

# Etty Hillesum and Thomas Merton: Twin Guides in a Post-modern Age

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*'It is...anguish and inner crisis that compels us to seek truth, because it is these things that make clear to us that we are sunk in the hell of our own untruth.'*<sup>1</sup>

The title of this paper is, to say the least, ambitious, and immediately begs many questions. Why link these two very different twentieth century writers together? In what sense can they be called 'twins'? And in what sense does *who* they were and *what* they wrote, offer us a way forward in the face of the complex phenomenon known as 'postmodernism'?

Etty Hillesum was a Dutch Jew born in Holland in 1914 to a Russian mother and a Dutch father. She studied law at Amsterdam and Slavic languages at Leiden University, and then from March 1941 to October 1942 she kept a very personal diary. This charts her path out of a chaotic past with the help of a Jewish psychotherapist with whom she had a complex but profound relationship. It is a story, in a remarkably short time period, of self discovery and the discovery of a profound and deeply personal faith. The diary also tells something of the story of the terrible suffering of the Dutch Jews during this period of Nazi occupation. In the summer of 1942, she voluntarily went for the first time to the transit camp where all the Dutch Jews were taken before being sent to the death camps—initially as a social worker though she was later to become a camp internee herself—and from this hellish place she wrote

letters which describe life in the camp. Her diaries and letters together provide one of the most important documents of the human spirit to come out of the Nazi Holocaust. With her parents and younger brother, she was eventually put on the train for Auschwitz, where she died in November 1943.

Thomas Merton was born in France in 1915, to a New Zealand father, and an American mother. He was educated in France, England and the United States, and went to Cambridge and then Columbia Universities. Following his conversion to the Roman Catholic faith in 1938, he became a monk in the Cistercian Order and from 1941 to 1968 belonged to the Monastery of our Lady of Gethsemane in Kentucky. He wrote a large amount of books, maintained a huge correspondence, and became an inspirational figure for movements of social protest in the western world in the second half of the 1960s. However, he remained first and foremost a monk and a contemplative, and towards the end of his life developed a particular interest in eastern traditions, notably Zen and Sufism. In 1968 he travelled to the east for a meeting of religious in Bangkok and it was there that he died, electrocuted by accident.

This brief glimpse at these two lives set alongside one another suggests huge differences—of gender, of nationality, and of outward religious affiliation. But also key differences as to how, as contemplative writers, they related to the institutions of their respective faith traditions as well as to how they related to the key historical phenomenon of their time—the rise of fascism.

As a Trappist monk Thomas Merton immersed himself in the institutional life of his order and more widely of the Catholic Church—though things changed radically towards the end of his life. By contrast, Etty Hillesum, though a Jew, was entirely indifferent to the institutional life of Judaism and showed not the slightest interest in it.

As regards the overwhelming reality of their time—the rise of fascism and the Second World War—and how they responded to these events, there could hardly have been a sharper contrast. In December 1941, in great haste, Merton entered the monastery in Kentucky and withdrew entirely from the life of the world. It is perhaps worth mentioning that his first novel written in 1940 was called *The Journal of My Escape from the Nazis*.

By contrast, Etty Hillesum, as a young Jewish woman in Nazi-occupied Holland, could not possibly escape the Nazi horrors, and indeed, later she refused to try to. Though offered hiding places on many occasions, she would not hide, but voluntarily went to the transit camp where she lived out her spirituality with extraordinary courage. It cost her her life.

And so in 1941, a crucial year in the development of both their stories, we have on the one hand a young Dutch

Etty Hillesum and Thomas Merton

Jewish woman increasingly immersed in the Jewish struggle to survive and find meaning in the hell of Nazi-occupied Europe; and on the other hand a young American Catholic Christian man escaping the world and finding meaning in the medieval world of a Trappist monastery in the southern United States.

How can these two figures remotely be called *twin* guides? The differences appear vast.

However if we look deeper there are striking similarities which result in a remarkable congruence in the spiritual emphases of their writings, emphases which speak particularly to our own confused age.

The first striking similarity is that they were born at virtually the same time, in Europe, at the beginning of the Great War. There is just a year between them. She, in January 1914; he, in January 1915. This meant that as young people growing up in Europe in the inter-war years, although his life was somewhat nomadic and hers was static (she never left Holland), nevertheless their thinking was shaped within the same dramatic and tragic context against the background of the epoch-making realities of their time: the aftermath and devastation of the First World War; the birth and growth of communism in Russia; the years of the Great Depression which posed huge question marks about capitalism; and then through the 1930s, in Germany, Spain and Italy, the ominous rise of fascism.

Across Europe, those inter-war years were a time of intense ideological debate. As intellectual young people this would have coloured their thinking—arguably hers more than his for she was growing

up in Holland, while he spent his adolescent years in England and so was more cut off from the political and ideological tide of events unfolding across Europe. But both of them made ideological commitments. At University she joined the 'Students League against Fascism' while he flirted briefly with communism in his early period in the United States. Yet for both of them, in their later writings, the question of ideology became important, in that they both became deeply sceptical as to whether commitment to any political ideology, be it socialism, communism or any other 'ism', could ever be adequate to comprehend and deal with the malaise of the modern world. Whilst not discounting the structural nature of evil, both of them came to the conviction that the only way to a future of hope lay in the sphere of the *personal*.

A second crucial similarity was that both of them experienced traumatic childhoods. '*It is anguish and inner crisis that compels us to seek truth*', wrote Merton, '*because it is these things that make clear to us that we are sunk in the hell of our own untruth*'. As young people both of them knew, very personally, intense 'anguish and inner crisis'. There is not time to tell their individual stories in detail and Merton's is well known, but for both of them the importance of this woundedness in terms of their psychological and spiritual development cannot be overstated. In their insecurity both became wild, self-indulgent and chaotic as young people, he in a dark year at Cambridge fathering a child, she consumed by sexual energy in her time as a student when she had a string of different relationships, though at the same

time her life was also shadowed by bouts of deep depression.

These personal struggles which they faced in very different circumstances drove him into the Catholic Church and eventually into a Trappist monastery, and led her to begin a complex relationship with a highly unusual Jungian psychotherapist. Again huge differences, but for both of them it meant that the focus of their intense spiritual search led them into the realm of the *personal*, focussing not so much on abstract questions of theology, about the nature of *God*, as on the complex and elusive questions of the *self*.

Related to this is a third important similarity. Both of them were diarists. Etty dreamed of being a writer and novelist, but all that she has left us in the short time that she had is her diary—ten spiral-bound notebooks—and some extraordinarily powerful letters. An important form of Merton's writing was his personal journal, now published in seven volumes.

For both of them the diary became a personal laboratory in which, alone, they made their way into understandings of personal truth discovered in the silence of their contemplative hearts. Their diaries were crucial in the outworking of their spiritualities.

Finally—and this is where the similarity is most significant for our time—both of them became 'outsiders'—people *on* the edge, even *beyond* the edge of their traditions. She more obviously than he in the sense that she never belonged within any circle of practicing Judaism, and showed no interest in it. The path she took, in which she drew inspiration from a whole range of

sources—among them the writings of Jung, the poetry of Rilke, the Gospels of the New Testament, and the writings of St Augustine—was uniquely her own.

Merton, though a Cistercian monk to the end, also became something of an outsider from his own tradition, both in the literal sense that he spent his last three years living in a hermitage in the woods away from his monastery, but also in the way that, ahead of his time, he went beyond the thinking of the Church of his day immersing himself in conversations which explored the relationship between Christian faith and other traditions.

It was this sense of being solitary outsiders pursuing a spiritual search which had its focus in the realm of the personal, which particularly marks them out as 'twin guides in a post-modern age'.

Postmodernism is an elusive umbrella term extremely difficult to pin down. However it is fundamentally to do with our understanding of knowledge, with how we know things and perceive things. Postmodernism embraces a way of perceiving reality which unravels and undermines the order and structure of previous ways of perceiving.

The French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard suggests that one way we can understand postmodernism is in terms of what he calls 'an incredulity towards meta-narratives'.<sup>2</sup> He suggests that one defining characteristic of the post-modern world is that 'grand narratives' have lost their hold. By this phrase, he means overarching theories and philosophies which interpret experience and to which all subscribe, even unthinkingly.

In the pre-modern world Catholic Christianity could be seen as providing such a 'meta-narrative' which has now

long since collapsed. In the modern world, scientific rationalism, that is the knowability of everything through rational science is another such 'meta-narrative', still dominant, but now under strain and question. In contrast to these increasingly unbelievable 'meta-narratives', postmodernity is characterised by an abundance of lesser narratives or 'micro narratives'. The result is that all we are left with is diversity and difference, your perception and my perception which are of equal value or perhaps of no value at all, for is there such a thing as 'value'? And so this era can be characterised as one in which, in the western world, people find themselves more and more going in search of their *own* meaning, for it would seem that we cannot escape our need of it. If there are no trustworthy givens, no reference points 'out there' any more because all is shifting, relative and contingent, we find that our search for some reference point increasingly takes us *within*, into the question of selfhood, and the question: *who is the one who perceives?* Who am 'I'? And what is the I-ness of 'I' in this complex world in which 'I' am caught amid so many diverse and bewildering ways of perceiving?

This is where Thomas Merton and Etty Hillesum are such significant guides because for both of them—though they used different ways of expressing it—the question of selfhood, that is the nature and question of the *inner* life, was at the heart of their spirituality.

In Etty Hillesum's case, the journey and search which took her from chaos to integration was remarkably rapid. In a matter of months she changed *from* a young woman in whom a secure sense of self was lacking and who felt herself to be

at the mercy of her own all-consuming erotic needs, to someone who had a new sense of identity. Over the months of her therapy she learnt to know and value and love this 'self' and to enter into a rich and profound *inner* life in which the self she discovered was more than just her 'self'; it had a transcendent dimension, was somehow ultimate, even divine. 'God', she said, '*is what is deepest and best in me.*'

It was an extraordinary transformation driven by many factors which I have explored in my book—*Etty Hillesum, A Life Transformed*.

The backcloth against which this transformation occurred was the persecution of the Jews which paradoxically played its part acting like a catalyst speeding up the process of change in her. In the camp the deepening sense of the reality of her inner life, which she wrote was far more real than all the hell and misery around her, enabled her to survive and go on loving and living, and, despite everything, insisting that life was glorious and magnificent.

Though the context and timescale were vastly different, a similar trajectory of inner discovery and transformation can be traced in Merton, who was a similarly wounded figure. For him the journey was much longer. But through the years in the monastery—at first triumphant years in the 40s, then difficult years in the early 50s, and finally liberated years in the 60s—he was taken deeper and deeper into the inner depths of his solitude, where he knew himself to be at one with the Divine Mystery. Here he discovered his 'true self'.

In worlds which both Hillesum and Merton saw as deeply alienated and disintegrating, where the narratives that

held human community together were collapsing or non-existent, they found their reference point in a profound 'innerness', in a life grounded in contemplative stillness and adoration.

But—and this is the crucial point—this must not be confused with a kind of narcissistic individualism. The search for, and resting in, a profound inner Ground whose name was 'God' was not merely an exercise in individual affirmation. The receiving of the gift of the 'true self' (as he put it), the saying yes to 'what is deepest and best in me' (as she put it) was both the deepest possible affirmation of themselves and it took them *beyond* themselves, making them *universal people*, able to transcend their own individuality and the boundaries of their own tribal loyalties and allegiances and identify deeply with the traditions, the worlds, and the sufferings of others.

This is why they are guides for our own time.

In Etty Hillesum's diaries there is a significant moment when she first equates the word 'God' with what is 'deepest and best' in her. But this 'God'—who is the Ground and Goodness of her life—is not some kind of private possession, but can only be known in relationship with others. At this first moment of intuition, she writes of her discovery in universal terms. What is 'deepest and best' in her links her to all other people. In a letter to her therapist she wrote of how in a moment of illumination, '*I regained contact with myself, with the deepest and best in me, which I call God, and so also with you.*' And of this moment she writes: '*Many new perceptions about myself and my bond with you and my fellow beings appeared.*'<sup>3</sup>

As she broke through to this inner depth, what she realised, in an intuition that went beyond words, was that as well as knowing what Merton would call her 'true self', she found she belonged unreservedly also to other people, indeed this 'true self' was only to be found in relationship to other people. This led to an extraordinary capacity for empathy with the whole suffering bundle of humanity around her, including, remarkably, her enemy. We need to remember that this is the story of a young Jew in a Nazi transit camp who watched defenceless fellow Jews being bundled into cattle wagons on their way to the death camps. And she too eventually shared that fate. But even in such a place, Etty Hillesum found the capacity to go on believing in the humanity of her enemy even when she could not see it. She even wrote of the need for compassion for those who suffered on the German side. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about her is that, to the very end, she steadfastly refused to hate. Despite the most extreme provocation she wrote in her diary, '*Do not relieve your feelings through hatred, do not seek to be avenged on all German mothers, for they too, sorrow for their slain and murdered sons.*'<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Merton too became a 'universal person' moving beyond the boundaries of his faith tradition in his search for the reality of God in the contemplative traditions of other faiths. It was this search that increasingly absorbed his energies in his last years, and took him to the East where he died.

What these two twentieth century spiritual pioneers were pointing to and exploring in themselves was a new

*universal grand narrative of the soul* open to all human beings of all races and faiths, a narrative of personal depth and truth in which we may find our unity.

In our twenty-first century world of disastrous divisions and competing loyalties, where the old narratives and reference points have either disappeared or hardened, defining more sharply our tribal boundaries against one another, we need to listen to Thomas Merton and Etty Hillesum and follow where they have trodden, courageously facing up to our own confusions as they did, and waiting for this narrative of God to be revealed in the depths of our own hearts.

There we shall find that our divisions, particularly our faith divisions, are an illusion. The truth is we all belong to one another, and there is hope.

## Notes

1. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1968), Thomas Merton. Image Books Doubleday. p.183
2. *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur le Savoir*. Lyotard, Jean-François (1979), Les Editions de Minuit. p.7.
3. *Etty: the Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941–1943, Complete and Unabridged*, Klaas A.D. Smelik (ed.), Arnold J Pomerans (trans.) (Eerdmans Publishing Company; Novalis, 2002), p.83
4. *Ibid.*, p.308.

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