

## **Glory in a 20<sup>th</sup> Century mystic – reflection on the experience of Etty Hillesum (1914-43)**

**Christopher Southgate**

**Submitted copy, pre-proof.**

**For *Exploring the Glory of God: New Horizons for a Theology of Glory* (London: Lexington Books, 2021)**

Synopsis: This essay explores the roots of the main term for divine glory in the Hebrew Bible, and proposes an understanding of manifestations of God's glory in terms of signs of the reality of the always-hidden God. It goes on to explore the experience of Etty Hillesum, who as a victim of Nazi oppression in occupied Holland persisted in seeing life as glorious, and refusing to hate her persecutors. Hillesum's diaries and letters offer glimpses of how glory may be perceived even under conditions of great harshness and misery.

Glory is 'prominent in first-order discourse about God',<sup>i</sup> but it is not a term that is well understood. Christopher Morgan notes that it is 'one of the hardest Christian terms to define'.<sup>ii</sup> I want to suggest that the concept of glory goes well beyond the familiar connotation of bright and beautiful light, and that it can help us express the ambiguity of the world as we experience it, for the following reasons:

- i) Divine glory has about it an inalienable element of mystery, which is very important in seeking to find language to address God's ways with a suffering world. Also, glory is not something that will ever be neatly reducible to a straightforward proposition. Glory is always more, and other, and more dangerous.
- ii) The root from which is derived the principal term for divine glory in the Hebrew Bible, *kavōd*,<sup>iii</sup> is associated with weight, importance, significance, rather than

beauty or radiance.<sup>iv</sup> Glory is therefore a discourse that can encompass the ambiguity of the world, and the ugliness of creaturely suffering, and face the possibility of God's involvement in, and even responsibility for, that suffering.

When the seraphim in Isaiah 6 cry out that the whole earth is full of God's glory, that acclamation can be understood as the earth being full of the importance of God, the weight of the divine reality. The term glory is not simply testament to the beautiful aspects of the world. Indeed the vision of Isaiah is full of smoke and dread. And in the New Testament, Christ comes into his full glory at his 'hour', which is seen by the writer of the Fourth Gospel as beginning with his Passion (Jn 3.14; 12.23). So divine glory encompasses not only light and radiance but also pain and suffering, degradation and death.

It seems to me therefore that the language of glory (as distinct from beauty) provides a vehicle for speaking honestly of the ambiguity of the created world and of human experience under God. Also, glory in the Scriptures is typically something apprehensible (usually by sight though occasionally by another sense<sup>v</sup>), therefore something that can be contemplated. Through that contemplation, that search, more can be understood of the God who is ultimately mysterious and always beyond our understanding.

It remains to ask – what understanding of glory, a notoriously elusive concept, is both faithful to its use in Scripture and in the best of modern theology, and is also able to contain the ambiguity of the natural world, the suffering of Christ on the Cross, and the eventual Christian hope for the redemption of all things?

The biblical witness to the glory of the Lord begins (canonically) with various appearances to the Hebrews in the wilderness. That glory is described as being 'in the cloud' (Ex 16.10), 'like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain' (24.17), and later filling the tabernacle (40.34), and appearing at the tent of meeting (Nm 14.10). Newman stresses that the Lord is not localized where the glory of the Lord (*kavōd Yahweh*) is seen, rather the latter

only appears at the ‘periphery or edge’ of ‘where Yahweh is thought to be’.<sup>vi</sup> Newman continues, ‘Yahweh is never said to be located in *kavōd*’.<sup>vii</sup>

*My hypothesis is that divine glory is best understood as a signs or array of signs of the (ultimately mysterious) reality of God.* (For a fuller analysis of this understanding of glory see my 2018 monograph *Theology in a Suffering World: Glory and Longing*.<sup>viii</sup>) Such signs are however not rightly discerned by everyone – even in respect of the Incarnate Christ, *the* great sign of the nature of God, the writer of the Fourth Gospel can note that ‘he came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him’ (Jn 1.11). Even the ultimate demonstration of love, on Calvary, can be rejected, as Luke describes it being rejected by one of the two thieves (Lk 23.39).<sup>ix</sup>

In this essay I explore how an important 20<sup>th</sup> Century mystic managed to see the glory of God, to apprehend signs of the divine reality, even in conditions of the greatest oppression and cruelty. The whole journey of mystical exploration is a journey towards a reality that lies beyond the world of everyday sensing. So we might explore what it is to interpret signs of ultimate reality via, for instance, the great seventeenth-century Spanish mystics – via Teresa’s interior castle or the dark night in John of the Cross – or yet more contemporary spiritual searchers such as Thomas Merton or Henri Nouwen. But I want instead to reflect on the experience of a young woman writing during the Second World War. My choice of mystic is Etty Hillesum, the young Jewish woman whose diaries and letters of 1941-43, before her deportation to Auschwitz and death there at the age of twenty-nine, make such extraordinary reading.

It is very difficult to speak appropriately about the horrendous violence and cruelty of the Holocaust; this must be done with great caution. And it is a fraught exercise to do Christian theology around the experience and suffering of a Jewish person. I venture to do this only because of Hillesum’s own fascination with the Christian Gospel, especially the

Gospel of Matthew. In what follows I need to make clear that I am fully aware of the risk of oversimplifying the life of a very complex woman, and the complexity as well as the horror of all that Jewish people had to bear. Also that I recognize that the responses of Jewish thinkers to the Shoah has been very various.

Further, I need to make it clear that I do not regard Hillesum's sometimes extraordinary pronouncements about her life under the daily threat of deportation and death as in any way ameliorating the brutal inhumanity of what was done. The systemic cruelty stands as what it was: a blasphemy of the most radical kind against the understanding – deeply embedded in biblical thinking and also that of the Enlightenment – of the common humanity of all persons. So: Etty's writings in no way make the Holocaust any less evil. Nor should they be taken as normative, in such a way that other responses are diminished. But they are nonetheless very illuminating.

Hillesum's writings do not offer a philosophical, or yet a theological system. Yet for Tzvetan Todorov, 'she offers us the rare example of someone who achieves a moral understanding at the very moment the world is collapsing around her. In the midst of the deepest despair, her life glitters like a jewel.'<sup>x</sup> I approach Hillesum's story through her own writings<sup>xi</sup> and Patrick Woodhouse's study in his *Etty Hillesum: A Life Transformed*. This (in Woodhouse's words) 'emotionally confused, sexually adventurous and intellectual young woman from a dysfunctional family'<sup>xii</sup> makes an odd candidate for sainthood. Ria van den Brandt notes the equivocal reception of Hillesum's writings when they were first published,<sup>xiii</sup> some seeing her as an 'overgrown selfish schoolgirl',<sup>xiv</sup> and yet the witness of her response to the Nazi persecution, her care for and delight in others, and her refusal to hate her persecutors, has about it a tang of holiness, wild and strange.

This passage from a late letter of Etty's, written from the transit camp of Westerbork, from which the only onward destination was Auschwitz, shows precisely how her experience ties into our theme:

'The misery here is quite terrible; and yet, late at night when the day has slunk away into the depths behind me, I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire. And then, time and again, it soars straight from my heart – I can't help it, that's just the way it is, like some elementary force – the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world.'<sup>xv</sup>

This shows, more clearly and convincingly than any theologian in the comfort of his study could express, what it is to bear an external reality of extraordinary harshness – not to deny it or seek to escape it (for Etty refused several opportunities to go into hiding) - but to face up to it, and despite it, within it, even because of it, to find glory and magnificence. Beyond that, too, to know a very profound hope, grounded entirely in faith, since no external factors in the Holland of the time provided evidence by which to hope.

So using Woodhouse's account as my guide, I now explore some of what Etty concluded in her diaries and letters, how she bore the reality that confronted her, and came to experience the world as 'glorious and magnificent'. A fellow-detainee, Friedrich Weinreb, wrote of Etty that: 'What I found most striking was her religious sense of things, a quality which she had recently discovered in herself. There was something about her that spoke of an ancient, primeval struggle, the weight of thousands of years – and at the same time something light and joyful'.<sup>xvi</sup>

There are two very interesting words in this account, 'quality' and 'weight'. There was a quality in Hillesum that spoke eloquently to others. And that life also spoke of weight, of reality more substantial than just the present moment.<sup>xvii</sup> Its quality and weight, we may

suppose, conveyed something of the glory of God, understood by Irenaeus as ‘a human being fully alive’, a quality at once sublimely weighty, and light with joy.<sup>xviii</sup>

In his play about the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, *Murder in the Cathedral*, T.S. Eliot gave Becket the resonant line ‘Human kind cannot bear very much reality.’<sup>xix</sup> Etty Hillesum was able to find beauty, and signs of love and meaning, while facing up to her situation to the full. In the transit camp she was bearing to the greatest possible extent the reality of her situation, lacking what she called the ‘armor of position, esteem and property’,<sup>xx</sup> and immersed in facing truthfully the way things really are,<sup>xxi</sup> in terms both of the violence with which humans can treat each other,<sup>xxii</sup> and our common inheritance of the image of God.<sup>xxiii</sup> Despite its bleakness and threat of death she can conclude in a late letter that her life ‘is one long sequence of inner miracles’.<sup>xxiv</sup> That is another interesting word, since a miracle is not merely an internal thing within a life, but always also revelatory. A life of miracles develops the quality of a sign.

Etty writes ‘to me the greatest reality is still the sun on the hyacinths, the rabbit, the chocolate pudding, Beethoven, the grey hair at his [Spier’s] temple..’<sup>xxv</sup> This is strange glory indeed, but that is what she is writing about. These were, for that mystic in that context, ‘living heaven in hell’,<sup>xxvi</sup> the signs of the reality that lies beyond our ordinary seeing, and which she learned to call God. And Etty’s own ‘glory’ was that she persisted in being able to see these signs. She wrote once,

‘My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God, one great dialogue. Sometimes when I stand in some corner of the camp, my feet planted on Your earth, my eyes raised towards Your heaven, tears sometimes run down my face, tears of deep emotion and gratitude... Things come and go in a deeper rhythm, and people must be taught to listen; it is the most important thing we have to learn in this life.’<sup>xxvii</sup>

It was under the influence of Julius Spier that Etty began in the last phase of her life to speak of God, and to God.<sup>xxviii</sup> Coetsier writes that ‘when she went into herself, she found within herself the presence of a transcendent Other. That which she found within her was ‘transcendent’ in the sense that it was not “present” in the same way that things and people in the world are present to one another. *Cor in cor loquitur*: heart speaks within heart.’<sup>xxix</sup> Rachel Feldhay Brenner sees a movement in Hillesum’s God-language, from ‘the “compelling” God, a God who can draw her to himself in love and help her to maintain her dignity and self-respect’ to a role-reversed God, whose ‘existence is predicated on the faith of those whom he cannot save’.<sup>xxx</sup> Brenner notes that, ‘Finding God... is therefore predicated on the ability to dissociate oneself from total absorption in the suffering, tormented self... The presence of God emerges in self-transcendence that liberates from fear and despair.’<sup>xxxi</sup> For Etty Hillesum (as for Anne Frank), writing was an essential part of the self-transcendence.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Strikingly, Etty comes to conclude that God will not, cannot, help those in the camp. All they can do is ‘safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves’.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Her God has handed Godself over to the world, entering the human heart, and being ‘guarded’ by those with the least worldly power. She writes: ‘there must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times.’<sup>xxxiv</sup> Her concern is ‘that God is in safe hands with us despite everything.’<sup>xxxv</sup>

There is a fascinating echo here of the German Jewish philosopher-theologian Hans Jonas. Jonas’ God empties Godself of mind and power in giving the creation its existence, and then allows the interplay of chance and natural law to take its course. God’s only further involvement is that God holds a memory of the experience of the creation - he receives his being back ‘transfigured or possibly disfigured by the chance harvest of unforeseeable temporal experience’.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Woodhouse notes in Hillesum some theological echoes of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was also responding to the same tyranny, and concluded that God was

‘weak and powerless in the world’.<sup>xxxvii</sup> This motif seems a very far cry from glory, and yet if it is an authentic discernment of the divine then it would be a response to signs manifested of the divine nature, albeit very far from the theophanic signs in Exodus and Isaiah. (Closer indeed to the glory seen in Jesus at his ‘hour’, after he has been handed over to the powers of evil.)

Etty is sure that her God will not, perhaps cannot, help her. The biblical book from which such a genre of narrative takes most encouragement is Ecclesiastes. Her ‘pitch’, the tone she found for her life, and the quality she evinced, is one of acceptance, lacking ‘lamentation or complaint’<sup>xxxviii</sup> Unquestionably however, she also lived in and with the Psalms. And on her final postcard, flung out of the train taking her and her family to Auschwitz, she found her God, whom she identified with ‘what was deepest and best in her’<sup>xxxix</sup> to be indeed a ‘high tower’<sup>xl</sup> for her spirit, even though she was convinced that that God would not rescue her. And there is a hope, going well beyond the world of Ecclesiastes, in that passage from Etty with which we began, ‘time and again, it soars straight from my heart – I can’t help it, that’s just the way it is, like some elementary force – the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world.’<sup>xli</sup> An unreasonable hope persists.

As Todorov shows, Hillesum was not by any mean alone in responding to beauty even in the depths of misery. He quotes Louis Micheels’ recollection of Bach being played on the guitar in Auschwitz: ‘The contrast between the purity of his music and our misery seemed to imbue every phrase with special depth. The horror of our situation made the beauty of life so much more poignant and precious.’ Todorov continues, ‘Laks and Coudy, musicians themselves, recall how “during the short time the music lasted we became normal human beings once more as we listened with religious awe”’.<sup>xlii</sup> The phrasing here is interesting. The prisoners became ‘normal’, or perhaps more than normal, in bearing their

reality yet responding with ‘religious awe’, discerning in that moment glory. Where Hillesum is so striking is both in her explicit use of the language of glory, and also in the way she seems to have sought out passionately these moments of disclosure. They did not just happen to her. She could write that life was ‘glorious and magnificent’<sup>xliii</sup> not by ignoring its ugliness and cruelty but by facing it, bearing it, to the greatest possible extent.

Todorov offers an analysis<sup>xliiv</sup> of Hillesum’s response to suffering, in three ‘registers’ (a reminder that we should not look for *system* in her writings). He detects the response of *indifference*: ‘If you have a rich inner life... there probably isn’t all that much difference between the inside and outside of a camp.’<sup>xliv</sup> He also sees a stoic *acceptance*: ‘I accept everything from your hands, oh God, as it comes’.<sup>xlvi</sup> Sometimes this takes on an Eastern quality, perhaps reflecting her interest in Taoism, ‘We have to become as simple and as wordless as the growing corn or the falling rain. We must just be.’<sup>xlvii</sup> Etty concludes that ‘you must be able to bear your own sorrow.. [it] must become an integral part of yourself.. Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due’<sup>xlviii</sup> Suffering then is contained, detoxified, and prevented from spreading by being given its own space in the ecology of the spirit. Even despair can be robbed of its power.<sup>xlix</sup> (She even came to a related conclusion about her own death – ‘He has a place in [her life] now, and I know that he is part of it.’<sup>1</sup>)

But Todorov also sees a ‘*preference*’ for suffering in Hillesum which he finds much more difficult. She grows to love the transit camp, with a joy that disturbs him. For Todorov ‘she was, without question, an extraordinary human being... [yet] In her most exalted moments there is something superhuman-and, therefore, inhuman-about her’.<sup>li</sup> I do not think that quite does justice to Etty, because she writes of that suffering that she seems almost to welcome: ‘If all the suffering does not help us to broaden our horizons, to attain a greater humanity by shedding all trifling and irrelevant issues, then it will all have been for

nothing'.<sup>lii</sup> Or again, 'if we fail to draw new meaning from the deep wells of our distress and despair, then it will not be enough.'<sup>liii</sup> In other words, the suffering can, must, have a transformative effect on human nature. She also writes, 'And I also believe, childishly perhaps but stubbornly, that the world will become more habitable again only through the love that the Jew Paul described to the citizens of Corinth in the thirteenth chapter of his first letter.'<sup>liv</sup> In other words, the love that 'bears all things' (1 Cor 13.7) will be transformative. Indeed the three categories of indifference, acceptance, and preference describe three modes of 'bearing reality' in love, and Christian tradition has always found a place for the third, the willing bearing of suffering for the sake of its capacity to form part of blessing (e.g. Col 1.24, 1 Pet 3.9).<sup>lv</sup>

For the purposes of this present essay, Etty Hillesum enables us to take yet a further step, the very difficult and controversial step of looking into the *cause* of the suffering itself and finding signs there of the deep reality of God. This is where Etty's extraordinary ability to see the humanity of her persecutors is so telling. For Woodhouse this is rooted in her ability to see every human being as created in the image and likeness of God.<sup>lvi</sup> She writes in her journal: 'All the appalling things that happen are no mysterious threats from afar, but arise from fellow beings very close to us.'<sup>lvii</sup> Or again, 'We have so much work to do on ourselves that we shouldn't even be thinking of hating our so-called enemies.'<sup>lviii</sup> Todorov notes that it was not until forty years after his imprisonment that Primo Levi could write, 'They were made of the same cloth as we, they were average human beings, averagely intelligent, averagely wicked: save the exceptions, they were not monsters, they had our faces.'<sup>lix</sup> For Todorov, 'Hillesum, one of Eichmann's victims, would never, in any circumstance, have acted as he did, but she is able to understand Eichmann as those like him by looking at herself.'<sup>lx</sup> When summoned before the Gestapo, she can write 'And that was the real import of this morning: not that a disgruntled young Gestapo officer yelled at me, but

that I felt no indignation, rather a real compassion.<sup>’lxi</sup> She makes clear: ‘The absence of hatred in no way implies the absence of moral indignation. I know that those who hate have good reason to do so. But... it has been brought home forcibly to me here how every atom of hatred added to this world makes it an even more inhospitable place.’<sup>’lxii</sup>

When this teaching is pushed to its logical conclusion, to look at another human, even one in *feldgrau* with a gun pointing at you, even one with a list transporting your family to certain death, even someone who makes members of your community draw up the list, is itself to look upon someone created in the divine likeness, to see a sign of God’s activity as creator. Hugely controversial ground. What element of the divine reality is signified to this sort of seeing? First the freedom of God, that God creates according to God’s own freely-chosen will, and not as the reproduction, or yet emanation, of some philosophical ideal. Second, that God’s will is to give freedom to humans, radical, extravagant freedom. Third, that God loves the little child within each human, however brutal, the child who in its turn is longing for love.

We are extrapolating now from Etty Hillesum’s inspiration, but all this seems entirely consonant with what she wrote, and how she is recorded as having behaved. In a remarkable essay J.R. Jones writes of love for the other being evoked by the other’s sheer existence:

‘It is seeing the love of a thing with the whole of existence as background to it. It is seeing the miracle of the existence of the thing. And this means it is the same as seeing things *sub specie aeternitatis*; it is seeing things as God sees them. And you cannot see living things in this way, without blessing them, without gratitude for their existence, without profoundly thanking God for the miracle which made them, for the miracle of their existence.’<sup>’lxiii</sup>

Within the Christian confession we can extrapolate further. To look upon a human being is to look upon someone for whose sins Christ died, therefore in a sense to look upon Christ. To look, therefore, on the infinitely costly love with which God responds to human freedom. This is, if you like, the scandal of the Incarnation at its most intense – the oppressor, who ‘knows not what’ he does, is weak even in his apparent power, he is thus Christ in his need to be ministered to, picking up in an admittedly rather unusual way on the teaching of Mt 25.<sup>lxiv</sup> His victim is likewise Christ. This incarnational dynamic is an extraordinary sign of the reality of the God who gives Godself to the world, ‘being found in human form’ (Phil 2.7).

I am emphatically not trying to convey that Hillesum’s was *the* appropriate response to the Holocaust (or yet that her situation was in some way exemplary of that colossal suffering).<sup>lxv</sup> We know, for instance, nothing of her story in Auschwitz, the last and most brutal chapter of that short life. Nor I am trying to suggest that there were not courageous Jewish responses that knew nothing of the Gospel of Matthew, or would have seen it as an enemy book. But in Hillesum, as in Bonhoeffer, the reality of a situation was being borne, and yet those caught up in the infliction of violence were still seen as God’s creatures. The contemplative has to look at the larger narrative to perceive the contours of glory. So also with Etty and her guards. Signs of God’s work in creation and redemption are still there to be interpreted as glory even in the bleakest contexts.

De Costa says that Hillesum’s God was ‘an immanent God, a God deep within herself, who is consistent with her dreams and thoughts’.<sup>lxvi</sup> Etty was massively constrained by the oppressiveness of her situation (though in other ways hugely freed by the generosity of her spirit, the breadth of her reading, and the inspiration of her lovers and friends). She is drawn both by her own loss of external freedom, and by her psychotherapeutic journey, to a God to be found deep within the self. This God is the ground of her freedom; she comes to

realise that she can also name God as the source of her zest for finding glory even within darkness. But strikingly her God-consciousness takes her towards, not away from, other people. She writes:

Sometimes people seem to me like houses with open doors. I walk in and roam through hallways and rooms. Every house is furnished a little differently, and yet they are all the same, and each one of them must be turned into a dwelling dedicated to you, God. And I promise you, yes, I promise that I shall try to find room and refuge for you in as many houses as possible... I walk up to the front door and seek shelter for you.<sup>lxvii</sup>

She moves from seeing signs of God in the outside world, such as in flowers, or music, deep into herself, and emerges from the journey determined both to see the divine likeness in others, and to help others become God-bearers.

It is hard to see how Ety Hillesum and the author of Job can both be right. Either God is transcendently powerful, or God is powerless to save, and instead entrusts Godself to the world. And yet who can doubt the authenticity of both interpretations of the Godness of God? Job's story sits within our understanding of God as creator, as we see from God's 'lecture' to Job in Chapters 38-41. The Christian understanding of God in the Passion of Jesus, as W.H. Vanstone so clearly perceived in his study *The Stature of Waiting*,<sup>lxviii</sup> involves the utterly willing being-handed-over of Godness to the world. Godness bears the full reality of human selfishness, fear, lust for power, and all other idolatries. This passion of God for the world is salvific only 'soul by soul and silently',<sup>lxix</sup> not in the ostentatious forms of human glory.

Looking through the lens of the Cross, interpreting the signs of the Godness of God that the Passion reveals, requires a very particular sort of seeing. It is important for Christians to see with that lens into the harshnesses of the world, into the trauma that affects the lives of

so many. The liturgy of Good Friday cannot be short-circuited by lust for Easter. Equally, Christians cannot allow their vision to be stuck in the Passion, any more than simply bearing the reality of the world as revealed by the lens of the creation can do justice to a resurrection faith.

Those who would look with the lens of resurrection glory, however, must bear the reality that we hope for things not seen (Rom 8.25). That the divine project is a long way from resolution, that human experiments with their freedom continue to fragment faith, and fill the world with the abuse of power. That the freedom that is able to put away all idols and respond gladly and lovingly to the other seems rare enough indeed. (Perhaps we are able to glimpse it in Etty Hillesum precisely because all the comfort and security of her life, all the things that might have kept her in a zone of selfishness and complacency, were stripped away by irresistible external forces.)

Hillesum, out of her therapeutic engagement with Spier, became committed to deep inner work on herself. Spier also enabled her to use God-language. Discovering (or interpreting) God in the deepest flow of her life proved to be her deepest and most intense and abiding adventure. Out of that work she is enabled to see God's work in others. Her conviction that all others are in the divine likeness (and by inference can be read as signs of the divine reality, such that to encounter another human being is in some measure to encounter the glory of God<sup>lxx</sup>) allows her to be steadfast in her refusal to hate any other individual.

In Hillesum we have discovered someone for whom misery and oppression seemed to release a sense of glory; she therefore serves as a paradigm case of bearing reality to as full an extent as is possible for an ordinary human being. She finds glory despite the processes she knows will lead to her death, and in her refusal to hate I suggest she finds vestiges of glory even within those systems (in the human beings caught up in them, not in their

inhumanity). Such signs of the divine reality reach down into, or are found in, the depths of the human spirit, created as it is in the likeness of God.

This is glory at its most difficult and attenuated – glory glimpsed behind the helmet of a Nazi guard, in God’s reckless creation of freedom and God’s longing for response – glory glimpsed in the presence-like absence that ‘rewards’ the deep searcher – glory found in the deepest part of the self, honestly explored. There is a sense at the extremes of this type of glory that the human searcher appears to be doing almost all the ‘work’, in stubbornly and honestly seeking to bear with authenticity the fleeting and paradoxical character of this ‘absent’ God, yet ultimately it is still God who makes Godself known.

In ETTY HILLESUM we see how her perception of glory fuelled that joy that made others in turn respond (as we saw for example in the quotation from her fellow-detainee who could speak of her in terms of ‘the weight of thousands of years – and at the same time something light and joyful’). She represents an extreme case of the discernment in the human world of signs of the divine reality, which is the way this essay has sought to understand the divine glory.

---

<sup>i</sup> J. Fout, *Fully Alive: The Glory of God and the Human Creature in Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Theological Exegesis of Scripture* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 26.

<sup>ii</sup> C.W. Morgan, ‘Towards a Theology of the Glory of God’ in *The Glory of God*, ed. C.W. Morgan and R.A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 153-87, at 156.

<sup>iii</sup> Various transliterations with the consonants kbd or kvd, and with various accenting of the vowels.

<sup>iv</sup> Carey C. Newman, insisting that *kavōd* in the Hebrew Bible ‘cannot be reduced to a light phenomenon’ continues that *kavōd*, ‘when used in reference to Yahweh, is best semantically defined as revealed, visual, divine presence.’ *Paul’s Glory-Christology: tradition and*

---

*rhetoric* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 137n.7. David Brown associates *kavōd* with ‘a ‘weight’ or what overwhelms... light or darkness might thus have very similar effects. Both brilliant light and impenetrable darkness might ‘weigh’ or ‘press down’ on the human observer in similar ways, creating awe or fear.’ *Divine Generosity and Human Creativity: Theology through Symbol, Painting and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2017), 82-3.

<sup>v</sup> E.g. Sir 17.13 ‘their ears heard the glory of his voice’.

<sup>vi</sup> Newman, *Glory-Christology*, 21.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>viii</sup> Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. The present essay contains extended excerpts from this book, reproduced with permission. Note that this understanding distinguishes sharply between divine glory and both human glory and the human glorification of God.

<sup>ix</sup> As Douglas Dales points out, writing of the theology of Michael Ramsey, the differing response of the thieves ‘reveals the power of divine love, and its agony in weakness, unable to force repentance, but able to save to the uttermost those who turn to God.’ *Glory: the spiritual theology of Michael Ramsey* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), 29.

<sup>x</sup> T. Todorov, *Facing the Darkness: moral life in the camps*, transl. A. Denner and A. Pollak (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1996), 198.

<sup>xi</sup> E. Hillesum, *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943* ed. K.A.D. Smelik, transl. A.J. Pomerans (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>xii</sup> P. Woodhouse, *Etty Hillesum: A Life Transformed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 134.

<sup>xiii</sup> R. van den Brandt, *Etty Hillesum: an Introduction to Her Thought*, transl. H. Monkel (Zürich: LiT Verlag, 2014). Cf. also M.G. Coetsier, *Etty Hillesum and the Flow of Presence: a Voegelinian Analysis* (Columbia, MO.: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 26.

---

<sup>xiv</sup> van den Brandt, *Etty*, 17. Van den Brandt also notes that the major English translation of Etty's writings smooths over some difficult passages, such as her references to her attempts at self-abortion in 1941. (*Ibid.*, 9-10).

<sup>xv</sup> Hillesum, *Etty*, 616.

<sup>xvi</sup> Quoted in Woodhouse, *Hillesum*, 109.

<sup>xvii</sup> She wrote: 'we carry everything within us, God and Heaven and Hell and Earth and Life and Death and all of history.' (Hillesum, *Etty*, 463).

<sup>xviii</sup> Even as the ghettoization of Amsterdam proceeded she could write, 'above the one narrow path still left to us stretches the sky, intact...I find life beautiful, and I feel free. The sky within me is as wide as the one stretching above my head.' *Ibid.*, 434.

<sup>xix</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 271.

<sup>xx</sup> Hillesum, *Etty*, 590.

<sup>xxi</sup> She wrote that 'Mysticism must rest on crystal-clear honesty, can only come after things have been stripped down to their naked reality.' (*Ibid.*, 426), and again 'at unguarded moments when left to myself, I suddenly lie against the naked breast of life.' (*Ibid.*, 386).

<sup>xxii</sup> In September 1943 Etty and her family were finally deported in crowded cattle-trucks the three days' journey to Auschwitz. Etty threw postcards out of the train, one of which included the words 'We left the camp singing'. (*Ibid.*, 659).

<sup>xxiii</sup> As noted by Woodhouse in his thoughtful conclusion – *Hillesum*, 143.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Hillesum, *Etty*, 640.

<sup>xxv</sup> *Ibid.*, 252. Etty had ongoing intimate relationships with two much older men, her landlord Han Wegerif and her therapist Julius Spier.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Coetsier, *Etty Hillesum*, 4.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Hillesum, *Etty*, 640.

---

<sup>xxviii</sup> On the day Spier died, she wrote that ‘You taught me to speak the name of God without embarrassment’ (Ibid., 516).

<sup>xxix</sup> Coetsier, *Etty Hillesum*, 197.

<sup>xxx</sup> R.F. Brenner, *Writing as Resistance: four women confronting the Holocaust* (University Park, PA.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 112.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>xxxii</sup> ‘One always has the feeling here of being the ears and eyes of a piece of Jewish history, but there is also the need sometimes to be a still, small voice.’ E. Hillesum, *Letters from Westerbork*, transl. A.J. Pomerans (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 124.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Hillesum, *Etty*, 488.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Ibid., 506.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Ibid., 657.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> H. Jonas, *Mortality and Morality: A Search for Good after Auschwitz*, ed. L. Vogel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 125.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Quoted in Woodhouse, *Hillesum*, 50.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Woodhouse, *Hillesum*, 119.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Hillesum, *Etty*, 83.

<sup>xl</sup> Quoting Ps 94.22, or possibly 18.2, or 61.3, or Proverbs 18.10? Denise de Costa notes that Etty on this postcard used the Dutch word *vertrek*, which can connote ‘departure’, or yet ‘retreat’, an interesting ambiguity indeed. D. de Costa, *Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum: inscribing spirituality and sexuality* transl. M.F.C. Hoyinck and R.E. Chesal (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 237.

<sup>xli</sup> Hillesum, *Etty*, 616.

<sup>xlii</sup> Todorov, *Facing*, 95.

<sup>xliii</sup> Hillesum, *Etty*, 616.

---

<sup>xliv</sup> Todorov, *Facing*, 204-9.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Hillesum, *Etty*, 279.

<sup>xlvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 515.

<sup>xlvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 483.

<sup>xlvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>xliv</sup> Woodhouse makes here an interesting link with the theology of Paul Tillich. Both Tillich and Hillesum independently used the phrase ‘the courage of despair’. Woodhouse writes of this phrase, ‘You do not pretend that despair is not there. You acknowledge it: it is part of you. *But, by living courageously in the face of it, you rob it of its power.*’ Hillesum, 150 (emphasis in original). He notes Tillich’s resonant conclusion that ‘Love is stronger [than death]. It creates something new out of the destruction caused by death; it bears everything and overcomes everything.’ P. Tillich, *The Boundaries of our Being: a collection of his sermons with his autobiographical sketch* (London: Fontana Library, 1973), 280-1.

<sup>l</sup> Hillesum, *Etty*, 464.

<sup>li</sup> Todorov, *Facing*, 208.

<sup>lii</sup> Hillesum, *Etty*, 502.

<sup>liii</sup> Hillesum, *Letters*, 31.

<sup>liv</sup> *Ibid.*, 36. Lawrence Langer criticises her for this very stance, importing Christian attitudes into the understanding of Jewish suffering. L.L. Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: collected essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 69-73, at 70. In a searingly critical passage, Langer mocks Hillesum for ‘breathtaking naïveté’ (70), and for ‘a certain arrogance of tone and style’ (72), above all for still embracing ‘the legacy of a Romantic era... that no grief is ultimate, that the human capacity for suffering is equal to any anguish’. (71) I would only note Etty’s own perception that she strove to work from ‘crystal clear honesty’ and to

---

‘lie on the naked breast of life’, and that she wrote from ‘the courage of despair’

(Woodhouse, *Hillesum*, 150).

<sup>lv</sup> Which is not to deny that the desire to cultivate, and indeed to impose, suffering for its purifying effects has at times been a deeply toxic element in the tradition.

<sup>lvi</sup> That this is a key doctrine for her is shown by such writing as this: ‘I sank to my knees with the words that preside over human life: And God made man after His likeness. That passage spent a difficult morning with me,’ (Hillesum, *Etty* 644). Cf. also Alexandra

Pleshoyano: ‘She had room for everyone and everything within herself, no matter how soiled the likeness of God might appear.’ ‘Etty Hillesum: for God and with God’, *The Way*, 44 (January 2005), 7-20, at 11.

<sup>lvii</sup> Hillesum, *Etty*, 259.

<sup>lviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 529.

<sup>lix</sup> Quoted in Todorov, *Facing*, 136.

<sup>lx</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>lxi</sup> Hillesum, *Etty*, 259.

<sup>lxii</sup> Hillesum, *Letters*, 36. Todorov notes that this was not by any means a unique position – Eugenia Ginzburg and Irina Ratushinskaya, in their own ways, make similar responses, and Primo Levi’s later reflections come to related conclusions. Todorov, *Facing*, 201.

<sup>lxiii</sup> J.R. Jones, ‘Love as Perception of Meaning’ in *Religion and Understanding*, ed. D.Z. Phillips (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 141-53, at 149, italics in original.

<sup>lxiv</sup> To alter the ancient Latin saying about the guarding of the guards themselves, we might here pose the question, *Quis custodes ipsos liberabit?* (Who shall free the guards themselves?)

---

<sup>lxv</sup> For a range of theological responses see for example D. Garner (ed.), *Antitheodicy, Atheodicy and Jewish Mysticism in Holocaust Theology* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012).

<sup>lxvi</sup> De Costa, *Anne Frank*, 228.

<sup>lxvii</sup> Quoted and adapted by de Costa, *Anne Frank*, 238.

<sup>lxviii</sup> W.H. Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982).

<sup>lxix</sup> From the poem 'Urbs Dei' by Cecil Spring Rice, sung as the hymn 'I vow to thee my country'.

<sup>lxx</sup> Pursuing the thought of Irenaeus, the encounter is at its fullest and truest when both parties are 'fully alive'.

#### Bibliography:

Brenner, R.F., *Writing as Resistance: four women confronting the Holocaust* (University Park, PA.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

Brown, D., *Divine Generosity and Human Creativity: Theology through Symbol, Painting and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2017).

Coetsier, M.G., *Etty Hillesum and the Flow of Presence: a Voegelinian Analysis* (Columbia, MO.: University of Missouri Press, 2008).

Dales, D., *Glory: the spiritual theology of Michael Ramsey* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003).

de Costa, D., *Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum: inscribing spirituality and sexuality* transl. M.F.C. Hoyinck and R.E. Chesal (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

Eliot, T.S., *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969).

- 
- Fout, J. *Fully Alive: The Glory of God and the Human Creature in Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Theological Exegesis of Scripture* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).
- Garner, D. (ed.), *Antitheodicy, Atheodicy and Jewish Mysticism in Holocaust Theology* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012).
- Hillesum, E., *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943* ed. K.A.D. Smelik, transl. A.J. Pomerans (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Letters from Westerbork*, transl. A.J. Pomerans (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).
- Jonas, H., *Mortality and Morality: A Search for Good after Auschwitz*, ed. L. Vogel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996).
- Jones, J.R., 'Love as Perception of Meaning' in *Religion and Understanding*, ed. D.Z. Phillips (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 141-53.
- Langer, L.L., *Admitting the Holocaust: collected essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- Morgan, C.W., 'Towards a Theology of the Glory of God' in *The Glory of God*, ed. C.W. Morgan and R.A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 153-87.
- Newman, C.C., *Paul's Glory-Christology: tradition and rhetoric* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).
- Pleshoyano, A., 'Etty Hillesum: for God and with God', *The Way*, 44 (January 2005), 7-20.
- Southgate, C., *Theology in a Suffering World: Glory and Longing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
- Tillich, P., *The Boundaries of our Being: a collection of his sermons with his autobiographical sketch* (London: Fontana Library, 1973).
- Todorov, T., *Facing the Darkness: moral life in the camps*, transl. A. Denner and A. Pollak (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1996).

---

van den Brandt, R., *Etty Hillesum: an Introduction to Her Thought*, transl. H. Monkel  
(Zürich: LiT Verlag, 2014).

Vanstone, W.H., *The Stature of Waiting* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982).

Woodhouse, P., *Etty Hillesum: A Life Transformed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

Biography: Christopher Southgate has taught in the Dept of Theology and Religion at the University of Exeter since 1993 and is now Professor of Christian Theodicy. His books include *A Love and its Sounding: Explorations of T.S. Eliot* (University of Salzburg, 1997); *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution and the Problem of Evil* (Westminster John Knox, 2008); *Greening Paul: Re-reading the Apostle in a time of Ecological Crisis* (with D.G. Horrell and C. Hunt) (Baylor University Press, 2010); and *Theology in a Suffering World: Glory and Longing* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), based on the 2014 Sarum Lectures.

Southgate is also the author of seven collections of poetry, the most recent being *Chasing the Raven* (Shoestring Press, 2016), and *Rain Falling by the River: New and Selected Poems of the Spirit* (Canterbury Press, 2017).