, p. 195).

But it is in her diaries that we see the transformation of a woman who crafted her life for the well-being of others, "a balm for all wounds," in response to what God had done in her. It is in the diaries that we glimpse the inner journey of a young, intelligent Jewish woman in love with a man who allows her to stand on her own two feet, and to speak God's name without embarrassment. The diary charts Hillesum's interior journey toward integration and liberation, while the public scenario being played out all over Europe was one of disintegration and extermination. In the face of disintegration and the destruction of her people, Hillesum's attitude toward life was one of radical altruism. The diaries spell out her response to racism, injustice, and innocent suffering. Her descriptions of persons, personal encounters, and historical events illustrate an astonishing familiarity with God. Her words developed into an uninterrupted dialogue which grew more passionate and all-consuming even and especially in light of the realization that her life would be interrupted definitively at the hands of the Nazis.

On the basis of this brief biographical sketch it may seem that Ety Hillesum and Thomas Merton share very little common ground. It is my purpose to indicate that despite vast differences, there are some striking similarities between them, particularly regarding the journey of transformation which each one charts. These similarities will simply be asserted and affirmed, rather than examined or analyzed in full. Such a thoroughgoing analysis is a task which might be undertaken on the basis of this preliminary study, or as a response to or critique of it.

The first similarity worthy of note is that Hillesum and Merton were

avid writers. Both were propelled by "an autobiographical impulse."¹³ Merton claimed that his vocation as a writer was fundamentally constitutive of his self-identity. This is expressed nowhere more clearly than when he writes: "It is possible to doubt whether I have become a monk (a doubt I have to live with), but it is not possible to doubt that I am a writer, that I was born one, and will most probably die as one. Disconcerting, disedifying as it is, this seems to be my lot and my vocation."¹⁴

Although Etty Hillesum left behind only eight notebooks and over one hundred letters, she nonetheless understood that she was destined to write. She states repeatedly that writing was the one thing she wanted and needed to do most. Her diary gives clear evidence of her struggle to accept her destiny as a writer. Merton's struggles on this score are well known. Where his struggles involved the sometimes competing claims and demands of the writer-as-artist vis-a-vis his monastic vocation, Hillesum's struggle was one of fidelity to the daily round of taking up the pen to record the shape of history-in-the-making in her inner and outer worlds. In the face of the horror which she witnessed, her response was to write with an unflinching honesty, absence of posturing, and lack of embellishment. Etty accepted her destiny as a writer only gradually. She came to know the small part she would play in human history — to shape it by writing everything down with a clarity springing from a mystical apprehension of truth and beauty in the midst of one of history's darkest hours. "I shall wield this slender fountain pen as if it were a hammer and my words will have to be so many hammer-strokes with which to beat out the story of our fate and of a piece of history as it is and never was before" (*Diaries*, p. 146).

A second similarity is that both Hillesum and Merton were children of war. Merton opens *The Seven Storey Mountain* by recounting his birth during the first winter of the first great war. His only brother died in combat, giving rise to what is arguably one of his finest poetic statements. His attention to the ethical implications of American involvement in Vietnam, to say nothing of his recognition of the debilitation of the human spirit caused by it, must be understood to be due in part to the impact of violence and war in his own life. The same may be said about his persistence in the pursuit of peace and his struggle for an end to the arms race.¹⁵

13. For a useful description of Merton's autobiographical impulse, see Kramer, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Artist*, pp. 18ff.

14. Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*; ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), p. 17.

15. See, for example, the Preface to the Japanese Edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* in *Honorable Reader*, pp. 59-67.

Hillesum's life and legacy cannot be understood if it is not seen in view of her radical altruism born in the midst of violence and war. In light of the fact that the Nazis were planning the systematic extermination of her people, Etty maintained that if "one decent German" could be found there would be reason enough not to hate the whole lot: "despite all the suffering and injustice I cannot hate others" (*Diaries*, p. 72). She writes with a sharp wit as she describes the perpetrators of war who mask timidity and cowardice as courage and power. She cuts through the illusion, seeing right through the self-deception by which they have been blinded. It is the Nazis themselves who are penned in by barbed wire — not their captives.

Hillesum's concern with human suffering caused by violence and war persists throughout the diaries and letters. She learned to embrace suffering through her relationship with "S." "Through suffering . . . we must share our love with the whole of creation" (*Diaries*, p. 125). Suffering is an art (*Diaries*, p. 126). We can suffer with dignity or without. But suffering, like death, is part of life. In her own life, Etty learned the art of suffering which gave rise to compassion. Born of a vulnerable, yet intelligent heart faced with the enormity of the suffering of her people, Etty affirmed that the human person is strong enough to bear everything which enters human life: God, heaven, hell, earth, life, death, and all of history: "There is room for everything in a single life. For belief in God and for a miserable end. It is a question of living life from minute to minute and taking suffering into the bargain" (*Diaries*, p. 129).

It is this all-pervasive reality of violence and war which provides the context for understanding the emphasis which Hillesum places on suffering and compassion, and which Merton places on sin and mercy. There is in Merton's writings a relentless assertion of himself as a sinner in need of God's mercy. In Etty's diaries, there seems to be little sense of sin, at least as it is commonly understood. And certainly the mercy of God which enveloped Merton the sinner is not to be equated with the compassion of Hillesum in the face of human suffering. Nevertheless, because of the impact of violence and war in their lives, each had a profound awareness of human frailty, limitation and failure as well as a conviction that it is precisely the human capacity for depravity, sin, and suffering which is itself the locus for the self-disclosure of the divine in human life.

A third similarity between Hillesum and Merton is the openness on the part of each to the truth wherever it may be found. The ecumenical and interreligious sensibility of Thomas Merton is well known. This has sometimes given rise to speculation as to whether Merton had lost his Christian bearings or relinquished his explicitly Christian commitment toward the

end of his days. For example, one argument suggests that Merton's self-identification as a Christian was set aside or sublated in the process of developing as a radical humanist.¹⁶

Hillesum's openness led her to insights and practices which are quite uncommon among Jews. As but one example of Etty's rather unconventional practice, she gradually adopted the practice of kneeling when she prayed, often on the coconut rug in the bathroom, or by cultivating an interior disposition of kneeling. This combined with her practice of reading the New Testament is not at all common among Jews, devout or secular. She reads the Bible and "worries" about its real meaning (*Diaries*, p. 22). The psalms were familiar to her, and she seemed particularly fond of the gospel of Matthew, especially chapter 6: 34. When friends would remark that many of her insights and attitudes seemed to be influenced by Christianity, she would respond: "Yes, Christianity, and why ever not?" (*Diaries*, p. 180).

Hillesum also read Jung, Dostoevsky, and especially Rilke. She found delight in reading Augustine. It is no wonder. In one who prayed for knowledge of God through knowledge of self she recognized an early echo of the awakening to God in the deep well of her own self. She does not say much about precisely who this God is. And never does she claim that this God tells, or reveals, anything. With very few exceptions, she simply addresses this God: "God." Unconventional though she may be in her religious attitudes and practices, I believe that Hillesum understands God to be the God of her people: "I am who I am." "I will be who I will be" (*Exodus* 3: 13-15). This provides her with the great confidence with which she faces all that is taking place in the world in which she lives. Etty discerns the presence of God at the heart of all that is, active in history and present to creation. Her diary reveals the progressive awakening of this God within herself until God is understood as the ground of her being and of all that is: "I am who I am." It is God in her self hearkening to God. Hillesum's awareness of God's immanence is so keen that we are free to wonder: is this an unconventional view of a conventional God? Or is this God, like Etty herself, unconventional? Whatever the answer, what is most worthy of note is that Etty's strength to bear suffering and to pour herself out in sacrifice for others comes as a continual surprise to herself even as she struggles to be true to what has taken place inside her.

In speaking of the openness of Merton and Hillesum to the truth wherever it might be found, great care needs to be taken to assure that the

16. David D. Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989).

specificity and particularity of these writers is respected. In other words, these texts must be read in the context of their lives. Just as astute readers and students of Thomas Merton caution against knee-jerk judgments that he was ready to set aside his Cistercian cowl and untether his christological convictions for some high, all-encompassing religious truth, attentive readers of Hillesum recognize the dangers involved in likening her to Edith Stein or in viewing her as an adult Anne Frank. Here, great caution should be exercised against the inclination toward Christian appropriationism. In using this term I am describing the proclivity among some Christians to claim, take or own Etty Hillesum as a sort of "closet Christian" because they see in her an example of the "uncovered Jew." One example of this tendency comes to mind immediately. A Merton devotee, upon hearing of the present essay-in-the-works, expressed delight that someone was finally doing a comparison between these two "contemplative" figures: "After all, Etty probably would have become a Carmelite nun had she not died at Auschwitz." Although the cloister had some appeal to Hillesum, she explicitly states that she did not intend to enter the convent, affirming instead that her lot and destiny were to stand with her people in the world. Addressing God she writes: "I sometimes imagine that I long for the seclusion of a nunnery. But I know that I must seek You amongst people, out in the world" (*Diaries*, p. 52). No matter how open she may have been to truth wherever it might be found, Etty Hillesum lived and died a Jew. And careful readers of Merton rightly resist naive interpretations which suggest that Merton was one who possessed a form of ecumenical or interreligious consciousness indifferent to the specificity of his own religious convictions.

On this score, Thomas Merton and Etty Hillesum may be said to be inverted images of one another. Through the disciplined adherence to a structure of monastic, religious practice, Merton was led to broader horizons of insight and truth. In other words, he moves from the truth embodied in a specific religious tradition and its practices to discern the truth in a great variety of religious traditions. On the other hand, Etty Hillesum did not stand within a specific religious tradition, *qua* religious. Religious convention was alien to her, and Hillesum's religiosity, if it can be called that, was decidedly unconventional. There are no hints of conventional forms of worship or methods of prayer in her writings. She was a Jew who chose her own way. And this way, though markedly different from that of Merton, led her to a similar experience of God, and a similar appreciation of the truth embodied in different religious traditions.

Merton and Hillesum are similar in yet another way. Both struggled to integrate seemingly irreconcilable polarities in their lives. Merton was a

monk and a writer. He was a celibate who later fell in love with a woman. He was a monk-become-hermit devoted to the quest for the essential in silence and solitude, while at the same time passionately invested in the struggle for peace and justice in the world in which he lived. He was a committed Christian attentive to the wisdom of the religions of the Orient. He was hidden with God, yet subject to the eye of public and ecclesiastical scrutiny. These tensions and more pulsed throughout the course of Thomas Merton's life, to say nothing of the more deeply rooted psychological conflicts which some current studies are bringing to the fore with greater or lesser persuasiveness.¹⁷

In a similar vein, Etty Hillesum wrestled with seemingly irreconcilable tensions. She writes of the various dimensions of heaven, hell, earth, life, God, and all history existing within her soul (*Diaries*, p. 131). She writes of her inability to be comfortable with her body, inclusive of the sexual, and with God on the same day. She records the apparent conflict of maintaining simultaneous, intimate relationships with two older men, all the while growing in self-reliance and independence so that she could stand on her own feet without either of them. There are the competing claims of solitude and care for others, whose need and urgent demands required her to act as a balm for their wounds. This is to name a few of the ostensibly conflicting factors which she holds together in her life. But there is a myriad of other tensions, so that it might be fair to describe Etty Hillesum, and Merton as well in my judgment, as a deeply "conflicted" personality.

I am not familiar enough with the entire Merton corpus to audition a response to the question of whether Merton ever resolved the deep conflicts which he faced. But I do think it is fair to say that in Etty Hillesum's interrupted life we see a gradual movement toward resolution and integration. Early in the diaries, she describes her "schizoid tendencies" which begin to fade as she grows in familiarity with the divine (*Diaries*, p. 46). Apparent conflicts and contradictions, opposing poles of her personality, seem to have reached a point of integration as she matured. On 21 July 1942, during the same month she voluntarily decided to go to live and work among her people at Westerbork, she wrote: "I believe I have gradually managed to attain the simplicity for which I have always longed" (*Diaries*, p. 158). I submit that Hillesum attained spiritual integration by recognizing and accepting duality, or the competing polarities in her life, as integral to

17. For an interpretation of Merton's life and work from the perspective of Erik Erikson's psychoanalytic investigations, see Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial*. For a less persuasive treatment, see Suzanne Zuercher, "Redemption and Romantic Melancholy: Thomas Merton and the Enneagram," *Review for Religious* 49: 2 (1990), pp. 243-255.

unity and simplicity, and by affirming the integrity of this duality. Maturity and wholeness come through such recognition, acceptance, and affirmation, as does simplicity. Hillesum achieved this simplicity by unrelenting attention to the awakening of God within, and by accepting that the Holy One who is revered and adored is a presence both strong and vulnerable, at once powerful and frail (*Diaries*, p. 151). The God whom she knew as the divine vulnerability is the ground in which she found resolution to the many apparent conflicts and tensions in her life.

It is the honesty with which both Merton and Hillesum face these deep conflicts and the struggle to resolve them in the quest for spiritual integration which, in part, accounts for the appeal they have for contemporary readers. Many find in Hillesum and Merton a mirror of their own quest for integration. The competing poles and ostensibly conflicting demands may vary in the life of this or that reader. Each sees in Hillesum and Merton something of his or her own story as they move toward fuller spiritual integration facing head on the various tensions and, at times competing, seemingly incompatible pulls which are often the occasion for personal fragmentation and disintegration, but which may also be the opportunity for further maturity and final integration.

The similarities between Merton and Hillesum which have been noted thus far do not, in the final analysis, account for their significance and their appeal. This can only be attributed to the fact that both possessed an extraordinary ability to articulate their experience of the divine, and the consequent pattern of human transformation. And this they do without attempting to provide doctrinal bases or theoretical explanations derived from their respective traditions. They do not attempt to explain or analyze the reality of the divine which they experience. Rather they simply record their response to the divine initiative. And this provides the reader with a glimpse of the nature of the reality disclosed in their respective transformations.

Here it must be noted that in some of his early work, e.g., *The Ascent to Truth*, Merton bent over backwards to the point of putting himself in a theological straight jacket in order to be orthodox. In some of his introductions, e.g., *Seeds of Contemplation*, he goes out of his way to claim expressly that nothing he writes is unorthodox. But by the late 1950s Merton seems to celebrate the breakthrough of his own existential voice, recording his own experiences of emptiness and the hiddenness of Christ in such environs. It is, then, in his later, best work that Merton ceases to provide theoretical explanations and doctrinal bases for that which he knows to be true through his experience of transformation by grace. What we find in

Hillesum and Merton is that different lives shaped by distinct traditions and histories give evidence of a very similar journey of transformation. This is easier to describe than to explain.

As recorded in her diaries, Hillesum's journey takes the following course. First, there is the discovery of her deepest self through her intimate relationship with "S" which is, at the same time, the occasion for the discovery of the God within with whom she begins an "uninterrupted dialogue." She writes:

Truly, my life is one long hearkening unto myself and unto others, unto God. And if I say that I hearken, it is really God who hearkens inside me. The most essential and the deepest in me hearkening unto the most essential and deepest in the other. God to God. (*Diaries*, p. 173)

Second, there is the growing awareness of the need for solidarity with and service of others. Third, there is the task of shaping her life as "a balm for all wounds," i.e., as a gracious self-donation for the well-being of others.

In Merton, we find a similar pattern. It is the long journey inward which is the necessary path of self-discovery. This inward journey is simultaneously the path to discovery of and union with God, but this path ineluctably entails identification with all those who strive to do the truth in love freely. And this implies, further, a willingness to stand in solidarity with all those who suffer and who are victims of evil, sin, and violence.

Merton and Hillesum are not the only ones who have charted this journey or traveled its path. We might describe the odyssey of Augustine as one in which there is a movement from interiority, to community (communion with the other, others and God) and finally to charity (self-sacrificial love). The journeys of many others on the quest for spiritual maturity might be described in similar terms, but it is always a similar path inviting self-knowledge as the occasion for knowledge of God, which entails care for the other or others, and a willingness to pour out one's life as a participation in redemptive love.

Both Hillesum and Merton describe the spiritual journey as the unavoidable, necessary path taken because of what God has wrought in them. Merton writes:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always though I may seem lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will

never leave me to face my perils alone.¹⁸

The appeal, indeed fascination, with both Hillesum and Merton lies in their ability to describe this journey in ways that are particularly appropriate for our time. The ravages of senseless violence, the scourge of racism and classism, the ever-present possibility of death at the hands of other human beings, the suffering of innocent millions — all of this is the context within which Hillesum and Merton chart and travel the journey of transformation. Neither one turns a deaf ear to these facts in pursuit of spiritual integration. These are part of the itinerary. Nor does either one lose a grip on the deep and abiding awareness of life as a gift which is all the more precious because of its contingency, fragility and radical impermanence, especially as these are disclosed in violence and innocent suffering. Finally, both recognize the importance of human responsibility, rather than divine intervention, when faced with evil and sin, as well as the power of redemptive, self-sacrificial love in the task of human transformation. Etty Hillesum's affirmation of human responsibility as a response to what has been wrought in her by the experience of God is nowhere better expressed than in a prayer written on a Sunday morning in July 1942, just before voluntarily deciding to go to live and work among her people in Westerbork. She writes:

I shall promise you one thing, God, just one very small thing. I shall never burden my today with cares about my tomorrow, although that takes some practice. Each day is sufficient unto itself. I shall try to help You, God, to stop my strength ebbing away, though I cannot vouch for it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well. Alas, there doesn't seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold you responsible. You cannot help us but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last. . . You are sure to go through lean times with me now and then, when my faith weakens a little, but believe me, I shall always labor for You and remain faithful to You and I shall never drive You from my presence. (*Diaries*, p. 151)

No doubt the God to whom we are introduced in this prayer is spoken of in quite different terms than Thomas Merton used to convey his understanding of God, but the responsibility he recognized to what had happened within him, and consequently to the world in which he lived, is echoed in this prayer of Etty's.

In fine, the journey of transformation which is charted by Hillesum and Merton is rooted in a mysticism of union, a deep and abiding apprehension of the truth that transformation in and through the experience of God

18. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1958), p. 83.

entails identification with all those who struggle, and who suffer because of humanity's inhumanity to humanity. Such a mysticism of union might be understood more fully by a close examination of the writings of another Jew with whom Merton had some familiarity, at least the kind of familiarity one may have to another through their writings. Such an examination lies well beyond the scope of this essay, but it may suffice to say that Simone Weil's writings, especially her "dogmatic ambiguities," both attracted and repelled Merton. Nonetheless, he thought her mysticism was "basically authentic."¹⁹ He recognized that authentic union with God involves suffering and love, as well as "identification with the unfortunate and the unbeliever. The realization that God's love must break the human heart" (VC, p. 159). Such identification with all humanity, even and especially the most vulnerable and unworthy, and the breaking of the human heart as the occasion for the divine inbreaking, constitutes the central insight of Merton's celebrated theophany at Louisville's Fourth and Walnut and, I submit, was at the core of the other experiences of God's transforming grace which he attempted to describe.²⁰

The lives of Etty Hillesum and Thomas Merton embody diverse traditions and divergent conceptions of the divine. But what is worthy of note is that they give evidence of a similar journey of transformation. This pattern of transformation involves three interlocking factors: 1) a commitment to discovery of the self which involves the surprising disclosure of the divine indwelling; 2) the simultaneous recognition of the needs and urgent longings of the other and others, and the necessity of caring for them; 3) identification or solidarity with others in their "unfortunate" condition, i.e., sinfulness, frailty, vulnerability and woundedness, as well as a willingness to sacrifice oneself in redemptive love as an act of mercy and compassion.

In viewing Hillesum and Merton as two vastly different figures, at times inverted images of one another, who chart a comparable journey of transformation particularly appropriate for our time, certain pitfalls need to be pointed out so as to be avoided by those who would follow their way. First, caution needs to be exercised in the face of the possibility of becoming overly introspective and self-preoccupied in the spiritual quest. Critics

19. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965*; ed. Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), p. 157. Hereafter referred to in the text as VC.

20. For an insightful treatment of Merton's spiritual experience of identification with the crucified and with suffering humanity, even prior to the mystical apprehension of union at Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, see Chrysoygonus Waddell, "Merton and the Tiger Lily," *The Merton Annual 2*; ed. Robert E. Daggy, et. al. (New York: AMS Press, 1989), pp. 59-79.

of both Hillesum and Merton have drawn attention to the tendencies of each to dwell unduly within the region of interiority. Although it may be true that the very nature of a diary or journal is to express one's deepest self, and that both Hillesum and Merton moved from the recesses of interiority to care for and solidarity with the other and others, their writings evidence a self-preoccupation that is sometimes difficult to reconcile with authentic maturity. I shall be so bold as to volunteer my contention that this is more the case with Merton than with Hillesum, especially when the later entries of Hillesum's diary are examined in view of the earlier.

A second area where cautionary remarks are in order pertains to the balance between contemplation, or prayer, and action. I have no intention of rehearsing the criticisms of Merton which have been advanced by others, e.g., Rosemary Radford Ruether, regarding the difficulties involved in maintaining a simultaneous commitment to the monastic life and to emancipatory praxis in view of the pressing needs and urgent demands of the age. But the balance between these two, at times, competing poles—the active and the contemplative—is something which Merton seems to have arrived at more in theory than in fact. And if my claim that Hillesum moves beyond self-absorption more successfully than Merton does seems audacious, it may seem downright flippant to Merton devotees to suggest that in the period of preparation for serving others, and at the stage of actually fashioning her life as a sacrifice in redemptive love, Hillesum achieves a more mature integration of the contemplative and active dimensions of her life than Merton seemed to manage.

Third, without prejudice to the complexity of the issue, it must be noted that both Hillesum and Merton give evidence of a degree of naivete in regards to the full implications of their ecumenical and interreligious sensibilities. Here, Merton evidences a greater maturity than Hillesum. Whereas Merton expressed an openness to the truth wherever it might be found, at the same time wrestling with the particular claims of his own religious tradition while refashioning his commitment to them, Hillesum does not seem to exhibit a realization that the specific, particular claims and convictions which shape the traditions within which people live do make a difference in the way they perceive the world and participate in it. For example, although Hillesum describes the conviction shared by Christians and Jews that life is a gift which is made ever more precious because of its radical impermanence, she seems coolly indifferent to the fact that this conviction cannot be untethered from the specific contexts, inclusive of the truth claims made within them, which mediate this conviction and the means by which it is lived.

In pointing out these shortcomings in both Hillesum and Merton, the purpose is not to engage in a mean quibble. It is rather to suggest that Hillesum and Merton were seekers whose own journeys provide compelling insight into a pattern of authentic human transformation in response to the divine initiative, even and especially in the way they record their stumbling *en route* or miss completely a point of destination along the way.