DIALOGISING LIFE: ETTY HILLESUM, CARNIVAL AND THE HOLOCAUST

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University, 2016.
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

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John M. Cartner
ABSTRACT

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To read the diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum is to encounter an individual imbued with the spirit of carnival as put forward by Mikhail Bakhtin in his ground-breaking work, Rabelais and His World. The correspondences between Bakhtin’s rendition of the spirit of carnival in the late Middle Ages, a period when fear was utilised as the dominant tool of control by both church and state, and Jewish existence under the Third Reich were not by any means similar. Clearly Hillesum, the subject of this thesis, confronted a reign of darkness that far outweighed the worst excesses of the Middle Ages. Yet, and this is the impetus of the thesis, it was amidst the Shoah that Hillesum fought her own battle against all that the Nazis stood for by adopting both a discourse and spirit of accommodation and generosity that led to a Weltanschauung of embrace, the centre of which was the Other.

How that spirit of accommodation evolved against perhaps humankind’s worst instance of inhumanity defined by the ‘illogic’ of a monologic reductivism finds one of its most powerful articulations in the letters and diaries of Etty Hillesum, herself a victim of Nazi genocide. It is the intention of this dissertation to explore a spirit of defiance that took the form of an expression of love for humanity even as the Other denied the possibility of such an expression. Hillesum’s dialogic discourse brought the Nazi Other within the Jewish frame of reference even as the latter were denied any sense of self-presence in terms of the Other. This extraordinary act – at once a register of accommodation and of helplessness – found its greatest strength in the idea of compassion and love.
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To my Other: for whom this work was written; without whom it would never have come into being.

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I would also like to make special mention of my friend, Mr. Karl Powell, whose own PhD journey has run parallel to my own. I will remember with fondness and appreciation the many conversations shared over a meal and pint of pale ale at Little Creatures in Fremantle as we discussed the travails familiar to all who have undertaken a research doctorate and reassured one another that we really were not insane, despite all evidence to the contrary.

Lastly, but certainly not least, I thank my students. The journey towards wisdom is a communal exercise and I am grateful to have been the beneficiary of the wisdom of many outstanding individuals who have generously given of themselves. Thank you for the knowledge and experiences shared, which have enriched my life. I look forward to many more years of shared growth in knowledge, wisdom and love for the Other.
Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.

Never shall I forget that smoke.

Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.

Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.

Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.

Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself.

Never.

(Elie Wiesel. Night, p.xix.)
INTRODUCTION

DISCOVERING ETTY HILLESUM: DIALOGISING LIFE

In January 2014 I travelled to the infamous extermination camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau. As a PhD student from Perth, Western Australia, who had spent the previous three years examining the diaries and letters of Dutch-Jewish woman, Etty Hillesum, I hoped to ‘get a sense’ of that which she may have confronted during the final weeks of her life. I was, of course, aware of the futility of the task: as a white male, raised a Catholic on the other side of the world, I shared none of the traits for which Hillesum was persecuted and murdered by the Nazis. And, though born in the same century as Hillesum, the years that separated her death from my birth may well have been a millennium for, in contrast to her life, which unfolded amidst the bloody conflict of two world wars and the Holocaust, my existence was marked by peace and privilege—our worlds were seemingly as distinct as her ideology was from that of her persecutors. No more vivid a demonstration of this existential chasm is there than the circumstances of our respective journeys to the camp that represents humanity at its diabolical worst. Despite travelling from the opposite hemisphere, my journey would take approximately twenty-four hours by plane in what first-world travellers euphemistically refer to as cattle class. The perversity of such terminology is starkly illuminated by the fact that Hillesum’s journey, like scores of her fellow Jews, took place over three days, packed inside cattle cars, at the hands of those who considered and treated her, and her compatriots, not only as less than human, but less kindly than the animals they kept as pets: Hitler’s dog experienced a more dignified death than the millions of men, women, children and infants murdered by the Nazis. The depraved conditions of this journey would commonly see the most vulnerable, usually infants and the elderly, perish before reaching their destination; indeed it was the common practice of the Nazis to account for this by loading ‘extra Jews’ onto the transports to ensure the gas chambers received their fill. In a letter to her friends, Johanna and Klaas
Smelik, Hillesum, writing from Westerbork, described one such transport in the following terms:

‘The misery here is quite indescribable. People living in those big barracks like so many rats in a sewer. There are many dying children. But there are many healthy ones too. One night last week a transport of prisoners passed through here. Thin, waxen faces, I have never seen so much exhaustion and fatigue as I did that night. They were being “processed”: registration, more registration, frisking by half-grown NSB men, quarantine, a foretaste of martyrdom lasting hours and hours. Early in the morning they were crammed into empty freight cars. Then another long wait while the train was boarded up. And then three days travel eastward. Paper “mattresses” on the floor for the sick. For the rest, bare boards with a bucket in the middle and roughly seventy people to a sealed car. A rucksack each was all they were allowed to take. How many, I wondered, would reach their destination alive?’¹

In his masterful account of the Holocaust, Saul Friedlander confirms Hillesum’s intuition, declaring: ‘Deaths during the transports were frequent, from exhaustion, thirst, suffocation and the like. They were duly accounted for and reported.’² This is verified by other first-hand reports such as that given by Ruth Kluger, which bear witness to the horror confronting the Jews:

The doors were sealed, and air came through a small rectangle that served as a window. Maybe there was a second rectangle at the back of the car, but that was the place for the luggage...Only one person could stand in this privileged spot [the small rectangle for air], and he was not likely to give it up. Rather he was apt to be someone who knew how to use his elbows. There were simply too many of us...Soon the wagon reeked with the various smells that humans produce if they have to stay where they are...The train stood around, it was summer, the temperature rose. The still air smelt of sweat, urine, excrement. A whiff of panic trembled in the air.³

³ Ibid., p.494.
This account, one of many describing the misery of Jews packed tightly into cattle cars, struggling to breathe and dying of thirst, evokes the disturbing scene from Stephen Spielberg’s Academy Award winning film, Schindler’s List, of Oskar Schindler’s attempt to provide momentary respite to the masses of suffering Jews by hosing down the cattle cars transporting them to their death. Watched by a group of Nazi officials, including chief antagonist, Amon Goethe, who laughingly chides Schindler, saying ‘This is very cruel, Oskar. You’re giving them hope. You shouldn’t do that. That’s cruel!’ Schindler persists. Ensuring each freight car is soaked, those within, mouths gaped wide, accept the rare humane gesture in the form of water droplets falling from the carriage roofs. Such respite was the exception rather than the rule and, while for some Jews the transports signified the final chapter of their Via Dolorosa, for the majority worse was yet to come. Such were the thoughts and images that occupied my mind as I flew into Krakow on that peaceful night in January.

Since the liberation of the surviving Jews from Auschwitz-Birkenau at the completion of World War II, the extermination camp has stood as a memorial to the memory of the millions who perished within its barbed-wire fences and as a warning against the bloody excesses of which humanity is capable. For myself,

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5 Nikolaus Wachsmann, KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2015, p.317: ‘The doomed prisoners’ last hours—between arrival and death—were marked by exhaustion, fear and torment. Following the traumatic separations by the SS at the ramp and the transfer to Birkenau, the doomed faced humiliation and violence outside the gas chambers. Women who refused to undress were assaulted, the clothes ripped from their bodies. Anyone who refused to enter the gas chamber was shot on the spot or beaten inside. What happened next, when dim suspicion became horrible certainty—with prisoners squeezed against one another in the darkness of the gas chambers, barely able to breathe even before the gas pellets were inserted—cannot be described. Standing outside, inmates from the Special Squad could hear that the death struggle lasted for several minutes; some of the dying threw themselves against the doors, sometimes smashing the glass peepholes and grilles protecting them, and crushing others who already laid on the ground. On occasion, the gas chambers were so packed that the SS forced some prisoners to wait nearby until it was their turn. They listened to the agony of those inside and waited for hours for their own deaths, suffering “the most terrifying pain in the whole world,” as Lejb Langfus wrote in his secret notes. “If you have not experienced it, you cannot picture it, even remotely.”
one of multitudes who have visited this mausoleum of Jewish suffering since it ceased its genocidal operations, it was a journey into silence. Disbelief is precluded by what the eye sees and the absurdity of the evidence renders one mute. For one whose profession centres around the enunciation of language, the experience of walking through the iron gates of Auschwitz, with its cruelly ironic sign *Arbeit Macht Frei* (*Work Sets You Free*), into a space of incommunicable silence, where millions uttered their final words, brought to mind Theodor Adorno’s famous proposition that ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ and served as a stark reminder of language’s impotency when staring into the face of the diabolical. As writer and survivor of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel, observes, ‘the radical negativity of the Shoah irreparably ruptures language, rendering discursive thought lamentably inadequate.’ This certainly rang true with my experience as I struggled to record that which I had seen. One can, of course, describe the displays of suitcases inscribed with the names of countless men, women and children piled high inside glass rooms, but never can one’s words capture the stories of those to whom these cases belonged, who packed them with their most treasured possessions, not knowing they would be harvested by the Nazis just as surely as their lives would be ripped away by the awaiting gas chambers; one can write of the mountains of human hair which fill another glass compartment, some still braided—belonging to women and children, mothers and their daughters, but no words can express the fears and questions that must have filled the heads of these, as they, like sheep, were shorn on the way to their execution; one can write of the mass of used Zyklon B canisters in yet another display of the Nazis’ murderous intent; yet never could the fears, terror and blood curdling screams of infants, children, women and men, as insecticide filled their lungs robbing them of their lives, be captured by the mere scratches of ink on paper. Where humanity fails, so too does language: nowhere is this more evident than in Auschwitz.

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I emerged from Auschwitz. Etty Hillesum did not. According to the Red Cross, she died at the extermination camp on November 30, 1943, a little over a month shy of her thirtieth birthday (xv). Of these final weeks of her life we know very little. Transferred from Westerbork to the Nazis’ death camp on September 7, one can assume she was one of the minority to survive initial selections for the gas chambers; this would have exposed Hillesum to the depraved conditions of the death-camp which included forced labour, extended roll calls, mistreatment by the guards, exposure to increasingly cold weather, malnutrition, dysentery, disease and the risk of torture and summary executions. As she herself had predicted, in such conditions, death was inevitable (748). Yet it is not for her death that Hillesum is increasingly known. It is rather her life, particularly her final years as they unfolded across the pages of her diaries and letters and the substance of these words, written as they were in the shadow cast by the Shoah across her existence, to which regard for Hillesum can be attributed.

My own journey to discovering Hillesum began at the turn of the century in an undergraduate unit on women’s spirituality taken as part of my Bachelor degree. Amongst names such as Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Avila, Therese of Lisieux and Joan of Arc there appeared Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman of whom I had no previous knowledge. Like many, I encountered Hillesum through the breakthrough publication of her writings entitled, *Etty Hillesum: An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork*. Edited by Jan G. Gaarlandt, ‘from the very beginning...it was an overwhelming success. Soon after [its Dutch publication in 1981] many translations were published and Etty Hillesum went—as she wished during her life—worldwide.’ Yet, as successful as it was in portraying a woman of strength and courage confronting all too real, albeit unimaginable circumstances, the portrait it painted was lacking. Comprised of ‘an incomplete

8 ‘In a labour camp I should die within three days. I should lie down and die and still not find life unfair.’  
and unreliable selection of Hillesum’s texts, it tended towards hagiography, a
genre with which this Catholic reader was all too familiar and found increasingly
unsatisfying. Nonetheless, despite its flaws, the global interest it sparked created
the appetite and demand for the publication of the scholarly edition of all
available texts written by Hillesum. This was made available in Dutch five years
after Gaarlandt’s original publication and sparked a myriad of popular and
academic responses. Astonished by the interest Hillesum’s writings had
generated, Gaarlandt observed:

   It’s shocking to read how many different aspects one can discover in
   her life and work. Literary, mystical, philosophical, historical,
   theological, psychological and therapeutic perspectives have
   generated material for many essays. She is compared and connected
to people like Kafka, Meister Eckhart, Ruusbroec, Kierkegaard,
Dostoevsky, Rilke, Jung, Seneca, Carry van Bruggen, Bonhoeffer,
important representatives of literature, theology and philosophy. It
has been said that her diary belongs to the most important document
of this century.11

Indeed, it was exactly this that attracted me to Hillesum. Having graduated with
majors in literature, history and theology, Hillesum brought all of these interests
together; so it was, that when she was suggested as a possible subject for my
doctoral dissertation, I pounced upon the idea.12 Given this, it should hardly
surprise the reader that the composition of this dissertation reflects the eclectic
nature of Hillesum’s writings, albeit to a lesser degree.

One of this dissertation’s significant aims, and its point of difference from the
current body of work in Hillesum studies completed in English, is its application
of the Russian philosopher and literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on
carnival laughter to the writings and spirituality of Etty Hillesum. While the role
played by laughter in the Holocaust has been explored by a variety of popular

10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Dr. Carmel Posa, who at the time was a lecturer in theology at The University
 of Notre Dame, delivered the unit on women’s spirituality, which included J.G.
 Gaarlandt’s publication of Etty Hillesum’s writings, *Etty Hillesum: An Interrupted
 Life and Letters from Westerbork* (1983). It was here that I first encountered Etty
 Hillesum.
and scholarly texts, and I am thinking here of Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful*, *Jakob the Liar*, starring Robin Williams, and Jacqueline Bussie’s *The Laughter of the Oppressed*, to name a few, to my knowledge, there has been no attempt to trace carnival laughter in Holocaust literature and certainly none in the area of Hillesum studies.

As those familiar with Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his World* are aware, carnival laughter is distinct from the satirical forms of laughter that dominate today insofar as its primary function is renewal. Reaching its height in the Middle Ages, a period of history dominated by the authoritarian utilisation of power, carnival laughter served the dual purposes of demolishing—albeit temporarily—the state sanctioned and socially constructed divisions which stratified the medieval population along lines such as class and gender and renewing the bonds of fellowship that these artificial distinctions destroyed. As such, the period of carnival and carnival laughter, imbued with the spirit of anti-authoritarianism, freed the people from the dominant tool of oppression employed by the ruling powers of church and state, namely fear, in all its forms.

While it is true that the emancipation carnival enacted was only temporary insofar as after its festivities concluded the strict hierarchical power structures which stratified and defined medieval relations were reinstated, that which could not be undone by the cessation of festivities, was, according to Bakhtin, the liberating spirit which carnival laughter produced: ‘Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power.’ Herein lies its tremendous relevance to the spirituality and writing of Etty Hillesum, which, despite developing beneath the demonic shadow cast by the Nazis, is remarkably free from fear and the fruits that commonly drop from its branches, namely ignorance, hatred and the sort of paralysis of the spirit which is the inevitable by-product of feasting on such a poisonous harvest. Indeed, through her writings,

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Hillesum has come to represent the antithesis of these qualities, which one might accuse her persecutors of possessing in abundance. Though certainly not immune to feeling fear in the face of the draconian anti-Semitic measures implemented by the Nazis, Hillesum refused to submit to these fears, as she saw only destruction in the seeds of hatred they planted:

I feel deep moral indignation at a regime that treats human beings in such a way. But events have become too overwhelming and too demonic to be stemmed with personal resentment and bitterness...against every new outrage and every fresh horror, we shall put up one more piece of love and goodness, drawing strength from within ourselves. We may suffer, but we must not succumb. And if we should survive unhurt in body and soul, but above all in soul, without bitterness and without hatred, then we shall have the right to say after the war. (778, 1008)

Frequently replicated across the pages of her diaries, such sentiments convey Hillesum's capacity to draw life from within and her determination to protect this inner life from the sort of destructive attitudes that proliferated around her. Through her spirituality, which was undoubtedly nurtured by her writing, Hillesum created a fear-free zone from which she drew the strength and courage to confront the diabolical and the love, which connected her to foe and friend alike. In this, her determination to resist differentiation, Hillesum rejected the foundational principles of the Nazis' ideology, which divided humanity along racial grounds; as such, like carnival—which created for medieval men and women a second world, free from the fears and prohibitions propagated by church and state—Hillesum created a space free from the fear and oppression that dominated Jewish existence within Nazi-occupied territories. This is not to assert that Hillesum was immune to the Nazis’ anti-Semitic measures; clearly she was subject to the same prohibitions and privations experienced by other Jews. However, despite the anger, frustration and indignation she felt and occasionally expressed at such measures, her inexorable response was to draw into her innermost self where she discovered a life that sustained her:

The main path of my life stretches out like a long journey before me and already reaches into another world. It is just as if everything that happens here and that is still to happen were somehow discounted
inside me. As if I had been through it already, and was now helping to build a new and different society. Life here hardly touches my deepest resources—physically, perhaps, you do decline a little, and sometimes you are infinitely sad—but fundamentally you keep growing stronger.

Hillesum’s response to the Nazis, as I shall argue in the third chapter of this dissertation, reflects a spirituality of carnivalesque constitution, to the extent that it serves as a second realm liberated from every fear, even the fear of death.\footnote{14}

To fully appreciate Hillesum’s \textit{Weltanschauung} one must examine the ideological context within which and to which it developed and responded. Herein lies the primary objective of the second chapter. One might reasonably argue that the ideological seeds of Hillesum’s outlook were planted in the soil of anti-Semitism, which spread across Europe in the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century. This is not to attribute credit to the Nazis’ virulent anti-Semitism, nor to ignore the influence of Hillesum’s family and friends on her existential stance; it is rather an important, albeit banal, reminder of the relationship between an individual and their times, an author and their work and a text and its context.

With this in mind, chapter two seeks to examine the nature of the anti-Semitism arrayed against Jews such as Hillesum. Beginning with an analysis of the eleventh chapter of \textit{Mein Kampf}, in which Hitler enunciates the racial theories that would lay the foundations for the Shoah, I explore the dangerous divorce from reality exhibited by his ‘Darwinian’ rhetoric. Informing my analysis is Bakhtin’s \textit{Toward a Philosophy of the Act}, in which the author identifies a fissure

\footnote{14 As I have explicated here (p.8) and elsewhere, there is no suggestion that Hillesum’s ‘second world,’ resembled the material experience of medieval carnival or that this historical reality was recreated in her writings. Indeed, there is scant evidence that Hillesum was even aware of medieval carnival. What is being suggested, however, is that the \textit{spirit} of medieval carnival can be traced in her writings and spirituality. In the first instance, the spirit of carnival laughter and unofficial or open seriousness is traced in the third chapter of this dissertation, while the underlying intention of chapters four and five is to display the communal spirit of medieval carnival imbibed through Hillesum’s dialogic relations with two significant literary figures who exerted a significant influence on her developing \textit{Weltanschauung}.}
between the theoretical and physical spheres of existence and attempts to reconcile this split within the human act. Drawing from the work’s philosophical principles, I propose that, notwithstanding the internal consistency of Hitler’s racial theories,\textsuperscript{15} at its heart, it emblematises the perilous schism between language and life about which Bakhtin was so concerned. This rupture continued beyond \textit{Mein Kampf} into the Führer’s anti-Semitic statements made after his ascension to the Chancellery of Germany and, unsurprisingly, it is equally evident in the rhetoric of the official mouthpieces of the Nazis’ propaganda machine, such as the \textit{Volkischer Beobachter}. As mentioned, the net effect of such schismatic discourse was to pave a path of linguistic violence that led to the acceptance and implementation of policies designed to inflict maximum physical violence upon the Jews of Europe—historical accounts abound testifying to the extent of the Nazis’ success in this regard. In concluding this chapter, I shall conduct a brief analysis of the synthesis between language and life increasingly evident in Hillesum’s diaries and letters. Unlike Hitler’s memoir/political treatise, \textit{Mein Kampf}, Hillesum’s writings exhibit the marks of a living document: composed incrementally, across the final years of her life, her diaries reveal her growth in strength, courage, faith and love, to name but a few of the traits she developed in the face of the atrocities perpetuated by the Nazis; along with her letters, composed largely within Westerbork transit camp, they reveal a young woman striving for authenticity in a world which appeared to many to have lost any sense of meaning. As such, Hillesum’s literary corpus stands as a document of resistance to the nihilistic worldview propagated by the Nazis.

One of the main features differentiating the discourse of Hillesum from that of her persecutors is that the latter speak with a monologic voice, whilst Hillesum’s words are infused with the voices of others: they are polyphonic through and

\textsuperscript{15} Laurence Rees. \textit{The Dark Charisma of Adolf Hitler: Leading Millions into the Abyss}. London: Ebury Press, 2012, p.62: ‘...Each element in this specious argument supported the other—something that made Hitler’s vision enormously robust. If you disagreed the Jews were a threat, or that the Jews controlled the Soviet Union, or any other aspect of Hitler’s political thinking, then he would simply dismiss you as ‘wrong’ and incapable of seeing what was in front of you. But once you accepted one element then you were embarked on a carousel where one idea led to another.’
through. In the case of Mein Kampf, it reads as a sermon delivered from a high priest who speaks the indisputable, infallible truth which none shall disobey. As such, it reflects the personality of its author, who, according to Laurence Rees, ‘had always despised debate and only wanted to lecture.’\(^\text{16}\) It was not until after the First World War, amidst a nation coming to terms with a humiliating defeat and severe terms of surrender, that Hitler, ‘...certain in his judgment and unwilling to listen to argument,’\(^\text{17}\) found an audience predisposed to his obdurate opinions and temperament. There is overwhelming evidence to suggest this combination of certitude and inflexibility was characteristic of Hitler throughout his life.\(^\text{18}\) Rudolf Hess, a member of Hitler’s inner circle, observed that he ‘must not weigh up pros and cons like an academic, he must never leave his listeners the freedom to think something else is right.’\(^\text{19}\) Herein lies one of the main ingredients of Hitler’s success in attracting such widespread support from the German population: so unflinching in his convictions and so bereft of doubt regarding the correctness of his decisions was he, that those around him were drawn into his web. Combined with the mythology Hitler had, with the assistance of his chief propagandist, Joseph Goebbels, created around himself, which saw him become an object of adoration for millions, the Führer’s intransigence was commonly perceived as strength of character rather than a flaw.\(^\text{20}\) Aided by the domestic and foreign policy successes enjoyed by the Nazis during their early years in power, millions fell in behind their Führer, submitting

\(^{16}\) Ibid., p.23.
\(^{17}\) Ibid.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., p.35: ‘...Hitler was helped by one other important quality that he exuded in his speeches—a sense of absolute certainty. Hitler’s analysis left no room for doubt. He never appeared remotely undecided between possible options. Hitler had used this technique in his monologue for years. He would read a book, for example, and then declaim loudly what the “correct” conclusion about it should be. “He was not interested in another opinion”, said August Kubizek, “nor in any discussion of the book.”’
\(^{19}\) Ibid., p.71.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., p.136: ‘The hordes of Germans who travelled—almost as pilgrims—to pay homage to Hitler at his home above Berchtesgaden; the thousands of personal petitions sent to Hitler at the Reich Chancellery; the pseudo-religious iconography of the Nuremberg rallies; the fact that German children were taught that Hitler was “sent by God” and was their “faith” and “light”; all this spoke to the fact that Hitler was seen less as a normal politician and more as a prophet touched by the divine.’
to his every dictate, obeying his every command. Ultimately, however, as Rees observes, their subservience would see them follow Hitler into the abyss. Indeed, as the tide of the war turned against the Nazis, and prospects of a German victory plummeted, Hitler, steadfastly adhering to his own brand of ‘Darwinian’ logic, dismissed concerns for the future of Germany, declaring: ‘the nation has proved to be the weaker, and the future belongs solely to the stronger eastern nation. In any case only those who are inferior will remain after this struggle, for the good have already been killed.’ That such sentiments conformed perfectly with those Hitler had expressed in Mein Kampf over twenty years earlier highlights the ideological obstinacy of an individual impervious to change and thus, incapable of growth. The contrast with Hillesum could hardly be starker.

One of the few characteristics according to which Hillesum’s writing can be defined, is its resistance to classification. Unlike Hitler, Hillesum was disinclined to ‘bind herself to one particular ideology. She wanted to retain her freedom and to make her own judgments, to think for herself and to search for her own way of

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21 Ibid., p.142: ‘It is no accident that this period in the growth of Hitler’s popularity—between 1933 and 1937—coincided with a series of foreign policy triumphs, all of which Hitler took credit for. In swift succession Germany withdrew from the League of Nations (1933), agreed a ten-year non-aggression pact with Poland (1934), and signed a naval agreement with Great Britain (1935)...Then, in 1936, Hitler ordered German troops to reoccupy the Rhineland, an area of Germany the Wehrmacht (as the Reichswehr was renamed in 1935) had been forbidden to enter under the terms of the Versailles treaty. There was, as a consequence, an outpouring of national pride. On the domestic front, alongside a vast expenditure on armaments—all built in German factories—the Nazis managed to reduce unemployment from a high of six million in January 1933 to one million in September 1936 and just 34,000 by the time of the outbreak of the war in September 1939...In parallel with the fall in unemployment came the rise of Volksgemeinschaft (the idea of a “people’s community”) that manifested itself not just in events like the Nuremberg rally but also in movements like the Kraft durch Freude (“Strength through Joy”) and Schönheit der Arbeit (“Beauty of Labour”) initiatives instigated by Robert Ley, head of the German Labour Front.’

22 Ibid., pp.393-394.

23 Ibid., p.400: ‘Even as he died Hitler did not blame himself for any of the calamities he had brought upon the world. Instead he claimed that ‘In these three decades I have been actuated solely by love and loyalty to my people in all my thoughts, acts and life.’
thinking. While Hitler appropriated ideas that confirmed his worldview, where, once adopted, they entered a fixed universe insulated from the incertitude that is synonymous with existence, Hillesum adopted an interminably open stance to life as it unfolded before her. This is not to assert a lack of conviction or indifference on Hillesum’s part: even the most rudimentary perusal of her writing reveals a woman passionate about life and living it to the full; it is rather to suggest that Hillesum’s conviction was grounded in a profound understanding of the self’s indispensable connection to their Other, whereas Hitler’s belief was rooted firmly in the self as an autonomous agent which was part of an exclusive idea of the nation. Consequently, Hitler, planted in the infertile soil of his ego, sought refuge in ideological certitude and was thus intolerant of any notion that challenged the edifice of his Weltanschauung, while Hillesum, who wrote that ‘One must not be too certain of anything, for then all growth comes to a halt’ (400), instead planted herself in the field of Otherness where she discovered a home as vast as the skies that stretched above her.

I am of course conscious that such imagery lends itself to the sort of two-dimensional hagiographic portrait which, in my youth, I found so frequently in the lives of the saints. Ultimately such ethereal portrayals are unhelpful, suggesting, as they do, lives immune to the uncertainties and failings which constitute our humanity. That said, neither would it do justice to Hillesum to


25 Throughout this dissertation the other is regularly referenced in the following three senses: the human, the divine, and the collective human/divine Other. For the sake of uniformity the capitalised Other shall be utilised in all three usages. More importantly, however, this reflects deference to the biblical invocation of humanity’s divine origins and acts as a literary signifier of resistance to efforts to ignore, diminish or—in the case of the Shoah—eradicate humanity’s divine dignity.

26 The dichotomous attitudes displayed by Hitler and Hillesum find their precedence in the contrast between the official seriousness that dominated medieval society and the liberating and embracing spirit which characterised carnival festivities and served as its antidote.
downplay the consolation she found in her spirituality; as such, the imagery I have utilised above mirrors that found within the pages of her diaries and letters. In a demonstration of an attitude which belied the dire circumstances of her existence, Hillesum, in a letter to her friend, Henny Tideman, written on August 18, 1943, penned the following:

This afternoon I was resting on my bunk and suddenly I just had to write these few words in my diary, and I now send them to you: 'You have made me so rich, oh God, please allow me to share out with full hands. My life has been transformed, in a continuous dialogue with you, my God, one great dialogue. Sometimes, when I stand in some corner of the camp, my feet planted on your soil, my face turned toward your heaven, tears sometimes run down my face, tears of my emotion and inner gratitude looking for a way to express itself. At night, too, when I lie in bed and rest in you, my God, tears of gratitude run down my face, and that is my prayer. (1050)

The dialogue with God of which Hillesum speaks, reveals an individual outwardly orientated. Written less than three weeks prior to her transportation to Auschwitz, Hillesum’s prayer conveys the strength and consolation she gained from this dialogue with her divine Other. Relayed, as it was, within a letter to her friend—presumably with the intention of providing encouragement and reassurance, it signifies the primacy of the Other to Hillesum’s existence. Such an attitude did not develop in a vacuum, but was cultivated and nurtured through her relationships, reading and writing. This is reflected through the therapeutic origins and evolving nature of her diaries, their addressees, and their composition. Whilst each of these will be explored in the body of this dissertation, in relation to the latter, two voices stand out as being particularly influential in informing Hillesum’s Weltanschauung with each featuring prominently in her writings, namely, Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky and German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. The nature of these literary giants’ influence on Hillesum is the primary subject of chapters four and five of this thesis.

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27 Reflecting the therapeutic origins of her diaries, Hillesum’s opening entry is addressed to Herr S (Julius Spier: psycho-chirologist and lover). It was at Spier’s suggestion that Hillesum began her diaries. As the diaries progress God becomes the dominant addressee.
While the pursuance of these ends sees a divergence away from the intense use of Bakhtinian theory that characterises chapters two and three of this dissertation towards a reliance on theorists such as Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Buber and Martin Heidegger, this does not signify a departure from the central thesis: that the writings and spirituality of Etty Hillesum exemplify the spirit of carnival. Just as ‘people who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free familiar contact on the carnival square,’ in Hillesum, and her dialogically constituted writings and spirituality, the same spirit of free and familiar contact prevails: as the analysis within these chapters demonstrate, the racial hierarchies which dominated the spirit and policies of Nazi fascism are fundamentally rejected by Hillesum’s dialogically constituted *Weltanschauung*.

According to Joseph Frank, ‘*The Brothers Karamazov (Brat’ya Karamazovy)* achieves a classic expression of the great theme that had preoccupied Dostoevsky since *Notes from Underground*: the conflict between reason and Christian faith.’ It is an opposition that is traced through each of the Karamazov brothers, but is most powerfully exhibited through the two younger siblings, Ivan and Alyosha. In Ivan, Dostoevsky represents an individual who has placed his faith in reason, but who, when confronted by the inexplicable—namely the suffering of innocents—flounders; unable to reconcile the irreconcilable, and unwilling to accept the order of God’s world, Ivan contemplates suicide—nonexistence—as the best refuge from the enigmatic nature of existence. In the words of Frank, Ivan’s ‘rationalism prevents him from believing in Christ and immortality, but his moral sensibility will make it impossible for him to accept the appalling consequences that logically flow from such a lack of faith.’

Alyosha, on the other hand, is the man of faith; though equally mystified by the suffering of innocents, like Dostoevsky, Alyosha is in love with a Christ who shares in the suffering of the guiltless and guilty alike. Compelled by this love, the youngest Karamazov, far from fleeing the unfathomable, abides within it, and, in

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30 Ibid., p.857.
this space, acts as an agent of reconciliation and love to those around him. This dichotomy is replicated in the ‘Legend of the Grand Inquisitor’, found in Book Five of *The Brothers Karamazov*, which juxtaposes the returned Christ against the staid and authoritarian figure of the Grand Inquisitor; it is, furthermore, evident in the life, writings and spirituality of Etty Hillesum, which, as has been mentioned, represent the antithesis of everything Hitler and the Nazis stood for.

Writing prior to the Holocaust, Dostoevsky saw the conflict between reason and faith being played out in the rise of socialism in Russia. Little could he imagine how much more weight the events of the following century would bring to bear on his Legend, for arguably, no event has tested the limits of reason or faith more than the Shoah. Perhaps, herein lies the origin of Hillesum’s interest in Dostoevsky’s writings, particularly his final novel. As Wil Van Den Bercken notes, ‘In her attitude towards life and in her diary, Etty Hillesum evidenced a remarkable similarity to the spiritual themes in *The Brothers Karamazov*. ‘ The origins of this common ground are to be discovered in Hillesum’s ideological openness. It is evident from the variety of Christian sources which Hillesum read and quoted in her diaries and letters, such as the Gospels, the Pauline letters, the writings of Saint Augustine and Dostoevsky, to name but a few, that she was influenced by and found solace in the sentiments they expressed. Indeed, such openness proved to be a point of contention amongst some of Hillesum’s friends, a fact she recorded in her diary entry of September 23, 1942. In an exchange with her one-time lover and friend, Klaas Smelik, Hillesum repeats her

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31 Ibid., p.788: According to Dostoevsky, the intention of the ‘Legend of the Grand Inquisitor’ was: ‘the portrayal of the uttermost blasphemy and the seed of the idea of destruction in our time in Russia among the young people uprooted from reality, and, along with the blasphemy and anarchy—the refutation of them, which is now being prepared by me in the last words of the dying elder Zosima.’ Identifying these convictions of Ivan, ‘as a synthesis of contemporary Russian anarchism, which entails ‘the rejection not of God, but of the meaning of His creation,’ Dostoevsky goes on to identify Socialism as symptomatic of this tendency.

conviction that the only solution to the world's ills was for each person to ‘destroy in himself all that he thinks he ought to destroy in others. And remember that every atom of hate we add to this world makes it still more inhospitable’ (850). Upon hearing this, Smelik replies, ‘But that—that is nothing but Christianity,’ to which Hillesum—‘amused by [his] confusion’—retorts, ‘Yes, Christianity, and why ever not?’ (850).

Though there is little dispute regarding the influence of Christian thinkers such as Dostoevsky on Hillesum, it is equally important to warn against any attempt to appropriate Hillesum and her writings into the Christian faith. To do so would be an act of sabotage, contravening the very essence of Hillesum’s spirituality, which stretched beyond any single ideology or faith tradition. Having observed first hand the deadly consequences of attempts to force life into a specific ideological framework, Hillesum resisted such tendencies in herself, insisting: ‘...the only way to find harmony is to accept all life’s contradictions. Every pole has its opposite, like it or not. But it’s not enough to grasp that with your mind alone, you must also experience the multiplicity of phenomena and not try desperately to forge that multiplicity into some sort of unity’ (188). Whilst Hillesum’s assertion illuminates the very essence of her spirituality, I would argue that her insistence on the acceptance of multiplicity, far from signifying the abandonment of the search for unity, represents its ultimate realisation. Recognising and rejecting the violence inherent in efforts that attempt to institute ideological unity, Hillesum sought alternate soil in which to ground her spirituality. Opening herself to life as it unfolded before her, Hillesum situated herself firmly in the realm of Being where she developed a spirituality founded and sustained in dialogic relations with her Other. Remarkably, so nourished by her spirituality was Hillesum, that even as the noose of the Nazi persecutions tightened around her, she wrote of an ever-expanding interior landscape which filled her with a sense of abundance and the feeling of being connected to the entire universe. Thus, though her life would be cut short in the name of an

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ideology premised on differentiation and division, Hillesum’s overwhelming experience and the dominant motif of her writing was of unity and connection. Indeed, when reading her diaries and letters, one is struck by Hillesum’s capacity to affirm life’s beauty, even amidst the horrors of camp life, even as the night of Auschwitz draws nearer. In Hillesum, we discover a woman who, having accepted all facets of her existence, even the reality of her own impending death, grows into life so completely that she comes to embody the liberating spirit of carnival. Hers is a spirit free from fear, a spirit that overcomes all divisions, a spirit which binds together all peoples in the truth of a shared humanity.34

Herein lies Hillesum’s greatest statement of resistance to her Nazi persecutors: refusing to be bound by the categories assigned to her, Hillesum opened herself to the enigmatic multiplicity of existence and, in so doing, walked a path upon which multitudes, regardless of colour or creed, could follow.

Whilst frequent traces of Dostoevsky’s influence upon Hillesum are to be found in her writings, and prominent thematic correlations in their respective works are observable, when it comes to identifying the voice that exercised the most influence on Hillesum’s developing worldview, even the great Russian novelist is obscured by the formidable shadow cast by the poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. Multitudes of references to Rilke are to be found across the pages of Hillesum’s diaries and, by her own admission, no other writer came close to exercising the same sort of influence over her imagination (518). Tracing the nature of this influence shall be the primary focus of this dissertation’s final chapter, although, by way of a basic introduction, obvious parallels appear to exist between the two writers’ attitudes towards life and death. In Rilke’s case, “he so thoroughly abandons antithesis that he regards death as transformation of life rather than its negation”, since, for Rilke, “meaning resides in the whole.”35

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34 Mikhail Bakhtin. Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, p.165: The dialogic nature of carnival which ‘excludes all one-sided or dogmatic seriousness and does not permit any single point of view, any single polar extreme of life or of thought to be absolutized’ is reflected in Hillesum’s dialogically constituted writings. Hence, whilst chapters four and five explore how the writings of Dostoevsky and Rilke inform Hillesum’s writing and spirituality, the very fact that they inform her outlook is the seminal point of these chapters.

carnivalesque approach to death as an indispensable part of life, is very much central to Hillesum's outlook and seems to have played a transformative role in enabling her to confront the calamitous circumstances of her existence. In equal measure do we find Rilke's image of God reflected in Hillesum's writings. Dispensing with the traditional image of an omnipotent and unchanging God upon whose benevolence humanity is totally reliant, Rilke conceives of a God with whom humanity shares a relationship of mutual responsibility; indeed, at times he completely inverts traditional images by portraying a God whose dependence seemingly exceeds that of His creation. Such portrayals are commonly found in Rilke's *Book of Hours*, which Hillesum read and cited from extensively, and, it is against this background, that Hillesum's often-proclaimed responsibilities to her God are best understood.

As the ensuing chapter will illustrate, there are significant points of convergence between the body of academic work completed on Etty Hillesum thus far and the present enquiry. The polyphonic nature of Hillesum's writings and outlook, for example, is acknowledged to varying degrees in the work of Wil van den Bercken, Meins Coetsier and Patrick Woodhouse. Coetsier and Woodhouse, together with Alexandra Pleshoyano and Klaas Smelik have also conducted some excellent analyses of Hillesum's existential orientation towards her Other. Similarly, in the work of Rachel Brenner, Denise de Costa and, again, Meins Coetsier, one encounters incisive expositions of Hillesum as witness and chronicler of the Holocaust. That these authors feature prominently in the forthcoming chapters is in many ways a homage to their formidable contribution to the ever-expanding realm of Hillesum studies. In seeking to build on the magnificent foundation of work already done on Etty Hillesum, this dissertation seeks to break new ground by tracing the carnivalesque in both her writing and spiritual outlook. As earlier stated, whilst the role of laughter in the Holocaust has been acknowledged in a number of critical studies, to date no serious analysis of carnival laughter in the Holocaust has been conducted, and none, specifically, in the realm of Hillesum studies. As such, it is hoped that by applying Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of medieval carnival to the writings and spirituality of
Etty Hillesum, the present enquiry may contribute to a proper appreciation of Hillesum’s life and legacy.
CHAPTER I

ETTY HILLESUM: HER LIFE AND LEGACY

I will give you wings that will lift you up on high, so your fear can be cast aside.
(Boethius)

ETTY HILLESUM: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Born Esther Hillesum on January 15, 1914 in Middelburg, the Netherlands, Etty—as she is frequently referred to by her readers—was seemingly destined to live a life marked by conflict. Hillesum was aged only six months when war broke out across Europe and, as with the first year of her life, her final year would transpire amidst the bloody conflict of another world war. The eldest of three children born to Louis Hillesum and Riva (Rebecca) Bernstein, Hillesum’s formative years unfolded in relative peace. That said, Hillesum experienced an emotionally tumultuous childhood. Though loved by her parents, Hillesum nevertheless felt they were unable to provide the emotionally secure environment she craved. Reflecting on her upbringing in her diary entry of December 22, 1941, Hillesum observed:

Many people have fixed ideas, and so they bring their children up in rigid ways. The result is not enough freedom of action. With us it was precisely the other way round. I think my parents always felt out of their depth, and as life became more and more difficult they were gradually so overwhelmed that they became quite incapable of making up their minds about anything. They gave us children too much freedom of action, and offered us nothing to cling to. That was because they never established a foothold for themselves. And the reason why they did so little to guide our steps was that they themselves had lost the way. (326)

Hillesum’s father—a classicist—was gentle, thoughtful and humorous by nature. He was, however, somewhat of a recluse, preferring the company of his books to
human companionship. Conversely, Hillesum’s mother—a Russian-language teacher who had fled Russian pogroms—‘had an unbalanced and difficult temperament’ (25), which, according to her daughter, had a detrimental impact on the family. Describing her mother as possessing ‘A disorganized life, moaning and complaining about feeling tired, spoiling the atmosphere of the house as she has been spoiling it her whole life,’ Hillesum saw Riva as ‘a model of what she must never become’ (25). Despite her shortcomings, ‘Riva brought a warm Russian Slavic touch to the Hillesum family [and] Etty inherited her mother’s affection for and interest in Russia as well as her proficiency in Slavic languages’ (25). Completing Hillesum’s family were her two brothers, Jacob (Jaap) and Michael (Mischa), both of whom were extremely gifted. Jaap, who was two years younger than Hillesum, was intelligent but temperamentally cold and, according to Meins Coetsier, little feeling was shared between him and his sister. Hillesum shared a warmer relationship with her youngest brother, Mischa, who, sensitive by nature, was musically gifted. Indicative of his talent was his capacity, at the age of six, to give public performances of Beethoven; indeed, he was said to have been one of the most auspicious pianists in Europe at the time. Though Hillesum’s brothers were quite different in many respects, they both experienced mental fragility: Jaap suffered from schizophrenia and was hospitalised several times, while Mischa became psychotic at the age of sixteen (27-28). The weight of her family’s problems with mental illness was borne heavily by Hillesum, a fact evidenced through her first diary entry, in which she revealed feelings of turmoil and thoughts of suicide: ‘A small slice of chaos was suddenly staring at me from deep down inside my soul. And when I had left you (Julius Spier) and was going back home, I wanted a car to run me over, and thought, ah, well I must be out of my mind, like the rest of my family, something I always think about when I feel the slightest bit desperate’ (2). Despite her fears, Hillesum did not share her brothers’ afflictions, and, although she had tendencies to fall into depressive moods, these seemingly diminished with Spier’s entrance into her life.

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Hillesum spent the early years of her life in Middelburg (1914-1916), Tiel (1916-1918) and Winschoten (1918-1924). From July 1924 her family lived in Deventer where Hillesum entered the gymnasium (grammar school). Amongst other subjects, she studied Hebrew, however, according to Klaas Smelik, Hillesum's school results were unremarkable and fell short of the exceptional heights reached by her brother, Jaap. Nevertheless, after completing school, Hillesum moved to Amsterdam, where she studied Law at the Municipal University. On June 6, 1935 she took her Bachelor's exam and followed this by taking her Master's exams in Dutch law four years later. It was during this period that Hillesum moved into the house of Hendrik (Han) J. Wegerif, an accountant who hired her as his housekeeper and with whom Hillesum had an affair. As with her school results, Hillesum's university marks were unexceptional (xi). Though purely speculative, perhaps this could be attributed to the volume of work she occupied herself with, for, in addition to her legal studies, Hillesum 'studied Slavic languages at Amsterdam and Leiden, but the anti-Jewish measures of the German authorities prevented her from completing this study with an exam. She did, however, continue to study Russian language and literature until the very end, and also gave lessons in these subjects' (xii).

By her own admission, the most significant moment in Hillesum's life occurred in 1941, when, through one of her house companions, Bernard Meylink, she met the psycho-chirologist, Julius Spier. Born in 1887, the sixth of seven children, Spier studied in Zurich under renowned psychologist, Carl G. Jung. It was at his recommendation that in 1929 in Berlin, Spier began practicing psycho-chirology. Though his practice proved extremely successful, the rise of the Nazis forced Spier to flee Berlin for Amsterdam, where he settled in 1939 (xiii). 'He rented a two-room apartment where he lived, pursued his practice, and gave chirology lessons. His students would invite “models” to offer their hands for a practical example.' On February 3, 1941, Hillesum was invited to Spier's apartment as

one such model. Hillesum was almost immediately enchanted by Spier's personality and impressed by his ability to 'see in her hands the reflection of things that she had probably never explicitly stated.' Soon afterwards she made the decision to undergo therapy with Spier while at the same time working as his secretary. It was as part of this therapy that Spier suggested to Hillesum that she start keeping a diary; thankfully for the multitudes today familiar with her writing, Hillesum followed Spier's advice.

There is no doubt that Spier played a significant role in Hillesum's rapid development during the final years of her life. In many respects his guidance helped to open Hillesum to an entirely new life, a fact perhaps best exemplified by Hillesum's decision to celebrate her birthday on the date she first met Spier: 'On the third of February I was one year old. I think I'll celebrate 3rd February as my birthday from now on—it is more important than 15th January, the day my umbilical cord was cut' (398). As Alexandra Pleshoyano observes, 'With Spier's help, [Hillesum] learned the importance of self-discipline in all areas of her life. Although their relationship was ambiguous, Spier helped Hillesum to probe the depths of herself, wherein she encountered what she chose to call God.' Pivotal to this task was the role of daily reflection, which took the form of prayer, but was also maintained through her diary writing. Indeed, across the pages of her diaries Hillesum copied much of Spier's counsel, including his advice that: 'If you practice something daily, then you will also feel daily that something is gradually taking shape' (48). In addition to providing a space for her personal development and enabling her to digest and come to terms with the tumultuous events surrounding her, Hillesum’s diaries facilitated her passage towards her God; she furthermore intended to utilise them as source material for her future literary ambitions, such as her desire to write a novel. While external circumstances

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3 Ibid.
4 Alexandra Pleshoyano. 'Etty Hillesum and Julius Spier: A Spierituality on the Fringe of Religious Borders.' *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings at the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, November 2008*, p.44: Though acting as Hillesum's therapist, Spier shared sexual encounters with her; some have also questioned aspects of his therapy which included wrestling with his patients, a technique which Hillesum references in her diaries.
would conspire against her realising this ambition, in her written body of work, Hillesum left a significant legacy of spiritual and literary value (xiii).  

The beginning of the end of Hillesum’s life commenced on July 5, 1943, when, after a period of approximately eleven months as part of the Joodsche Raad (Jewish Council), Hillesum had her special status revoked. Up until this date, Hillesum had enjoyed relative freedom of movement, travelling between her home and camp Westerbork on several occasions. Having been first transferred there on July 30, 1942, as a member of ‘the department of “Social Welfare for People in Transit”...Her first stay at camp Westerbork did not last long; on 14 August 1942, she was back in Amsterdam’ (xiv). According to Smelik,  

From there she left on 19 August to visit her parents for the last time in Deventer. On Friday afternoon 21 August 1942, she returned to camp Westerbork. Probably, she was allowed to return to Amsterdam on 4 September 1942 on the ground of the leave scheme. On 20 November 1942, she went back to camp Westerbork. There she was shocked by the deterioration of the situation in the camp. When she returned to Amsterdam on 5 December 1942, she became very ill. It was not until 5 June 1943 that she had recovered sufficiently to be allowed to return to camp Westerbork. For, unlike what one might expect, she was very keen to get back to the camp and resume her work, to provide a bit of support for the people as they were preparing themselves for transport. It was for this reason that Etty Hillesum continually turned down offers to go into hiding. She said that she wished to ‘share her people’s fate.’ (xiv)  

The day after having her special status revoked, Hillesum departed Amsterdam for the final time. Joining the other camp internees, which included her father, mother and brother, Mischa, Hillesum spent the final months trying ‘to act as a balm for all wounds’ (886) by continuing the work of comforting her fellow Jews as they sought to endure the hardships of camp life and trepidatiously awaited their transportation. This day arrived for Hillesum and her family on September

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5 According to Smelik, ‘through writing in her diary she tried to find a literary form to articulate her thoughts and feelings. A task which was often burdensome. Nonetheless, her writing style gradually developed. Though she mainly wanted to become adept at describing her inner life, her reflections on human situations are the most arresting. Especially her portrayal of camp Westerbork is not only historically significant but also of great literary value.’
7, 1943, and it was inside a packed cattle car heading to Auschwitz, that Hillesum scrawled her final recorded words onto a postcard, which she then threw from the train. Discovered and posted to its recipient, it read:

Christine, opening the Bible at random I find this: 'The Lord is my high tower.' I am sitting on my rucksack in the middle of a full freight car. Father, Mother and Mischa are a few cars away. In the end, the departure came without warning. On special orders from The Hague. We left the camp singing, Father and Mother firmly and calmly, Mischa, too. We shall be travelling for three days. Thank you for all your kindness and care. Friends left behind will still be writing to Amsterdam; perhaps you will hear something from them. Or from my last long letter from camp.

Good-bye for now from the four of us.

_Etty_ (1082, 1084)

**ETTY HILLESUM’S WELTANSCHAUUNG: CRITICAL RESPONSES**

Hillesum’s transportation, while sudden, was not, as far as she was concerned, unexpected. Though never abandoning hope, Hillesum, having chosen to share the fate of her people, was aware this would in all likelihood result in her death. ‘So, before her final departure for Westerbork, she gave her “Amsterdam diaries” to her friend Maria Tuinzing, who had meanwhile come to live in the house on the Gabriel Metsuistraat.⁶ Knowing she would probably end up in a concentration camp Hillesum gave her diaries for safe keeping and asked Tuinzing to pass them on to Klaas Smelik...[who] was a writer himself.’⁷ According to Coetsier, ‘Etty felt sure that he would take care of her diaries and of the request that they be published if she did not return.’⁸ While almost four decades would pass before Hillesum’s wish was fulfilled, once her writings were published she rapidly attracted a following which has grown steadily across national boundaries covering the four points of the compass.

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⁶ The residence of Han Wegerif and Hillesum’s home until her final departure for camp Westerbork.
⁸ Ibid., pp.67-68.
Soon after the world celebrated the birth of a new millennium, two significant milestones in Hillesum studies occurred. In 2006, thanks largely to the work of Klaas A.D. Smelik, an independent research centre was founded at Ghent University in Belgium. Two years later, in November 2008, at the same site, the inaugural international Etty Hillesum Congress was held. Bringing together speakers from across the globe, the conference examined Etty Hillesum’s spirituality and writings and ‘the meaning of her vision for today’s world.’

Drawn from disciplines such as literature, theology, philosophy, psychology, education, Hebrew studies and Germanic languages, scholars presented papers that explored Hillesum’s spirituality, her role as writer and witness and her philosophy, all areas that fall under the purview of this dissertation. In launching the conference, the Rector of Ghent University, Professor Paul Van Cauwenberge, made note of Etty Hillesum’s intellectual courage at a time when the Nazis quashed freethinking as they sought to establish their Aryan-constituted Third Reich. On May 10, 1933, in Berlin, in an act which signified their intention to eradicate the free flow of thought in Germany, ‘the S.A. and Nazi youth groups burned approximately 20,000 books from the Institut fur Sexualwissenschaft and the Humboldt University; including works by Heinrich Heine, Thomas Mann, Karl Marx, Erich Maria Remarque and H.G. Wells.’10 Similar burnings were replicated across the country in the following weeks. While as a citizen of the Netherlands, Hillesum was not immediately subject to the Nazis’ censorship, it was nevertheless against this backdrop of intellectual suppression that she soaked up the words and wisdom of artists and writers from a diversity of religious and cultural backgrounds. Hillesum’s attitude not only signified her antithetical existential position to that of the Nazis, but, when she later found herself in camp Westerbork, fed her desire to be the ‘thinking heart of the barracks’ at a time when her fellow Jews ‘wanted neither to think or to feel.’11 As Cauwenberge notes, for Hillesum this entailed finding new thoughts and the

9 Ibid., p.72.
11 Ibid., p.xvi.
discovery of new meanings from ‘the deep well of our [Jews] distress and despair.’

Insisting that the well-trodden path of responding to intolerance with intolerance, hate with hate, injury with injury and murder with murder, had run its unfruitful course, the new thoughts, which Hillesum hoped would radiate from out of the camps, were founded on inclusion, not exclusion and displayed an attitude of embrace rather than marginalisation. That such thoughts permeate Hillesum’s writing signify her success in taking a tentative step forward onto a new path, which, while born from the sacred ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau, leads humanity away from that which the extermination camp represents.

To read Hillesum’s writing, particularly her late diaries and letters from Westerbork, is to encounter a woman of remarkable strength and faith ‘who, in the very darkest years of the twentieth century faced down and—though it was finally to engulf her—nevertheless triumphed over a terrible evil.’ Yet, as Patrick Woodhouse reminds us, the woman we encounter in Hillesum’s late writings has undergone a remarkably rapid transformation and is, in many respects, unrecognisable from the emotionally fragile individual we encounter in the first diary entry of March 8, 1941. While Woodhouse traces this journey in his paper, ‘The Roots of Chaos and the Process of Change in Etty Hillesum,’ on account of its greater length, one is treated to a more nuanced and in-depth interpretation of Hillesum’s transformation in his book, *Etty Hillesum: A Life Transformed*.

Aside from the striking analysis marking each page of Woodhouse’s scholarly exposition, which opens up new questions and avenues of enquiry, one of the remarkable elements of the text encountered by this reader was the symbiosis between the author’s analysis of Hillesum’s spirituality and the carnivalesque

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12 Ibid.
14 Whilst Hillesum’s emotional fragility is evident in her opening diary entry, so too is her determination to overcome her fears and weaknesses; thus, in this respect, the Hillesum we encounter in her late diaries and letters from Westerbork is less a surprise and more a fulfillment of her earlier desires.
patterns I have sought to trace throughout this dissertation, but particularly in chapter three. While Woodhouse does not utilise the vocabulary of carnival, he regularly identifies aspects of Hillesum’s spirituality which display what one might call carnival truth. One such element, cited earlier, which is both central to carnival ideology and permeates Hillesum’s spirituality is the insight that death, far from being the end of life, is rather its source. Death, when spoken about in such terms, refers not only to the termination of organic life, but also encompasses the experience of dying to modes of being. This entails a shift, often radical, in one’s existential stance—the way one sees and relates to oneself and their world; and, because such shifts involve transitioning from one’s previous perceptions, beliefs and attitudes, into new ways of seeing, they are frequently painfully felt, keenly resisted and likened to death. Hillesum’s rapid transformation is remarkable because she had to undergo many such deaths prior to her physical death at Auschwitz. The first of these, the difficulty of which should not be underestimated, was, according to Woodhouse, the ground from which her spirituality sprung:

The first step towards what eventually became a deep religious faith was not through any interest in ‘religion’ as such at all. It was more to do with a sense in her of the inadequacy of the way that she, as an intellectual young woman educated in a modern university in post-Enlightenment Europe, engaged with the world around her—predominantly through the mind. It was to do with the limitations of conceptual understanding, of rationality itself.15

Hillesum loved words. She was a voracious reader and reflected deeply on the ideas conveyed by some of the preeminent authors from the east and west alike. She, furthermore, held lofty literary aspirations, some of which she would never achieve and in others of which she would excel. Her legacy, the diaries and letters she left behind, testify, in their form and content, to the central role words played in her formation and, indeed, transformation. Yet, confronted as she was by the Holocaust, an event unsurpassed in its capacity to cast language into the void, Hillesum realised the limitation of the conceptual world: ‘Thinking gets you

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nowhere. It may be a fine and noble aid in academic studies, but you can’t think your way out of emotional difficulties. That takes something altogether different. You have to make yourself passive then, and just listen. Reestablish contact with a slice of eternity’ (154). Of course, it is one thing to awaken to this realisation and entirely another to make the transition from intellect to heart; yet, having determined this was the path she must take, Hillesum, drawing on all her discipline and courage, took the steps necessary to facilitate her transformation.

In the opening entry of book two of her diaries, Hillesum reflects on the temptation to flee from the difficult realities surrounding her into intellectual endeavours, writing:

Sometimes I long for a convent cell, with the sublime wisdom of centuries set out on bookshelves all along the wall and a view across the cornfields—there must be cornfields and they must wave in the breeze—and there I would immerse myself in the wisdom of the ages and in myself. Then I might perhaps find peace and clarity. But that would be no great feat. It is right here, in this very place, in the here and now, that I must find them. I must fling myself into reality, time and again, must come to terms with everything I meet on my path, feed the outer world with my inner world and visa versa. But it is all so terribly difficult and I feel so heavyhearted. (118)

Given the dire nature of Hillesum’s existence, the temptation to take flight into the realm of her mind is understandable. That she resists this avenue, instead seeking the path of integration, demonstrates that which Woodhouse, utilising the vocabulary of Paul Tillich, calls the courage of despair—a term which ‘gives courage an altogether deeper meaning. It is “the courage to be” in spite of death, fate, meaninglessness or despair. It is about affirming life in the face of what seems unalterable in your situation. 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. This is the courage of despair.’

Interestingly, the term, like the phenomenon it signifies, conveys the carnivalesque death-life dialectic mentioned earlier, insofar as an experience like despair, which is commonly a precursor to non-existence, becomes instead a source of life. A remarkable

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feature of Hillesum’s writings is the number of times she affirms life’s beauty, even while acknowledging its terrible hardships; such affirmations are not rhetorical flourishes exhibiting delusional hopes, but rather express heart-felt convictions, which have the effect of further enriching the lived experience of their author and, by extension, those with whom she has contact. As Woodhouse observes, ‘As she lives courageously in [camp Westerbork], we begin to glimpse why she is described elsewhere as radiant—why she shone:

It was simply that, as she went round in that place where everyone was doomed to death, she affirmed and embodied life. She loved people and, against the utterly bleak backdrop of their existence, she offered warmth and care, humour and kindness. Even in the face of death, she would not be daunted. She writes: “With the courage of despair I shall try to steal from this day one hour to tell you a few trifles which even happen in this heath land of Drenthe.”...“it is good to live even behind barbed wire and draughty barracks if one lives with the necessary love for people and for life”17

Herein lies the life-affirming key of Hillesum’s efforts to integrate her love of language with life. By resisting the temptation to abscond into a conceptual world insulated from everyday existence, in the way that her father would often do, and instead, drawing from the sublime wisdom of the centuries she discovered in her books and applying its lessons to her life, Hillesum enriched, not only her own existence, but also that of those around her. In essence, Hillesum’s path of integration was a choice for dialogue with her world as opposed to a monologic mode of living that seeks safety in ideological insularity, cut off from the ambiguities and absurdities of existence. As Hillesum noted, living in such a manner was terribly difficult as it entailed a willingness to understand—in the etymological sense of the word—the world, including the irrational and enigmatic.18 For Hillesum, this necessitated the need to look unblinkingly into the eyes of life, regardless of whether she encountered love or

17 Ibid.
18 Whilst the term understand, in its contemporary usage, often connotes a command of a subject, its old English origins signify the idea of one attaining knowledge by standing amidst the subject. This usage emphasises receptivity and, by implication, dialogic activity.
hatred staring back at her. Anything less, would entail a denial of the uncomfortable truth that humanity, while capable of incredible altruism is equally adept at inflicting indescribable cruelty. In the words of Woodhouse:

The search for truth was a driving force in Etty’s makeup...she came to understand her vocation as the seeing and bearing witness to what was more deeply true in the terrible times in which she lived. And she knew that truth is indivisible. If it is complex and multidimensional in the personal lives of individuals, it is also complex and multidimensional in the political affairs of nations. And this is why she cannot be doing with hatred, for to hate short-circuits the whole demanding and complex process of understanding—of fathoming underlying currents—in both people and nations. It closes down people’s minds, diverts precious energy into resentment, stops the asking of difficult questions, and produces superficial and easy answers. Then discovering what is true is impossible. And when the search for truth is abandoned, a terrible blindness overcomes people.19

While the propensity to such blindness was amply evident in the actions of the Nazis and their followers, as far as Hillesum was concerned, it was by no means the domain of Germany alone. Indeed, convinced that every individual and nation was equally susceptible to the indolent tendency of scapegoating, Hillesum fought tenaciously against this temptation in herself as the necessary precondition of fidelity to the truth. And, since for Hillesum, truth was indivisible, the excision of oneself from the problems of humanity was nothing more than an exercise in delusion. Subsequently, Hillesum concluded that the only solution to the world’s ills was to extract them from oneself. It was in keeping with this conviction that Hillesum took on the responsibility for making God visible in her world.

Woodhouse observes that Hillesum had seen too much pain and suffering to believe God could help rescue the Jews from their predicament (50). Yet, far from seeing the Holocaust as evidence of God’s failure, or proof of his non-existence, Hillesum saw it as axiomatic of humanity’s failure to provide within itself a space for the Deity to prosper. Rather than scapegoating God or humanity for the

deficiency of love in her world, Hillesum set about turning herself into a living
temple, a space in which God could live, flourish and console. As Woodhouse
notes,

Out of the crucible of the Holocaust emerged a profound theology of
vulnerable Presence which led this extraordinary young woman to
triumph over the evil that threatened to engulf her. But what she
achieved was not based on sentiment. Her triumph was the fruit of
remarkable discipline developed over a very short space of time as
she battled against the power of the menace all around them which
overshadowed everything. She knew that, if she gave into it, it would
weaken and destroy her. And so, as the clamour of the fear rises, she
cultivates an inner solitude; as the contagion of the fear spreads, she
practices an inner detachment; as the cancer of the fear eats away
the spirit of those around her, she is rigorously watchful against it in her
own mind; as the cries of the fear become an awful cacophony, she
learns to listen deeply to the silence of her own heart; as she faces up
to and accepts what the fear points to—their inevitable end—she
consciously nourishes a profound inner freedom. And at the heart of
this rigorously disciplined inner life was her openness to the Mystery
of the Divine experienced within her as vulnerable Presence. (53)

This theological inversion of an omnipotent God to vulnerable Presence, noted
by Woodhouse, which facilitated Hillesum’s journey out of fear towards inner
freedom, reflects the spirit of carnival, which liberated its participants from fear
in all its manifestations, through a reversal of the usual, foreboding existential
order. Emancipated from the chains of helplessness, Hillesum, convinced that
‘there must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that
God lived, even in these times’ (808) took it upon herself to help God become
visible in her world: I shall merely try to help God as best I can, and if I succeed in
doing that, then I shall be of use to others as well’ (774).

The strong sense of solidarity at the heart of Hillesum’s sentiments perhaps go
some way in addressing the question explored by Woodhouse and many other
Hillesum scholars as to why, despite her stated desire to live beyond the
Holocaust, Hillesum refused the persistent offers of friends and compatriots to
help her go into hiding. Noting the profound identification Hillesum felt with her
Jewish community, Woodhouse observes ‘She could no longer think of her life in
terms of herself as an individual on her own. They shared a common destiny, and
she could not absent herself from that.’

If this is true, and Hillesum’s own comments suggest it is, then her attitude reflects a carnivalesque approach to life, which contextualises the life of the individual within the greater life of the whole people. Again, Woodhouse’s analysis is instructive:

Perhaps the deepest thing she had discovered in her spiritual journey was that the secret of life is its interconnectedness. She belonged to others, and others belonged to her. She had discovered that she truly lived insofar as the deepest and best in her was in communion with the deepest and best in others. This is what she had learnt to ‘hearken for’—expressed in the German word she uses, ‘hineinhorchen’, the meaning of which, when she uses it again towards the end of the diary, she extends even further: ‘the most essential and the deepest in me hearkening unto the most essential and deepest in the other. God to God.’ (89)

In this respect, Hillesum was largely living for a time beyond herself, which, as shall be explored in chapter three, saw her inhabit the time of the Other. Through the death of her ego, self-interest gave way to altruism. The self had died so the Other may live. Given this, the idea of going into hiding was not only unthinkable to Hillesum, but would signify a betrayal of her transformed nature, which, in transcending self-concern simultaneously transcended fear of her fate. In the absence of existential fear, which she boldly asserted on more than one occasion, Hillesum felt no compulsion to flee. As Woodhouse observes, to do so would be to lose the battle against fear and, in this sense, she would die (91).

Hillesum’s transformation amidst horrific circumstances powerfully illuminates the essence of what it means to be human. Standing comfortably alongside figures such as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Aung San Suu Kyi and Nelson Mandela, she reminds her readers ‘that it is only what human beings have discovered and nourished within themselves that will be, in the end, of any value’ (113). For those as yet unfamiliar with Hillesum’s writings, Woodhouse provides an excellent introduction to her life and the dominant motifs that informed her outlook and saturate her work.

20 Patrick Woodhouse. Etty Hillesum: A Life Transformed, p.89. Subsequent references shall appear in-text.
One of the most significant influences on Hillesum’s rapid transformation was undoubtedly the Psycho-chirologist, Julius Spier. Woodhouse, who calls him Hillesum’s ‘greatest teacher,’ claims her therapy with Spier ‘was the crucible in which her spirituality—which was marked by the most profound acceptance, and the most profound life-affirming courage—was forged.’ It is an assessment which finds concurrence in Alexandra Pleshoyano’s article, ‘Etty Hillesum and Julius Spier: A Spierituality on the Fringe of Religious Borders.’ As her playful use of the term, Spierituality indicates, Pleshoyano attributes to Spier a seminal role in the development of Hillesum’s spirituality. Alongside Rilke, he forms a duopoly of unrivalled influence, and, echoing Woodhouse, the author considers him one of Etty’s ‘two great teachers.’ Through a chronological exposition of Hillesum’s writing, Pleshoyano seeks to trace the nature of Spier’s influence, primarily by displaying ‘how Spier introduced her to different sources of spiritual influence’ (43).

The very existence of Hillesum’s diaries points to Spier’s influence for it was at his suggestion that she took up the discipline of recording her thoughts on their pages. There is little doubt the practise played an indispensable role in Hillesum’s development, so much so, one might reasonably argue, that she would not have attained the level of growth and maturity evident in her latter writings without it. Further indicative of Spier’s influence was the sheer number of his thoughts, which she copied down into her diaries, thoughts which, ‘she wrote, might as well have been taken from her own heart’ (45). Beyond his own thoughts, Spier also introduced Hillesum to many of the writers whose work would prove formative to her personal and spiritual development, one of these being Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Gustav Jung. As Pleshoyano observes, ‘Most impressed by Jung, Hillesum considered spirituality as being inseparable from

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psychology, in which she wished to specialize. Nevertheless, she recognised that the complexity of an individual could not be reduced to psychological formulas and that only an artist could render a human being as a whole down to its last irrational element' (47). Though not addressed by Pleshoyano, it was likely this latter conviction which saw Hillesum drawn to her other great teacher, Rilke, as well as other renowned artists, such as Dostoevsky, whose insights into the subtle complexities of human nature continue to attract the admiration of his readers.

This capacity to tune into the ebbs and flows of oneself and one’s world, which Hillesum found in the great artists, was a quality she nurtured in herself. Reflected in her habit of inscribing into her diaries the wisdom she encountered from others, Hillesum would often spend days mulling over a single sentence, phrase or word, drawing nourishment from it and integrating the kernel of truth it contained, where it would sustain her into the future. This attentiveness extended to her inner machinations as evidenced by the frequent and insightful reflections located across the pages of her diaries, and also served her well as she sought to listen to the deepest part of herself, which she came to call God. Like Woodhouse, Pleshoyano picks up on Hillesum’s description of this process as a hearkening towards herself, others and her world: *hineinhorchen* (48).

Importantly, such movement required absolute openness to the Other and, as such, Hillesum had to let go of her desire to draw down the disparate phenomenon surrounding her into an artificial synthesis that was palatable; instead she had to undergo the more personally painful process of carnivalesque growth, which required that she first give way to preexisting ideas and notions as to how life should unfold, in order to accommodate life as it did unfold before her. Herein lies arguably Hillesum’s greatest insight: ‘the only way to find harmony was by accepting all of life’s contradictions’ (48). In this, Hillesum’s acceptance of life’s multiplicity, lay the foundations of her ever-increasing capacity to love her neighbour—which, as she came to understand it, was all-inclusive, encompassing even those who desired her extermination. As Pleshoyano notes, at the heart of Hillesum’s efforts to love universally was her belief in the interconnectedness of existence. 'Hillesum had come to realize that
when she was at odds with her neighbors she was really at odds with her own self. Quoting the Bible again in her diary, she wrote: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself (28.11.41)” (51). Such love required that Hillesum subordinate self-interest to the needs of her Other, a process that included the subordination of ideology to that which she perceived as most essential: shared humanity.

Tracing the evolution of Hillesum’s journey towards love of God and neighbour, Klaas A.D. Smelik, in his paper, ‘Etty Hillesum and her God,’ examines the changing images of God evident in Hillesum’s writing and the relationship between these and the authorial and socio-historical influences informing them. Beginning his analysis by differentiating between Etty Hillesum the narrator and Etty Hillesum the person, Smelik cites a series of reflections on a jasmine bush as evidence of this dichotomy:

The image of a jasmine bush whose blossoms have blown away serves as a metaphor for the fate of the Jews in occupied Europe. According to Joanna Smelik, who knew Etty Hillesum quite well, her friend had little interest in nature. Etty had eyes only for books. Joanna thought that Etty wrote this passage to venture down a literary path, and not from any fascination with the wasted beauty of this bit of nature. If this is correct, we should analyze this text as a literary creation and not as evidence for any outstanding love of nature that Etty Hillesum is to have had. In reality, she was not a nature lover; yet in this passage she uses the fate of the jasmine as a metaphor for the fate of her people. Literature is not the same as reality—not even in a diary.23

While there is no reason to dispute the essential point being made here by Smelik, the definitiveness of his differentiation between literature and reality prompted an instinctive response of consternation in this reader and brought to mind Hillesum’s insistence that ‘A poem by Rilke is as real and as important as a young man falling out of an airplane’ (142). Though shocking, Hillesum’s assertion highlights the important role literature played in her development and

points to the ambivalence that characterised her outlook. It furthermore, albeit unintentionally, plays into the broader debate regarding the relationship between literature and reality which took on its most radical form in the structuralists’ assertion that literature writes reality in terms of the received conventions of its chosen intertexts.\textsuperscript{24} While this debate falls outside the immediate scope of this dissertation and, notwithstanding the validity of Smelik’s position, it is worth noting that such a differentiation represents only part of the larger spectrum of opinions pertaining to literature’s relationship with reality.\textsuperscript{25}

Beyond contestation is Smelik’s warning against the appropriation of Hillesum to one’s own religious outlook. A central motif of this dissertation pertains to the polyphonic composition of Hillesum’s writings, which reflect and inform her resistance to classification and reluctance to adhere to a single ideological outlook. While writers such as Rilke and Dostoevsky exercised a significant influence upon Hillesum, with the Russian novelist representing the paragon of her literary aspirations and the German-born poet leading her into her deepest self, her diaries are saturated with a variety of other voices, all of which to varying degrees contribute to her Weltanschauung. While many of these voices articulate a Christian vision of the world—a vision to which Hillesum was sympathetic—attempts to claim Hillesum as emblematic of Christianity betray a fundamental misunderstanding of her outlook. As Smelik notes: ‘Etty Hillesum did not want to be absorbed by any party discipline of whatever type. This is one of the points where her view of life fits well with our own time, in which people seem to have grown averse to any kind of ideology. The time for great narratives is past—we now hear emphatically proclaimed. For Etty Hillesum that happened


\textsuperscript{25} There is no doubt that Hillesum had literary ambitions and used her diary as a means of developing her skills, as such, Smelik’s differentiation is absolutely valid. That said, when discussing the broader question of literature’s relationship to reality, the common conflation of ‘reality’ with ‘life-like’ phenomenon is contestable. Metaphors, for example, are often employed to describe ‘realities’ that are less accessible to more literal linguistic indices.
already in 1941.’26 Given Hillesum faced the Holocaust, an event unsurpassed in exemplifying the dangerous consequences of slavish adherence to a particular ideology, her reticence to follow suit by pledging her allegiance to a grand narrative is understandable, to say the least.27 It is similarly implausible that those who inhabit a post-Holocaust world would rush to worship at the altar of ideology, where so many who have come before have been sacrificed. Unlike the postmodernists, however, Hillesum’s abandonment of grand narratives did not equate to a relinquishment of the search for unifying meaning or truth. Indeed, arguably her greatest contribution is her discovery of meaning and truth in relationship: relationship with Otherness.

Paradoxically, one of the most vivid demonstrations of Hillesum’s entrance into Otherness—namely her identification with the Jewish people—was prompted by the Nazi persecutions. As earlier mentioned, Hillesum was an assimilated Jew, who, while not ignorant of Judaism, did not consciously adhere to the religion’s precepts or rituals.28 However, as Smelik notes, ‘the measures of the German occupiers put an end to any personal option for neutrality for her and all other assimilated Jews. From then on, Etty Hillesum started writing about “we Jews”’ (78). The strength of this identification is best measured by her refusal of all attempts to hide her from her people’s fate, including the offer made by Smelik’s father (78).

While acknowledging the important role played by various authors in Hillesum’s spiritual quest, Smelik rightly reminds us of the centrality of her conversations with God that took place through both the written and spoken word. The catalyst of these conversations was Hillesum’s diary, which ‘changed from a therapeutic

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27 ‘Grand narratives’ or ‘meta-narratives’ as the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard coins them, are informed by a single ideology and history.

28 Klaas A.D. Smelik. ‘Etty Hillesum and her God.’ Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings at the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, November 2008, p.78: ‘She had studied Hebrew in secondary school and spent some time with a Zionist youth group in Deventer, but her interest in Judaism never truly blossomed’ Subsequent references shall appear in-text.
instrument to a conversation with God’ (80). By way of demonstration, Smelik observes the increasing frequency of direct addresses to God: ‘In the tenth notebook God is addressed 40 times, in the eleventh 59, while in the third, for example, the word “God” occurs only three times in direct address’ (82). While such a trend suggests an increased consciousness of the divine Other in Hillesum, Smelik observes an evolution in the nature of this consciousness:

Even in a superficial reading of the diaries, it is striking that not all occurrences of the word ‘God’ have the same meaning...We start from the use of the word ‘God’ early on in the diaries. This use should probably be viewed as an imitation of a stylistic figure that we find in Hillesum’s paragon Rilke...In Das Stundenbuch, the poet spoke to God as if he were speaking to himself. For Rilke, God was not a transcendent personality, but something enclosed within himself. One could even wonder whether his use of the name ‘God’ was not merely a literary device for better illustrating his own ideas. In that case, the term ‘God’ has no meaning beyond the literary horizon of his work. In my opinion, this also applies to the way in which Etty Hillesum introduced ‘God’ into some passages in her diaries—as an imaginary figure to whom she spoke because doing so made it easier for her to articulate her thoughts. (84)

If it is true that Hillesum’s early usage of the term ‘God’ was little more than a literary device, it is equally true that the term quickly came to signify a reality, distinct from herself, with whom she enjoyed an ever-deepening relationship (86). This presence, which she referred to as God was not primarily experienced as a transcendent, all-powerful presence, but—as shall be explored in greater detail in the subsequent chapters of this thesis—a divine Other encountered immanently. Furthermore, in a remarkably Rilkean sense, Hillesum’s God was impoverished: helpless in the face of the Holocaust and in need of humanity to act as a receptacle of divine presence. In seeking to illustrate this relationship of mutual need Hillesum employs the image of digging up God from beneath the obstacles burying Him. It is a process Hillesum performs, firstly on herself, and then seeks to assist others with:

And that’s when my task begins. It is not enough simply to proclaim You, God, to commend You to the hearts of others. One must also clear the path towards You in them, God, and to do that one has to be a keen judge of the human soul. A trained psychologist. Ties to father
and mother, youthful memories, dreams, guilt feelings, inferiority complexes, and all the rest block the way. I embark on a slow voyage of exploration with everyone who comes to me. The stock of tools I need to pave the path towards You in others, is still very limited. But some tools are there already, and I shall hone them, slowly and patiently. And I thank you for the great gift of being able to read people. Sometimes they seem to me like houses with open doors. I walk in and roam through passages and rooms, and every house is furnished a little differently, and yet they are all of them the same, and every one must be turned into a dwelling dedicated to You, oh God. And I promise you, yes, I promise that I shall try to find a dwelling and a refuge for You in as many houses as possible. This really is a droll metaphor. There are so many empty houses, and I shall prepare them all for You, the most honored lodger. Please forgive the poor metaphor. (832)

Smelik cites the above excerpt as illustrative of that which Hillesum saw as her ‘most important task when she worked at Camp Westerbork,’ and the passage certainly conveys a strong sense of felt responsibility to act as an agent of divine presence who, through the loving extension of the self, opens up spaces in others for the inhabitance of God. This is consistent with Hillesum’s insistence that it is not God, but humanity, who bears responsibility for the evil inflicted upon the world; it was a conviction that spurred Hillesum to act to increase the measure of love in her sphere of influence. That said, in a typical demonstration of the ambivalence that marked her worldview, God is needy and powerful, immanent and transcendent. This is a point taken up by Smelik who cites Hillesum’s stated feeling of safety in the arms of God as indicative of her transition between an immanent and transcendent God. In a remarkable rejection of accusations of indifference and passivity surrounding her refusal to go into hiding, Hillesum dismisses the notion that she is surrendering to the clutches of the Nazis: ‘I don’t feel in anyone’s clutches; I feel safe in God’s arms, to put it rhetorically, and no matter whether I am sitting at this beloved old desk now, or in a bare room in the Jewish district, or perhaps in a labour camp under SS guards in a month’s time—I shall always feel safe in God’s arms’ (776). As Smelik notes, such imagery contrasts significantly with the images of a vulnerable, nigh-on helpless God

found elsewhere. Yet, the power Hillesum attributes to God is not akin to the God of Moses who conquers Pharaoh before leading the Jewish people out of bondage in Egypt; there is no suggestion that God will rescue Hillesum from the Nazis—certainly not in the physical sense. There is, however, an unmistakable sense that Hillesum’s God has exercised a preemptive salvific power, which, operating within her, has opened an infinitely rich and expansive interior space that has insulated her from the fear and dread that the Nazi persecutions generally evoked. As such, in answer to Smelik’s question as to whether the sense of security conjured through Hillesum’s imagery is metaphorical or ‘an expression of a sense of security and warmth in the presence of a God who exists outside her?’ I would suggest both/and. Yes, Hillesum is speaking metaphorically, however, this is not to deny the existential reality of which she speaks. It is impossible to contemplate her refusing the chance to escape from the Nazis’ clutches in the absence of her divine-sanctuary. As for the source of this safe-haven, this seems to be the fruit of her internal life and the operations of her God within her. Again, this is not to deny the presence of a transcendent God and the possibility of his power being bestowed from on high, however, such imagery does operate on a different level to the extremely intimate images of God that dominate Hillesum’s discourse, particularly in her later diaries. Even the God who takes her by the hand and leads her through the tempests of life is a God of proximity (89).

An important feature of Hillesum’s outlook is the question of theodicy. While in the Judaic-Christian tradition the question is most famously explored in the book of Job, since the Holocaust it has loomed particularly large: Where, when the Nazis were massacring the Jews, was God? For Hillesum, the question itself is fallacious. As Smelik observes:

Even as the Shoah was taking place, Etty Hillesum gave a clear answer to the many questions that have been asked since about why God did not intervene when the Nazis were persecuting and exterminating his

people. ‘And God is not accountable to us for the senseless harm we cause one another. We are accountable to Him!’ While others considered God responsible for the war crimes that people committed, Etty Hillesum was able to demarcate the matter clearly. People are responsible for what people do. God has nothing to do with it. The question is not, Where was God during the Shoah? The question is, Where were the others during the persecution of the Jewish people? (95)

Hillesum’s position may, as Smelik suggests, be difficult to reconcile with ‘the biblical image of God as Redeemer’ (95), though I suggest this is truer of the Tanakh than the New Testament, in which salvation is won through a crucified God. A similar dynamic is evident in Hillesum’s own life. Though not delivered from the Nazis’ gas chambers, by her own account, neither is she in their clutches. She is beholden neither to their ideology, nor the paralysing fear or destructive hatred they seek to produce. As such, she becomes a living temple, in which the love of her God dwells and is visible in the darkest of times and simultaneously redeems her from the destructive produce of the Holocaust. This is far from an outlandish romantic notion, but is evident in the faith she maintains in both God and humanity:

Etty Hillesum not only retained her faith in God, she also retained her faith in people despite the atrocities perpetrated every day during those war years. She stated repeatedly that people should not hate one another, but that we should work to reduce, if not eliminate, the hatred in the world. Even during her life, this irenic attitude elicited negative responses and even today, after the publication of her diaries, it appears to be a difficult position for some readers. Yet, it is worthwhile to consider for a moment the way Etty Hillesum rejected the consequences of harboring animosity. The idea that people are each other’s enemies is indispensible to every armed conflict. The war in Bosnia is a harrowing example of this. Whereas up to 1992 various population groups (Roman Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs, Muslim Bosnians and Jews) lived together in peace, after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, people drowned in a vortex of violence, hate and terror, dragged down by the idea that they were one another’s’ enemy. And now that the war is past, the same people must once again rebuild their lives and country together. Seen from this perspective, Etty Hillesum’s view has lost none of its meaning. (96)

Sadly the Bosnian conflict is not the only example of humanity’s destructive tendencies to have occurred since the sun set on World War Two. The Khmer
Rouge massacred 25% of the Cambodian population, numbering close to two million, between 1975-1979. The 1994 Rwandan genocide saw a million Tutsi and moderate Hutus massacred at the hands of the Hutu majority, while in the Congo six million are estimated to have been killed since 1997.\textsuperscript{31} These are but some of the crimes inflicted against humanity since Hillesum, amidst the Holocaust and with a view to history, wrote of the need to eliminate animosity from our hearts, and they do not account for the thousands who have perished in 9/11 and the subsequent and ongoing war on terror. The fruitless repetition of history, which such conflicts represent, compelled Hillesum to look for an alternative path upon which to walk; her success in traversing this road less travelled, and the record of her journey, have indeed, in the words of Smelik, ‘become a blessing upon us.’\textsuperscript{32}

Alongside Klaas Smelik, one of the leading academic voices in the realm of Hillesum studies is Meins Coetsier. Director of the Centre of Eric Voegelin Studies and founder of the Flow of Presence Academy, Dr. Coetsier’s contribution to the 2008 Congress is entitled, ‘“You-Consciousness”—Towards Political Theory: Etty Hillesum’s Experience and Symbolization of the Divine Presence.’ As the title suggests, Coetsier proffers the opinion that Hillesum’s life and work—grounded as it is in You-Consciousness—offers ‘us concrete tools for finding order in our lives, inspiring us to relate to one another under or rather in the Presence; connecting to You!’\textsuperscript{33} In reaching this position, Coetsier begins by suggesting Hillesum demonstrated the qualities of a mystic, which he defines as one ‘who is intuitively aware of and attuned to the timeless “Presence” or “God” in and


\textsuperscript{32} Klaas A.D. Smelik. ‘Etty Hillesum and her God.’ \textit{Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings at the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, November 2008}, p.102.

beyond the world of sensory experience of space and time, encountered and addressed as *You* or *Thou* (the German “Du” and the Dutch “Jij,” “Je” or “Gij”)’ (105). Coetsier quantifies his assessment by tracing Hillesum’s *You-Consciousness*, a phenomenon he describes as ‘the conscious experience of the divine, a distinct Presence, other than my own presence to myself, whom I can address as *You*’ (113). This orientation, to a Presence outside oneself, necessitates dialogue with the Other, and, according to Coetsier, it was Hillesum’s dialogic stance that played a pivotal role in the development of her *You-Consciousness*:

Hillesum’s experience as symbolized in her writings was that of a person in dialogue with the *Other*. She discovered her own identity and the life of dialogue, not by working it out in complete isolation: rather, she negotiated it through an encounter, partly explicit, partly internal, with others and the divine *Other*, whom she addressed as *You*. Etty Hillesum’s identity crucially depended on these relations, through dialogue with the *Other*. Consequently, she developed a consciousness of *You* that was formed in open dialogue, unshaped by a predefined social script. (108)

By focusing on the role of dialogue in the formation of Hillesum’s *You-Consciousness*, Coetsier aligns himself with ‘a diverse group of philosophical writers who have articulated the notion of persons in dialogue, including Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel and Emmanuel Levinas’ (113). Theirs is an approach that conforms well to the carnivalesque—a *way of being* which facilitates dialogic proximity through the defining death/life dialectic informing its philosophy and associated rituals, and, as this dissertation shall demonstrate, underpins Hillesum’s existential outlook.

As the bridge linking Hillesum to contemporary readers, her diaries reveal her journey through dialogue towards *You-Consciousness*. Yet, for Hillesum, they functioned as living documents, recording and facilitating this same journey, which, paradoxically, navigated the path to Otherness through her entrance into interiority. The often-noted conversion of Hillesum’s diary from a document with therapeutic origins to one outwardly orientated is but one signifier of her developing *You-Consciousness*; a related and more obvious signifier is the
aforementioned observation by Smelik, namely the substantial increase in direct addresses to God made in the later diaries. A further indispensable sign of her deepening relationship with her divine Other is the increased focus on acting as a balm for the wounds of her fellow Jews. It is not by chance that the depth and richness of Hillesum’s relationship with others increases commensurately with her relationship with her divine Other—a movement that demonstrates the intrinsic link between love of God and neighbour. The seamlessness of this relational dynamic is implicit in Coetsier’s description of the individual’s entrance into You-Consciousness:

The concrete human being experiences You-Consciousness, when the ‘God-Reality,’ the divine presence, moves into our awareness as a You or Thou ‘begegnet’ (‘meet’). Whether I address You in myself, in the other person or directly as the transcendent Other, this encounter of You arises within the spiritual domain, between the divine and human. (114)

This carnivalesque movement of the Deity into immanence occurs to initiate and enrich relationship and is, therefore, necessarily dialogical. Furthermore, the spiritual domain, as Coetsier calls it, in which this encounter takes place, is not an ethereal space but rather integrally immanent—tied to the earth which dies and gives life. It is here that mystery is encountered and You-Consciousness developed and deepened. While affirmation of human materiality might seem obvious, the age-old tendency to divorce the spiritual from the embodied world necessitates the point. Significantly, in affirming You-Consciousness as intrinsic to humanity, Coetsier cites the primal human experience of birth, observing: ‘...You-Consciousness is something that we are born with the moment we enter this world. The very act of being born is You related’ (115). Though designed for You-Consciousness, individuals vary in the degree to which they are conscious of their Other; the death of six million Jews is testament to this fact. One would struggle to posit the argument that Hitler demonstrated You-Consciousness on any level; even his highly selective brand of nationalism, was, one could argue, but a veneer for his narcissism. Hillesum, on the other hand, demonstrated an increasingly acute sensitivity to Otherness, which manifested itself through her dialogue with significant compatriots such as Spier, a multitude of authors, her God and fellow
Jews; it even extended to those responsible for the Holocaust, albeit primarily as an interior dialogue, which facilitated encounters that transcended the fear and hatred which usually characterised Jewish-German interactions of the time.

In a wonderfully striking depiction, Coetsier describes *You-Consciousness* as, ‘an event that happens within the flow of presence, within that intersection of time with the Timeless’ (116). Such phraseology emphasises the inherently concrete operations and impact of *You-Consciousness*, which situates divine presence in human consciousness resulting in the responsive movement of this consciousness towards the divine, embodied in the *You*. In other words, as an individual is awakened to the divine within they respond by moving towards the divine, without. Coetsier, thus asserts, ‘a two-fold structure in consciousness: that of intentionality and that of luminosity’ (117). As mentioned, Hillesum’s life, particularly her final years, as they unfolded amidst the Holocaust, demonstrate this movement: as her consciousness of her God increased, so too did her consciousness of her fellow human beings; her movement towards divinity necessitated her movement towards humanity: intentionality led to luminosity.

Though Coetsier acknowledges Hillesum’s consciousness of the divinity as a presence within her, he rejects any suggestion of passivity. As she herself observed, her *You-Consciousness* constituted a continual hearkening towards the Other: ‘it is an interpersonal activity of transcending that reaches out to God, to others in society and even beyond the life which ends in death’ (119).

Coetsier concludes his paper by asking how the concerns of modern life impact upon our openness to *You-Consciousness*. One might cynically respond that contemporary preoccupations with I-pods, I-pads, I-phones and selfies, suggest the need for a radical reorientation of the self towards their Other; yet, beyond the glibness of such a response, serious questions regarding the benefits to be gleaned from Hillesum’s experience merit our attention. Hillesum was confronted with as serious a threat to one’s consciousness as anyone is likely to confront—an ideology designed to negate her dignity driven by the machinery of a state intent on her destruction. That, in apparent defiance of all instincts
towards self-preservation, Hillesum survived this attack on her humanity by directing her consciousness outside of herself, towards You, suggests a potent existential stance deserving of our attention. As far as Coetsier is concerned, it offers the foundation for the only sustainable political theory, namely one based on ‘the inter-relationship between the consciousness of the person and the emancipatory search for the You’ (121):

Etty Hillesum could bring greater clarity to fundamental (yet challenging) political concepts such as freedom, equality, democracy and justice. Her experience and symbolization of the divine presence in her works are powerful expressions of Meaning; they could exert great influence on the real world and help determine not only the fate and struggle of the individual person, but of the lives of thousands of people. (122)

It is difficult to argue against the merits of the reorientation of the self towards Otherness that Hillesum represents; that her stance was forged amidst political circumstances expressly designed to eradicate the Other serves only to enhance its credibility. While the Holocaust’s substantial shadow continues to loom large, warning against political systems that predicate their existence on the exclusion of difference, examples of individuals and nations proliferating fear for political advantage are everywhere to be found. As such, the vigilance and moral courage discovered in abundance in the person and writings of Etty Hillesum, remains as pertinent as ever.

According to Brendan Purcell, Etty Hillesum represents a standard of humanity against which the Holocaust can be judged. Beginning with the premise that ‘to judge an action as objectively evil, we need a standard of goodness,’ Purcell posits Hillesum as representative of such a standard based on three dimensions: ‘that of the human person, of human society and of human history’ (126). In relation to the first of these criteria, the human person, Purcell compares the cognitive closure of the likes of Adolf Eichmann, which was later characterised

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by Hannah Arendt as thoughtlessness, with Hillesum's cognitive openness, expressed through her vigilant rejection of stereotypes. One sees this demonstrated in her efforts to search for the divine within even the most objectionable individuals, such as the guards she observed mercilessly coordinating the transportation of the Jews from Westerbork (128). In assessing the degree of cognitive openness of the respective parties, Purcell utilises Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, in which our ‘desire to know’ (126) is identified as inherently human. It follows, therefore, that the realisation of one's humanity is determined by the degree of openness to existence they demonstrate. In the words of philosopher of history, Eric Voegelin: “All men are by nature in quest of the ground [of their existence].”...the greatest corruption [occurs] when the accent of reality shifts under the pressure of social power from truth to the lie’ (126). In the case of Nazi Germany, their entrance into the lie of Aryan superiority involved the, often willful, frequently thoughtless, subscription to a self-serving ideological framework that was divorced from reality. By contrast Hillesum fought ignorance, whether willful or thoughtless, by probing beneath the phenomenological surface of things; she searched for the common ground of existence, namely one's humanity, in German and Jew alike, even when such traces appeared permanently elusive. Herein lies the ground of Hillesum’s morality. While Eichmann's willingness to 'follow him [Hitler] anywhere' (131) saw him surrender his moral autonomy, Hillesum's steadfast orientation towards the good resulted in the elevation of the Other above self-concern; a prioritisation manifestly expressed through her acceptance of death as the necessary consequence of her solidarity with her fellow Jews. By way of comparison, Purcell quotes Socrates who, in dialogue with Callicles in the *Gorgias*, makes the following observation:

I want you to see that the noble and the good may possibly be something different from saving and being saved: May not he who is truly a man cease to care about living a certain time?—he knows, as women say, that no man can escape fate, and therefore he is not fond of life; he leaves all that with God and considers in what way he can best spend his appointed time. (131)
As Purcell points out, the parallels with Hillesum’s attitude are striking. Having stared evil in the face, Hillesum realised her moral indignation must run deeper than self-concern and extend to the Other. Such an orientation went to the heart of what Purcell would call Hillesum’s anthropological foundation, the primordial question of which is: Who am I?

Hillesum realised her life-defining actions offered the only adequate answer to such a question. Thus it was that she lived for a time beyond herself and, in so doing, revealed herself as one-for-Others. Emblematic of this attitude was her resolution, amidst the darkest hour of Jewish existence, to remain with her people, a decision which defined her and, according to Purcell, solidified her standing as a exemplary human being: ‘Her ability to soar high, above the moral horrors unfolding around her in hope, love and courageous commitment marks her out as a rarely paradigmatic person, someone who, like Socrates, has set new standards for what it is to be human’ (134).

Turning again to Plato’s Gorgias, Purcell measures Hillesum’s social dimension according to Socrates’ vision of human society based ‘not on the externalism of the robber, but on the inner formation that leads to communion with likeminded seekers of wisdom and friendship’ (136). It is interesting that Socrates predicates friendship on inner formation as it suggests the need to lay aside self-interest in order to enter authentic relationships. Hillesum assertion that her ‘soul has no Fatherland’ (137) certainly reflects the dynamic relationship between one’s inner and outer worlds suggesting her inner expanses had stretched well beyond the confines of personal and political concerns, which, conversely, drove the nationalism of the Nazis and, one may suggest, underpins nationalism in general.

While Hillesum’s willingness to embrace humanity in its entirety reflects her enlarged social vision, it simultaneously informs her historical vision, which, according to Purcell, is the final criteria according to which the fullest judgment of the Holocaust can be made. As far as Hillesum was concerned, every person shared a common origin under God, which not only superseded any
differentiations in the human family, but also connected her to every Other, demanding a filial response. Evidently, Purcell hears in Hillesum the echoes of Voegelin who, reflecting on the horrors of National Socialism, cites the *imago Dei* as that which binds all people in common:

> Through the life of the spirit, which is common to all, the existence of man becomes existence in community. In the openness of the common spirit there develops the public life of society. He, however, who closes himself against what is common, or who revolts against it, removes himself from the public life of human community. He becomes thereby a private man, or in the language of Heraclitus, an *idiotes*. (144)

Though separated by two and a half millennia, in his assessment of the individual estranged from his community, Heraclitus bears remarkable similarities to Bakhtin who assigned such personages the term *pretenders*. Regardless of the noun chosen, such individuals, through willed segregation, create a hellish realm that, in the words of Dostoevsky’s monk, Zosima, condemns its inhabitants to ‘the suffering of no longer being able to love’ (146). So overwhelming in its magnitude was the Hell created by the Nazis that Hillesum found Dante’s eschatological vision inadequate as a means of comparison. It is, according to Purcell, against this backdrop of darkness, that Hillesum’s humanity is all the more illuminated: ‘The brighter her humanity shines, the more terrible is shown to be the willed refusal of those who wreaked the Holocaust to participate in the human family. And the more transparently is the life of Etty Hillesum grounded in the Power that constituted it, the more clearly is pronounced the sentence of spiritual death upon them’ (146).

Purcell’s concluding reference to Dostoevsky’s novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* acts as a useful segue into Wil van den Bercken’s paper, which seeks to trace the relationship between the Russian novelist’s spirituality as conveyed through his epic tome and Hillesum’s worldview. Noting the relative dearth of research into Dostoevsky’s influence on Hillesum compared to other figures who feature less prominently in her writing, the author explores a variety of leitmotifs common to *The Brothers Karamazov* and Hillesum’s diaries and letters. Beginning with the
problem of suffering, van den Bercken highlights the shared image of a suffering God which underpins both Hillesum and Dostoevsky’s response to Ivan’s question: How can a loving God permit suffering, particularly the suffering of innocents? Given Hillesum’s familiarity with Dostoevsky it is unsurprising that her response to Ivan’s question resembles that of his creator and van den Bercken is accomplished in drawing his readers’ attention to such similarities; that which lies beyond the scope of his paper, however, is the significant role played by Rilke in informing Hillesum’s conception of God: it is a relationship which will be explored within this dissertation.

In the course of exploring Hillesum’s approach to suffering, van den Bercken observes her capacity to simultaneously accommodate sorrow and a belief in ultimate harmony. Utilising Ivan’s terminology, Hillesum affirms the high price of the admission ticket before exclaiming, ‘But all the suffering and tears are worth it.’ ³⁵ Whilst rightly identifying differentials between Hillesum and Dostoevsky’s conceptions of harmony and the suffering God, van den Bercken observes in Hillesum’s response ‘a more penetrating approach to suffering than Ivan Karamazov…The latter simply blames the Creator for suffering and calls God to account. Etty Hillesum turns the relationship around, whilst she herself is in the midst of suffering’ (164). As van den Bercken observes, Hillesum’s inversion of Ivan’s approach is far from an intellectual exercise; her religious consciousness, rather, finds its origins and sustenance in experience—a differential which, in chapter four of this dissertation, shall be explored in greater detail.

Manifesting Hillesum’s capacity to accommodate the enigmatic dialectic of a loving God and incredible suffering is her regular tendency to affirm life’s beauty whilst being witness to the inhumane measures of Nazi Germany. Readers of Hillesum’s diaries regularly observe this tendency increases as she draws closer to her impending death:

Etty Hillesum's conviction that “[...] God’s world was beautiful despite everything [...] [and] its beauty now filled me with joy” is found at the beginning of the diary, and is repeated in the middle in a more serious context: “[And] I meekly resigned to all the disasters and pains that might be in store for me. And I firmly believed that I would go on finding life beautiful, always, despite everything.” She restates this conviction more often at the end, when the disasters and pains are coming closer and closer. (166)

Indeed, some of Hillesum’s most moving affirmations of life are found in her letters, which, written in Westerbork, also contain some of the most distressing accounts of Jewish suffering; suffering in which she shared. This suggests a consciousness elevated above the preoccupations of the self, or ego; a consciousness that van den Bercken finds mirrored in Dostoevsky’s monk: ‘In Hillesum’s diary, we find this special spirituality of Zosima’s, of suffering and joyfulness, of universal solidarity with our good and bad deeds and of active love and meekness. Zosima is not named in Hillesum’s diary, but their kinship is remarkable’ (166).

Alongside, and underpinning, Hillesum and Dostoevsky’s shared approach to the problem of suffering and their mutual affirmation of life’s beauty, van den Bercken traces a comparable treatment of love and forgiveness. Whilst both authors trace the source of evil to the heart of man, this very proximity demands a response of humility, empathy and love. Recognising in herself both goodness and the capacity to do ill, Hillesum sought goodness in her tormentors, even when such a search seemed futile. Recognising war as symptomatic of people’s tendency to scapegoat others, rather than battling their inner demons, Hillesum instead turned within, where she fought to ensure the better angels of her nature emerged victorious. Similarly, the turning point of Zosima’s life pivoted on his awakening to his mistreatment of his Other, his servant, Afanasy, to whose humanity he had previously given scant regard.

Wil van den Bercken’s exploration of the inspiration found by Hillesum within the pages of Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* is insightful as it is convincing. His analysis of the shared motifs found in the two authors, particularly pertaining to their approach to the question of suffering is
instructive and, though reached via differing paths, his conclusions largely coincide with those of this dissertation. As earlier alluded to, there is a remarkable similarity in the existential concerns of Dostoevsky and Rilke, and, as both authors exercised a powerful influence upon Hillesum’s ideological outlook, the task of differentiating their respective contributions is problematic and arguably futile in any case. It is important, however, to recognise that each of these literary giants had a formative influence on Hillesum’s Weltanschauung.

The nature of Hillesum’s spirituality, particularly her capacity to rise above the Nazis’ hatred through an interior life that seemingly enhanced the quality of her relationships, has raised inevitable questions regarding the mystical qualities of her writings and outlook. At the outset, it is worthwhile noting that, though Hillesum was influenced by some of the luminaries of the Christian mystical tradition, such as Augustine and Meister Eckhart, the attribution of mystical qualities to her writing should not be mistaken with an attempt to appropriate her to the Christian tradition. In the first instance, mysticism can be traced across all of the major world religions and can be no more appropriated by Christianity than it can by any other religious tradition; indeed it is in the nature of mysticism to cross, or, rather, transcend, boundaries, whether these are the frontiers of rationality, empiricism, national, cultural or religious traditions. In the words of Evelyn Underhill, mysticism ‘denies that possible knowledge [of the Absolute] is to be limited (a) to sense impressions, (b) to any process of intellection, (c) to the unfolding content of the normal consciousness. Such diagrams of experience, it says, are hopelessly incomplete.’

36 She proceeds with the observation:

The mystics find the basis of their method not in logic but in life: in the existence of the discoverable “real,” a spark of true being, within the seeking subject, which can in that ineffable experience which they call the “act of union,” fuse itself with and thus apprehend the reality of the sought Object. In theological language, their theory of

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knowledge is that the spirit of man, itself essentially divine, is capable of immediate communion with God, the One reality.\textsuperscript{37}

Herein lies Hillesum’s place in the mystical tradition: confronted by Nazi ideology, which precluded any appeal to logic, Hillesum entered into the increasingly absurd existence they created and, here, stripped of every pretense, discovered in that which she called God, the spark of true being. In communion with the Other, otherness gave way to communion, to the extent that even as the Nazis sought to render Jewish life asunder, Hillesum experienced life as one, indivisible phenomenon. Even the ideas which so enchanted her were brought down into life’s material realm, where they breathed their life into Hillesum’s life: life in life, as it were, or, in Meister Eckhart’s words: God in God.\textsuperscript{38}

Describing Hillesum as an atypical mystic, Francesca Brezzi locates her mysticism, not in the volume or depth of her writing, which she rightly assesses as lacking in comparison to mystics such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, but in Hillesum’s persistent search for and ‘union with what life really reveals and demands of us.’\textsuperscript{39} It is true, of course, that circumstances beyond her control steered Hillesum towards that which was most essential; a reality she reflected on from Westerbork:

Leading lights from cultural and political circles in the big cities have also been stranded on this barren stretch of heath five hundred by six hundred metres. With one mighty convulsion all their scenery has collapsed about them, and now they stand around a little hesitantly and awkwardly on this drafty, open stage called Westerbork. These figures wrenched from their context still carry with them the restless atmosphere of a society more complicated than the one we have here. They walk along the thin, barbed-wire fence. Their silhouettes move, life-sized and exposed, across the great stretch of sky. You cannot imagine it...The armor of position, esteem and property has collapsed and now they stand in the last shreds of their humanity. They exist in empty space, bounded by earth and sky, which they must fill with whatever they can find within them—there is nothing else. One

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p.24.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p.174.
suddenly realizes that it is not enough to be an able politician or a talented artist. In the most extreme distress, life demands quite other things. Yes, it is true, our ultimate human values are being put to the test. (954, 956)

Though writing as an observer, Hillesum was very much a part of the battlefield she describes.\(^{40}\) And, in a reflection of her state in the battle for ‘our ultimate human values’ she latter asserts: ‘The realms of the soul and the spirit are so spacious and unending that this little bit of physical discomfort and suffering really doesn’t matter all that much. I do not feel I have been robbed of my freedom; essentially no one can do me any harm at all’ (998). Combined with her many other affirmations of spiritual freedom and life’s inherent beauty and goodness, Hillesum’s assertion demonstrates that we are here dealing with an individual who had stripped from herself everything other than that which was most essential; an individual with a deep connection to life’s most vital constituents. Whilst not alone in confronting the horrors of the Shoah and certainly not a singular figure in responding with dignity and courage, there is an element of uniqueness to Hillesum’s response, which, as Brezzi notes, reverberates with Raimon Panikkar’s definition of mysticism as an “integral experience of life,” almost as a new connection with reality, with human beings and the mystery, as an experience of remaining in the centre, as a profound dimension of things.”\(^{41}\) It was Hillesum’s desire that new thoughts be offered to the post-Holocaust world and there is no doubt in this reader’s mind that she speaks powerfully with a new voice to our contemporary, pluralistic society; it may even be the case that she offers a new, or, atypical model of mysticism to a world which, in its search to quench its spiritual thirst, has increasingly dismissed the puritanical sectarianism so often proffered by traditional religious institutions. Whilst claims of Hillesum’s mysticism have been contentious, and

\(^{40}\) Rachel Brenner. ‘Etty Hillesum: A Portrait of a Holocaust Artist.’ *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings at the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, November 2008*, p.246: ‘There is not even a shadow of irony in this description; the shift from “they” into “we” indicates Hillesum’s sense of solidarity with the deportees.’

continue to be debated, Brezzi insists that Hillesum ‘embodies a *different way of thinking of God in which mysticism is grounded in the experience of unity, search and desire* (my emphasis).’

**ETTY HILLESUM: WITNESS AND WRITER**

The inseparability of Hillesum’s writings from her *Weltanschauung* points to the intimate relationship that exists between the artist and their art. Hillesum’s diaries played a critical role in her development as a human being, providing her with a space in which to make sense of herself and her increasingly chaotic world. Beyond acting as a vehicle for her ideological, psychological and spiritual development, her diaries also served as the realm of her artistic development. To paraphrase Rachel Brenner, a leading critic in the analysis of Hillesum’s work, Hillesum’s art cannot be separated from her ethical vision. This is most aptly captured in her desire to be the thinking heart of the barracks (874). Yet, as Brenner insightfully observes, in order to materialise such a desire, Hillesum would have to perform two counterintuitive tasks:

The circumstances of terror confronted Hillesum with a formidable challenge…On the one hand, she wished to place herself in the role of a compassionate participant in the suffering inflicted upon her people; on the other hand, she wished to assume the role of an artist capable of chronicling this suffering, putting it in writing. These tasks are contradictory because one evokes the ethics of identification with the suffering victims, while the other seeks the aesthetics of representation of their suffering in art. Emotional proximity to the victim, which borders on self-sacrifice clashes with emotional detachment required in order to articulate the victim’s pain.

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42 Ibid., p.190.
44 ‘I was sometimes filled with an infinite tenderness, and lay awake for hours letting all the many, too many impressions of a much-too-long day wash over me, and I prayed, “Let me be the thinking heart of these barracks.” And that is what I want to be again. The thinking heart of a whole concentration camp.’
One finds regular examples of this tension in Hillesum’s writings; occasions—such as the aforementioned observations of her fellow Jews as they traverse Westerbork stripped of all indicators of their former stations in life—whereby Hillesum writes as a detached observer might, before declaring her identification as a fellow-sufferer. Whilst pathos is indispensable to the artistic process it simultaneously threatens to drive ‘the thinking artist to the depths of despair.’

Nevertheless, in typical style, Hillesum fought to hold these phenomena together, and, in order to achieve this feat, she again turned to her inner world.

Brenner identifies two phases in Hillesum’s evolution towards becoming the thinking heart of the barracks. The first, which she calls the stage of preparation, took place in Amsterdam where, having chosen solidarity with her fellow-Jews, Hillesum readied herself to confront the horrific face of the Shoah. As Brenner observes, this was largely a process that required Hillesum to turn within and necessitated a period of introspection:

Like most assimilated Western European Jews, Hillesum was undeniably steeped in the culture of Christian Enlightenment, and in this sense the diary provides a response of a Western Jewish intellectual to the Nazi terror. Hillesum’s response to the Holocaust is that of immersion in self-education as a writer. Her self-educational program highlights the importance that she attributed to psychology and more specifically to analytical self-exploration. To a large extent, Hillesum’s diary is a lucid, unsparing self-analysis. Her self-analysis was the initial phase in her consciously devised plan aimed at self-formation as an artist. Hillesum believed that her growth as an artist was predicated upon an uninhibited, in-depth self-knowledge. Gaining self-knowledge will be transformational; it will move her to the next phase because self-understanding will enable her to shape a new attitude toward humanity.

There is considerable evidence in Hillesum’s later writing which suggest a contingent relationship between her transformation toward the Other and this earlier period of personal development; the woman writing from Westerbork bears little resemblance to the psychologically fragile individual unveiled in her opening diary entry. Despite this, some of Hillesum’s more ardent critics cite this

46 Ibid., p.238.
47 Ibid., p.239.
period as evidence of an individual who shares more in common with Narcissus than Dostoevsky's Zosima or Alyosha. Furthermore, they have cited Hillesum’s utilisation of Christian sources to dismiss her as an a-typical Holocaust diarist intent on discarding the burden of her Jewish identity. Such accusations signify a shallow reading of Hillesum and a fundamental misunderstanding of her worldview. In the first instance, while Hillesum’s diaries do focus largely on her self-development, the institution of personal agency they facilitate signifies resistance of the Nazis’ dehumanising project; in Brenner’s words, ‘The significance of the process of self-improvement as the meaning of life elucidates [Hillesum’s] determination to confront the exacerbating adversity with dignity and rectitude. Such determination signifies resistance.’\(^{48}\) Furthermore, ‘Gaining self-knowledge will be transformational; it will move her to the next phase because self-understanding will enable her to shape a new attitude toward humanity.’\(^{49}\) That this accurately describes the pattern of her personal transformation is observable from even the most casual reading of her work. As for the accusation that the consolation Hillesum found in Christianity represents a betrayal of her Judaic roots, Brenner responds by citing Hillesum's refusal to go into hiding, despite the persistent pleas of those close to her: ‘The explanation that she offered—that it is arrogant to claim to be in any way better than the other victims of the Nazi terror—certainly did not project egocentricity or narcissistic superiority; on the contrary, it was an act grounded in an open and willing self-identification as a Jew facing the Final Solution, as one of the victims of the unfolding history of Jewish destruction.’\(^{50}\)

The second phase, which Brenner refers to as the stage of the test, began with Hillesum's original departure for Camp Westerbork. It was here, within the transit camp's barbed-wire fences that Hillesum’s values would be subject to the severest examination. This is most clearly conveyed by Hillesum's letters which


\(^{49}\) Rachel Brenner. ‘Etty Hillesum: A Portrait of a Holocaust Artist.’ *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings at the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, November 2008*, p.239.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., pp.240-241.
detail a litany of miseries visited upon the Jews; indeed, these descriptions rank as some of the most moving and distressing records of the deportations available. Accounting for their pathos is Hillesum’s capacity to meet the suffering, eye to eye; though aware ‘that the “Human suffering that we have seen during the last six months, and still see daily, is more than any one can be expected to comprehend in half a year,” ...it was important to seek the abilities hidden in us to “grapple with the incomprehensible.”’ In this, her capacity to confront and record the absurd, Hillesum enacts her desire to be the thinking heart of the barracks. Whilst one might admire Hillesum’s strength in refusing to shun the horror surrounding her, the question as to the ultimate meaning and purpose of such strength inevitably arises. Brenner’s analysis reveals a two-fold answer:

First, the persecuted and victimized Jews must redeem themselves and attain a new understanding through this horrible experience. In order for it to happen, the terrible experience must not be forgotten. Hillesum admonished her people—and we note the inclusive pronoun ‘we’ that she constantly uses—‘If we abandon the hard facts that we are forced to face [...] if we do not allow them to settle and change into impulses through which we can grow and from which we can draw meaning—then we are not a viable generation.’ While she conceded that it was ‘[…] less easy for us Jews than for anyone else’ to draw a new meaning from this horrible experience, nonetheless she affirmed that, ‘new thoughts will have to radiate outward from the camps themselves, new insights, spreading lucidity, will have to cross the barbed wire.’ These insights will enable humanity to build a better future once the war is over.52

Narcissus drowned in the beauty of his own reflection, whilst here we have a woman who, soon to drown amidst the ashes of Auschwitz, challenges herself and her fellow Jews to live for a time beyond themselves. The contrast could hardly be starker. Hillesum’s transformation was orientated towards her Other as unveiled in her God and fellow human being. Her determination that new insights emerge from the camps signify an individual connected to life in its carnivalesque wholeness; that Hillesum’s legacy, which, thanks to her writings, has been left to benefit generations for time immemorial, is one for the Other,

51 Ibid., p.247.
52 Ibid., p.248.
demonstrates the triumph of her humanity and artistic endeavours. As Brenner observes, her final known correspondence carries the voice of one who, to the end, defied terror, hopelessness and despair.\footnote{Ibid., p.251.}

Whilst the Other played a significant role in determining the trajectory of Hillesum's life and outlook, this journey was largely facilitated through her artistic endeavours. To differentiate Hillesum's growth as a person from her growth as an artist would be problematic, to say the least, as one informed the other; this dialectic is best surmised by Gotthold Lessing's assertion that friendly discourse is the only avenue by which liberty and tolerance can be actualised:

Lessing, Arendt claimed, 'was concerned solely with humanizing the world by incessant and continual discourse....Every truth outside this area...is inhuman in the literal sense of the world.'\footnote{Rachel Brenner. \textit{Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust}, p.19. \textit{Subsequent references shall appear in-text.}} Despite the failure of the Enlightenment in the Holocaust, Arendt reasserts Lessing's position and remains convinced that, even in the post-Holocaust era, relationships based on an open dialogue among equals are the only thing that will guarantee a humane future for humankind.

The pertinence of such assertions to this dissertation can hardly be overstated: the correlation of truth with encounter and embodiment and, in the case of the Nazis, the lack thereof, strike at the heart of this enquiry's concerns and, furthermore, illuminate the nature of Hillesum's contribution to her readers. Through her openness and absorption of friendly discourse, Hillesum animated her own existence and that of her Other; through the investment of time and effort into her writing Hillesum signified her resistance to despair and hope for a future—even while conscious of the unlikelihood she would participate in this future; through her writing, Hillesum articulated an outlook which located truth inside encounter, thus rejecting the disembodied ideology of her oppressors and, indeed, any ideology disconnected from dialogic relations.
More immediately, however, Hillesum’s writings facilitated her psychological survival, a fact, which, given her dire circumstances, testifies to the tremendous power of art. As Brenner notes:

The Final Solution represented the (im)possibility of the apocalypse actualized. It literally denoted the final stage in Jewish history and thus placed the mythical, immanent notion of the apocalypse in the sphere of the imminent. The presence of the apocalypse in the historical rather than mythical sphere spells the end of history and therefore the end of time. Both the hiding Jews in the Annex and the imprisoned Jews in Westerbork faced a world in which their history had stopped evolving. Their past irrevocably erased, their future brutally denied, the Jews were doomed to the apocalyptic present of an imminent destruction. (105)

Confronted with an apocalyptic fate, which ‘rendered all decision making, all moral acts meaningless’ (106), Hillesum, nevertheless, maintained self-agency by turning within; here, she developed and drew from resources which lay beyond the control of the Nazis. By refusing to submit to their humiliating designs, Hillesum maintained the dignity which their anti-Semitic measures strove to eradicate. As Brenner observes:

At the psychological level,...Hillesum’s resistance to the increasing degradation takes the form of constant, disciplined modification of behavioral and perceptual patterns. To overcome the emotions of fear and distress,...Hillesum employ[’s] intellectual sophistication and the freedom of imagination. For example, Hillesum talks about the humiliation of being harassed in stores by those ‘who want to clear society of all Jewish elements.’ Despite her sadness and sense of ‘utter defenselessness,’ she is determined not to let these feelings take over. ‘I have my inner strength,’ she maintains, ‘and that is enough, the rest doesn’t matter.’ (103)

Such strength does not develop in a vacuum and whilst Hillesum’s relationship with God was pivotal in equipping her with the inner resources required to maintain a sense of agency in an apocalyptic world, even this relationship, in terms of its conception and development was contingent on the written word, whether it originated from the pen of the evangelists, Rilke, Dostoevsky or spilt from her own hand. Indeed, Hillesum’s capacity to create ‘an imaginary “physical” space that separated her from the immediate surroundings and
allowed her to reach the intimacy of communion with God’ (112), was nurtured by the likes of Spier and Rilke and largely enacted upon the pages of her diaries and letters.55

The role of detachment in the artistic process, which requires the artist to distance themselves from the object of their representation, facilitates cathartic possibilities; this is particularly so in Hillesum’s case, and that of her contemporaries, who have grappled with the task of representing an event which lies beyond representation, a dilemma poignantly captured by Elie Wiesel’s avowal: ‘There is no such thing as a literature of the Holocaust, nor can there be.’56 Several instances of Hillesum articulating her struggle to represent the incomprehensible can be found in her diaries and, as Brenner observes, she sought unexpected narrative forms by which to represent the horrors she witnessed on a daily basis: ‘Watching the “unreal reality” of Westerbork, Hillesum wrote: “One should be able to write fairy tales here...The misery here is so beyond all bounds of reality that it has become unreal. Sometimes I walk through the camp laughing secretly to myself because of the completely grotesque circumstances”’ (132). Despite this struggle, Hillesum’s writings testify to her persistent attempts to describe the indescribable, and, as mentioned, the practice of recording that which she witnessed proved beneficial in staving off the despair-induced madness to which so many Jews fell victim. For this task, the diary, composed intermittently, suited the haphazard, unpredictable nature of events as they unfolded. In explaining the machinations of this process, Brenner cites the testimony of Holocaust survivor, Alfred Kantor who claimed that ‘as an artist, “by taking the role of an ‘observer’ I could at least for a few moments detach myself from what was going on in Auschwitz and was

55 Denise DeCosta. *Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum: Inscribing Spirituality and Sexuality*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998, p.194: ‘Language arises in places of lack, of absence; writing too, is a reaction to a paradise lost. It is both a way of reestablishing a connection and a mourning ritual. It is like a vehicle that braves hell in search of a second paradise (Cornell 1988, 130). Hillesum found that second paradise; in writing she achieved inner peace and quiet. She succeeded in battling depression by filling the void with words.’

therefore better able to hold together the threads of sanity” (131). Whilst, for Hillesum, there was no possibility of post-Holocaust representation, her diary did provide a space, withdrawn from the daily horrors, where she discovered emotional and spiritual consolation: ‘In the reality of the Holocaust the terrible signification of the uttered word paradoxically engenders a sense of liberation, control, and even consolation. The concreteness of the reality is relived in its immediate diaristic rendition. For a short while, the menacing reality is transformed into the subject of an artistic interest’ (137).

In the conclusion of her important work, *Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust*, Brenner, citing Levinas’ postulation that ‘The uniqueness of the responsible ego is possible only in being obsessed by another’ (176), observes the Other’s predicative relationship to the development and fulfillment one’s humanity: ‘Being “obsessed” with the other’s well-being determines one’s own humanity, because, as Levinas argues, “no-one can save himself without the Others”’ (176). In Hillesum one discovers the embodiment of this principle, for the salvation she discovered, and, through her example and writings offers to others, is indispensably connected to Otherness. In the words of Brenner: ‘My contact with the other extends me beyond myself. My being for the other is not a function of compassion, but rather a function of absolute necessity, as the other is part of my inner self but also a part that extends beyond my “I” beyond the limits of my self’ (177).

This orientation beyond the “I” to the Other is, according to Denise DeCosta, revealed in the concerns and style of Hillesum’s prose. Drawing on feminist writer and theorist, Helene Cixous’ differentiation between masculine and feminine libidinal economies, DeCosta situates Hillesum’s writings in the latter camp. The masculine economy is based on the fear of death. In a sense it is capitalistic in nature…This realm revolves around one focus: the same, the self, one’s own, and ownership…in the masculine libidinal economy differences are hierarchically arranged, the feminine libidinal economy leaves room for the
other to take a position of equality.' In light of all that has already been said about Hillesum, it is easy to see why DeCosta, and, indeed Cixous, sees in her work, the exemplification of the feminine libidinal economy. As a member of the ‘School of Loss,’ Hillesum discovered, through ‘the experience of loss and mourning’ an appreciation of life’s riches; though writing in the face of death, Hillesum’s prose lacked the fear of death characteristic of the male libidinal economy; as such, self-concern gave way to presence which was increasingly invested in the Other. This too, according to Cixous, is characteristic of the female libidinal economy:

Fear of death is alien to women; men teach it to them. The feminine economy has more to do with abundance, with sharing, living and laughing. The feminine economy is therefore an economy of positive lack. It is an economy that knows loss of self, because risks are taken; this includes the risk of leaving oneself, of spilling over into an other, of overextending oneself, of overindulging. The other and otherness are not feared as they are in the masculine economy. There is room for freedom, including the other’s freedom. The other and otherness are left intact, respected. This is not a life and death battle for appropriation but the playful game of differences: ‘[E]ach would take the risk of other, of difference, without feeling threatened by the existence of an otherness, rather, delighting to increase through the unknown that is there to discover, to respect, to favor, to cherish.’

Of course, it is important to note—as DeCosta does—Cixous’ refusal to appropriate the male and female libidinal economies along gender lines: ‘Obviously the two modes of writing occur both in men and women. Therefore Cixous prefers to describe a masculine style of writing as “a style marked by the pain of reduction” and a feminine style of writing as “the style of live water.”’

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., p.182.
Identifying the diary form utilised by Hillesum as emblematic of the style of live water, DeCosta notes that though it possesses its own inbuilt structure, namely time, ‘Within the confines of the genre, Etty Hillesum let her thoughts and feelings pour out onto the empty pages of the notebooks...To her, diary writing was not only a matter of language but also for healing purposes...' (273). Yet, as has been repeatedly observed, this healing facilitated Hillesum’s movement beyond her “I” to her Other. By way of demonstration, DeCosta borrows again from Cixous’ vernacular to classify Hillesum’s work, particularly her letters from Westerbork, as “nourishing books”...These are books that, in their passivity, are militant and that, ultimately, give us real recipes for spiritual survival. These are nourishing books: books by starving people that feed us’ (276-277). DeCosta perceives a generosity in Hillesum’s writing, specifically in its content, ‘where she reports on her inner growth toward an all-encompassing, unconditional love of life and humanity’ (277), but also in her style, which displays traces of the feminine libidinal economy: ‘This is evident not only when she reflects on a writing style to convey her experiences but also in the transition from the diaries to the letters (273).62 At first, she wrote for herself, motivated by an urge to possess, but later she increasingly wrote to give, to share with others. This shift in emphasis reveals an openness to the other and others’ (273).

Beyond DeCosta’s utilisation of feminist theory, which enriches our appreciation of Hillesum’s writings, a further significant offering lies is her use of reader-response theory to highlight Hillesum’s ongoing capacity to speak beyond the grave:

*Se laissez lire par Etty Hillesum*, to let oneself (be) read (by) Etty Hillesum, is to open up to and be swept along this undercurrent in her texts. To read Etty Hillesum is to be pushed over an inner edge where

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62 Here, DeCosta is referring to Hillesum’s expressed desire to write in a manner that reflects Japanese prints “‘with that much space around a few words. I hate wordiness.” This last sentence might seem absurd among the thousands of closely scrawled words in her notebooks, but it was meant seriously. Increasingly, she was longing for a style of writing that tended toward wordlessness. As the increasing peril she lived in taught her to be humble and to accept death as part of life, she sought a new language in which to express this outlook.’
there is no recognition; instead, the reader is transported out of the familiar into a world that rewrites him or her. Hillesum’s texts appeal to the ‘stranger in ourselves,’ the repressed and twisted part of ourselves that we usually outgrow during our development into adulthood. Hillesum’s texts go beyond adulthood to ‘the second innocence,’ an innocence that, by following the path of understanding and experience, returns to simplicity and the nakedness of existence. What Etty Hillesum loved most of all, was ‘to read life from people.’ Letting oneself be read by Etty Hillesum means reestablishing contact with the other and the alien both inside and outside oneself. Her oeuvre is an interdisciplinary, multidimensional study of the other. (273)

Adopting the position of ‘modern literary theory [which] foregrounds the “reader’s encounter with the text,’” DeCosta reminds her own readers of their role in the truth-making process, which serves to re-orientate truth from the realm of ideology to that of encounter. Given the primacy of encounter to the formation and manifestation of Hillesum’s own Weltanschauung, it seems exceedingly appropriate to partake in this same process of encounter with the Other, and, as De Costa suggests, to this end, Hillesum’s writings serve as an excellent vehicle.

**ETTY HILLESUM: A PHILOSOPHICAL READING**

Eclipse of the light of heaven, eclipse of God—such indeed is the character of the historic hour through which the world is passing. But it is not a process which can be adequately accounted for by instancing the changes that have taken place in man’s spirit. An eclipse of the sun is something that occurs between the sun and our eyes, not in the sun itself. Nor does philosophy consider us blind to God. Philosophy holds that we lack today only the spiritual orientation which can make possible a reappearance ‘of God and the gods,’ a new procession of sublime images. But when, as in this instance, something is taking place between heaven and earth, one misses everything when one insists on discovering within earthly thought the power that unveils the mystery. He who refuses to submit himself to the effective reality of transcendence as such—our vis-à-vis—contributes to our human responsibility for the eclipse.64


Articulated by Martin Buber, these sentiments denote a radically different reading of history to the more secular approach that—at least in the West—dominates today, insofar as the human story is reoriented as unfolding within the purview of the divine. From Buber’s perspective, this reorientation signifies nothing more than the passing of an eclipse, which had, for a period, obscured the transcendent reality. As Meins Coetsier highlights, Buber’s viewpoint bears remarkable similarities to those of philosopher of history, Eric Voegelin, whose work seeks to restore the order of existence by evoking the experience of radical conversion to the transcendent order; the sort of conversion manifestly observable in the life and writings of Etty Hillesum (99).

Born at the turn of the century in Cologne Germany, on January 3, 1901, Voegelin became an ardent critic of Hitler’s National Socialism. Rejecting the Darwinian stratification of races advocated by the Nazis, Voegelin lost his academic posting at Vienna University and fled to Switzerland after the Anschluss of Austria in 1938 (96-97). ‘He studied the extreme ideological movements as they developed into enlarged social myths and diagnosed them as a manifestation of a disease of the spirit...The cure for such disease lies, according to Voegelin, in the rediscovery of the order of the soul’ (96). One might imagine that his use of sickness/disease and cure metaphors in his critique of the National Socialists would have been particularly galling, given their centrality to Hitler’s Mein Kampf and the Nazis’ broader discourse. He, nevertheless, demonstrated great courage in publishing several books that placed him in direct opposition to the Nazi regime (97).

According to Coetsier, the defining motif of Voegelin’s work is ‘that the source of order in human existence lies in man’s attunement to “the flow of presence”—to one’s relationship with God—who has revealed himself historically in different ways and different degrees’ (100). As such, the degree of order or disorder in the individual or society at large is determined by their attunement to the transcendent—however that is perceived. In Voegelin’s terms, order is analogous to existence in truth, while the aversion of, or rebellion against the divine manifests existence in untruth. History, then, is read not simply as the
linear development of the human story but, rather, as a constantly unfolding encounter of time with the Timeless:

A recurring theme in Voegelin’s work is the experience of human tension toward the divine ground of existence. For him, philosophical existence is existence in awareness of one’s humanity as having been constituted by this tension toward the divine ground. This awareness, Voegelin argues, emerges in the context of an existence centered on a turning toward the ‘Ground’ (God): it is a living attunement to the dimension of Divine timeless ‘Presence’ in each transient conscious present moment of time. (103)

Drawing from T.S. Eliot’s famous phrase from the *Four Quartets*, “the point of intersection of time with the timeless,” [Voegelin observes] a horizontal “flow” of present moments [which] make up man’s life in the world of space and time [intersecting with] ...the presence of the divine to, and in, and with, the man, if only he advert to it and acquires and practices the existential habits of responsiveness to it’ (105). It is immediately evident why Coetsier finds Voegelin’s philosophy a useful avenue into Hillesum’s work: Her writings unveil an individual increasingly open to the transcendent, signifying an exemplar of one living in the flow of presence. In Voegelin’s vernacular, Hillesum’s life became increasingly ordered, almost commensurately with the increasing disorder of her societal surroundings. Unsurprisingly, Hillesum’s writings are cited as pivotal to this process:

Hillesum’s dialogues and her struggles with herself in *The Letters and Diaries* created many vivid and memorable symbols of insight and wisdom, with representative power transcending all human barriers. As in Voegelin, so in Hillesum, there seemed to be a universal tension between the love of being and love of existence. The love of being, for Hillesum, constantly drew her away from the Nazis’ terrors into the safe haven of her diary, a ‘place of intersection’ between time and the timeless. The love of existence, however, brought her back to shed light on her fellow human beings who were fighting for their life in the darkness of the concentration camp. Knowing that she could not escape her fate, she embraced her life in that place of the In-Between. She bore the problems of the everyday while keeping herself attuned to the flow of life. (125-126)
Through his desire to resurrect God as a player in the human story, Voegelin provides a philosophical framework to Hillesum’s theodicean response to the Shoah: As Coetsier observes, through her writing Hillesum develops a consciousness situated between time and timelessness which facilitates an ever-deepening openness to transcendence and humanity. In other words, consciousness—‘the site in which participation in the ground of man’s existence is experienced’ (108), leads to luminosity: the material manifestation of the consciousness opened to transcendence. In Hillesum we observe an individual who, having undergone this process, enacts a break in the eclipse of God brought about by the Nazis: Her conscious and physical movement towards the Other signifies a moment of luminosity as the Divinity breaks through the blanket of darkness that was the Holocaust.

Whilst the manner of Hillesum’s growth forms part of the subject matter of this dissertation, for Coetsier’s part, he cites the intimate connection between her relationship with God and those around her as indicative of a consciousness transformed:

Voegelin used the term open self to symbolize a person like Hillesum who fled from the isolation and loneliness of her merely private existence as an atomized individual to embrace the mysterious togetherness of reality disclosed in pure experience. For Hillesum, the term open self referred to the experience of ‘willingness’ and ‘openness (‘bereidwilligheid’). ‘To be willing (‘bereid zijn’), for her, is to be open and receptive to life (‘leven’), which means that one should actively participate in the flow of life. ‘Openness’ (‘bereid zijn’) is intimately linked with the ‘Other’ (‘Ander’) and with ‘love’ (‘liefde’): ‘I kneel once more on the rough coconut matting, my hands over my eyes and pray: “Oh, Lord, let me feel at one with myself. Let me perform a thousand daily tasks with love, but let every one spring from a greater central core of devotion and love.” Then it won’t really matter what I do and where I am.’ (133)

Hillesum embodies all that is antithetical to that which the Nazis represent: Her openness to life is the ground of her resistance to Hitler’s factories of death, and, to repeat a defining motif of this dissertation, her polyphonically-formed Weltanschauung stands as one of the most significant touchstones of her openness: while the Nazis were burning books seen to violate their narrow,
monologic worldview, Hillesum spent innumerable hours encountering and absorbing the wisdom of the ages through its many faces.

Given the indispensable relationship between the vitality of Hillesum’s voice and those that she so voraciously consumed, it is unsurprising that the major philosophical approaches to her work are informed by the dialogic principle. This is certainly so in relation to Coetsier’s important and ambitious work, The Existential Philosophy of Etty Hillesum: An Analysis of Her Diaries and Letters. At the heart of the author’s examination of Hillesum’s existential philosophy are the formidable oeuvres of Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, respectively, of which the first two are most pertinent to this exploration.

Beginning with Buber, Coetsier identifies the philosophical articulation of the dialogic principle as fundamental to his life work. As with Voegelin, Buber was concerned with the operations of dialogue on both the horizontal and vertical axis. In the words of Coetsier, ‘He brings a theistic vision to his exploration of religious consciousness, interpersonal relationships (Beziehung), and community (Gemeinschaft).’ To this end, Buber sees humanity as the conduit and benefactor of divine encounter and dialogue as the requisite component of this same encounter:

For Buber ‘dialogue’ (Gespräch) meant ‘experiencing the other side’ of the relationship (Beziehung). It is an act of ‘inclusion’ (Umfassung) which makes it possible to meet and know the other in his concrete uniqueness and not just as a component of one’s experience (Erfahrung). Freely entered into, open and honest dialogue ‘between’ (zwischen) persons is, for Buber, the condition and medium of authentic learning about human things.

The differentiation made by Buber between encountering one as a unique subject as opposed to encountering them as a component of one’s own experience is critical to his philosophy as articulated through his terms, ‘Ich-Du

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66 Ibid., p.129.
67 Ibid., pp.133-134.
("I-Thou,” “Ik-Jij”)...[and] Ich-Es (“I-It,” “Ik-Het”). I-Thou orientations are reciprocal relationships of dialogue between (zwischen) one subject (Ich, “I,” “Ik”) and another (Du, “Thou,” “Jij”). The more functional relational dynamic expressed as Ich-Es, on the other hand, while sometimes necessary, can, when applied at the expense of the Other, stray into the realm of the demonic—as was the case with Nazi Germany.

By contrast, authentic human development, according to Buber, can only take place through I-Thou relations; in the words of Coetsier, the term signifies ‘...the spiritual path which everyman must follow if they are to find their way to the deeper reaches of their humanity within which alone they can embrace an ethical responsibility in the midst of life.’ Critically then, the path to wholeness, or, holiness, does not lead to an ethereal realm but—as Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov insists—takes the subject through the messiness of materiality: ‘The divine force which man actually encounters in life does not hover above the demonic, but penetrates it’ (165). The means by which this penetration occurs is, of course, dialogue. That Hillesum’s life and writing bear witness to this truth reveals the suitability of Buber’s philosophy as a segue into her Weltanschauung:

...Buber’s life and writings are a universal testimony to human courage and individuality, to man’s ability to become who he really is. As such, Buber, like Hillesum, was a ‘mystic.’ His need to be, that is, to communicate and be in dialogue (Gespräch) with others was a natural ‘power and melody.’ As a mystic he desired to bring the timeless into time and ‘to make the unity without multiplicity into the unity of all multiplicity.’ (171)

This final sentence brilliantly captures the essence and effect of Hillesum’s Weltanschauung. Confronted with a ‘unity’ that was in reality the (dis-) embodiment of its antithesis—the epitome of the disembodied demonic,

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68 Ibid., p.135.
69 The demonic is used to refer to speech and/or ‘relations’ which move towards incommunicable silence; in such instances, there is no genuine recognition of the other. A more detailed exposition is provided in Chapter IV.
Hillesum sought unity through her unceasing dialogue with the multiplicity of reality. Whilst the Nazis fled into ideology, Hillesum took the path of Dostoevsky’s Zosima and Alyosha, by entering into dialogue with her world—a movement predicated on proximity to her Other which effected the elimination of othering.

Whilst the Other may be described as the beating heart of Buber’s philosophy, for Levinas it constitutes the lifeblood of existence, with its trace running through the arterial system of his life’s work. Influenced by Dostoevsky, an author who, by his own admission, led an armada of Russian literary talent which formed his ‘preparation for philosophy’ (276), Levinas sees the Other as the pinnacle of one’s existential meaning and the sole gateway to transcendence. Fitting it is then, that Coetsier opens his chapter on Levinas with an epigram that posits the defining theme of his philosophy and Dostoevsky’s literary masterpiece, *The Brothers Karamazov*: ‘I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of subject. It is in this precise sense that Dostoevsky said: “We are all responsible for all, for all men before all, and I more than all others”’ (263).

Born in 1906, Levinas lived to witness the apocalyptic event that was the Shoah. Though outliving the Third Reich by a span of fifty years, the destruction it wrought nevertheless exercised a formidable influence on the formation of Levinas’ philosophy. In every respect, the Nazi regime enacted during their reign of terror the antithesis of all that the philosopher advocated. Far from interpersonal relations based on intractable responsibility for the Other, the Nazis displayed a mindset that reduced ‘everything to the “same” pav(ing) the way for deformed ideology, and for its horrific end result: persecutions and systematic mass-murder’ (319).

Rejecting secular humanism for its failure to prevent the Holocaust, Levinas returned to first principles: a humanism of the Other grounded in Biblical teaching (265). Accordingly, he, for whom ethics was the first philosophy, identified the Other as the predicate of all experience:
The fundamental experience which objective experience itself presupposes is the experience of the Other. It is experience par excellence. As the idea of the Infinite goes beyond Cartesian thought, so is the Other out of proportion with the power and freedom of the I. The disproportion between the Other and the self is precisely moral consciousness. Moral consciousness is not an experience of values, but an access to external being: external being is, par excellence, the Other. (320)

As is here indicated, Levinasian philosophy is immersed in materiality and emphasises an asymmetrical responsibility on the part of the subject towards their Other. As Coetsier notes, Levinas 'became convinced that what was demanded of each human person was an “infinite” willingness to be present to and available for the other’s suffering...The Other’s hunger—be it of flesh, or of bread—is sacred; only the hunger of the third party limits its rights’ (311). One is reminded here of Hillesum’s time in Westerbork spent attending to the needs of her fellow-Jews. Hillesum’s capacity to look into the eyes of the suffering Other amidst the shadow of death and labour to meet their hunger revealed an individual manifesting the subject’s primordial responsibility. In the most practical manner, Hillesum exhibited her affirmative response to Cain’s question: ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ (Genesis 4:9).

To the extent that Hillesum lives, not for herself, but for her Other, she participates in transcendence as any genuine movement towards the Other requires recognition of their uniqueness. As Coetsier observes, ‘The Other obliges me beyond my own limitations, my own physical death. For Levinas, responsibility for the Other, responding to the Other’s death, is a relationship to the other as other, and not a reduction of the other to the same’ (323). Herein lies the singular failure of the Nazis and the point of their differentiation from figures such as Levinas and Hillesum.

Paradoxically, the appreciation of the Other’s uniqueness—which obliges the subject to transcend self-concern—necessitates the recognition of their transcendental nature: the Other lies beyond one’s conceptual comprehension. This is best articulated through Levinas’ concept of Face, which Coetsier
references as ‘signification without context’ (331). Such phraseology is useful, pointing as it does to being’s presence prior to its apprehension. It is in this sense that Levinas asserts the face is unseen:

Access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in a social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that. (327)

By way of emphasising the enigmatic nature of the face, Levinas employs the term ‘trace’ to insist on one’s interminably incomplete grasp of their Other. As Coetsier explains, ‘Just as humans could never see God, but at best see traces of God’s presence in the world, so we never see the “face” of the Other, but only its trace’ (331). Set against the backdrop of the Nazis arrogant appropriation of the Jewish Other and their ceaselessly presumptive discourse, which reduced the Jew to less than their signification, the importance of Levinas’ philosophy as a guarantor of human dignity is luminously apparent.

In Hillesum’s case, the Other increasingly took centre stage; indeed, Coetsier observes its determinative impact on her search for existential meaning: ‘The face in which the Other—the absolutely Other who has no frontier—presented himself to Hillesum, did not offend her inner freedom. She was called to personal responsibility for God and man, and the presence of the Other defined her freedom’ (397). While such assertions, which link increased bonds of responsibility to the Other to commensurate increases in the subject’s freedom, may seem counterintuitive, Hillesum’s writings provide emphatic evidence that this was her lived experience. Significantly, the content of Hillesum’s diaries and letters stand as a secondary denotation of this process, for the primary signifier is the act of writing itself, which opened her to the Other. Once again, Coetsier proves instructive: ‘In the diaries and letters, we see a process where her writing created new energy in the relationships between her and other people. The Other, conversely gave new imput (sic), was teaching her, helping her to reflect
on her experience and create new material for the writing process’ (406). That this dialogic process defines Hillesum's resistance prior to the signification of any word penned into her diaries and letters goes to the heart of this dissertation and informs both its structure and thematic analysis.
Then the snake said to the woman, No! You will not die! God knows in fact that the day you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good from evil. (Genesis 3:4-5)

UNFETTERING THE CHAINS OF OPPRESSION

Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel, Beloved, which explores the demoralising impacts of chattel slavery in the United States in the 19th century, contains a particularly moving exposition of the healing powers of dialogic language and gesture. In a southern forest clearing, Baby Suggs—mother-in-law to the novel’s major protagonist, Sethe, and respected elder leads her community in a ceremony of cathartic effect, the power of which resonates forcefully through each word of the author’s masterful prose. Its profundity and pertinence necessitates its recounting here:

It was in front of that 124 that Sethe climbed off a wagon, her newborn tied to her chest, and felt for the first time the wide arms of her mother-in-law, who had made it to Cincinnati. Who decided that, because slave life had ‘busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,’ she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart—which she put to work at once. Accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, she became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it. In winter and fall she carried it to AME’s and Baptists, Holinesses and Sanctifieds, the Church of the Redeemer and the Redeemed. Uncalled, unrobed, unannointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence. When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing—a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place. In the heat of every Saturday afternoon, she sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees.

After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from the trees. They knew she was ready when she put her stick down.
Then she shouted, ‘Let the children come!’ and they ran from the trees toward her.

‘Let your mothers hear you laugh,’ she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling.

Then, ‘Let the grown men come,’ she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees.’

‘Let your wives and your children see you dance,’ she told them, and groundlife shuddered under their feet.

Finally she called the women to her. ‘Cry,’ she told them. ‘For the living and the dead. Just cry.’ And without covering their eyes the women let loose.

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.

She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure.

She told them the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.

‘Here,’ she said, ‘in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ’cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, you! And no, they ain’t in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don’t love your mouth. You got to love it. This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I’m telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it, and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they’d just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.’

Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their
masks and gave her the music. Long notes held until their four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh.¹

From her opening invocations, Baby Suggs reveals her wisdom. Confronted by a traumatised people, it is not language which she calls forth, but that which lies beyond: extra-linguistic expressions—laughter, dance and crying, which transcend conceptual modes of communication and speak from, and to, the pain of the heart—that faculty which Baby Suggs values most of all.

It is furthermore noteworthy that Baby Suggs’ speech aims to dialogise life: speaking to the traumatised as one who has experienced trauma, her words reach out to the hearts of those before her, seeking to revive the sites bearing the scars of their persecution. The body, bearing the weight of colonial oppression, is affirmed in an effort to heal the marks of a demonic discourse, which, taking no account of the Other, paved the way for policies that mirrored its neglect. Where, ‘yonder,’ African-Americans are made invisible through the discursive and structural denial of their humanity, Baby Suggs foregrounds their flesh, affirming its worth, whilst simultaneously speaking to that part of them which lies beyond the blows of the slave masters and cannot be restrained by the chains that have shackled them. As such, Baby Suggs’ orature exemplifies postcolonial literature at its best: resisting the reductive discourse of the oppressor while reviving and affirming the humanity of the oppressed. In more philosophical terms, Baby Suggs seeks to heal the destruction wrought by the fissure between language and life enacted by the reductive discursive and institutional practices of the oppressor. Herein lies the relevance of Morrison’s prose to the purposes of the present chapter, which seeks to trace the impact and machinations of the linguistic violence produced by Hitler’s discourse and that of the Nazis more broadly and the inevitable structural violence that followed.

**HEALING THE SCHISM BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND LIFE**

Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* is a seminal text in his work as it represents the thematic genesis of his ontological and aesthetic vision. Within

this short but incredibly dense essay the philosophical underpinnings of Bakhtin's body of writing are established. The central purpose of *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* is to reconcile the epistemological fissure between the theoretical and physical realms of existence, the division between culture and life. According to Bakhtin the only site of reconciliation between these two worlds, the place of their fusion, is the human act. It is in the historically constituted, embodied act of the individual that culture is taken out of the realm of the abstract and dressed in flesh and blood. Knowledge can, for example, exist as a self-contained system which has no relation to the embodied world, or what Bakhtin calls the event of Being. Such a body of knowledge operates according to its own laws and is sufficient unto itself. It invites no interaction and needs none; within the parameters of its own logic it is entirely self-sufficient; such knowledge is finalised, closed to the event of Being, it is that which Bakhtin calls *given*. Any body of knowledge can exist in this theoretical realm, yet insofar as it does, insofar as it remains abstract, it lacks validity in the event of Being:

Any kind of practical orientation of my life within the theoretical world is impossible: it is impossible to live in it, impossible to perform answerable deeds. In that world I am unnecessary; I am essentially and fundamentally non-existent in it. The theoretical world is obtained through an essential and fundamental abstraction from the fact of my unique being and from the moral sense of that fact—"as if I did not exist." And this concept of Being is indifferent to the central fact—central for me—of my unique and actual communion with Being (I, too, exist), and it cannot in principle add anything to it or subtract anything from it. For it remains equal to itself and identical in its sense and significance, regardless of whether I exist or not; it cannot determine my life as an answerable performing of deeds, it cannot provide any criterion for the life of practice, for the life of the deed, for it is not the Being in which I live, and, if it were the only being, I would not exist.²

To overcome this disjuncture between the realm of knowledge and the event of Being in which humans live out their existence, one must avoid any attempts to force human life into theoretical categories, but rather must incorporate knowledge into the answerable human act. This brings knowledge out of the

abstract realm into embodied existence, a movement which serves to validate the abstract by making it answerable to the event of Being. This is best demonstrated through the Johannine formula: ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,’ (John 1:14) which references the event of the Incarnation. To Christians, the Incarnation is the final statement, par excellence, of God's solidarity with humanity and is also the means by which humanity is reconciled with God. In the first instance then, the Incarnation is a kenotic activity: the self-renunciation of God is an essential prerequisite for disclosure. In literary terms, humility is an essential prerequisite for dialogue. Within both frames of reference, genuine encounter requires a movement out of the self towards the Other. This act of kenosis, far from being a passive movement is, according to Bakhtin, an actualisation of the individual’s place in the event of Being:

In self-renunciation I actualize with utmost activeness and in full the uniqueness of my place in Being. The world in which I, from my own unique place, renounce myself does not become a world in which I do not exist, a world which is indifferent, in its meaning, to my existence: self-renunciation is a performance or accomplishment that encompasses Being-as-event. A great symbol of self-activity, the descending [?] of Christ [illegible words]. The world from which Christ departed will no longer be the world in which he had never existed; it is, in its very principle, a different world.3

Through the renunciation of the self and the movement towards the Other, the event of Being is enriched and, as Bakhtin correctly observes, the self, far from losing significance, becomes, through his/her kenotic movement, an even more important player in the event of Being. To Bakhtin, Christ is the exemplar of this fact, yet every person possesses a non-alibi in Being, which is Bakhtin's way of asserting the individual’s moral agency derived from their unique place in the world, a place that no-one else can act from, that no-one else can replicate: ‘The acknowledgment of the uniqueness of my participation in Being is the actual and effectual foundation of my life and my performed deed...I participate in Being as its sole actor. Nothing in Being, apart from myself, is an I for me. In all of Being I experience only myself—my unique self—as an I.4 The uniqueness of the

3 Ibid., p.16.
4 Ibid., p.41.
individual obligates them to acknowledge this same uniqueness in the Other and, in recognition of this fact, to act benevolently; to do otherwise would be to diminish Being and take up an alibi in Being. To those who refuse to take responsibility for their uniqueness and the moral imperative inherent to their status as unique agents, Bakhtin gives the name pretenders: 'In full knowledge that he (or she) has a unique contribution to make towards the unification of being, the pretender consciously rejects the moral implications of this for himself, and in doing so perpetuates the split between the world of endless theoretical possibility and the world of concrete historical reality.' Such a rejection enacts a dual-diminishment in the event of Being: In the first instance the person refusing to take up their answerability to Being deprives themselves of the opportunity to actualise their unique contribution in a historically constitutive way; in other words, in opting for the given over the posited realm, they fail to incarnate their being. Furthermore, their failure to take up their kenotic responsibility deprives both themselves and the Other of the enrichment that would inevitably be produced by such a dialogic exchange of self-renunciation. While Bakhtin acknowledges the possibility of every person to refuse their non-alibi in Being, to do so always constitutes a diminishment in the event of Being as it is to choose closure over the dialogic and open event of life; In other words, it constitutes an exercise in autonomy over the interdependence that is the constitutive condition of Being. As Ruth Coates observes:

In Bakhtin’s universe one cannot name oneself, and all autonomy is falsely conceived, for life depends upon interdependence, on the willingness and ability of each consciousness to transcend itself in a self-denying, creative, affirmative move out into the world. To repeat, to claim autonomy is both self-destructive and destructive of the world.⁵

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⁵ Ruth Coates, Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.30: Coates’ analysis is instructive, indeed, groundbreaking, for its demonstration of the Christian motifs running through Bakhtin’s oeuvre. Her analysis of Toward a Philosophy of the Act, which traces the Christian motifs of the fall and incarnation within the work and her reading of Bakhtin’s exploration of carnival have both informed and converged with my own reading of his work.

⁶ Ibid., p.32.
Bakhtin’s ontology is uncompromisingly grounded in his belief in life’s interdependent and incarnational nature. As the epigraph opening this chapter illustrates, this ontology also finds firm footing in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The theological significance of the Genesis account lies largely in its attribution of humanity’s fall to the sin of pride. The first man and woman’s choice to violate the only prohibition given to them by God so that they too could ‘be like God’ (Genesis 3:5) was a choice for self-agency over interdependence. The consequence was a rapid diminishment in Being: suddenly aware of their nakedness, the man and woman cover themselves, an act which ended the openness and trust that had hitherto defined their relationship; then, confronted by God as to the reasons for their shame, they reject their non-alibi in Being by seeking to abrogate responsibility for their action (the man blamed the woman; the woman blamed the snake). The schism in the human family takes an even more dramatic turn in the following chapter when Cain murders his own brother, Abel. When quizzed by God as to his brother’s whereabouts, Cain’s response, ‘I do not know…Am I my brother’s keeper?’ (Genesis 4:9) is loaded with dramatic irony. The answer to Cain’s question, a fact to which he is obviously oblivious, is clearly, Yes! In killing his brother, Cain had, like his parents before him, abrogated his responsibility to the Other and torn asunder the interdependent event of Being.7

Like the writers of Genesis, Bakhtin attributes any attempt to avoid one’s moral obligation to the Other to pride:

The...loss of once-occurrent unity takes place as a result of the attempt to see in every other, in every object of a given act or deed, not a concrete uniqueness which participates in Being personally, but a representative of a certain large whole. This does not increase the answerability and ontological non-fortuitousness of my performed deed, but, on the contrary, lightens it and in a certain way de-realizes it: the deed is unjustifiably proud, and the only thing this leads to is

that the actual concreteness of the compellently actual uniqueness or singularity begins to be decomposed by abstract sense-possibility.\(^8\)

In applying Bakhtin’s assertions to the Genesis account, one may argue that Adam and Eve subverted their interdependent existential state to the promise of autonomy, which only ever existed in the abstract realm namely in the empty promise of the snake. Similarly, Cain, blinded by jealousy of his brother, chose self-actualisation over his obligation to interdependent existence. Ironically, both attempts to attain autonomy ended not in self-actualisation but in a diminishment in the event of Being. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition the antithesis of pride and the means to self-actualisation is humility, which facilitates a genuine encounter between the self and Other in the historically-constituted event of Being. Bakhtin affirms this, asserting that ‘One has to develop humility to the point of participating in person and being answerable in person.’\(^9\) This answerability can only happen in the concrete, unique human act and can never occur in the abstract realm.

It is impossible to understate the centrality of interdependence to Bakhtin’s ontology. Any proposition that an individual’s realisation could occur in isolation from their Other is, insofar as Bakhtin is concerned, an absurdity that defies the weight of reality; this is underlined by his assignation of the noun *pretenders* to those who ignore their non-alibi in Being, for such individuals effectively introduce an existential crisis, or split, into the event of Being:\(^{10}\) by refusing to live interdependently, the individual effectively abdicates his/her place in Being. As we have already noted, this diminishes the individual and the Other, bringing

\(^8\) M.M. Bakhtin. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, p.53.
\(^9\) Ibid., p.52.
\(^{10}\) Ruth Coates. *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author*, p.29: Coates highlights Bakhtin’s unambiguous terminology when describing the impacts of those who enact a schism between language and life: ‘The first thing to notice...is the word split, in Russian, *treshchina*, which may also be translated as ‘crack’ or ‘fissure’: the term is a strong one. Elsewhere in the essay the same phenomenon is referred to as a ‘gulf’ (*bezdna*: 123), or, tellingly, as a ‘schism’ (*raskol*: 82, 119, 120). ‘...it is clear that the fissure runs through every aspect of being, dividing all that is closed, abstract, impersonal, repeatable and deaf to value (the ‘given’), from the event of being as a vital, open, personal, unique process, charged with value (the ‘posited’). In essence the gulf divides life itself and spiritual death.’
about a two-fold contraction in the existential realm. In literary terms, Bakhtin’s ontology is equatable with dialogism, which is an innately interdependent phenomenon. As with Baby Suggs’ discourse cited at the commencement of this chapter, in dialogue, the individual self-enunciates in an act of disclosure to the Other. This enunciation, in its very formulation, anticipates a response, as such it is innately unfinalised—it does not contain the totality of meaning but seeks a rejoinder, without which meaning is elusive. Standing in antithetical relationship to dialogism is the monologic word, which enunciates without ears. This is the word of the autocrat: dictated from on high it invites no response but demands subservience. Like the theoretical world in which it is most at home, the monologic word ‘remains equal to itself and identical in its sense and significance, regardless of whether I exist or not; it cannot determine my life as an answerable performing of deeds, it cannot provide any criterion for the life of practice, for the life of the deed, for it is not the Being in which I live, and, if it were the only being, I would not exist.’ For Bakhtin, these two modes of language represent and enact two contrasting modes of living: dialogism is open to life as it unfolds and, as such, is necessarily incarnated: it brings embodied beings into contact with one another and through dialogic exchange each is necessarily changed as a result. The monologic realm of existence, on the other hand, insofar as it seeks no rejoinders, exists only for itself. Interestingly, the ontological and aesthetic implications of these two existential modes would continue to preoccupy, inform and shape Bakhtin’s scholarly output. In both his analyses of dialogism in the novel and his examination of medieval carnival as articulated in Rabelais and His World, we can trace a continued concern with the battle between the centripetal and centrifugal tendencies of language and their correlative modes of existence.

11 Ibid., p.9.
13 Michael Holquist (ed.). The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin. (Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist). Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006, p.425: Centripetal and Centrifugal are terms employed by Bakhtin to describe ‘the centralizing and decentralizing (or decentering) forces in any language or culture. The rulers and the high poetic genres of any era exercise a centripetal—a homogenizing and hierarchicizing—influence; the centrifugal
Toward a Philosophy of the Act was written between 1919 and 1921.\textsuperscript{14} Three years later Joseph Stalin rose to power in the Soviet Union and in the same year Adolf Hitler, imprisoned in Landsberg, began writing his political manifesto, Mein Kampf. It is difficult to envisage two individuals who better embodied the antithesis of Bakhtin’s worldview, than Stalin and Hitler. Similarly, Mein Kampf, which articulates the worldview of one of the twentieth century’s greatest exponents of the monologic word, is as far removed from the liberalism of Rabelais and the dialogism of Dostoevsky—two authors who informed much of Bakhtin’s academic work—as the north pole is from the south. Given most of Bakhtin’s scholarly insights were conceived and developed beneath the shadow that Stalin and Hitler cast over Europe, it seems appropriate that these same ideas will play a pivotal role in shedding light on some of the discourse responsible for producing and resisting this same dark shadow. Indeed, in looking to apply a Bakhtinian reading to the monologic text Mein Kampf and the polyphonic diaries of Etty Hillesum, we have a perfect example of the battle that Bakhtin identified within language when he made the following observation: ‘Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted process of decentralization and disunification go forward.’\textsuperscript{15} Insofar as the present chapter is concerned, Toward a Philosophy of the Act will inform our analysis of Hitler’s ideology and discourse and the manner in which it informed the policies and actions of the Nazis to the extent that it paved the way to the Shoah. The obvious starting point for this task is chapter XI of Hitler’s political treatise, Mein Kampf, for here we find the ideological seeds that would germinate to devastating effect between 1933 and 1945.

\textsuperscript{14} Ruth Coates. Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author, p.viii.
\textsuperscript{15} Michael Holquist (ed.). The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin, p.272.
SOWING THE DEMONIC SEED

Entitled ‘Race and People,’ chapter XI of Mein Kampf begins with Hitler’s reflections on ‘the garden of nature.’ According to Hitler, even the most casual spectator walking about in this garden can observe in nature ‘certain truths,’ (179) one of the most outstanding of which is ‘the inner isolation which characterizes each and every living species on this earth’ (179):

Even a superficial glance is sufficient to show that all the innumerable forms in which the life-urge of Nature manifests itself are subject to a fundamental law—one may call it an iron law of Nature—which compels the various species to keep within the definite limits of their own life-forms when propagating and multiplying their kind. Each animal mates only with one of its own species. The titmouse cohabits only with the titmouse, the finch with the finch, the stork with the stork, the field-mouse with the field-mouse, the house-mouse with the house-mouse, the wolf with the she-wolf, etc. (179)

Hitler goes on to observe that on the occasions this law is violated, nature produces a hybrid which is biologically superior to the weakest parent but inferior to the strongest; this results in a weakening of the species that opposes the will of nature, which is directed ‘towards the selective improvements of life in general’ (179). As such, the maintenance of a species’ blood-purity becomes a matter of life and death, for whenever this purity is violated the destruction of the species follows. Insofar as Hitler is concerned, if the intermingling of fauna species is abhorrent to Nature, the intermingling of races is anathematic to Her evolutionary work:

History furnishes us with innumerable instances that prove this law. It shows with startling clarity, that whenever Aryans have mingled their blood with that of an inferior race the result has been the downfall of the people who were standard-bearers of a higher culture…the results of miscegenation are always the following:

a.) The level of the superior race becomes lowered;

b.) Physical and mental degeneration sets in, thus leading slowly and steadily towards the progressive drying up of the vital sap.

The act which brings about such a development is a sin against the will of the Eternal Creator. And as a sin this act will be avenged. Man’s efforts to build up something that contradicts the iron logic of Nature brings him into conflict with those principles to which he himself exclusively owes his own existence. By acting against the laws of nature he prepares the way that leads to his ruin. (180-181)

Unsurprisingly, scholars such as Eberhard Jackel have found Hitler’s racial analysis to be beneath contempt while ‘Alan Bullock, Ian Kershaw and Richard J. Evans have spoken of “enter[ing] the world of the insane”, an “overriding and all-embracing obsession” or a “paranoid conviction.” While Hitler’s biological determinism can be readily dismissed as the ranting of a megalomaniac it nevertheless found a sufficient audience in its time to facilitate the enactment of the Final Solution against the Jews of Europe. In attempting to understand this disjuncture Andreas Musolff maps the framework of metaphors employed by Hitler to justify his social Darwinism and finds within it an internal consistency.

In constructing his ideas of German nationhood and outlining its parameters, one of the defining metaphors of Hitler’s lexicon was that of the body-nation. Within this discursive framework, terms such as ‘body’, ‘blood’, ‘nature’ and ‘disease’ are utilised by Hitler to diagnose a malaise in the German nation, identify its cause, and present himself as the physician equipped with the skill and will to apply the cure, which would restore Germany’s body to health once again. According to Hitler, Germany’s defeat in the Great War was a symptom of an impurity that had infected the bloodstream of the nation’s body; the source of this infection was the parasitic Jew; the cure was the elimination of the parasite from the body of the German nation. By framing the Jews as agents of disease, to which, as their defeat in World War One had shown, Germany was vulnerable, Hitler was able to justify the measures enacted against them. The measure of the metaphor’s effectiveness can be seen in its recognition as a core belief held by all leading Nazis. This is not to assert a literal interpretation of the metaphor on the part of the Nazis, but neither was it disconnected from reality as they perceived it;

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18 Ibid., p.3.
rather, the metaphor established a closed cognitive framework within which the Jew could be represented and constantly renegotiated as the origin of Germany’s ills. One such representation, designed to emphasise the Jews’ parasitic nature and present Germany as a body under attack, portrayed virginal and pure German girls being raped by predatory Jewish boys:

The black-haired Jewish youth lies in wait for hours on end, satanically glaring at and spying on the unsuspicous girl whom he plans to seduce, adulterating her blood and removing her from the bosom of her own people. The Jew uses every possible means to undermine the racial foundations of a subjugated people. In his systematic efforts to ruin girls and women he strives to break down the last barriers of discrimination between him and other peoples.19

This excerpt from Mein Kampf follows a similar discursive pattern to Hitler’s 1939 ‘prophecy’ to the Reichstag (explored later in this chapter), whereby he cites an unverifiable real-life scenario to construct the Jew as a threat to the interests of the German nation. In this instance, the portrayal of the Jew as a source of blood-poisoning and the alignment of the act of defilement with the work of Satan serves to construct the nation’s body as vulnerable to the pernicious and blood-defiling actions of the Jews, while assigning eschatological significance to their resistance. Hitler is then able to represent himself as a redemptive figure, a divine physician, who arises to save the German people from defilement and damnation: ‘today I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.’20

Hitler’s messianic claims are inextricably connected to a biological determinism which, as has been noted, is grounded in his belief in the ‘iron law of Nature’ that demands the separation of the species. With creation so ordered, to violate the natural order of things is to violate the will of the Creator and to tread the path towards self-destruction. Regardless of the fallacious foundations of Hitler’s discursive framework, once its basic premises were accepted, it upheld an

internal coherency which proved convincing to many of his followers. In the case of the previously cited excerpt we see a conflation of historical evidence, which is again unsubstantiated, with the blood-nation/body-illness metaphors to construct a racial hierarchy that expresses the Divine will. If one were to accept that the German nation-body was sick and that the cause of this sickness was the dilution and poisoning of German blood, then the proposition that the avenue to return health to the nation’s body was the removal of the poisoning agent appears reasonable. To ignore the poisoning agent would condemn the body to a progressing illness that would ultimately end in a slow and painful death. As such, the need of a physician who would extract the poisoning agent from the nation’s body was necessary and urgent:

[The Jew] is and remains a parasite, a sponger who, like a pernicious bacillus, spreads over wider and wider areas according as some favourable area attracts him. The effect produced by his presence is also like that of a vampire; for wherever he establishes himself the people who grant him hospitality are bound to be bled to death sooner or later.  

Barely veiled beneath this grotesque characterisation of Jews lies Hitler’s ardent belief in the ineradicable distinction differentiating pureblooded Aryan-Germans from their antithesis, the parasitic Jews. According to Hitler’s social Darwinism, races were separated according to their abilities as ‘founders of culture, bearers of culture and destroyers of culture—the Aryan alone can be considered as representing the first category’ while carrying the stigma of the destroyer of culture is the Jew. All other races and peoples are just intermediates: mere bearers of the founder’s culture to a higher or lesser degree. By representing Jews as the destroyers of culture and, within the body-illness metaphorical framework, aligning their impact with that of parasites feeding off the nation’s body, Hitler sought to justify the increasing array of measures enacted against them as the harsh but necessary medicine required to safeguard the nation’s survival. To successfully facilitate the administration of such medicine, language that belied the foreignness of Jews promoted by the Nazis was targeted; phrases

21 Ibid., p.192.
22 Ibid., p.183.
such as German-Jews, which signified a connection between Jews and Germany, proved anathema to Nazi ideology and as such became the target of the regime's propaganda machine.\textsuperscript{23} This task was made simpler upon Hitler's ascension to the Chancellorship as the Nazis were able to eliminate contesting voices and more easily control the narrative pertaining to the Jewish question and definitions of Germanness. Prior to exploring how the Nazis implemented Hitler's ideology and assessing the impact of this implementation upon the Jews, it is first necessary to submit its content to Bakhtin's ontological vision, as enunciated in \textit{Toward a Philosophy of the Act}.

One of the immediate and obvious signifiers of Hitler's monologic worldview, as articulated through \textit{Mein Kampf}, is the rigidity of his language and representations. From the opening line, Hitler proclaims the existence of observable truths which are so obvious that 'every passer-by may see them'.\textsuperscript{24} Yet he bemoans the fact that so many 'disregard such truths or at least they do not make them the object of any conscious knowledge' (192). From the beginning then, Hitler establishes an epistemological hierarchy at the top of which he positions himself. As the seer of truth, one of the very few, he takes it upon himself to spell these out to his readers, the majority of whom are too lazy, ignorant or visionless to observe that which lies unveiled before them: ‘People are so blind to some of the simplest facts in every-day life that they are highly surprised when somebody calls attention to what everybody ought to know. Examples of the Columbus Egg lie around us in the hundreds and thousands; but observers like Columbus are rare’ (192). While Hitler regularly claims the exceptional capacity to perceive natural truths, he is dismissive of those whose view of the world differs to his own. For example, after describing the 'iron law of Nature—which compels the various species to keep within the definite limits of their own life-forms when propagating and multiplying their kind,' (192) he labels as 'born weakling[s]' (192) those who see this principle as cruel. In a


similar vein, he characterises German civil servants who fail to recognise the pervasive and poisoning influence of Jews within the nation’s body as ‘lacking in instinct and intelligence’ (197). As scathing as such criticisms were, it was towards the Jew—the most debased of all creatures—that Hitler directed his harshest critiques. As self-appointed oracle of natural truths, Hitler placed the Jew on the lowest rung of his epistemological hierarchy, insisting that they were devoid of creativity and culture:

Jews completely lack the most essential pre-requisite of a cultural people, namely the idealistic spirit...That is why the Jewish people, despite the intellectual powers with which they are apparently endowed, have not a culture—certainly not a culture of their own. The culture which the Jew enjoys today is the product of the work of others and this product is debased in the hands of the Jew. (190-191)

The idealistic spirit which Hitler found lacking in the Jews and abundantly present in the Aryan people was ‘the willingness of the individual to make sacrifices for the community and his fellow-men’ (188). Leaving aside Hitler’s characterisation of the Jew for the moment, at first appearance his call to self-sacrifice appears to reflect two millennia of Christian teaching and echo Bakhtin’s own belief in the necessity of kenosis to the genuine participation of the individual in the event of Being. A closer look, however, reveals Hitler’s notion of self-sacrifice to be of an entirely different order to that proclaimed in the Gospels and Toward a Philosophy of the Act.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus’ call to self-renunciation is framed within an ethic of love: ‘This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you. No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.’ (John 15:13) Bakhtin, similarly, connects self-renunciation to love for the Other: ‘Only un-self-interested love on the principle of “I love him not because he is good, but he is good because I love him,” only lovingly interested attention, is capable of generating a sufficiently intent power to encompass and retain the concrete manifoldness of Being without impoverishing and schematizing it.’25 Clearly in both Jesus and Bakhtin’s ontology love is synonymous with the unqualified

25 M.M. Bakhtin. Toward a Philosophy of the Act, p.64.
recognition of the Other. In the individual’s self-renunciation love is actualised in the event of Being; it is manifest in the self’s affirmation of their Other, a movement that, at its most authentic, is empty of any form of contingency. In contrast, while Hitler frames his call to self-sacrifice within superficially benevolent language, in reality it is for the creation and benefit of a racially-defined utopian Aryan society that the demand is made. As such, unlike the Christian call to kenosis, which enriches the event of Being through the actualisation of the self and Other, Hitler demands the erasure of the individual for the service of the nation. Existentially speaking, he is subordinating the realm of actuality, the physical world in which individuals live out their lives, to the abstract realm, which ‘is obtained through an essential and fundamental abstraction from the fact of my unique being and from the moral sense of that fact—“as if I did not exist.”’ 26

Furthermore, when the act of self-sacrifice is connected to the physical realm, it is demanded not for the actualisation of the Other but for the protection of culture: ‘The renunciation of one’s own life for the sake of the community is the crowning significance of the idea of all sacrifice. In this way only is it possible to protect what has been built up by man and to ensure that this will not be destroyed by the hand of man or of nature.’ 27 Placing a higher value on a nation’s culture than on the individual, Hitler again imposes a fissure between the physical and abstract realms by subordinating the former to the latter. In so doing, he fails to realise that the culture he values so highly is not the product of a community or nation, but of individuals without whom such notions are illusionary. As Bakhtin observes, ‘even if you are representative of a large whole, you are represented first and foremost personally. And that large whole itself is composed not of universal or general moments, but of concretely individual moments.’ 28

At every stage of Toward a Philosophy of the Act, Bakhtin asserts the primacy of the individual as the constitutive element of existence and the centre for ethical action. The event of Being is comprised first and foremost of a multitude of

26 Ibid., p.9.
28 M.M. Bakhtin. Toward a Philosophy of the Act, p.53.
individual agents each of whom occupies a specific, non-repeatable, absolutely unique place in Being that cannot be replicated in another. Any effort, therefore, to schematise the individual is an act of violence that diminishes once-occurrent Being. Echoing Levinas, Bakhtin believes ‘Life can be consciously comprehended only in concrete answerability. A philosophy of life can be only a moral philosophy.’ As such, cultural values only make sense within the embodied world. Individuals dress values in flesh and blood through their emotional-volitional stance. To affirm the products and values of culture above the individual, without whom they are rendered meaningless, is the equivalent of placing the cart before the horse—it is an absurdity.

Notwithstanding the problematic constitution of Hitler’s conception of self-sacrifice, his characterisation of the Jew as devoid of any altruistic traits plays into his assertion that they are a parasitic people. Indeed, it is to this trait that he attributes a lack of religious instinct amongst the Jewish people. In one of his more astounding assertions, Hitler suggests the Jews use religion to cover their racial agenda:

What could be more effective and at the same time more above suspicion than to borrow and utilize the idea of the religious community? Here also everything is copied, or rather stolen; for the Jew could not possess any religious institution which grew out of his own consciousness, seeing that he lacks every kind of idealism; which means that belief in a life beyond this terrestrial existence is foreign to him.

Hitler goes on to justify his position by asserting a lack of eschatological orientation within the Talmud, insisting that it is rather ‘a collection of instructions for maintaining the Jewish blood pure and for regulating intercourse between Jews and the rest of the world: that is to say, their relation with non-Jews’. Leaving aside the absurdity and irony of Hitler’s claims, his adoption of a monologic stance which enables him to characterise himself as the arbiter of wisdom, knowledge and insight and deride those who fail to subscribe to his

29 Ibid., p.56.
31 Ibid.
ideological position enables him to take up an alibi in Being. Like the mythical Adam, Eve and Cain, Hitler fails to account for his interdependent state and acts from a position of pride. He speaks as an autonomous agent with a monologic voice and as such he proliferates the rupture ‘between the world of endless theoretical possibility and the world of concrete historical reality,’ which is the mark of the pretender.

Hitler is most at home in the realm of the abstract. While this is certainly evident within his representations, it is in the first order a consequence of the hierarchical structure of his worldview. Since it is in the nature of hierarchies to differentiate and stratify and, in the realm of human relations, to privilege the few over the many based on categories determined by the privileged classes, there is a necessary diminishment in the event of Being. This is brought about by the arbitrary and abstract composition of the hierarchy and the measures enacted to reinforce and justify its existence. In effect, the hierarchy forces life into predetermined and capricious categories, the consequences of which are most often dire: ’Theory consigns the performed act or deed to the realm of brute Being, drains it of all the moments of ideality in it and draws them into its own autonomous self-contained domain, that is, totally impoverishes the performed act.’ It is interesting that Bakhtin sees the movement into the theoretical realm as responsible for the loss of ideality in the world in which human beings operate and actualise their being, while Hitler abdicates his place in this world and from the theoretical realm characterises the Jew as lacking in ideality. For the Jew, the consequence of this movement into abstraction was their entry into the realm of brute Being: placed into the lowest category of Hitler’s biological hierarchy, upon his ascension to power, the Jew became expendable. Those living in Germany suddenly found their citizenship revoked and they became subject to discrimination, deportation and extermination; Jews

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32 Laurence Rees. *The Dark Charisma of Adolf Hitler: Leading Millions into the Abyss*, pp.28-29: The irony of Hitler’s accusation lies in his tendency to utilise Christianity (a distorted reading of it) as a means of furthering his racial agenda.
across Europe soon shared in the same fate as the Wehrmacht’s blitzkrieg
brought them under Nazi control.

Without exception, Hitler’s representations of European Jews were divorced
from the actuality of their existence; his references to ‘Jews,’ ‘Jewish problem,’
‘Jewry in Germany,’ ‘international finance Jewry’ and ‘Jewish race in Europe’ all
deny Jews an individual identity and, as Bakhtin observes, it is only as
individuals that we are grounded in the event of Being:

From my own unique place an approach is open to the whole world in
its uniqueness, and for me it is open only from that place. As
disembodied spirit, I lose my compellent, ought-to-be relationship to
the world, I lose the actuality of the world. Man-in-general does not
exist; I exist and a particular concrete other exists—my intimate, my
contemporary (social mankind), the past and future of actual human
beings (of actual historical mankind).35

Insofar as Hitler’s discourse is concerned, the historically constituted lives of
Jews were irrelevant; they were ‘essentially and fundamentally non-existent.’36
This is further highlighted by descriptors such as ‘parasite,’ ‘vampire,’ ‘bacillus’
and ‘sponger’ which not only repudiate Jews’ individual agency but also deny
them their humanity altogether. The expurgation of Jewish individual identity
divorced them from the event of Being, reducing them to what Bakhtin calls
disembodied spirits. As such, Mein Kampf, operating in the abstract realm, enacts
a discursive erasure of the Jew; this act of linguistic violence foreshadowed and
helped facilitate their physical erasure at the hands of the Nazis.

Hitler’s abstraction and subsequent dehumanisation of the Jew reflected his
epistemology, which framed knowledge and particularly truth within absolutist
and predetermined categories. This is reflected through his biological
determinism and the language used to enunciate his worldview. The
aforementioned opening sentence of the eleventh chapter of Mein Kampf frames

35 Ibid., p.47.
36 Ibid., p.9.
‘certain truths’ as phenomena encoded in nature, which ‘stand out so openly on the roadsides of life, as it were, that every passer-by may see them’ (179). Hitler thus places truth in the realm of the given, that which is closed to the unfolding event of life. Such truth is monologic in nature insofar as it exists independently of the fact of the individual’s existence. It does not seek to encounter the subject, rather the subject is expected to submit to its dictates. This subordination of the subject is reinforced through phrases such as ‘the simplest facts of everyday life,’ (179) ‘one of the outstanding principles that Nature employs,’ (179) ‘the life-urge of Nature,’ (179) ‘a fundamental law,’ (179) ‘an iron law of Nature,’ (179) ‘compels the various species to keep within the definite limits of their own life-forms,’ (179) ‘the will of Nature,’ (179) the will of the Eternal Creator,’ (181) ‘the iron logic of Nature,’ (181) ‘the laws of Nature,’ (181) ‘her eternal mysteries and secret,’ (181) ‘Nature’s laws and mysteries,’ (181) ‘those laws which furnish the conditions of his existence’ (181). The use of such phraseology conflates naturalistic and logical-mathematical images to establish an epistemology that can best be described as unyielding, the effect of which is to render the individual a slave to its abstract framework and the ‘truth’ it upholds. This is reinforced by the mythical and theological terminology that Hitler employs, which lends the weight of the Creator’s eternal will to his social-Darwinist outlook. In a clear allusion to the Yahwist creation account in Genesis, which details the sin of pride that brought on Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Hitler observes that, ‘Walking about in the garden of Nature, most men have the self-conceit to think that they know everything’ (179). By employing such well-known mythical images as the basis of his worldview Hitler reinforces the weight of his pronouncements and ironically frames them as holding foundational and eschatological significance for the unfolding human story. This is clearly demonstrated when he again employs the imagery and language of the Genesis myth to justify his belief in the segregation of races: ‘the conquering race offended against the principles which they first had observed, namely, the maintenance of their racial stock unmixed, and they began to intermingle with the subjugated people. Thus they put an end to their own

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separate existence; for the original sin committed in Paradise has always been followed by the expulsion of the guilty parties’ (184).

In this instance Hitler correlates the violation of the segregation of the species and races with the original sin of Adam and Eve, which ruptured paradise; that he subsequently cites the mythical expulsion to warn of the necessary consequences for those who fail to maintain racial purity is revealing of his misuse of the Judeo-Christian myth, not to mention his complete misunderstanding of one of its fundamental messages, to justify his biological determinism. As mentioned, one of the central insights of Genesis pertains to the interdependence of creation. For example, in the Yahwist creation account, ‘Yahweh God took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it’ (Genesis 2:15), while the Priestly account expresses humanity’s responsibility to creation in the following manner: ‘God said, “Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild animals and all the creatures that creep along the ground’ (Genesis 1:26). Whilst the verse from the Priestly account has often been quoted to justify humanity’s superior position over and subsequent oppression of creation, this interpretation completely defies the writers’ intention and the myth’s meaning. Stewardship demands responsibility to the Other; it derives from a recognition of the interdependence of all creatures and the subsequent responsibility which stems from this recognition. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ‘this freedom to rule includes being bound to the creatures who are ruled. The ground and the animals over which I am lord constitute the world in which I live, without which I cease to be.’

As such, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden was a consequence of the failure of Adam and Eve to recognise and live out of their true state, namely interdependence; in other words, the schism in paradise was brought about by a refusal to accept one’s non-alibi in being, that is living out of one’s uniqueness through the self-sacrificial outpouring of oneself towards the Other. Given this, Hitler’s use of the Genesis Myth to justify his isolationist reading of creation is fundamentally flawed.

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38 Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Creation and Fall*, p.66.
THE PATH TO GENOCIDE

On the 30th of January 1939, in an address to the Reichstag, which commemorated the sixth anniversary of his ascension to power, Adolf Hitler made the following pronouncement:

I have very often in my lifetime been a prophet and have mostly been derided. At the time of my struggle for power it was in the first instance the Jews who only greeted with laughter my prophecies that I would some day take over the leadership of the state and of the entire people of Germany and then, among other things, also bring the Jewish problem to its solution. I believe that this hollow laughter of Jewry in Germany has already stuck in its throat. I want today to be a prophet again: if international finance Jewry inside and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into world war, the result will be not the Bolshevization of the earth and thereby the victory of Europe, but the annihilation [Vernichtung] of the Jewish race in Europe! 39

This statement is widely considered by Holocaust scholars to be the definitive announcement of Hitler’s genocidal intent toward the Jews. 40 Three quarters of a century after its enunciation Auschwitz still stands as testimony to its devastating effects. Beyond the immeasurable weight of the six million Jewish lives lost in the Holocaust, this statement illustrates the important role played by language in paving the way for the Nazis to enact their genocidal plans. As scholars such as Thomas Kaplan41 and Andreas Musolff42 show, linguistic violence played a pivotal role in establishing and fertilising the ground upon which the Holocaust unfolded. Hitler’s declaration, furthermore, proves revealing in demonstrating the type of discourse with which he and the Nazis would engage and that which they would oppress. In the first instance, Hitler’s self-referential use of the personal pronoun ‘I’ establishes a definitive monologic

40 Ibid.
stance, which he places in a historical and biblical/prophetic framework designed to lend the weight of truth to his pronouncements. Referencing unverifiable instances of having his equally unverifiable past prophecies derided by Jewish laughter and using his present position as leader of the German nation to disprove such dismissals, Hitler constructs a binary between his own prophetic voice and the foolish communal laughter of Jewry. On the one hand, he constructs his own voice as independent, courageous, defiant and ultimately justified by history, while on the other hand Jews are given neither an independent identity or voice, but rather are categorised as an ignorant and destructive communal force. This negative construction serves to objectify Jews as a blight upon both German society and the broader European continent, which in turn functions to justify their prophesied extermination.

Hitler's discourse calls to mind Bakhtin's observations, cited at the beginning of this chapter, regarding the disconnect between the world of theory and that in which the event of Being unfolds. While Hitler appears to ground his discourse in the physical realm by claiming as its authoritative source his own experience, the vague unsubstantiated nature of the referenced events combine with the recurrent references to Jews as a communal entity to place his speech firmly in the theoretical realm. On the few occasions in which Hitler refers to an individual Jew, they are cited as an archetype representative of Jews in general. The anecdote of the black haired Jewish youth raping the innocent Aryan girl cited earlier in this chapter is a case in point.

Of further interest to the purposes of this dissertation is Hitler's construction of the Jewish voice as derisive. Tellingly, he cites laughter as the sole signifier of their mockery, which is revealing on two levels: firstly, Jews are represented as incapable of articulating a rational response to his pronouncements (Hitler operates from the presumption that laughter and reason are mutually exclusive—a presumption that shall be interrogated within this thesis); secondly, in his assertion that he has rendered the 'hollow laughter of Jewry in
Germany’s mute he unwittingly reveals his fear of its potency. While this final observation might appear to border on a psychological reading that breaches the actual text, it seems significant that of all the enunciations Hitler could have attributed to the Jews, it was laughter that he placed in their mouth and this same laughter which he promised to render mute. This reading moves further out of the speculative realm when considered against the backdrop of legislative measures enacted by Hitler upon his ascension to the chancellorship of Germany in 1933:

One of the Third Reich’s first actions was to pass a censorship law that prohibited mockery of the Nazis, called the “Law against treacherous acts on the state and party and for the protection of the party uniform.” This law made even telling a joke against the Führer or government an act of treason bearing the death penalty. That the prohibition of laughter was legislatively prioritised by the new regime reveals an awareness of its potency, particularly when directed towards a monologic entity such as the Nazis. Like any autocracy the Nazis based their authority upon the strength of their centralised and singularly articulated voice orientated towards one will: the will of the Führer. The maintenance of this voice’s authority required that all speak in unison with it, that all obeyed its precepts and that any dissension be rapidly excised. Herein lies the tension of the autocratic state: because the monolithic stance it adopts is inherently unrepresentative of any society—which is an innately interpersonal and dialogic construction—over which it seeks to exercise power, its authority must be elicited through means of persuasion. Historically, such persuasion has been enacted through a combination of linguistic and physical violence, the net effect of which is to elicit subservience through the propagation of fear and

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intimidation. This was certainly the modus operandi of the Middle Ages and was employed in an even more unrelenting manner by the Nazis towards the Jews. It is towards the specifics of the Nazis’ linguistic violence and the manner in which it paved the way for legislative and physical attacks on the Jews of Europe that our attention shall now turn.

When applied to the Nazis’ use of language in paving the way to genocide, the term linguistic violence commonly refers to the rhetorical and discursive strategies employed to marginalise Jews, and other perceived enemies, in order to justify their removal from society. To fully comprehend the mechanisations of these strategies a second and related usage must also be applied: namely, the violation of language’s normal usage in order to deceive and better facilitate the extermination of the regime’s enemies. In other words, in seeking to inflict violence upon their enemies the Nazis first needed to inflict violence upon language itself. Euphemisms such as ‘special treatment’ and ‘final solution’ were commonly employed by the Nazis in order to mask their genocidal practices and serve to highlight how language functioned simultaneously as the victim and inflictor of violence. That the employment of such camouflaging language lies at the heart of propagandist’s art was confirmed by the Nazis own propaganda expert, Joseph Goebbels in a private speech to party members at the Nuremberg rally of 1935:

[You have to always leave the ending open] just as the Führer did in his masterly speech yesterday: ‘We hope that the laws concerning the Jews have opened the chance for a tolerable relationship between the German and the Jewish people and...’ [laughter]. That’s what I call skill! That works! But if one had said immediately afterwards: Well, these are today’s laws for the Jews; don’t think that’s everything; next month...there’ll be new ones so that in the end you’ll be back to being beggars in the ghetto—then it’s no surprise the Jews mobilise the whole world against us. But if you leave a little chance open to them, then the Jews will say, ‘Hey, if we start atrocity propaganda from

outside, it'll be worse, so let's keep quiet, and maybe we can go on after all’ [laughter, applause].

As Musolff observes, none of Goebbels’ audience were in any doubt about the destruction of the Jews’ social existence in Germany; neither was there any naïveté as to the need for the Nazis to mask their intent and actions behind language that would minimise alarmist responses. That millions of Jews could, in relative calm, be ushered into gas chambers to meet their death demonstrates the extent to which the Nazis’ linguistic violence was effective.

One of the Nazis’ first acts of linguistic violence was to enact a conceptual divorce of Jewishness from Germany. This was designed to isolate Jews within Germany, thus creating an environment conducive to their persecution, expulsion and extermination. According to Kaplan, ‘the new government made the reconstruction of Germanness and Jewishness as mutually exclusive categories one of its key goals.’ To this end, in March 1933, Joseph Goebbels was appointed Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda and immediately set about taking control of the nation’s discourse surrounding national identity by aligning it with the Nazis own racial ideologies. No longer held back by the prohibitions of the Weimar years, the new ministry added a press department with the intention of directing the nation’s newspapers with the intention of directing the nation’s newspapers (58). Led by Otto Dietrich, a confidant of Hitler ‘in all questions related to the press,’ (64) the Reich Press Office issued directives to editors that provided the discursive parameters within which they were expected to operate. These linguistic guidelines reflected Jewish and German racial constructions that were developed and approved by the Interior Ministry. Though diverse in content and imagination, these representations consistently adopted binary formulations which characterised Jews as the destroyers of culture and Germans as its guardian and defender. German Jews, for example, were commonly represented as belonging to

48 Ibid.
International Jewry and other foreign bodies such as financial institutions and media interests, all of which were conspiring to destroy Germany. The common denominator in all such representations was the foreignness of the Jew to all things German. This was further reinforced through prohibitions around phrases such as ‘German-Jewish civil servants’ and ‘German-Jewry’; the Nazis’ linguistic guidelines instead directed editors to use phrases like ‘Jewish civil servants’ and ‘Jewry in Germany’ (63). While papers like the Volkischer Beobachter, which Hitler described as the Nazis’ ‘best weapon,’ (43) enthusiastically implemented the regime’s linguistic guidelines and often surpassed them in their anti-Semitic sentiments, the more liberal papers such as the Frankfurter Zeitung also fell into line, particularly after attracting the attention of Hitler’s SA units:

...SA units stepped up their violence against journalists. Communist and Social Democratic reporters suffered the full brunt, but the onslaughts also extended to the editors of the liberal press. Editors of the Frankfurter Zeitung reeled under the shock from Nazi assaults. On March 31 [1933], after several short-term arrests of FZ editors, Nazi activists entered the offices of the newspaper in Frankfurt/Main, searching the buildings and hoisting a Nazi banner. Identifying the FZ as a ‘Jewish’ paper, they returned on April 1, the day of anti-Jewish boycott, and blocked all entrances. The SA men also targeted German-Jewish journalists. In March 1933, a group of SA men joined with regular police officers to search the headquarters of the Central Organization of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith in Berlin. They interrogated and detained members of the CV-Zeitung leadership, including the editor-in-chief Alfred Hirschberg. Although the Nazi-controlled police stopped short of shutting down the Frankfurter Zeitung, CV Zeitung and Judische Rundschau, they forced a second leading liberal paper, the Berliner Tageblatt (BT), and another major German-Jewish newspaper, the Israelitische Familienblatt, to cease publication temporarily. As Margaret Boveri, who worked for the BT at the time, noted, the crackdown on her paper had a tremendous effect on the press corps, demonstrating that the new rulers had not exempted liberal papers from their wrath. (61-62)

The fervour of the SA’s attacks on the press was no doubt emboldened by the linguistic violence propagated by Hitler and his government’s propaganda machine and was increasingly legitimised through the array of legislative measures enacted against the Jews. A presidential emergency decree enacted by Hitler on February 4 1933, for example, ‘allowed for the prohibition of
periodicals whose content “threatened public safety and order”’ (61). This was followed by a second decree on February 28, which eliminated basic human rights such as freedom of expression and instituted a state of emergency across Germany. The justification of press prohibitions as a public safety and order issue enabled the Nazis to categorise public discourse according to its conformity to their own official discourse. Furthermore, by placing discourse in a legislative framework, those found to be circulating unofficial discourse could be prosecuted for threatening the public safety and order. The decree was instituted to protect. The intentional ambiguity surrounding the parameters deeming discourse a threat to the public safety and order enabled the Nazis to apply prohibitions according to their ever-changing needs. This furthermore placed editors in a precarious situation that saw many sacrifice their editorial independence by taking the lead from papers like the Volkscher Beobachter, which had effectively received the imprimatur of the ruling regime (71).

In 1935 at the Nuremberg party rally, Hitler instituted a new set of racial laws which more clearly delineated Germanness from Jewishness. Definitions of German blood, Jews and Mischlinge were enshrined into law, which turned the language spoken by Hitler and his followers into legal categories. With the question of who was to be seen as a Jew in the German Reich settled, laws designed to replicate, in people’s lives, the linguistic separation of Jews and Germans were enacted: Marriages and extramarital relationships between Germans and Jews were forbidden, which turned Jews into second-class citizens and made them even more vulnerable to acts of physical violence:

The November pogroms of 1938 outmatched all previous manifestations of Nazi violence. Instigated by Joseph Goebbels and personally sanctioned by Hitler, packs of SA and SS troops destroyed hundreds of synagogues and thousands of Jewish stores throughout the Reich. At least ninety-one Jews died at the hands of Nazi perpetrators, hundreds committed suicide, and more than 26,000 German-Jewish men were deported to concentration camps. (104)
The increasing precariousness of Jewish existence in Germany was directly attributable to their reclassification: ‘Public identity became a matter of sheer survival. In the Third Reich, “suffering was determined by categories”’(8).

Further exacerbating Jewish suffering were the successes of the Wehrmacht in the early years of the war; bolstered by its military advances across both western and eastern Europe, the Nazis committed themselves to a program of genocide against European Jewry. On the first day of September, 1941 Hitler issued the yellow star decree which increased the visibility of Jews thus subjecting them to increased verbal and physical violence:

The widely visible yellow badges not only allowed but even encouraged ordinary Gentiles, state administrators, party activists, and other Germans of Jewish ancestry to easily identify people marked as Jews in public and to apply Nazi official racial categories to them. Individual Germans could reify exclusionary and anti-Semitic categories, carried from Nazi government agencies via discursive guidelines through the press; prompted by the yellow badges, its readers could then impose those violent and exclusionary terms. Thus, Nazified language further ostracized “star bearers” from the German community and targeted them for physical and verbal assault. (196)

By the middle of the same month Hitler ordered the deportation of all Jews from the Reich. Shipped to occupied eastern Europe, Jews were massacred at a rate of between 2,700 and 4,200 per day (161). With the rise in persecution, and rumours of mass murder circulating, suicide rates amongst the Jewish population within Germany increased dramatically. According to Kaplan, between the autumn of 1941 and spring of 1945, 3000 German Jews took their own lives prior to their deportation (197).

**DIALOGISING LIFE**

Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas has observed that, ‘In horror a subject is stripped of his subjectivity, of his power to have private existence. The subject is depersonalized.’

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destruction many Jews attempted to rediscover their humanity by turning to writing. Through their diaries and letters these Jews sought to affirm and redefine the subjectivity denied them by their oppressors. They thus elevated themselves from the realm of brute being and, through their assertions of subjectivity, acted to resist the dehumanising effects of the Nazis' discourse and policies. Amidst the pages of Hillesum's dairies and letters we encounter one such individual; one who displays a determination to assert moral agency in a world in which morality had collapsed.

It has been said of Hillesum that she lived Heaven in Hell. Few who have read her diaries and letters are left untouched by the spiritual resilience and love displayed across their pages, sentiments forged and enacted amidst the nightmare created by the Nazis that was the Shoah. As mentioned, Hillesum had barely drawn her first breath when war broke out and whilst she survived World War One and lived out her childhood in a state of relative peace, 1933 saw the rise to power of Adolf Hitler, a figure whose ideology would dramatically shape the direction of her life, not to mention the lives of millions of her fellow Jews, and the immediate fate of the European continent. Hitler ascended to the Chancellorship of Germany as Hillesum was embarking on her adult years and only a decade would pass before she became one of the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Yet to label Hillesum a victim is to do her a disservice, for though she died within the barbed-wire fences of the notorious concentration camp, Auschwitz, her writings reveal the development of qualities one does not associate with victims.

Fully cognisant of the fate awaiting her, Hillesum refused to give in to despair: ‘I have looked our destruction, our miserable end, which has already begun in so many small ways in our daily life, straight in the eye and accepted it into my life, and my love of life has not been diminished. I am not bitter or rebellious, or in any way discouraged. I continue to grow from day to day, even with the likelihood of destruction staring me in the face’ (740). As her words indicate,

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Hillesum fought to confront reality as it unfolded and, though this reality was predominantly horrific and its scope enormous, Hillesum did not cower before it; rather, she reduced its power by localising it, by recognising its genesis lay within the human heart:

All disasters stem from us. Why is there a war? Perhaps because now and then I might be inclined to snap at my neighbor. Because I and my neighbor and everyone else do not have enough love. Yet we could fight war and all its excesses by releasing, each day, the love that is shackled inside us and giving it a chance to live. And I believe that I will never be able to hate any human being for his so-called wickedness, that I shall hate only the evil that is within me, though hate is perhaps putting it too strongly even then. In any case, we cannot be lax enough in what we demand of others and strict enough in what we demand of ourselves. And I believe that the reason I am not frightened at times like these is because everything that happens is so close to me, because it originates—no matter what monstrous dimensions it may sometimes assume—from humankind, and thus time and again is reduced to human dimensions. And that is why so many events do not fill me with fear, because I keep thinking that they originate in man, in each individual, in myself, which makes everything understandable and ensures that deeds never degenerate into monstrously inhuman misdeeds. (496)

Hillesum's insistence on the need to look within for the source of evil and good places her in antithetical relationship to Hitler. While Hitler sought to scapegoat the Jews and other undesirables and, through exclusionary language and practices, fought to create a utopia made in his own image and ideology, Hillesum insisted on the need to change the world by starting with herself: the Heaven she created within the Hell that surrounded her was based on principles of inclusion. Rejecting the idea that any one ideology could contain the entirety of truth she instead chose to open herself up to wisdom wherever she found it. (180) Indeed, in contrast to Hitler's monologic word, which enunciated without ears, Hillesum's every sentence is infused with the marks of polyphony. From the myriad of voices, including Dostoevsky's and Rilke's, which inform her reflections and aid her growth, to the affirmations of life's beauty and God's goodness, and her letters from Westerbork, which were so often written with the material and emotional needs of others in mind, Hillesum's writings regularly take the form of a rejoinder; in them we hear echo the accent of her Other. This is
furthermore demonstrated through the diary genre which, in Hillesum’s case, was conceived at the behest of her therapist and friend, Julius Spier and is predicated on an openness to life as it unfolds. Thus it is, that Hillesum’s diaries, in both their form and content, facilitate and reflect the openness of their author. The contrast to Hitler’s political diatribe, *Mein Kampf*, is palpable.

Hillesum, furthermore, fought to embrace reality in all of its diversity and resisted the temptation to categorise even her persecutors as a homogenous group:

...hatred of Germans poisons everyone’s mind. ‘Let the bastards drown, the lot of them’—such sentiments have become part and parcel of our daily speech and sometimes make one feel that life these days has grown impossible. Until suddenly, a few weeks ago, I had a liberating thought that surfaced in me like a hesitant, tender young blade of grass thrusting its way through a wilderness of weeds: if there was only one decent German, then he should be cherished despite the whole barbaric gang, and because of that one decent German it is wrong to pour hatred over an entire people. (30)

Echoing Abraham’s pleas on behalf of the people of Sodom found in the fourteenth chapter of Genesis, this excerpt is one of many examples of linguistic resistance to be found in Hillesum’s writing, which articulates an adversative attitude to those displayed through the linguistic violence inflicted by the Nazis. Yet, as her words reveal, Hillesum also had to resist the cultivation of hatred as the understandable, albeit fruitless, response to Germany’s persecution of the Jews: ‘indiscriminate hatred is the worst thing there is. It is a sickness of the soul’ (30). This conviction, which had germinated in the middle of March 1941, took root in Hillesum’s soul despite the increasingly difficult circumstances of her existence, circumstances brought about by the Nazis’ anti-Semitic measures. Indeed fourteen months later, in the early hours of July 5, 1942 she wrote: ‘we must help increase the store of love in this world. Every bit of hate we add to the surfeit of hate there already is, renders this world more inhospitable and uninhabitable’ (752). Such convictions were not attained without a struggle and reflect an act of the will on Hillesum’s part to submit the hatred of the Holocaust’s perpetrators to a reality-check. While understanding the source of
such hatred, Hillesum also realised the futility of fighting hatred with its like knowing it would only bring about a further diminishment in the event of Being. On December 22, 1941, she wrote: ‘the only true unity is that which embraces all the opposites and irrational elements, or else it is just another form of frenzy, of being tied down, and that violates life’ (326). As such, in contrast to Hitler, when Hillesum looked life in the eyes and encountered the gaze of multiplicity she responded by extending her arms in an attitude of embrace.

One can trace this attitude throughout Hillesum’s writing which, as previously stated, in both its content and form, reflects her openness to existence in all of its terrible beauty. Unlike the discourse found in Mein Kampf, and that disseminated by the Nazis, which operates firmly in the realm of the given, is necessarily cut off from the actuality of existence, exists for itself, and lacks any referential function, the primary constitutive element of Hillesum’s prose is ‘the living word, the full word, [which] does not know an object as something given.’ According to Bakhtin, ‘the mere fact that I have begun speaking about it means that I have already assumed a certain attitude towards it—not an indifferent attitude, but an interested-effective attitude.’

While a document such as Mein Kampf, particularly chapter XI, Race and Nation, is littered with references to the Jews, at no stage is Hitler’s prose marked by the quality of encounter; in fact, quite the opposite is true: the Jew is universally defined as other and at no stage does the Jewish voice intrude upon Hitler’s monologic tirade. Conversely, in Hillesum’s writing, we discover an active encounter with the Other and, where this is lacking, a desire, or capacity to imagine the position of the Other fills its place. In her diary entry of March 28, 1942, Hillesum records the following from a source she cites only as Blumenthal:

‘Do not relieve your feelings through hatred, do not seek to be avenged on all German mothers, for they, too, sorrow at this very moment for their slain and murdered sons. Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due, for if everyone bears his

52 M.M. Bakhtin. Toward a Philosophy of the Act, p.32
53 Ibid.
54 Possibly Otto Blumenthal (1876-1944), German mathematician who passed through Westerbork Transit Camp to Theresienstadt where he died.
grief honestly and courageously, the sorrow that now fills the world will abate. But if you do not clear a shelter for your sorrow, and instead reserve most of the space inside you for hatred and thoughts of revenge—from which new sorrows will be born for others—then sorrow will never cease in this world and will multiply.’ (496, 498)

Blumenthal’s words might well have been spoken by Hillesum, so closely do they resemble her sentiments regarding the futility of hatred as a response to the Holocaust, or indeed to any wrong enacted in the world. That she was now living through her second world war was more evidence than Hillesum required of the need to find another way to respond to the world’s ills. In line with figures such as Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Hillesum insisted that morality should start with the self. Moral indignation, if it is to be authentic, must have the characteristics of the Janus, looking back towards the self and forward to the Other; insofar as Hillesum was concerned, an ethic that lacked this universal vision, that failed to make the self as accountable as the Other was simply self-interest masquerading as morality:

...genuine moral indignation must run deep and not be petty personal hatred, for personal hatred usually means little more than using passing incidents as excuses for keeping alive personal hurts, perhaps suffered years ago—Call it psychology, but we can't let ourselves be led astray any longer; we must look at all that indignation we feel and discover whether its roots were genuine and deep and truly moral. (576)

Situating herself at the centre of her own moral universe, Hillesum strove for synchronicity between her ideals and the world in which she lived out her existence. As such, in perhaps the most demanding assertion of her moral agency and resistance of the Nazis’ efforts to dehumanise the European Jew, Hillesum mobilised her inner resources towards the task of self-actualisation. That she pursued such an undertaking, even in the face of imminent death, reflects her belief in the uniqueness of the self and the interconnectedness of life. As has been noted, such beliefs underpin Bakhtin’s work in equal measure. Since life can only be comprehended as a series of historically constituted events, ‘a
philosophy of life can only be a moral philosophy.\textsuperscript{55} In other words, life exists in the posited realm: its constitutive condition is unfinished, open and necessarily dialogic since it is comprised of a multitude of selves, each of which exists as a morally answerable agent. As Bakhtin observes:

\begin{quote}
The unitary uniqueness of this world (its emotional-volitional, heavy, compellent uniqueness, and not its uniqueness with respect to content/sense) is guaranteed for actuality by the acknowledgment of my unique participation in that world, by my non-alibi in it. This acknowledgment of mine produces a concrete ought—the ought to realize the whole uniqueness of being, in relation to every constituent moment of this being; and that means my participation transforms every manifestation of myself (feeling, desire, mood, thought) into my own actively answerable deed.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

Hillesum realised that for as long as she drew breath, she had a moral obligation to act out of her uniqueness. Indeed, so expansive and compellent was this obligation felt by Hillesum that she sought to act for the benefit of both her present generation and those yet to come:

\begin{quote}
...what they are after is our total destruction, I accept it. I know it now, and I shall not burden others with my fears. I shall not be bitter if others fail to grasp what is happening to us Jews. I work and continue to live with the same conviction, and I find life meaningful—yes, meaningful—although I hardly dare say so in company these days. Living and dying, sorrow and joy, the blisters on my feet and the jasmine behind the house, the persecution, the unspeakable horrors—it is all as one in me, and I accept it all as one mighty whole and begin to grasp it better if only for myself...I wish I could live for a long time so that one day I may know how to explain it, and if I am not granted that wish, well, then somebody else will perhaps do it, carry on from where my life has been cut short. And that it why I must try to live a good and faithful life to my last breath: so that those who come after me do not have to start all over again, need not face the same difficulties. Isn’t that doing something for future generations? (738)
\end{quote}

Hillesum continually situates herself within a vision of life that extends beyond the confines of her own lifespan and her prose regularly demonstrates the

\textsuperscript{55} M.M. Bakhtin. \textit{Toward a Philosophy of the Act}, p.56.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p.57.
markings of one with an historical sense of the world. Seeing herself as participating in a much larger process, Hillesum’s perception is such that it gives greater meaning to her existence and relativises the horrors confronting her: ‘one moment it is Hitler, the next it is Ivan the Terrible; one moment it is the Inquisition and the next war, pestilence, earthquake, or famine. Ultimately what matters most is to bear the pain, to cope with it, and to keep a small corner of one’s soul unsullied, come what may’ (772). With an eye to the past, and armed with an awareness of the transitory nature of life—in all its dimensions—and of her subsequent responsibility to fully enact her moment in being, Hillesum remained true to her word until her last days. As earlier noted, her last known correspondence to the outside world, written on a postcard from the middle of a packed freight car travelling to Auschwitz, sees Hillesum write as one unsullied by the moral vacuum surrounding her. In prose void of any sense of victimisation, she writes of being protected by God and of a departure marked by song.
CHAPTER III

ETTY HILLESUM: CARNIVAL RESISTANCE AND LIBERATION

*Of all living creatures only man is endowed with laughter*

(Aristotle)

CARNIVAL: LIBERATING FROM FEAR

In *Rabelais and His World*, Russian philosopher and literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin explores the folk culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. According to Bakhtin, the primary constitutive element of medieval folk culture was the laughing aspect of the world, which was most clearly expressed through carnival.1 To the men and women of the Middle Ages, carnival provided an escape from the ‘intolerant, one-sided tone of seriousness’ (73) that otherwise dominated their lives. Carnival’s participants were freed from the restrictions of religion, class, ethnicity and gender; hierarchies were demolished: kings were uncrowned and priests mocked; even Hell was subjected to the laughing aspect of the world (91). Indeed, all realms of medieval life that exercised authority over, and provoked fear in the people, were exposed to carnival’s uncrowning processes. As such, carnival, an event heavily invested with philosophical meaning, was concerned with liberation from fear in all its forms. Indeed, all of its symbols, rituals, feasts, even its language, were designed to enact liberation, exposing the people to the laughing aspect of the world.2

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2 Ruth Coates. *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.127: "The primary target of carnival, and by implication that of its eulogist Bakhtin, is arguably not so much the feudal system or the Catholic (or Protestant) Church, nor is it the more basic ideologies of class society or religion; rather it is the captivity of the human spirit as such, its enslavement to fear...carnival is seen by Bakhtin to address a primarily existential state of humankind, and the liberation it brings about is in the first instance a liberation of the spirit...His deeper concern is to expose the logic of power and authority and its relation to truth, and to present laughter as a means..."
So powerful was the carnival-induced spirit of liberation that it created a second realm of existence, which opened its participants up to new ways of seeing. Freed from ‘truth’ dictated from on high, truth, which imprisoned and enslaved, men and women experienced life unshackled by authoritarianism and its mechanisations of fear; they saw the world anew. While the state-sanctioned periods of carnival, which could last up to three months per year (13), provided medieval men and women with a material experience of the laughing aspect of the world, carnival truth was most powerfully experienced interiorly:

Laughter is essentially not an external but an interior form of truth; it cannot be transformed into seriousness without destroying and distorting the very contents of the truth which it unveils. Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power. It unveils the material bodily principle in its true meaning. Laughter opened men’s eyes on that which is new, on the future. (94)

Laughter’s potency, its connection to truth, its power to liberate from fear and its hope-filled orientation, explains why it was so closely monitored during the Middle Ages, a period dominated by official seriousness which ‘terrorized, demanded and forbade’ (94).

Authoritarian societies are universally built upon official seriousness; it is the artifice upon which their authority is fostered. Unlike laughter, which familiarises and comforts, which brings people into dialogic proximity with one another and, in so doing, destroys hierarchy and fear, official seriousness creates distance and division. It establishes hierarchy and enforces its power through its monologic voice. To this voice, subservience is demanded, to its monologic word, no dissent is tolerated. The appearance of unity which monologism promotes to counteract it.’ Coates reading of Bakhtin’s treatment of carnival coincides closely with my own; she articulates here why I found Bakhtin’s analysis, as outlined in Rabelais and His World and Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, such an apt framework for constructing my own reading of Etty Hillesum’s diaries and letters.
constitutes both the foundation and justification of its power. Yet the monologic word is insecure as it masks far more than it reveals. It possesses no signifying function as the ideological unity to which it points is, in the event of Being, nowhere to be found. As such, the constitutive characteristic of the monoglossic word is pretense, and, as history recurrently illustrates, in order to hide its pretentiousness and maintain the illusion of ideological purity upon which it relies, a variety of mechanisms, designed to suppress all that threaten to unmask its deception, are employed.

In contrast to many contemporary examples, medieval authoritarianism sought to mitigate laughter’s liberating power by limiting its movement to a particular time and place, namely the marketplace. Described by Bakhtin as ‘the centre of all that is unofficial [the marketplace] enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official order and official ideology, it always remained “with the people”’ (154). As the geographical heart of the laughing aspect of the world it was a space saturated with an ‘atmosphere of freedom, frankness and familiarity’ (154). Nevertheless, while the marketplace did indeed provide a sanctuary from the official seriousness that otherwise dominated the Middle Ages, strict prohibitions prevented it from breaching its assigned boundaries. As such, ‘its truth was ephemeral; it was followed by the fears and oppressions of everyday life, but from these brief moments another unofficial truth emerged, truth about the world and man which prepared the new Renaissance consciousness’ (91). Herein lies the irrepressible power of the laughing aspect of the world: while its material expression could be monitored and regulated, once its liberating spirit had seeped into medieval man’s consciousness it lay beyond the reach of the controlling arm of authoritarianism. This is not to say that official seriousness lost its power to control medieval populations: ‘The seriousness of fear and suffering in their religious, social, political and ideological forms could not but be impressive’ (95); what is clear, however, is that the laughing aspect of the world, once unleashed, could never be repressed:

It was the victory of laughter over fear that most impressed medieval man. It was not only a victory over the mystic terror of God, but also a victory over the awe inspired by the forces of nature, and most of all
over the oppression and guilt related to all that was consecrated and forbidden (‘mana’ and ‘taboo’). It was the defeat of divine and human power, of authoritarian commandments and prohibitions, of death and punishment after death, hell and all that is more terrifying than the earth itself. Through this victory laughter clarified man’s consciousness and gave him a new outlook on life. (90)

The power of laughter over fear, even the fear of death, has been regularly recognised by despots. Upon his ascension to the Chancellorship of Germany Adolf Hitler immediately began to pursue his ambitious agenda of establishing a thousand-year Reich by eliminating the voices of all he perceived as a threat to his Aryan agenda. ‘One of the Third Reich’s first actions was to pass a censorship law that prohibited mockery of the Nazis, called the “Law against treacherous acts on the state and party and for the protection of the party uniform.” This law made even telling a joke against the Führer or government an act of treason bearing the death penalty. People were put on trial just for naming their dog Adolf.’

Prohibitions such as this highlight the fragility of the autocratic power base: fearful of laughter that uncovers and exposes their limited, monolithic vision, autocrats employ fear-based mechanisms to outlaw dissent and uphold the veneer of their authority. Laughter is necessarily banished because of its democratic nature and its relationship to truth, a relationship articulated by the maxim, ‘What prevents him who says the truth from laughing?’

Medieval men and women were acutely aware of laughter’s connection to truth, They understood that ‘laughter created no dogmas and could not become authoritarian; it did not convey fear but a feeling of strength...It could never become an instrument to oppress and blind the people. It always remained a free weapon in their hand’ (94, 95). Bakhtin’s alignment of folk culture with a laughing aspect of the world is, therefore, unsurprising. Furthermore, since laughter is usually directed towards societies’ upper stratums, the prohibitions enacted against it should also come as no surprise. While medieval laughter

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certainly derided authority in all its forms it was equally concerned with renewal. Unlike satire, which Bakhtin characterises as a laughter that does not laugh (45), carnival laughter was directed towards the folly and pretensions of the whole people:

It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated “comic” event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of the whole people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant and at the same time mocking and deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival. (11-12)

No comparison can be made between carnival laughter and the sardonic laughter of the oppressor taking joy in his victim’s suffering. While the latter derides the Other only and invests no energy into renewal, carnival laughter is derisive of the self as much as it is of the Other; furthermore, carnival laughter disparages not as an end in itself but in order to renew. The uncrowning of kings, for example, reminded the people of power’s transitory nature while carnival feasting, which was characterised by ‘free and familiar contact [between people normally] divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession and age,’ (10) stood in opposition to official feasts whereby ‘everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank and merits to take the place corresponding to his position’ (10). As such, carnival stripped the people of the paraphernalia that differentiated and divided them and provided a site upon which authentic human relations could take place.

In every respect carnival laughter opposed all official aspects of society which were characterised by an intolerant, one-sided tone of seriousness (94); however, this did not preclude it from all forms of seriousness, only that which was characterised by dogmatism, fear and completion, such as the official seriousness of the Middle Ages. That which Bakhtin calls ‘open seriousness,’ (122) was free of dogmatism and thus did not fear the degenerating and renewing effects of carnival laughter for it was ‘aware of being part of an
uncompleted whole’ (122). Bakhtin traces this form of seriousness to the Greek tragedy of antiquity, which was ‘infused with the spirit of creative destruction’ (121) that resembled the ambivalent nature of carnival laughter: ‘Antique tragedy did not fear laughter and parody and even demanded it as a corrective and a complement’ (121). A similar openness is identified in Socratic dialogue and contemporary scientific seriousness, both of which resist finalisation by adopting a self-critical and interminably enquiring approach to the world (121-122). The distinction Bakhtin draws between the dogmatic official seriousness of the Middle Ages and the forms of open seriousness found elsewhere point to the deeply philosophical and enduring nature of carnival’s laughing aspect of the world. It furthermore points to the rationale underpinning this thesis’ methodological approach, which seeks to trace the carnivalesque in the spirituality and writing of Holocaust writer, Etty Hillesum.

Taken in their totality, Hillesum’s diaries and letters represent a polyphonic sense of the world that stands in total opposition to the Nazis’ monologism. Indeed, it is Hillesum’s openness to a multitude of voices, her willingness to listen to a range of ideologies, and the eclectic outlook, which she subsequently came to embody, that has been recognised as one of the few characteristics by which she could be defined. Given the increasingly authoritarian environment that surrounded her during her adult years, Hillesum’s ontological stance demonstrates a high degree of intellectual and moral courage. While fully cognisant of the genocidal intentions and activities of the Nazis, Hillesum, nevertheless, dismisses retaliatory beliefs advocating the extermination of eighty million Germans as the ‘kind of hatred so many people nowadays force upon themselves against their better nature’ (182). In one of the clearest expressions of her polyphonic outlook, Hillesum reflects on a discussion between her friend and confidant, Julius Spier and Werner Levi regarding the significance of Jesus:

On Friday [28 November, 1941] evening a discussion between S. and L. about Christ and the Jews. Two visions of life, sharply defined, brilliantly presented, rounded off; defended with passion and vigour.

5 Open seriousness shall also be referred to as unofficial seriousness within this dissertation.
But I can’t help feeling that every hotly championed vision of life hides something deceitful. That ‘the truth’ is always violated. (260)

These sentiments, which appear recurrently in Hillesum’s diaries and letters, demonstrate the chasm between her ontological stance and that of her oppressor. While the Nazis promoted and operated from a closed ideological system, which, through the exclusion of difference, strove for a state of ideological and existential purity, Hillesum insisted that, ‘Life cannot be forced into a system. Nor can people. Or literature. And it is to systems, sometimes built with great hardship, that men sacrifice reality and truth’ (292). In every sense, Hillesum occupied a dichotomous intellectual and existential realm to that held by the Nazis. Furthermore, in the binary oppositions established by these two worldviews one can trace the battle between the monologic and polyphonic sense of the world; it is a battle that finds its historical precedence in medieval society:

The serious aspects of class culture are official and authoritarian; they are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations and always contain an element of fear and of intimidation. These elements prevailed in the middle ages. Laughter on the contrary, overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority.6

The violence, prohibitions, limitations, fear and intimidation that characterised the official life of medieval man were similarly the constitutive elements of existence for the Jew living under Nazi occupation. Unlike men and women of the Middle Ages, however, Jews were afforded no respite from the mechanisms of fear and oppression that dominated their existence. Far from enjoying a state-sanctioned, carnivalesque second life, the Nazis subjected Jewish men, women and children to an apocalyptic existence: they lived on the precipice of death and in many instances, the certitude and increasing proximity of their demise brought about a state of despair and existential disconnection.

6 Mikhail Bakhtin. Rabelais and His World, p.90.
The ultimate embodiment of this state was the Muselmann, a term given to the camp prisoner ‘who has abdicated his inalienable freedom and has consequently lost all traces of affective life and humanity.’ Jean Amery describes the Muselmann as ‘a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions in its last convulsions, while Primo Levi utilised terms such as ‘non-men,’ (44) ‘shell-man,’ (45) ‘husk-man’ (45). The Muselmann was one in whom the divine spark had died (44). In every sense then, medieval carnival and the Holocaust stand in antithetical opposition: Carnival was a time of festivity. It was an event in which the whole people participated. It was a time of freedom, licentiousness, and liberation from all that oppressed the human spirit. The Holocaust, on the other hand, extinguished life: the deaths of its six-million Jewish victims signified the final act in a systematically stage-managed operation that began with the dehumanisation of its victims through measures designed to elicit submission and crush their spirit. The Muselmann remains a powerful signifier of the effectiveness of this process.

Given the extreme nature of their oppression, it is remarkable, almost incomprehensible, that all Jews were not reduced to the state of the Muselmann. While one can make no definitive statements about the final state of mind of those who perished in Nazi concentration camps, written records of Holocaust victims, such as those of Etty Hillesum, do demonstrate active and conscious resistance on the part of their authors to the measures enacted against them. Such records are important, not only for their revelatory function as cultural artifacts, but also for the way they functioned as conduits of resistance in the lives of their authors. In the case of Hillesum, her writing signified the beginning of a journey of self-discovery that developed into a vehicle of witness and resistance.

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In 1941, eleven months after the Nazis occupied the Netherlands, Hillesum met psycho-chirologist Julius Spier and subsequently decided to undergo therapy with him. As part of this therapy, Hillesum began keeping a diary. Beyond the therapeutic benefits of this practice, it also ‘nourished her early literary ambitions and her later drive to be a chronicler of the fate of the Jewish people in her time’. As such, upon the faded blue lines of her diary, Hillesum found a space in which she could try to make sense of herself and her world: ‘Such a longing to jot down a few words ... Such a strong sense of: here on these pages I am spinning my thread. And a thread does run through my life, through my reality, like a continuous line’ (528). Hillesum, here, points to the critical role the art of writing played in her life. With each entry, Hillesum was able to draw from the absurdity of her existence a sense of meaning. The two and a half years covered by her diaries and letters was a period of immense personal and spiritual growth, characterised by a movement out of fear towards fearlessness. In effect, her diary became her second world and, as this dissertation will show, it was here that she forged her carnival sense of the world.

**CARNIVAL AMBIVALENCE: EMBRACING ALL**

To understand the role Hillesum’s writing played in her personal and spiritual transformation one must consider her life from the perspective of its final chapter. Written in Auschwitz, of these final pages of Hillesum’s life we shall forever be ignorant, for so little that resembled life emerged from within its barbed-wire fences. Nevertheless, as has been shown, Hillesum was acutely aware of the fate awaiting her. Like so many Jews during this period of history, death stood at Hillesum’s door, casting its ever-increasing shadow over her precarious existence. Yet, in a response that can be described as atypical, Hillesum opened the door of her life to death in all of its manifestations; she brought death into familiar proximity by accepting it as an integral part of her existence and thus removed its power to control and paralyse. In her entry of July 2, 1942, Hillesum expresses sentiments which can be accurately described

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as carnivalesque, as they articulate an unconditional openness to life that serves to liberate her from fear in all its forms:

Suffering is not beneath human dignity. I mean: it is possible to suffer with dignity and without. I mean: most of us in the West don’t understand the art of suffering and experience a thousand fears instead. We cease to be alive, being full of fear, bitterness, hatred and despair. God knows, it’s only too easy to understand why. But when we are deprived of our lives, are we really deprived of very much? And I wonder if there is much of a difference between being consumed here by a thousand fears or in Poland by a thousand lice and by hunger? We have to accept death as part of life, even the most horrible of deaths... What I feel is not hopelessness, far from it. What do I mean then exactly? Perhaps: I have lived this life a thousand times over already, and I have died a thousand deaths, so can there be anything new under the sun? (734, 736)

Hillesum, speaking here of death in both its literal and metaphorical sense, identifies the refusal to accept life unconditionally as a source of unnecessary suffering. Indeed, the decision to turn one’s back on suffering, far from mitigating anguish, only serves to increase it. Paradoxically, Hillesum insists that when one accepts suffering, and indeed death, when these realities are embraced as essential parts of one’s existence—in the same way one accepts winter as an inevitable and necessary part of the seasonal weather cycle—they lose their foreboding character, or, rather, they are not invested with potency beyond that inherent to them. To borrow terminology coined by American physiologist Walter Bradford Cannon, when confronted with a multitude of fears, and the choice of fight or flight, Hillesum consistently chose to stand her ground and fight.9

In carnival’s system of grotesque imagery, Bakhtin observes a remarkably similar approach to death as that articulated by Hillesum:

...death is not a negation of life seen as the great body of all the people but part of life as a whole—its indispensable component, the condition of its constant renewal and rejuvenation. Death is here

always related to birth; the grave is related to the earth’s life giving womb. Birth-death, death-birth, such are the components of life itself as in the famous words of the Spirit of the Earth in Goethe’s *Faust*. Death is included in life, and together with birth determines its eternal movement. Even the struggle of life and death in the individual body is conceived by grotesque imagery as the struggle of the old life stubbornly resisting the new life about to be born, as the crisis of change...Thus, in the system of grotesque imagery death and renewal are inseparable in life as a whole, and life as a whole can inspire fear least of all.  

In fidelity to medieval and renaissance folk attitudes, carnival imagery portrays life holistically. As such, the representation of life in its communal aspect takes precedence over its individual manifestations. Thus, in Rabelais’ work we regularly encounter the amalgamation of death and life presented in its macabre-humorous form; nowhere is this more vividly demonstrated than in the grotesque portrayal of the body:

> It is the people’s growing and ever-victorious body that is at home in the cosmos. It is the cosmos’ own flesh and blood, possessing the same elemental force but better organized. The body is the last and best word of the cosmos, its leading force. Therefore it has nothing to fear. Death holds no terror for it. The death of the individual is only one moment in the triumphant life of the people and of mankind, a moment indispensable for their renewal and improvement. (341)

The birth of Rabelais’ hero, Pantagruel, is a case in point, as it brings on the death of his mother, leaving his father in a state of ambivalence as to how to respond to this birth-death event: ‘Gargantua does not know whether to weep over his wife’s death or to laugh with joy at the birth of his son. He now laughs “like a calf” (a newborn animal), or moos “like a cow” (birth-giving and dying)’ (331). This ambivalence is one of carnival’s dominant characteristics. The significance of an individual’s death is diminished in relation to the ever-renewing communal body, as it is simply part of life’s cyclical nature; indeed, since it is intimately connected to birth and renewal it is an inherently positive and hope-filled phenomenon. Interestingly, Hillesum’s reflections from July 2, 1942, cited above, reference suffering within a communal framework: initially she refers to

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westerners and then, through allusions to the Nazi death camps in Poland, incorporates the Jewish community into her deliberations. Her use of the plural personal pronoun we suggests that she identifies with both of these groups. Hillesum goes on to ask rhetorically whether we are deprived of very much when we are deprived of our lives? To the contemporary reader, such a question has a jarring effect; it leaps from the page as an affront to western Enlightenment thought, which elevated the individual to god-like status; to the carnivalesque mind, however, the implications inherent to the question are unexceptional—death and life are intimately linked and, as such, Hillesum’s final, inherently carnivalesque assertion, that she has lived a thousand lives and died a thousand deaths, is simply an acknowledgment of the ambivalent nature of existence.

We seemingly enter into dangerous territory when speaking about ambivalent attitudes towards death and life in the context of the Holocaust. However, it is important to note that this is territory Hillesum herself has broached. From her diary entry of November 30, 1941, it is clear ambivalence is a state Hillesum was familiar with and embraced:

No doubt that my feelings are what is called ambivalent. But for Heaven’s sake, why shouldn’t there be room for everything inside me? In fact, everything is inside me: a heavily charged seriousness and humour and a quick wit. Surely one’s profound inner feelings need not play false? The heavy and light must be accepted as two different aspects of my being. Why deny one aspect as soon as the other asserts itself more strongly? That is nothing but lacking the courage to be oneself. (264)

Clearly, Hillesum sees ambivalence as a positive state of being as it reflects the incongruent nature of existence; as such, certitude attained through the exclusion of contradiction is in fact illusion. As far as Hillesum was concerned, if certitude is to exist, it must be open to life’s absurdities and, as far as absurdities go, none was greater than the Holocaust. It is important then, to distinguish between an acknowledgment of life’s ambivalence and an indifferent approach to life. Hillesum was anything but indifferent to suffering, a point she made recurrently in her diaries and letters. While several instances of resignation to the nature and imminence of her death can be traced in her writing, at no stage
does Hillesum recoil from the moral indignation she feels in relation to the Holocaust. She does, however—as noted in the previous chapter—demand that moral indignation run deep, that it is birthed, not from self-concern, but a concern for the Other (576). Enhancing her ability to cope with her suffering was her capacity to place the events of her life and times within a broader historical framework. In a passage bearing all the hallmarks of a carnivalesque approach to life, Hillesum articulates a perspective that enables her to cope with the suffering that, as a Jew living under Nazi-jurisdiction, must inevitably come her way. Her historical vision relativises both her present and future suffering, enabling her to confront, rather than run from, the difficult circumstances of her present:

Last night I wondered again if I was so 'unworldly' simply because the German measures affect me so little personally. But I don't fool myself for one single moment about the gravity of it all. Yet sometimes I can take the broad historical view of the measures: each new regulation takes its little place in our century, and I try then to look at it from the viewpoint of a later age...every century may stroke the fire with fresh fuels, but all that matters is the warmth of the fire. And the fact that nowadays, we have yellow stars and concentration camps and terror and war is of secondary importance. And I don't feel less militant because of this attitude of mine, for moral certainty and indignation are also part of the 'big emotions.' But genuine moral indignation must run deep... (576)

Hillesum's ability to view life as a phenomenon that was larger than not only her own life, but also larger than a movement as seemingly powerful as the Third Reich, proved to be a source of strength and renewal. Sensitive to the lessons of history, which revealed that the constitutive elements of life were birth, death and renewal, Hillesum determined that for as long as she was a participant in history's continual unfolding she would invest all her energies into activating her uniqueness in Being. It is clear that Hillesum's holistic vision of life and the value she placed on her unique contribution to it, far from dwarfing her place in the event of Being, actually enhanced it. That Hillesum felt a part of something larger than herself facilitated the conviction that the significance of her life would extend beyond the confines of the years allotted to her. Her diary entry of July 3, 1942, cited earlier, signifies her felt responsibility to labour for the sake of future generations; it is a conviction that serves to enhance the meaning of her material
existence by giving her purpose and protection from despair (738). Evidently, Hillesum sees herself as a part of a larger living body that, if needed, will carry on the work she leaves unfinished. Furthermore, her carnivalesque embrace of death as an essential part of life had a powerfully renewing impact upon her existential outlook:

By ‘coming to terms with life’ I mean: the reality of death has become a definite part of my life; my life has, so to speak, been extended by death, by my looking death in the eye and accepting it, by accepting destruction as part of life and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability. Through non-acceptance and through having all those fears, most people are left with just a pitiful and mutilated slice of life, which can hardly be called life at all. It sounds paradoxical: by excluding death from our life we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our life we enlarge and enrich it. (740)

Hillesum’s sentiments are congruent with carnival wisdom, which, by incorporating all aspects of life into its laughing realm, eliminates fear in all its manifestations. As Bakhtin observes, ‘life as a whole can inspire fear least of all’. This carnivalesque approach to the world can also be found in the New Testament scriptures, with which Hillesum was familiar. In the Gospel of John we hear Jesus’ proclamation that ‘unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit’ (John 12:24). Such an image of death and rebirth would have resonated powerfully with Jesus’ agrarian audience, so familiar and reliant were they on the seasonal operations of nature, and, though five centuries separated Jesus’ audience from the collapse of the Roman Empire and advent of the Middle Ages, participants of carnival were no less familiar with life’s cyclical designs; as such, Jesus’ proclamation would have resonated with similar clarity. Indeed, the same birth-death-renewal

11 ‘I wish I could live for a long time so that one day I may know how to explain it, and if I am not granted that wish, well, then somebody else will perhaps do it, carry on from where my life has been cut short. And that is why I must try to live a good and faithful life to my last breath: so that those who come after me do not have to start all over again, need not face the same difficulties. Isn’t that doing something for future generations?’

12 Mikhail Bakhtin. Rabelais and His World, p.50. Subsequent references shall appear in-text.
formula underpinning Jesus’ metaphor took centre stage in carnival celebrations. Describing carnival as ‘the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal (10),’ Bakhtin traces its festivity to the seasonal nature of existence: ‘through all stages of historic development feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man. Moments of death and revival, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world’ (9).

Hillesum, of course, was a product of a radically different society to that which gave birth to carnival. The terror that surrounded her was stamped with the fingerprints of an industrialised world, a world that appeared hell-bent on its own destruction; and, since a third of Hillesum’s life was spent amidst two world wars, her carnivalesque vision could hardly be attributed to a festive experience of the world. Herein lies the critical importance of Hillesum’s writing, for it was on the pages of her diaries that she processed the absurdity of her existence and came to terms with the reality of death. Whilst this will be examined in greater detail later in this dissertation, at this point it is sufficient to note that Hillesum’s diaries and letters acted as her second world. Like carnival’s laughing aspect of the world, which ‘builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state (88),’ so too did Hillesum’s diaries act as a world set apart from the official seriousness, suffering and persecutions that dominated the lives of Jews living under the jurisdiction of the Nazis.

**ETY HILLESUM’S CARNIVAL LAUGHTER**

Having considered Hillesum’s carnivalesque embrace of death as an indispensable component of life and the renewing impact this had upon her ability to live meaningfully in a world in which meaning was increasingly elusive, we shall now turn our attention to carnival laughter as it appears in Hillesum’s writing and ontology. As has been observed, medieval carnival laughter was deeply invested with philosophical meaning. Universally directed, it was indissolubly connected to truth and freedom. Far from contemporary laughter, which is so often directed outside of oneself and used as means to denigrate the
Other, carnival laughter was of the people: it emerged from them and was directed back towards them; as such, it was self-deprecating and, as Bakhtin is at pains to point out, unlike satire, which only derides, carnival laughter was ambivalent—it disparaged and renewed. The essential and indivisible relationship between carnival derision and renewal cannot be overemphasised. In the same way it was understood that death and life were inextricably linked and that from one the other was born, so too was degradation an essential component of renewal:

To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better...it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth takes place. (21)

As such, carnival laughter was often directed towards societies’ upper strataums. The decrowning of kings, the derision of clergy and the mockery of Hell were all designed to subject the mighty and fearsome to the laughing aspect of the world. ‘All unearthly objects were transformed into the earth, the mother which swallows up in order to give birth to something larger that has been improved’ (91). Carnival topography was thus incarnational. Through the perpetual downward movement to the earth, the world was experienced in its laughing and free aspect, liberated from fear and all that terrified.

Whilst one might countenance laughter’s potency in the Middle Ages, which was certainly a time characterised by the widespread use of fear as a means of control, it is perhaps more difficult to imagine its presence amidst the horrors of the Holocaust, an event closer to our own times yet beyond our imaginings in regards to the scale of terror inflicted. Nevertheless, Holocaust survivors and victims have testified to the importance of humour in their resistance. In one of her letters, written within Westerbork transit camp, the last stop for a hundred-thousand Dutch Jews transported to Auschwitz, Hillesum wrote: ‘There was a moment when I felt in all seriousness that after this night it would be a sin to
ever laugh again. But then I reminded myself that some of those who had gone away (on the transports) had been laughing, even if only a handful of them’ (1058). Hillesum not only witnessed laughter, she utilised it to assert her autonomy and as a means of transcending the scapegoating mechanisms employed against her. These two simultaneous movements of resistance and affirmation, which saturate Hillesum’s autobiographical accounts, find their historical precedence in carnival laughter.

Fully aware of the authoritarianism, violence, prohibitions, limitations, fear and intimidation employed by the Nazis against the Jewish population, Hillesum, like medieval man, employs laughter to combat these all ‘too transparent’ (418) devices. This is most vividly recalled in her diary entry of Friday 27 February, 1942 when she recounts her encounter with a young Gestapo officer:

Very early on Wednesday morning a large group of us were crowded into the Gestapo hall, and at that moment the circumstances of our lives were the same. All of us occupied the same space, the men behind the desk no less than those about to be questioned. What distinguished each one of us was only our inner attitudes. I noticed a young man with a sullen expression, who paced up and down looking driven and harassed and making no attempt to hide his irritation. He kept looking for pretexts to shout at the helpless Jews: ‘Take your hands out of your pockets...’ and so on. I thought him more pitiable than those he shouted at, and those he shouted at I thought pitiable for being afraid of him. When it was my turn to stand in front of the desk, he bawled at me, ‘What the hell’s so funny?’ I wanted to say, ‘Nothing’s funny here except you,’ but refrained. ‘You’re still smirking,’ he bawled again. And I, in all innocence, ‘I didn’t mean to, it’s my usual expression.’ And he, ‘Don’t give me that, get the hell out of here,’ his face saying, ‘I’ll deal with you later.’ And that was meant to scare me to death, but the device was too transparent. I am not easily frightened. Not because I am brave, but because I know that I am dealing with human beings and that I must try as hard as I can to understand everything that anyone ever does. And that was the real import of this morning: not that a disgruntled Gestapo officer yelled at me, but that I felt no indignation, rather a real compassion, and would have liked to have asked, ‘Did you have a very unhappy childhood, has your girlfriend let you down?’ Yes, he looked harassed and driven, sullen and weak. I should have liked to start treating him there and then, for I know that pitiful young men like that are dangerous as soon as they are let loose on mankind. But all the blame must be put on the system that uses such people, what needs
eradicating is the evil in man, not man himself. Something else about this morning: the perception, very strongly borne in, that despite all the suffering and injustice, I cannot hate others. All the appalling things that happen are no mysterious threat from afar, but arise from fellow beings, very close to us. That makes these happenings more familiar, then, and not so frightening. The terrifying thing is that systems grow too big for men and hold them in a satanic grip, the builders no less than the victims of the system, much as large edifices and spires, created by men's hands, tower high above us, dominate us, yet may collapse over our heads and bury us. (418, 420)

The importance of this event and its recollection, and the reason for its complete citation here, lies in its demonstration of essential elements of carnival laughter: unlike contemporary satire or the laughter of the oppressor—laughter that does not laugh—which are solely directed towards the subjugation and derision of their subject, Hillesum's laughter does not pursue denigration as an end in itself, nor is it motivated by cruelty. Rather it is universal in its scope: though responding to the transparent fear-based devices of the Gestapo officer, Hillesum laughs at the folly of all of humanity. In so doing, she relocates the authoritative discourse of the oppressor into a universal economy; this serves to undermine its power to instill fear through a process of familiarisation. This process further undermines authoritative discourse by destroying the hierarchy upon which its power is based. Hillesum displays this in the first line of the aforementioned excerpt when she claims that all those gathered in the Gestapo hall that Wednesday morning shared the same circumstances: 'All of us occupied the same space, the men behind the desk no less than those about to be questioned' (418). Not only does Hillesum ignore what most would perceive to be an obvious power differential between the Gestapo officials and Jews in the room, she proceeds to reverse the hierarchy by occupying a position of fearlessness: 'All the appalling things that happen are no mysterious threat from afar, but arise from fellow beings, very close to us. That makes these happenings more familiar, then, and not so frightening' (420). Hillesum's laughter universalises the Gestapo officer's fragilities, and enables her to occupy a completely fearless existential space.

13 Mikhail Bakhtin. Rabelais and His World, p.45. Subsequent references shall appear in-text.
Like medieval carnival laughter, in addition to liberation from fear, Hillesum’s laughter also facilitates renewal: it aims to ‘liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things’ (34). As Hillesum’s laughter is directed towards the whole people’s folly it invites no retaliation. It is renewing because it stops the cycle of hatred, by absorbing it rather than returning it. In literary terms, Hillesum and the Gestapo Officer occupy dichotomous narratives, which are perfectly captured by Bakhtin in the following: ‘Fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter…Complete liberty is possible only in the completely fearless world’ (47). No more vividly are these two worlds highlighted than in Hillesum’s final known correspondence, the importance of which necessitates its repeated citation here:

Opening my bible at random I find this: ‘The Lord is my high tower.’ I am sitting on my rucksack in the middle of a full freight car. Father, Mother and Mischa are a few cars away. In the end, the departure came without warning. On sudden special orders from the Hague. We left the camp singing, Father and Mother firmly and calmly, Mischa, too. We shall be travelling for three days. Thank you for all your kindness and care. Friends left behind will be writing to Amsterdam; perhaps you will hear something from them. Or from my last letter from camp. (1082)

The phrase, which stands out like a beacon in Hillesum’s final statement to the world is her assertion, ‘We left the camp singing’ (1082). In a manner not dissimilar to the aforementioned ritual displayed in Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved, within Hassidic tradition song and dance are valued as supra-linguistic forms of resistance to oppression and its companions, fear and internalised inferiority:

Who says that power comes from a shout, an outcry rather than a prayer? From anger rather than compassion?...The man who goes singing to death is the brother of the man who goes to death fighting. A song on the lips is worth a dagger in the hand. I take this song and
make it mine. But do you know what the song hides? A dagger, an outcry...\(^\text{14}\)

 Appropriately situated at the centre of her final correspondence, Hillesum's song testifies to the central role laughter played in her resistance. Singing, of course, played an essential role in medieval carnival and was seen as synonymous with laughter as it demonstrated the defeat of official seriousness, which was ‘infused with elements of fear, weakness, humility, submission, falsehood, hypocrisy, or on the other hand with violence, intimidation, threats, prohibitions. As a spokesman for power, seriousness terrorized, demanded, and forbade.’\(^\text{15}\) Like Baby Suggs, Hillesum’s song defied all of these traits, present as they were in the Nazis’ rhetoric, but most importantly it revealed her inner freedom and fidelity to truth—that contrary to the reductive narrative of the Nazis, Jews shared a common humanity with all: ‘true peace will come only when every individual finds peace within himself; when we have all vanquished and transformed our hatred for our fellow human beings of whatever race—even into love one day, although perhaps that is asking too much. It is, however, the only solution’ (696).

 Hillesum’s capacity to affirm life’s beauty amidst a world that had industrialised death, her openness and ability to incorporate within herself all aspects of existence and her insistence on the futility of hatred—an emotion that closes one off from the Other and from the open event of Being—all reflect a laughing aspect of the world. Interestingly, in a case of art reflecting life, one of the more famous Holocaust films of recent times, Robert Benigni’s Academy Award winning production, Life is Beautiful, explores the capacity of an individual to affirm life amidst horror and use humour to resist the dehumanising practices of the Nazis. Far from being only ‘the stuff of fiction’ or the imaginings of an eccentric film director, the testimony of Hillesum and other Holocaust survivors and victims support the film’s central premise: that within the laughing aspect of the world one can find a space free from fear-induced paralysis and a source of

\(^{14}\) Jacqueline Bussie. The Laughter Of The Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison and Endo, p.40.

\(^{15}\) Mikhail Bakhtin. Rabelais and His World, p.94. Subsequent references shall appear in-text.
resistance and renewal. As Bakhtin indicates, 'Laughter showed the world anew in its gayest and most sober aspects. Its external privileges are intimately connected with interior forces; they are a recognition of the rights of those forces. This is why laughter could never become an instrument to oppress and blind the people. It always remained a free weapon in their hand' (94).

According to Bakhtin, 'Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter' (66). Within the records of Holocaust survivors and victims, where we discover the widespread recognition of the failure of language to represent and respond to their experience, we also find testimony confirming the presence of laughter within the camps. In Hillesum’s letter dated August 24, 1943, she records her response to the absurd cruelty of life in Westerbork:

Oafish, jeering faces, in which one seeks in vain for even the slightest trace of human warmth. At what fronts did they learn their business? In what punishment camps were they trained? For after all, this is a punishment isn’t it? A few young women are already sitting in a freight car. They hold their babies on their laps, their legs dangling outside—they are determined to enjoy the fresh air as long as possible. Sick people are carried past on stretchers. I almost find myself laughing; the disparity between the guards and the guarded is too absurd. My companion at the window shudders. (1068, 1070)

To witness the transports of multitudes of men, women and children to their death was to observe an event that lay beyond reason’s capacity for explanation. Hillesum experienced ‘the radical negativity of the Shoah (which) irreparably ruptures language, rendering discursive thought lamentably inadequate.’ Tellingly, laughter arises as the only audible response, or, in the case of her companion, a shudder fills the lacuna left by the failure of language. In this incident we see laughter operating where words fall silent.

In her analysis of laughter in Elie Wiesel’s, Gates of the Forest, Jacqueline Bussie provides a characterisation of Holocaust laughter that applies with equal force to Hillesum’s laughter:

\[16\] Jacqueline Bussie. The Laughter Of The Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison and Endo, p.33.
laughter functions as a mode of ethical and theological resistance in the face of radically negating oppression that has ruptured both language and traditional frameworks of belief…first, laughter functions as a creative, extra-linguistic response to tragic suffering and the commonly acknowledged post-Holocaust rupture of language and crisis of representation. In this way, laughter also evokes the limit of Holocaust storytelling. Second, on the ethical level, laughter functions as an interruption of the system and state of oppression imposed on the Jews by the Nazis. In this way, Jewish laughter helps the sufferer resist internalization of the oppressors’ values, including the oppressors’ dehumanization of the oppressed. Third, laughter is a unique theodicean response to the problem of evil—a response that resists evil and acknowledges with Paul Ricoeur that evil cannot be thought. As a creative and protesting response to the twin problems of evil and suffering, laughter interrupts the banality of evil. Fourth, also on the theological level, laughter helps the suffering believer to resist metaphysical despair, absolute doubt, and the logical outcome of such despair—loss of faith. Laughter achieves this by capturing the paradox of faith…in a way that rational discourse cannot. And finally and fifth, laughter is a form of ‘mad midrash’—an attempt to hold together God and the world in the face of radical evil.\(^{17}\)

As Hillesum observed the loading of the transports she looked in vain for signs of humanity amongst her oppressors; finding none, she instead discovers the failure of language to express the evil before her. The subsequent desire to laugh that arises from within her places her in antithetical space to that of her oppressors. Hillesum’s laughter is a rejection of the existential schism brought about by their actions and she quarantines herself from the ideologically derived hatred motivating their crimes. To locate the theodicean element of Hillesum’s laughter we must look beyond this event to her reflections of the role and place of God amidst the Holocaust. Quoting Rilke, Hillesum lays the blame for the Shoah at the feet of humanity: ‘For truly, even the greatness of the gods depends upon their need: no matter what house we keep for them, they are nowhere safe except in our hearts’ (832). In this carnivalesque maxim, which brings the omnipotent deities down into the material realm, specifically into the hearts of humanity, the traditional theological power-structures are inverted to the extent that the gods’ influence becomes entirely contingent upon the capacity of men and women to live out their dictums. Hillesum develops these sentiments in her

\(^{17}\) Ibid., p.31.
diaries insisting ‘that it is not God’s fault that things are as they are at present, but our own. We have been granted every opportunity to enter every paradise, but we still have to learn to handle these opportunities’ (768). This attitude conforms to Hillesum’s refusal to scapegoat others. In her reflections on the origins of war, cited in chapter two, Hillesum places responsibility on the self (496). Global conflict, she reasons, is the individual’s failings writ large. Biblically speaking, war reflects the failings of those who pass by their neighbour in need and can only be solved by the response of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-27).

In Levinasian terms, Hillesum sought to address the ills of the world through her asymmetrical responsibility to her Other. Rejecting the tendency to scapegoat, which Hillesum realised only deepened the rupture in life, and, instead, taking responsibility to actualise her unique contribution to the event of Being, Hillesum enhanced her power as an autonomous human agent. Refusing to see herself as a victim, she invested her energies into reconciling the gulf in humanity, an aspiration expressed by the final exhortation found in her diaries: ‘We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds’ (886).

**OPEN SERIOUSNESS IN ETTY HILLESUM’S WORLDVIEW**

At this juncture it is appropriate to recall the familiarity of seriousness to the laughing aspect of the world. Of course, as has been earlier noted, carnival seriousness or, that which Bakhtin calls open seriousness, stands in contrast to official seriousness, which conjoins itself with ‘violence, intimidations, threats (and) prohibitions. As a spokesman of power, seriousness terrorized, demanded and forbade. It therefore inspired the people with distrust. Seriousness had an

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18 ‘All disasters stem from us. Why is there a war? Perhaps because now and then I might be inclined to snap at my neighbor. Because I and my neighbor and everyone else do not have enough love. Yet we could fight war and all its excesses by releasing, each day, the love that is shackled inside us and giving it a chance to live. And I believe that I will never be able to hate any human being for his so-called wickedness, that I shall hate only the evil that is within me, though hate is perhaps putting it too strongly even then. In any case, we cannot be lax enough in what we demand of others and strict enough in what we demand of ourselves.’
official tone and was treated like all that was official. It oppressed, frightened, bound, lied and wore the mask of hypocrisy.\textsuperscript{19} By contrast, open seriousness, which finds itself at home with the laughing aspect of the world, is inherently accessible. Unlike the seriousness of the Nazis, which actively prohibited laughter, lest its frail foundations be exposed, open seriousness is securely entrenched within the open event of being: ‘True open seriousness fears neither parody, nor irony, nor any other form of reduced laughter, for it is aware of being part of an uncompleted whole’ (122). For its part, while laughter militates against official seriousness, in the company of open seriousness it operates unhindered:

True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness. Such is the function of laughter in the historical development of culture and literature. (123)

To read Hillesum’s writings is to encounter a body of work that shares all of the traits assigned here by Bakhtin to laughter. The lack of fear and dogmatism characteristic of her outlook have already been touched upon; however, in order to solidify the foundations of our claim that Hillesum’s diaries and letters articulate a laughing approach to the world, it is appropriate to turn our attention to a more specific and in-depth analysis of the open seriousness permeating her work.

In her diary entry of March 15, 1941, Hillesum reflects on the use and abuse of truth in the political realm, asserting that ‘One must never compromise with the truth in politics, otherwise one turns into a petty demagogue oneself. Political truth must be incorporated into the greater “Truth”. When it comes to this, one’s stand must be perfectly clear’ (32). In elaborating upon her assertion, Hillesum

\textsuperscript{19} Mikhail Bakhtin. \textit{Rabelais and His World}, p.94. \textit{Subsequent references shall appear in-text.}
cites the observable tendency amongst Jews, including herself, to misrepresent and/or completely fabricate situations in order to justify their hatred of Hitler’s regime. Condemning this tendency, she compares it to the tactics employed by the propaganda chiefs of the Third Reich designed to ‘incite people with theories they don’t believe in themselves’ (34). Hillesum goes on to connect this lack of fidelity to the truth with barbarism, a barbarism that must necessarily be rejected in order to drag the world from the moral quagmire in which it found itself. In responding to the Nazis’ cruelty, Hillesum insists on a brand of resistance that in terms of both its means and ends rejects Nazi methods:

‘Fighting the evil instincts those people bring out in one is something quite different from supposedly being “objective”, from seeing the supposed “good” in the enemy—doing that is mere shilly-shallying and has nothing to do with what I am talking about. But you can be very militant and act in a principled way without being crammed full of hatred, and you can be chock-a-block full of hatred without realizing what it is all about.’ (34)

Hillesum is here advocating an ethic grounded in the event of Being; in other words, she demands synchronicity between ideology and life. Any reliance upon lies or even half-truths to justify one’s stance brings about the sort of disjuncture in the event of Being that was the central preoccupation of Bakhtin’s Toward a Philosophy of the Act and the primary focus of the previous chapter of this dissertation. In this instance, the ‘Truth’ to which Hillesum demands submission is grounded in Being. As such, any truth posited in the theoretical realm must coincide with the actuality of existence. Put simply, Hillesum is demanding that one’s words conform to reality, that representations are authentic and not deliberately calculated misrepresentations. Such an idea, which is effectively a rejection of hypocrisy, is far from radical; however, as our analysis of Nazi rhetoric has shown, in the context of her times, it was an authenticity often neglected. Nevertheless, Hillesum’s call to ground ideological truth within the event of Being is inherently carnivalesque as it brings truth from the ethereal realm down into the material ground of existence.20 In conformance with

Bakhtin’s aforementioned description of laughter, Hillesum rejects dogmatism...didacticism, naiveté and illusion.\textsuperscript{21} Neither does she permit ‘seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete.’\textsuperscript{22} Rather, she restores to the world its ambivalent wholeness. When Hillesum speaks of battling, it is most often referencing her efforts to reconcile the world of ideology with the existential realm. In her diary entry of October 4, 1941, Hillesum articulates this struggle through a self-referential address: ‘That is your disease: you want to capture life in formulas of your own. You want to embrace all aspects of your life with your intellect instead of allowing yourself to be embraced by life. You want to create the world all over again, each time, instead of enjoying it as it is. There is something compulsive about it all’ (194). Nevertheless, Hillesum spent the remainder of her life fighting this compulsion. In contrast to Hitler, who attempted to force Being into a narrow and narcissistically framed realm of ideology, Hillesum chose the path of ambivalence—understood as an openness to contrasting phenomena, to the world of fluctuations, paradox, uncertainty and nuances, an openness to the historically constituted event of Being as it unfolded:

\begin{quote}
I keep looking for harmony, for synthesis, but know perfectly well there isn’t any. I want to see everything from just one angle, express it as a single idea, but the only way to find harmony is to accept all (of) life’s contradictions. Every pole has its opposite, like it or not. But it’s not enough to grasp with your mind alone, you must also experience the multiplicity of phenomena and not try to forge that multiplicity into some sort of unity. (188)
\end{quote}

Hillesum’s efforts to accept multiplicity began with her own living arrangements:

down to earth; ahistorical, metaphysical truths enter into the realm of chronotopic (spatial and temporal) limitation and possibility and are thereby divested of their power to distance and to terrify the believer. Jesus is “Immanuel, God with us” (Isaiah 7.14; Matthew 1.23).’ As earlier mentioned, Coates identifies a significant incarnational motif running through Bakhtin’s work. The materialisation of Truth, which, as Coates observes, is central to carnival’s philosophy, is similarly significant to Hillesum.

\textsuperscript{21} Mikhail Bakhtin. \textit{Rabelais and His World}, p.123.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
I have recently made it my business to preserve harmony in this household of so many conflicting elements: a German woman, a Christian of peasant stock, who has been a second mother to me; a Jewish girl student from Amsterdam; an old levelheaded social democrat; Bernard the Philistine, with his pure heart and his fair intellect, but limited by his background; and an upright young economics student, a good Christian, full of gentleness and sympathetic understanding but also with the kind of Christian militancy and rectitude we have become accustomed to in recent times. Ours was and is a bustling little world, so threatened by politics from outside as to be disturbed within. But it seems a worthy task to keep this small community together as a refutation of all those desperate and false theories of race, nation and so on. A proof that life cannot be forced into pre-set molds. (30)

In carnivalesque terms, Hillesum was firmly grounded in the earth and, as the aforementioned excerpt demonstrates, she constantly fought to test her ideas in the material realm. It is important to note that, in speaking of Hillesum’s efforts, verbs such as fought and battled, are entirely appropriate, as they allude to the difficulties she experienced in her attempts to transcend her desires to stereotype by assigning blame to the entire German population for the Jewish persecutions. Indeed, this was a battle she experienced on her home front, specifically in relation to her German housemate, Kathe:

Sometimes when I read the papers or hear reports of what is happening all round, I am suddenly beside myself with anger, cursing and swearing at the Germans. And I know that I do it deliberately to hurt Kathe...now and then I say nastily, ‘They’re all scum,’ and at the same time I feel terribly ashamed and deeply unhappy, but can’t stop even though I know it’s all wrong. At other times, we all feel very close to Kathe and tell her encouragingly, ‘Yes, of course there are still some good Germans, and anyway, the soldiers can do nothing about it, and there are some quite nice ones among them.’ (32)

Herein lies one of the primary differences between Hillesum and her persecutors. When confronted with stereotypes, Hillesum subjected these to the material realm. Where, in the open event of Being, she found a single exception that disproved the rule, Hillesum rallied behind it, knowing that her failure to do so would violate life and drive the wedge of division further into the existential realm. Indeed, on March 17, 1941, only two days after articulating her struggles with Kathe, Hillesum wrote the following: ‘Anyone who lumps people together
(and then despises them) betrays his own sloth and lack of discrimination. Those who do so never care to be likened to others themselves, because they consider themselves better than the rest’ (48). This statement, which was very likely written with the Nazis in mind, identifies intellectual laziness and a closed approach to life as the central causes of anti-Semitism and, indeed, all forms of prejudice. As a victim of a regime that readily sacrificed truth upon the altar of ideology, Hillesum was acutely aware of the devastatingly violent impacts this willing disconnect between ideology and life had on existence. Armed with such knowledge she endeavoured to ensure the same disjunction was not replicated in her own life.

Standing alongside its connection to truth, open seriousness shared laughter's relationship to freedom; the elemental manifestation of this carnival freedom was the liberation from fear in all its appearances. Amongst medieval men and women, whose lives were dominated by the 'seriousness of fear and suffering in their religious, social, political and ideological forms...it was understood that fear never lurks behind laughter (which does not build stakes) and that hypocrisy and lies never laugh...’

While church and state, as the main agents of medieval official seriousness, colluded to induce the people's subservience through the threat of immolation of body and soul at the stake and an eternity within Hell thereafter, open seriousness rejected blind adherence to dogma and monolithic world views, as these inevitably led to fanaticism and violated life's multiplicity. Significantly, Hillesum's writings powerfully express this same concern with freedom; a frequently used example cited to demonstrate Hillesum's ideological freedom is her response to an aforementioned conversation regarding Christ and the Jews. Her 'feeling that every hotly championed philosophy hides a little lie. That it must fall short of the truth' (260) is mirrored by her insistence that 'life is full of endless nuances and cannot be captured in just a few formulas' (220).

These sentiments reflect Hillesum's ability to confront life, as a historically constituted, infinitely dynamic and complexly unfolding phenomenon. Such a high degree of openness required Hillesum to forgo many of her own preconceptions and simultaneously opened her up to a richer experience of life

than would otherwise have been possible. This carnavalesque experience of death and rebirth, which saw her prejudices and predeterminations give way to life’s regenerating processes, formed part of her reflections on September 25, 1941: ‘...my brain, my capable brain, tells me there are no absolutes, that everything is relative, endlessly diverse, and in eternal motion, and that it is precisely for that reason that life is so exciting and fascinating, but also so very, very painful’ (172). As such, instead of slavishly adhering to a single ideology, Hillesum embraced truth wherever she found it. We are not speaking here of a postmodern outlook which relativises truth to such a degree as to render it meaningless; Hillesum did not assign truth to subjectivity, but rather submitted subjectivity to truth, which she recognised as constitutively life-enhancing. For Hillesum this meant refusing to imprison life or people within one’s preconceptions which violates life by submitting it to the theoretical realm: ‘...not only must we gain inner freedom from one another, but we must also leave the other free and abandon any fixed concept we have of him in our imagination. There is scope enough for imagination as it is. Without our having to use it to shackle the people we love’ (254).

Literature provided one such avenue for the exercise of the imagination, however, in its reception, Hillesum demanded the same freedom and openness as that which she required for life: ‘one must approach a book in the same way as one approaches one’s fellow man. Without preconceived ideas or demands. Sometimes one forms an image of the work after the first few pages and clings to that image, refusing to let it go—often doing violence to the author. Human beings must be granted their full freedom and so must books. Every expression used by a person or found in a book may cast a sudden and surprising new light, shattering our fixed ideas and the certainty into which they have lulled us’ (81). Once again, we find Hillesum occupying adverse ideological space to that of her oppressors whose genocidal activities were preceded by the burning of Jewish literature, an act famously prefigured by German-Jewish poet, Heinrich Heine’s words, ‘Where they have burned books, they will end in burning human
As a response to the Nazis’ linguistic violence, which violated literature and life, Hillesum’s work epitomises a carnivalesque open seriousness that embraces rather than excludes. In her own words: ‘...the only true unity is that which embraces all the opposites and irrational elements, or else it is just another form of frenzy, of being tied down and that violates life’ (326).

Coinciding with Hillesum’s ideological freedom was a freedom from fear that arose from her fidelity to the present moment. Living with an acute awareness of the importance of the present and knowing her potency lay only within the now, Hillesum was unfettered by the past and refused to bow to the sort of fears that were for many Jews the fruit of a precarious future:

> Reality is something one shoulders together with all the suffering that goes with it, and with all the difficulties. And as one shoulders them, so one’s resilience grows stronger. But the idea of suffering (which is not the reality, for real suffering is always fruitful and can turn life into a precious thing) must be destroyed. And if you destroy the ideas behind which life lies imprisoned as behind bars, then you liberate your true life, its real mainsprings, and then you will also have the strength to bear real suffering, your own and the world’s. (864)

In a typically carnivalesque assertion, Hillesum subordinates the realm of the theoretical and imagined to the material reality of existence. Possibilities are ignored in favour of encounter with the actual. By resisting the tendency to expend energy upon imagined sufferings, Hillesum instead channeled her strength into confronting life as it unfolded before her. Furthermore, in her assertion that the fruit of suffering borne is resilience, we see yet another example of the carnivalesque in operation. Like carnival laughter, which derides and renews, suffering borne births new possibilities into the world. In the case of Hillesum, it was an avenue that led to a world of creative possibilities.

Of course, such assertions, while verifiable through a reading of Hillesum’s writings, are entrenched in paradox and, as such, to generations steeped in Enlightenment rationality, appear to border on the absurd. Ironically, however,

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those operating within carnivalesque ideology would have viewed the Enlighteners’ reduction of epistemology to rationality with similar incredulity, indeed, Bakhtin identifies this ideological gulf as the source of contemporary misunderstandings of Rabelais and, by extension, all who operate from a carnivalesque worldview:

The Enlighteners had a lack of historical sense, an abstract and rationalist utopianism, a mechanistic conception of matter, a tendency to abstract generalisation and typification on one hand, and to documentation on the other hand...cogitative reason became the yardstick of all that existed. This abstract rationalism and antihistoricism, this tendency to generalisation and nondialectic thought (the break between negation and affirmation) prevented the Encyclopedists from grasping theoretically the nature of ambivalent festive laughter. The image of the contradictory, perpetually becoming and unfinished being could not be reduced to the dimensions of the Enlighteners’ reason.25

Whilst a worldview that embraces both rationality and supra-rationality (reality that lies beyond reason), cannot be accommodated by the Enlighteners, Hillesum had no such difficulties in accepting life’s ambivalence and, based on three quotes copied from Will Durant’s The Mansions of Philosophy into the first diary, she also shared Bakhtin’s concerns about the reduction of knowledge to rationality. Given that it was Hillesum’s practice to transcribe excerpts from works that she found meaningful into her diaries, it is worthwhile citing each here:

Nowadays no one (except for Spengler) dares to look at life as a whole; analysis is rushing ahead and synthesis is lagging behind; we fear the experts in every field, and for the sake of our own safety remain stuck within the narrow confines of our own discipline. Everyone knows his part, but not its meaning in the play as a whole. Life is losing its purpose and is becoming empty just when it seemed so full of promise.

We shall define philosophy as a view of the whole, as the spirit, spread out over life and forging unity out of chaos.

Knowledge is power, but wisdom alone is freedom. Culture in our time is superficial and our knowledge dangerous because we are rich in mechanisms and poor in objectives. The intellectual balance that sprang from a warm religious belief has disappeared; science has removed the supernatural foundations of our moral philosophy, and the whole world seems consumed by an unruly individualism, which reflects the chaotic fragmentation of our character. (36)

Hillesum’s rejection of the Enlightenment’s division of knowledge—organised as it is within a rational/irrational binary that privileges the first and derides the second—is perhaps best understood beneath the shadow cast by the Holocaust. As has been discussed, the Shoah was born of an ideology that was totally separated from the reality of existence. As such, with origins that lacked any grounding in reality but consequences that were all too real, the Shoah introduced a radical disjunction into Being and exposed rationality’s inability to account for life’s ambivalence. As Theodor Adorno observes, ‘rational cognition has one limit: its inability to cope with suffering.’

Confronted with an event incompatible with reason and saturated by suffering, Hillesum sought alternate resources with which to find meaning amidst the absurdity of her existence:

True, things happen here that in the past our reason would not have judged possible. But perhaps we have faculties other than reason in us, faculties that in the past we didn’t know we had but that possess the ability to grapple with the incomprehensible. I believe that for every event, man has a faculty that helps him deal with it. If we save our bodies and nothing more from the camps all over the world, that would not be enough. What matters is not whether we preserve our lives at any cost, but how we preserve them. I sometimes think that each new situation, good or bad, can enrich us with new insights. But if we abandon the hard facts that we are forced to face, if we give them no shelter in our hearts, do not allow them to settle and change into impulses through which we can grow and from which we can draw meaning—then we are not a viable generation. It is not easy—and no doubt less easy for us Jews than for anyone else—yet if we have nothing to offer a desolate postwar world but our bodies saved at any cost, if we fail to draw meaning from the deep wells of our distress and despair, then it will not be enough. New thought will have to radiate outward from the camps themselves, new insights, spreading lucidity, will have to cross the barbed wire enclosing us and join with the insights that people outside will have to earn just as

26 Jacqueline Bussie. The Laughter Of The Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison and Endo, p.34.
Hillesum’s resolve to find new ways to deal with the horror of the Holocaust, represents an absolute rejection of its designs. The observable lack of fear that so often characterised her response to the increasingly arduous circumstances of Jewish life is symptomatic of the carnivalesque vision through which she perceived the world. Hillesum sought the sort of existential insight that would enhance not only her life, but also the life of the whole people, so that humanity might progress, even if only by one tentative step. It is impossible to imagine such a breadth of vision developing within one overcome by fear, as it has an insular rather than expansive effect upon the individual. Contrastingly, Hillesum drew strength from suffering, claiming her sorrows as amongst the most precious constituents of her being because of the creative activity to which they gave birth (424). In one of her more striking reflections, on the evening of March 12, 1942, Hillesum wrote: ‘If you have a rich inner life, I would have said, there probably isn’t all that much difference between the inside and outside of a camp’ (448). While in the ensuing sentences she wondered whether she could live up to such sentiments given the increasing levels of hardships confronting Jews such as herself, there is no indication in her subsequent writings of her having abandoned the struggle to maintain a sense of freedom. Indeed, herein lies the source and ultimate statement of Hillesum’s resistance: in her fidelity to maintaining a diary Hillesum asserts her humanity in an increasingly inhumane world.

**ETTY HILLESUM’S SECOND WORLD**

In its conception, formation and reception, art exists as an inherently posited phenomenon; in the first instance, it opens the artist to themselves and their world and, in the second, invites its recipient into a similarly unfinalised world. Art cannot coincide with the given, for this is the realm of the propagandist who speaks without ears. Conversely, even after the work of the artist is conceived and produced and thus moves out of the hands of he or she who gave it birth, it
offers itself to reception and interpretation, as such, it exists as a living organism. Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*, produced in 1937 as a response to the Spanish Civil War is a case in point. As a comment on the destructive powers of war, it speaks powerfully beyond the event that inspired its production, to those who endured the Second World War and every generation henceforth who have witnessed humanity’s unceasing propensities towards self-destruction. In their reception, Hillesum’s diaries operate in a similar fashion. It is in their production, however, that their full and most immediate impact can be appreciated.

According to Rachel Brenner, the diary as ‘an intermittent recording of events as they evolve—indicates a continuous, almost uninterrupted, creative use of time.’ This is based on the genre’s composition as “a book of time,” the diary points to two durations of time: the duration of the occurrence and the duration of its recording’ (137). Given that the raw material of life becomes the focus of the diarist’s art—in the case of Hillesum—its foreboding character is transformed into material suitable for creative use. As such, ‘writing engenders an attitude that obviates the sense of hopelessness the experience evokes’ (137). In effect, the diary creates a second world in which the diarist is able to free herself from a preoccupation with circumstances that were designed to induce paralysis by removing the capacity for human agency. While mindful of the increasing restrictions of life under Nazi occupation, by keeping a diary, Hillesum was able to exert some control over these same circumstances by viewing them as an artist rather than as a victim. As Brenner observes, Hillesum’s writing is a ‘force that shapes her life as a meaningful whole’ (138). Importantly, much of this meaning is determined by the poetics of the diary form—one that is inherently open to life as it unfolds and to the yet to be disclosed future: ‘Every entry produces anticipation of the next entry and thus creates future expectations. It is precisely the intermittent and dated form of diaristic writing that infuses the recoded life with a sense of vitality’ (139). Plainly aware of the life-giving force of her chosen art, Hillesum expressed dread of a time when this too would be

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denied her: ‘the worst thing for me will be when I am no longer allowed pencil and paper to clarify my thoughts—they are absolutely indispensable to me, for without them I shall fall apart and be utterly destroyed’ (760).

The importance of the act of writing as an assertion of self-agency cannot be overstated. Given the industrialised scope of the depersonalisation and destruction of European Jews—a process that produced the Muselmann—any affirmation of human agency took on greater significance. In Hillesum's case, writing was a source of vitality and renewal; not only did it open a space free from the climate of fear that surrounded her, but, in the course of committing her reflections of the day's events to paper, Hillesum was able to process and transcend the fear that led others to a state of inertia: 'By virtue of its existence in the reality of the Final Solution, the diary generates tension that upholds life. The determination to engage in diaristic writing creates life-sustaining tension, because the activity of recreating life in art clashes with the terrible alternative of passive surrender to the lifelessness of despair.'

While life in Nazi-occupied Netherlands certainly produced in Hillesum moments of fear and dread, examples of entries that exhibit a noticeable lack of fear in the face of Nazi-manufactured nihilism, abound within her diaries. One of the most common phrases found in Hillesum’s writing, a phrase that, contrary to expectations, increases commensurately with the rising oppression of the Jews, is her affirmation: 'life is beautiful' (118). If French poet, Charles Baudelaire is correct in his assertion that, 'the repetition of a particular word betrays the obsession and soul of an author,’ then Hillesum is obsessed with the beauty she perceives in life, even under the most depraved of circumstances. In a letter to Johanna and Klaas Smelik, composed from within the confines of Westerbork transit camp only four months before her death, Hillesum writes:

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

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28Ibid., p.138.
29 Jacqueline Bussie. The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo, p.31.
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. Against every outrage and every fresh horror, we shall put up one more piece of love and goodness, drawing strength from within ourselves. We may suffer, but we must not succumb. (1008)

From the emotional freedom that Hillesum here articulates we hear the echoes of medieval laughter, which enacted ‘a liberation of the emotions that dim the knowledge of life.’ According to Bakhtin, such laughter ‘proves the existence of clear spiritual vision and bestows it. Awareness of the comic and reason are the two attributes of human nature. Truth reveals itself with a smile when man abides in a nonanxious, joyful, comic mood’ (141). Whilst the aforementioned excerpt lacks laughter in its specific form it is nevertheless imbued with the ‘positive, regenerating, creative’ (70) spirit that is characteristic of the laughing approach to the world. As Hillesum describes it, an energy soars from within her that enables her to see beyond the barbed-wire fence surrounding her to a future defined by the creation of a new world. Thus, in response to the Nazi-created dystopia Hillesum imagines a utopia built with love and goodness. However, in truth, Hillesum’s vision is more substantial than hopeful imaginings; it is rather the projection of her inner experience, her innermost world: ‘Through me course wide rivers and in me rise tall mountains. And beyond the thickets of my agitation and confusion there stretch the wide plains of my peace and surrender. All landscapes are within me. And there is room for everything’ (880). Indeed, commensurate with the increasing persecution of the Nazis was the growth of Hillesum’s interior world:

Everywhere signs barring Jews from the paths and the open country. But above the one narrow path still left to us stretches the sky, intact. They can’t do anything to us, they really can’t. They can harass us, they can rob us of our material goods, of our freedom of movement, but we ourselves forfeit our greatest assets by our misguided compliance. By our feelings of being persecuted, humiliated and oppressed. By our own hatred. By our swagger, which hides our fear. We may of course be sad and depressed by what has been done to us;

that is only human and understandable. However, the greatest injury is the one we inflict upon ourselves. I find life beautiful, and I feel free. The sky within me is as wide as the one stretching above my head. I believe in God and I believe in man, and I say so without embarrassment.’ (696)

In claiming insulation from the horror of the Shoah, Hillesum is clearly speaking metaphysically. It is an assertion of her humanity, a phenomenon, which, in her experience, exceeds the limits of the material world. For Hillesum, resistance of the Nazis consists not in evading the Shoah, but in maintaining her place in being as an autonomous and free agent. Reflecting on a conversation about the labor camps from the previous night, Hillesum in her diary entry of July 5, 1942 stated: ‘the main thing is that even as we die a terrible death we are able to feel right up to the last moment that life has meaning and beauty, that we have realized our potential and lived a good life’ (758). Less than a week later, in her diary entry of July 11, Hillesum elaborates upon this theme in a reflection which powerfully conveys her existential stance:

Many accuse me of indifference and passivity when I refuse to go into hiding; they say that I have given up. They say everyone who can must try to stay out of their clutches, it’s our bounden duty to try. But that argument is specious. For while everyone tries to save himself, vast numbers are nevertheless disappearing. And the funny thing is, I don’t feel I’m in their clutches; I feel safe in God’s arms, to put it rhetorically, and no matter whether I am sitting at this beloved old desk now, or in a bare room in the Jewish district, or perhaps in a labor camp under SS guards in a month’s time—I shall always feel safe in God’s arms. They may well succeed in breaking me physically, but no more than that. I may face cruelty and deprivation the likes of which I cannot imagine in my wildest fantasies. Yet all this is as nothing to the immeasurable expanse of my faith in God and my inner receptiveness. I shall always be able to stand on my own two feet even when they are planted on the hardest of soil of the harshest reality. And my acceptance is not indifference or helplessness. I feel deep moral indignation at a regime that treats human beings in such a way. But events have become too overwhelming and too demonic to be stemmed with personal resentment and bitterness. These responses strike me as being utterly childish and unequal to the ‘fateful’ course of events...It is not as if I want to fall into the arms of destruction with a resigned smile—far from it. I am only bowing to the inevitable, and even as I do so I am sustained by the certain knowledge that ultimately they cannot rob us of anything that matters. I certainly do not want to go out of some sort of masochism,
to be torn away from what has been the basis of my existence these last few years. But I don't think I would feel happy if I were exempted from what so many others have to suffer. They keep telling me that someone like me has a duty to go into hiding because I have so many things to do in life, so much to give. But I know that whatever I may have to give to others, I can give it no matter where I am, here in the circle of my friends or over there, in a concentration camp. And it is sheer arrogance to think oneself too good to share the fate of the masses. And if God Himself should feel that I still have a great deal to do, well then, I shall do it after I have suffered what all the others have to suffer. And whether or not I am a valuable human being will become clear only from my behavior in more arduous circumstances. And if I should not survive, how I die will show me who I really am. It's no longer a question of not getting oneself into a certain situation, come what may, but of how, in whatever situation, one conducts oneself and goes on living. (776)

As her words indicate, Hillesum is operating from a unique space that is indeed insulated from the despair and destruction that defined the world around her. Paradoxically it is a space created through her determined efforts to incorporate into herself the world in its fully ambivalent state. Having embraced both the multiplicity of life and death, with its various masks, as a necessary part of existence, Hillesum, writing from Westerbork, was able to claim the entire world as her homeland: 'I have no nostalgia left, I feel at home. I have learned so much about it here. We are “at home.” Under the sky, in every place on earth, if only we carry everything within us' (842). As such, Hillesum enacted at the cellular level the philosophical truth of carnival: 'In the whole of the world and the people there is no room for fear. For fear can only enter a part that has been separated from the whole, the dying link torn from the link that is born. The whole of the people and of the world is triumphantly gay and fearless.'31

ETTY HILLESUM: AFFIRMING LIFE

To medieval man, carnival was a celebration of time that, in some respects, suspended time. Celebrated as the hero and author of change and renewal, of death and rebirth, time’s deriding and renewing processes were keenly observed. To the men and women of the Middle Ages and Renaissance who

31 Mikhail Bakhtin. Rabelais and His World, p.256. Subsequent references shall appear in-text.
observed the winter rains, which laid the foundations for the new life welcomed by the spring sun, who obeyed Lenten fasts prior to Easter feasting, and who witnessed childbirth, the accompanying trauma of which too often claimed the mother’s life, it was understood that time ‘uncrowns, covers with ridicule, kills the old world (the old authority and truth), and at the same time gives birth to the new’ (207). Yet life’s ambivalence was not a source of fear, as it was rarely understood in its singular dimension. Rather, the individual was part of a whole, and as life was constantly renewed, as death gave birth to new life, the people viewed themselves victorious; herein lies the philosophical essence of carnival celebration. As such, carnival—a celebration of time—also suspended time, specifically the time of fear that otherwise dominated medieval life. As we have observed, carnival freed the people from fear in all its manifestations through its observance of a laughing approach to the world. Official seriousness and its disciples, which terrorised and forbade, were the subject of derision; hierarchies, which segregated and promoted fear, were demolished and replaced with the marketplace, where the whole people were brought into familiar contact with one another. Described by Bakhtin as ‘man’s second nature,’ (75) carnival laughter, which was itself born from the existential death enacted by official seriousness (75), was imbued with a truth that emerged not from dogma, doctrine or the law, but from the material world. ‘Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint’ (66). This is not to assert discordance between laughter and seriousness. As has been earlier observed, laughter could certainly accommodate seriousness—in its open and enquiring form; it could not, however, abide the dogmatic and closed phenomenon that was official seriousness. With its connection to truth and freedom carnival laughter was experienced as a truly liberating phenomenon. Transcending its material manifestation, carnival laughter freed ‘human consciousness, thought and imagination for new potentialities’ (49). This was certainly the case with Etty Hillesum in whose writing and spirituality the laughing aspect of the world is powerfully present.
Given what we know about the exercise of tyranny in the Middle Ages, it is difficult to imagine it could be replicated let alone exceeded. Yet, in the Holocaust, Hillesum confronted an experience which not only enacted a schism in the event of Being, but also in the capacity of language to carry out its primary function—signification. In an attempt to overcome this disjunctures, and convey the magnitude of the Shoah’s horror, Hillesum resorts to analogising Dante’s *Inferno* to a comic opera (782). Despite being quite aware of the horrendous scope and nature of the Final Solution, and experiencing first-hand the increasing tightening of the Nazis’ tourniquet around her existence, Hillesum nevertheless experienced life as a spectacle characterised by freedom and beauty. Herein lies the power of her carnivalesque vision. Seeing life as a holistic ambivalent reality and herself as a responsible and autonomous agent, who was nonetheless part of life in the most complete sense of the word, Hillesum was able to accommodate all aspects of existence into her worldview. Life and death made a home in her, with each enriching the meaning and significance of the other: ‘And now death has come as large as life, and I greet him as an old acquaintance...There death suddenly stands, having slipped simply, unmistakably and almost silently into my life. He has a place in it now, and I know that he is a part of it. And so I can go to sleep peacefully’ (742). While Hillesum certainly experienced moments of fear and terror as she witnessed the impact of the Nazis’ violent anti-Jewish measures, these feelings were not to define her. In fact, quite the opposite is true. By admitting death into her life, Hillesum enlarged and enriched it and, as has been noted, in her last known correspondence to the outside world, thrown from the train transporting her to Auschwitz, she articulated a freedom of spirit that points to her success in maintaining her humanity in the face of a system designed to crush the human spirit.

It is, of course, important to acknowledge the fact Hillesum’s laughter was powerless against the genocidal mechanisms of her oppressors. She is counted among the six-million Jews who perished as a result of the Final Solution. Indeed, this is one of the criticisms levelled against Jewish resistance, namely there
seemed to be very little resistance. There were of course instances of Jewish resistance, in the physical sense, though the Nazis generally crushed these with ruthless efficiency. Nevertheless, given that in the first years of the war, Hitler’s armies conquered several sovereign nation-states, condemning European Jewry for failing to resist the Nazis’ onslaught seems somewhat disingenuous. Furthermore, in the case of Hillesum, such criticism entirely misses the point. As has been shown, Hillesum insisted that the battle for peace must be fought within the heart of each individual. This is a task she took very seriously:

I feel like a small battlefield, in which the problems, or some of the problems, of our time are being fought out...the problems must be accommodated, have somewhere to struggle and come to rest, and we, poor little humans, must put our inner space at their service and not run away. In that respect, I am probably very hospitable; mine is often an exceedingly bloody battlefield, and dreadful fatigue and splitting headaches are the toll I have to pay. (104)

For Hillesum, the pages of her diaries and letters were the battleground upon which she fought; her writings acted as a second carnivalesque world. Through each stroke of her pen she developed a philosophy of life that would enable her to comprehend and confront the absurdity of a war that would result in her death. It was here that she developed her laughing approach to the world. That Hillesum’s voice continues to challenge the narrative of Auschwitz testifies to her

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32 Nikolaus Wachsmann. *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*. London: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2015, pp.530-532: Exploring instances of resistance within the camp system, Wachsmann notes: ‘Direct challenges to the SS were madness, most veteran prisoners agreed. It was dangerous enough to charm, bribe, or trick SS officials, but to defy them directly could only lead to disaster. After a Flossenbarg prisoner was beaten senseless for insulting the SS during an evening roll call, Alfred Hubsch wondered what had possessed this “lunatic” to swim against the tide. “Everyone here must have learned a long time ago that any resistance will be broken.” Inevitably, acts of open defiance remained very rare during World War II. When they did occur, they burned themselves deep into the memories of survivors.’ Laurence Rees, *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the Final Solution*, BBC Books, London, 2005, p.322: ‘It was almost impossible for Jewish prisoners to sustain a secret resistance movement for any length of time at Auschwitz because of the network of Kapos who so closely supervised them and, of course, because of their appalling mortality rate in the camp.’ Jewish resistance was similarly difficult outside the camps. Though such instances are written into the historical record, the Nazis met these with similar ruthlessness.
success on this battleground and to the power of literature, the field upon which she fought.
CHAPTER IV

ETTY HILLESUM AND FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY: INCARNATING ACTIVE LOVE

‘I should e’en die with pity/ To see another thus.’
(William Shakespeare, King Lear, iv. vii. 53-54)

‘To be, or not to be,’ Is that the question?
(Emmanuel Levinas)

DISCOURSES OF THE DEITY AND THE DEMONIC

In her famous modernist novel, Mrs Dalloway, Virginia Woolf portrays the damaging effects of discourse disseminated without account for the Other. Shattered by the experience of The Great War, Septimus Smith, upon returning to England, finds himself ‘unable to integrate the traumatic event into his personal life history.’¹ Tragically, as one whose ‘flesh was melted off the world, [whose] body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left...spread like a veil upon a rock,’² Septimus’ efforts to draw back together the strands of his shattered existence are met with obdurate medical professionals in possession of a discourse incapable of accommodating the war veteran’s traumatised narrative:

Proportion, divine proportion, Sir William’s goddess, was acquired by Sir William walking hospitals, catching salmon, begetting one son in Harley Street by Lady Bradshaw, who caught salmon herself and took photographs scarcely to be distinguished from the work of professionals. Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalized despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion—his, if they were men, Lady Bradshaw’s if they were women (she embroidered, knitted, spent four nights out of seven at home with her son), so that not only did his colleagues respect him,

his subordinates fear him, but the friends and relations of his patients felt for him the keenest gratitude for insisting these prophetic Christs and Christesses, who prophesied the end of the world, or the advent of God, should drink milk in bed, as Sir William ordered; Sir William with his thirty years' experience of these kinds of cases, and his infallible instinct, this is madness, this sense; in fact his sense of proportion.  

In effect, Sir William Bradshaw’s response is one of incommunicable silence: steeped in hubristic self-assurance, the psychiatrist’s prescription ’of rest, rest, rest; a long rest in bed,’ bears no relation to the specificity of Septimus’ circumstances but rather reflect an expertise of self-sufficiency; an ideological system closed to the event of Being. Sir William’s patients may as well be a homogenous group, for they are expected to subscribe to his tenets regardless of their suitability to their circumstances. As Karen DeMeester notes, ‘Sir William Bradshaw is well-versed in the rhetoric of the dominant culture and is deeply invested in preserving it because it affirms his identity and the organizing principles by which he gives meaning to his life.’ Given this, regardless of the physician’s intentions, Sir William’s failure to encounter his patients, in their unique specificity, sees them reduced to invisibility. They in effect become victims of a demonic discourse. Realising this, Septimus succumbs to the despair induced by his shattered psyche and jumps to his death.

Though of an entirely different order, in terms of nature, intent and effect, the same demonic machinations operate in Hitler’s discourse pertaining to the Jews. Through a monologic voice devoid of the faintest trace of encounter, Hitler reduces the Jewish Other to invisibility and thus paves the way for their persecution and elimination. The physical erasure of the Jews in the Holocaust represented the horrific consequence of their linguistic erasure brought about through a combination of oral and written violence enacted by Hitler and enthusiastically promoted by the Nazis. In the words of Daniel Goldhagen,

3 Ibid., p.109.
4 Ibid., p.106.
5 Karen DeMeester. ‘Trauma, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Obstacles to Post-War Recovery In Mrs Dalloway.’ Suzette Henke & Eberly, David (eds.). Virginia Woolf and Trauma: Embodied Texts, p.86.
6 Virginia Woolf. Mrs Dalloway, p.164.
‘deportation and physical violence were not a radical break with, but a corollary of, the monumental intended harm that Germans, through the medium of language, perpetrated upon the Jews constantly.’

By contrast, Hillesum’s voice is saturated with the accents of her Other. Like the marketplace of medieval carnival, ‘in which the exalted and lowly, the sacred and profane are leveled and are all drawn into the same dance,’ Hillesum’s diaries bring together, in free and familiar contact, a multitude of voices. Drawing these ideological strands down onto the pages of her diaries and letters, Hillesum here enters into dialogue with them, an act she describes as spinning her thread:

And a thread does run through my life, through my reality, like a continuous line. There is the Gospel of Saint Matthew morning and night, and now and then a few words on this paper. It’s not so much the imperfect words on these faint blue lines as the feeling, time and again, of returning to a place from which one can continue to spin the same thread, where one can gradually create a continuum, a continuum that is really one’s life. (528)

The continuum of which Hillesum speaks provided existential meaning during a period of unprecedented persecution for Jews such as herself. Whilst around her, the social death of Jews—which had already been effected in Germany as the precursor to their deportation and elimination—was instituted in the conquered territories including Hillesum’s home, the Netherlands, Hillesum sought refuge and meaning in the wisdom she discovered in others: ‘Michelangelo and Leonardo. They, too, are part of me, they inhabit my life. Dostoevsky and Rilke and Saint Augustine. And the Evangelists...These writers tell me something real

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9 Daniel Jonah Goldhagen. *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans of the Holocaust*, p.169: ‘...during the Nazi period, Jews were socially dead people—they were violently dominated, naturally alienated, and deemed incapable of bearing honor—who were not thought to be part of the human race, and who were seen to have virtually no utilitarian value.’ The measures instituted by the Nazis to enact Jews’ social death are well documented and Hillesum makes note of many of these in her diaries.
and pertinent, each in his own way’ (614). As her metaphor indicates, Hillesum drew these voices into dialogic exchange and spun a thread of meaning into her existence; given the Nazis’ nihilistic discourse and existential threat it enacted, the sense of continuity provided by the voices that filled her diary cannot be underestimated. As noted in the previous chapter, Hillesum’s diaries were the site of her productivity and within their pages she recorded, with a sense of urgency, the formative influence of others upon her own developing Weltanschauung:

There is still so much to do that I really don’t understand how I can waste a single moment of my life. There are Jung’s Transformations and then his Psychic Energy. St Augustine is also waiting, and the Bible, and I still haven’t read all of Rilke. For weeks, Walter Pater’s Renaissance has been lying on my desk. And I suddenly abandoned Prince Myshkin to his fate. I feel I am about ready for the Gothic Cathedrals, which have been lying about unnoticed on that little white table but increasingly clamour for my attention now. And so many other books, so infinitely many more. (596)

Written in May, 1942, two years into the German occupation of the Netherlands, Hillesum’s words signify an attitude of self-projection that represented the antithesis of the social and psychic death envisaged for her, and all Jews, by the Nazis. Confronted with their destructive enterprises, Hillesum utilised every moment to assert herself into Being; a process necessarily connective by design: through absorption in dialogic exchange, Hillesum participated in an act of authorship which, by affirming life, rejected and overcame the void created by the Nazis’ narrative. Significantly, in the constitutive differences inherent in these dichotomous narratives one can trace the narrative of the Devil in conflict with that of the saint.

According to Rowan Williams, ‘It is characteristic of diabolical speech to move toward silence, not a listening silence but that of incommunicable self-enclosedness, death. To speak as if the other’s responses were already known and could be dealt with or circumvented in advance.’10 Such a characterisation

can be attributed to the rhetoric of Hitler and his Nazis. The disconnect between language and life that marked their representations of the Jews revealed a narrative void of any of the signifiers of encounter so frequently found in Hillesum’s writing; whether it be Hitler’s proclamation of genocidal vengeance upon the Jews who laughed at his prophecies,\textsuperscript{11} or the recycled fables of the dark-haired Jew preying on the virginal Aryan girl,\textsuperscript{12} Hitler’s references to Jews belong firmly in the realm of the abstract—divorced, not only from the reality of their existence, but from reality according to every possible measure. This willful deafness to the Other promotes rigid representations with no relation to time and space; the Other is removed from their embodied reality and transposed into a fictional chronotope, where they become a plaything for the oppressor. The fantastical and, ultimately, ghastly consequence of such discourse is related by Melita Maschmann, a member of the girls’ division of the Hitler youth and daughter to prosperous and educated parents, in her confessional memoir to a lost childhood Jewish friend:

Those Jews were and remained something mysteriously menacing and anonymous. They were not the sum of all Jewish individuals...They were an evil power, something with the attributes of a spook. One could not see it, but it was there, an active force for evil. As children we were told fairy stories which sought to make us believe in witches and wizards. Now we were too grown up to take this witchcraft seriously, but we still went on believing in the ‘wicked Jews.’ They had never appeared to us in bodily form, but it was our daily experience that our adults believed in them. After all, we could not check to see whether the earth was round rather than flat—or, to be more precise, it was not a proposition we thought it necessary to check. The grownups ‘knew’ it and one took over this knowledge without mistrust. They also ‘knew’ that the Jews were wicked. The wickedness was directed against the prosperity, unity and prestige of the German nation, which we had learned to love from an early age. The anti-Semitism of my parents was a part of their outlook which was taken for granted.\textsuperscript{13}

The induction of patriotism alongside virulent anti-Semitism created the perfect storm for the Jews and enabled German citizens like Maschmann to operate from a fantastical psychic space which permitted her to ‘dedicate body and soul to an inhuman political system, without [experiencing] doubts about [her] own individual decency.’\footnote{Ibid., p.89.} As she relates in the following, the anti-Semitic narrative in which she was invested, enacted, in her own existential domain, a schism that enabled her to approve of Jewish persecutions while being blind to the ramifications of such actions on the lives of those Jews she had called friends:

In preaching that all the misery of the nations was due to the Jews or that the Jewish spirit was seditious and Jewish blood was corrupting, I was not compelled to think of you or old Herr Lewy or Rosel Cohen: I thought only of the bogeyman, ‘the Jew.’ And when I heard that Jews were being driven from their professions and homes and imprisoned in ghettos, the points switched automatically in my mind to steer me round the thought that such a fate could also overtake you or old Lewy. It was only the Jew who was being persecuted and made ‘harmless.’\footnote{Ibid.}

Maschmann’s testimony exhibits the dangerous consequences of the divorce of language from life: the sacrifice of reality upon the altar of ideology by the Nazis and the broader German population produced a Holocaust of diabolical proportions. Given the apocalyptic consequences of the Nazis’ one-sided rhetoric, one could justify its characterisation, in eschatological terms, as the discourse of the Devil. According to Williams, ‘the Devil’s priority is...to freeze human agency in the timelessness of a “rational” order in which love or reconciliation is impossible.’\footnote{Rowan Williams. Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction, p.108.} Echoing synonymous intent in an eschatologically framed oration, Hitler fatefully declared: ‘...we are animated with an inexorable resolve to seize the Evil [the Jews] by the roots and to exterminate (auszurotten) it root and branch. To attain our aim we should stop at nothing, even if we must join forces with the Devil.’\footnote{Daniel Jonah Goldhagen. Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans of the Holocaust, p.134.}
Pronounced to an audience of 1200 in 1920, Hitler’s declaration utilises the same reductive characterisations of the Jews as found in Mein Kampf and elsewhere.\(^{18}\) Deaf to the target of its derision, both the uncompromising tone and genocidal intent of the statement leads to demonic silence—silence that militates against communication and leads to destruction and death. Such ends are intrinsically situated in the formalistic markers of diabolical speech acts: the rejection of genuine otherness, a fundamental characteristic of Hitler’s statements pertaining to the Jews, serves as a linguistic signifier which enacts in speech that which it foreshadows. As Williams notes, ‘someone who has lost the capacity to hear and speak, to engage humanly with others and to change in response, is already potentially a murderer. The crime comes out of the inner dialogue that is practically never interrupted by a real other.’\(^{19}\) As the disseminator of discourse which has no true Other, Hitler acts as the demonic narrator, as do all who take up his narrative.

If the demonic narrative leads to incommunicable silence, the Deity’s narrative leads to dialogue. Whilst the former ends in nihilism and death, the latter enacts an interminable recognition and openness to the Other, which assures the continued growth of its participants. Herein lies one of the fundamental, indeed, defining characteristics of Hillesum’s writings. Through openness to the voices of her Other, an attitude demonstrated and nurtured through her voracious reading of literature and the book of life—within the pages of which she encountered and dialogised with the Other clothed in flesh and blood—Hillesum guaranteed her growth as subject while simultaneously defining the nature of her resistance and discovering the meaning of her existence.

Within a Bakhtinian framework, Hillesum’s cognitive openness is at once an act of self-renunciation, insofar as it signifies a willingness to enter into the world of the Other, and a statement of responsibility for that same Other, as genuine dialogue provides the Other space and time to actualise their authentic selves, which facilitates the possibility of one taking up the Other’s cause: ‘To take

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
responsibility is so to act and speak that the options of others are clarified, not controlled. And this can happen only when there is an imaginative penetration into what is other.\textsuperscript{20} In contrast to the demonic narrative, which is deaf to the voice of the Other, and, in an act of violence, silences the Other, Hillesum creates a space for the Other’s voice to speak and creatively act upon her existence:

It is about letting one’s own voice be molded by that encounter, silenced in its own uncritical or precritical confidence, so that the exchange is real—a matter neither of treating the other as a peg on which to hang prepared ideas and ego-centered concerns, nor of abandoning one’s own voice in abjection before the other, but of discovering what the other can say in one’s own voice, and what one can say in the other’s voice.\textsuperscript{21}

Such is the nature of authentic dialogue. To utilise a phrase from Bakhtin, the above describes internally persuasive discourse at work.\textsuperscript{22} To reiterate the importance of other voices on Hillesum’s existential outlook is to acknowledge its socially constitutive and interdependent character: ‘The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention.’\textsuperscript{23} Whilst it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore the impact and influence of all the voices to appear in Hillesum’s writings, the literary voices of the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and the German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke—both of whom had a powerful influence on Hillesum’s imagination and outlook and figure prominently in her writings—will, in the present and subsequent chapter, be explored.

**ETTY HILLESUM AND DOSTOEVSKY: A THEODICEAN RESPONSE**

Born in 1821, Dostoevsky is, in the company of Leo Tolstoy, widely considered Russia’s greatest novelist. Much like the philosopher and literary theorist,

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p.171.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p.174.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p.293.
Bakhtin, who did so much to shed light on his artistic genius, Dostoevsky dedicated his artistic labours to bridging the gap between art and life. Creator of that which Bakhtin calls the polyphonic novel, an art form, which, he argues, raises the novel above the other genres as most reflective of existence, Dostoevsky brings to life some of literature’s most famous characters and, through them, explores many of life’s deepest and most perplexing questions. Arguably the most famous of his novels, which was also his final one, is *The Brothers Karamazov*. Eponymously focused on the lives of three brothers, Dmitri, Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov, one of its central motifs is the conflict between reason and faith. The pinnacle of this exploration is reached in books five, ‘Pro and Contra,’ which contains the ‘Legend of the Grand Inquisitor’, and six, ‘The Russian Monk’, considered by many as Dostoevsky’s response to Ivan Karamazov’s legend. Regarded by Joseph Frank as the ideological centre of the novel these two sections pivot on Ivan’s rationalistic attack upon Christianity and the elder, Father Zosima, who represents an embodied response to Ivan’s rationalism as voiced by his Grand Inquisitor.

Much magnificent scholarly work pertaining to *The Brothers Karamazov* and its legend of ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ has been conducted since its publication, and the purpose of the novel’s treatment here is not to add to this collection; our interest, rather relates to the possible impact the text had on Hillesum’s outlook. While her stated aspiration to write the next *Brothers Karamazov* (154) suggests Dostoevsky’s novel left a profound impression, beyond a tantalising promise to further develop a fleeting reflection on the lessons of the ‘Legend of the Grand

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26 Speaking of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Hillesum states: ‘When I do a simple translation, the whole of Russia spreads out before my mind’s eye and I feel I must write another *Brothers Karamazov*.‘
Inquisitor’ for her generation (34). Hillesum leaves only a few other clues as to her thoughts regarding the work. While these clues do suggest Dostoevsky played a formative role in Hillesum’s outlook, their relative scarcity, in comparison to her musings on a writer such as Rilke, will necessitate an inductive approach be taken to our task. With this in mind, a comparative analysis of the thematic concerns of Dostoevsky’s, *The Brothers Karamazov* and Hillesum’s writings will be pursued.

The ‘Legend of the Grand Inquisitor’ is relayed by Ivan, during the course of a conversation he has with his younger brother, Alyosha, regarding ‘the eternal questions.’ As a poem of Ivan’s conception, it reflects his beliefs, or, rather, disbelief pertaining to the world created by God, which Ivan admits cannot be grasped by his own Euclidean mind. Torn between his desire for harmony and the discordant world he observes around him, Ivan explains:

It’s not that I don’t accept God, you must understand, it’s the world created by Him I don’t and cannot accept. Let me make it plain. I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man, that in the world’s finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all crimes of humanity, of all the blood they’ve shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened with men—but though all that may come to pass, I don’t accept it. I won’t accept it. Even if parallel lines do meet and I see it myself, I shall see it and say that they’ve met, but I

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27 ‘With Communism in Russia, immediately after 1917, the problem, I think, was different. A new world had to be cobbled together from scratch, and there was no time for deeper thought, for taking an objective view. But yes, basically, it was still the same contempt for the masses, who must not be left to their own devices, who must not be allowed to choose between good and evil for themselves. This puts me in the mind of Dostoevsky’s “Grand Inquisitor”, but I shall work that out later.’

28 Due to her premature death at Auschwitz, Hillesum was denied the opportunity to pursue her literary ambitions; neither did she complete her promised reflections on *The Grand Inquisitor*.

still won’t accept it. That’s what’s at the root of me, Alyosha; that’s my creed. (257)

Ivan's opening assertion, that it is not God, but His world, that he rejects is theologically problematic and betrays his schizophrenic state of mind. Certainly from a Christian perspective, one cannot on the one hand profess belief in God and, on the other hand, reject his creation. As the writer of the Johannine letter proclaims: 'Those who say “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen’ (1 John 4:20). Yet, ironically, it is exactly on the basis of his professed love for suffering humanity, specifically the suffering of innocent children, that Ivan rejects God's world. It is unreasonable and incomprehensible to Ivan that innocents should suffer, and, in this, Ivan shares company with multitudes. As a rational proposition, the notion that anyone, but especially children, should be subjected to the evil of which they are devoid and for which they share no responsibility, is both abhorrent and intellectually intolerable. Unlike adults, who have 'eaten of the apple and know good and evil' (259), children, 'If they, too, suffer horribly on earth, they must suffer for their fathers' sins, they must be punished for their fathers, who have eaten the apple; but that reasoning is of the other world and is incomprehensible for the heart of man here on earth. The innocent must not suffer for another's sins, and especially such innocents!' (260). More offensive still to Ivan is the idea that such an absurd state of affairs should be reconciled in an eschatological love-fest that sees 'all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions...vanish like a pitiful mirage' (257). To Ivan, reconciliation without recompense—a recompense that is immediate and visible—equates to a harmony that is bought too dearly and 'beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it' (268). Thus, torn between his longing for life, his love of 'the sticky little leaves as they open in spring' (251) and the absurdity of existence that lay beyond his rational mind’s comprehension, Ivan rejects the order of God's world and returns his ticket (268).

In this, the conflicted complexity of his character, John Desmond sees 'a brilliantly-conceived portrait of a modern rationalist intellectual, a son of the
secular Enlightenment who renounces his faith in God, yet who in his rebellion suffers the anguish of disbelief.\textsuperscript{30} While there is no reason to doubt the genuineness of Ivan’s distress and his concern for the suffering of innocent children, it appears largely a result of cognitive dissonance rather than being experientially induced. This is borne out in the litany of miseries he relays to his brother, Alyosha, as he seeks to justify his rejection of God’s world. From his account of a peasant lashing the eyes of his overloaded and exhausted horse,\textsuperscript{31} to the story of a ‘well-educated, cultured gentleman and his wife beat[ing] their own child with a birch rod’ (263), to the disturbing tale of a serf-boy being torn apart by a general’s hounds as punishment for an accident brought about from his innocent play (265), Ivan’s stories are collected from historical accounts; thus, whilst horrific, and historically grounded, they are nevertheless second-hand and, therefore, removed from Ivan’s experience. Though of a different order to Hitler’s fabrications regarding the Jews, their recollection reflects an individual similarly disconnected from the present time and space and thus, disengaged from authentic human relations. As such, it is unsurprising to hear Ivan’s incomprehension of embodied love:

‘I must make you one confession,’ Ivan began. ‘I could never understand how one can love one’s neighbor. It’s just one’s neighbours, to my mind, that one can’t love, though one might love those at a distance. I once read somewhere of John the Merciful, a saint, that when a hungry, frozen beggar came to him, he took him into his bed, held him in his arms, and began breathing into his mouth, which was putrid and loathsome from some awful disease. I am convinced he did that from “self-laceration”, from the self-laceration of falsity, for the sake of the charity imposed by duty, a penance laid on him. For anyone to love a man, he must be hidden, for as soon as he shows his face, love is gone.’ (258)

Aside from the fact that Ivan, once again, uses an historical anecdote to rationalise his position, the most noticeable feature of his language is the cynical anthropological vision underpinning it. Ivan clearly lacks any faith in humanity’s


\textsuperscript{31} Fyodor Dostoevsky. \textit{The Karamazov Brothers}, p.263. \textit{Subsequent references shall appear in-text}. 
capacity to act for good and, where he encounters examples of altruism, he feels compelled to dismiss them as motivated by duty. In so doing, he reduces the deed to that of a slave, rejecting the possibility that one could act from any position other than self-interest. In his dismissal of both human atrocities and goodness Ivan effectively removes himself from the human narrative, or, in the words of Bakhtin, takes up an alibi in being. Through his conscious amputation from embodied existence, Ivan has nowhere, but his mind, to take refuge; as such, he shares in the Devil’s narrative, which, according to Williams, is marked by skepticism about anything outside of his mind, which reflects his disembodied nature. Thus, removed from the narrative continuum of existence, truth is reduced to a set of abstract propositions that one can defend without making them accountable to an embodied world. As has been demonstrated through our analysis of Mein Kampf and the Nazis’ discourse, ‘a truth demanding assent as if belief were caused by facts, generates a diminished view of what is human; it educates us in ignoring aspects of human narrative that we disapprove of or find impenetrable.’ The results of such exercises in abstraction are often catastrophic, a fact of which Dostoevsky was all too aware. Rejecting the reductive impacts upon the human story brought about by such cognitive dissonance, he insisted on subjecting all ideologies to narrative embodiment, where their real impacts could be fully played out; herein lies the defining trait of his artistic endeavours.

Sharing Dostoevsky’s distrust of abstractionism, Hillesum, as one who lived and died amidst the diabolical event that was the Holocaust, refused to submit to the nihilistic narrative it enacted. Unlike Ivan, Hillesum witnessed and experienced

33 Ibid., p.43.
34 Joseph Frank. Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time, p.745: Despite this knowledge, the inconvenient and unfortunate propensity of Dostoevsky to propound anti-Semitic sentiments in his extra-fictional writings is well documented. In the words of his biographer Joseph Frank: ‘The Diary is distressingly marred by Dostoevsky’s deep-rooted xenophobia, which extended to every people not of Great Russian origin and is most obvious here in relation to the Jews. Time and again Dostoevsky hurls the direct accusation against them as ruthless exploiters of the misery of others, motivated by a greedy lust for gain, and deploying their international influence against the interests of the Russian state.’
the suffering of innocents and looked searchingly into the faces of its perpetrators for traces of humanity. In an extensive and moving letter written to Han Wegerif, a mere fortnight prior to her own deportation, she recounted the impact of watching the loading of a transport at the hands of the Ordnungspolizei,\textsuperscript{35} otherwise known as the Grüne Polizei: 'When I think of the faces of that squad of armed, green-uniformed guards—my God, those faces! I looked at them, each in turn, from behind the safety of a window, and I have never been so frightened of anything in my life. I sank to my knees with the words that preside over human life: And God made man after his likeness.\textsuperscript{36} That passage spent a difficult morning with me' (1058).\textsuperscript{37} Watching the Nazis' extermination process unfold before her eyes at the hands of those whom, based on Hillesum's reaction, betrayed little humanity as they turned the cogs of the Nazis' genocidal machine, it is little wonder that the scripture so seminal to Judeo-Christian anthropology proved difficult to comprehend. Confronted with unprecedented depravity and aware that she would inevitably share the fate of those transported on that day,\textsuperscript{38} that Hillesum wondered at humanity's divine origins or the benevolence of her God is less surprising than the fact she sought to reconcile the absurdity surrounding her. Like Ivan, the suffering of children proved the most incomprehensible; unlike Ivan, Hillesum's recollections were not drawn from the pages of history but the pages of her life:

\textsuperscript{35} The Ordnungspolizei played a significant role in loading the transports during the Holocaust. Due to their uniform they were often referred to as the Green Police.

\textsuperscript{36} Hillesum is referencing Genesis 1:27: 'So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'

\textsuperscript{37} From a passage further on in this letter (1058), it appears that Etty had sneaked into the barracks that was situated opposite the leaving train. This was strictly forbidden: on the morning of the transport everyone not involved had to stay in his/her barracks.

\textsuperscript{38} Typically, Tuesday was the day transports departed for Poland. Hillesum's entry is dated August 24, 1943. As this was the fourth Tuesday of the month Hillesum's recollections record fresh horrors that she feared may be rendered unbelievable by the passing of time: 'I have to put it all down quickly, in a muddle, because if I leave it until later I probably won't be able to go on believing that it really happened.' Hillesum was included on the transport of September 7 and Hillesum scholars believe she died in Auschwitz on November 30, 1943.
But the babies, those tiny piercing screams of the babies, dragged from their cots in the middle of the night to be carried off to a distant land. I have to put it all down quickly, in a muddle, because if I leave it until later I probably won’t be able to go on believing that it really happened. It is like a vision, and drifts further and further away. The babies were easily the worst. And then there was that paralysed young girl, who didn’t want to take her dinner plate along and found it so hard to die. Or the terrified young boy: he had thought he was safe, that was his mistake, and when he realised he was going to have to go anyway, he panicked and ran off. His fellow Jews had to hunt him down. If they didn’t find him scores of others would be put on the transport in his place. (1058)

Hillesum’s letter portrays a mosaic of misery as she recounts a throng of Dantesque images as they unfolded around her. Witnessing a young girl wondering aloud at the meaninglessness of her short life; a woman with a sick child in distress at the lack of provisions allowed on the transport; the preparation of small bottles of milk for the infants being conveyed to their deaths; the gentle chiding of a mother telling her crying child that unless it behaves she won’t allow it to accompany her on the transport; another mother hysterically pleading with Hillesum to hide her child; one of her colleagues feeding poison to a dying woman, who also happened to be her mother; another mother who recently witnessed her husband being dragged away and, having just seen her own child die, remark at the crying babies around her, ‘I’ll have good work to do on the train, I still have lots of milk;’ a woman in her ninth month of pregnancy being readied for the transport; a dying man, reciting the Shema to himself as he is carried away, and the loading of the elderly, frail, sick, disabled, infants, children, mothers and fathers onto the train for their final journey, it is little wonder Hillesum exclaimed, ‘So that’s what Hell is like,’ before asking, ‘God Almighty, what are you doing to us?’ (1060-1064).

Though immersed in desolation on an apocalyptic scale and understandably confounded by the absurdity of the needless suffering of her fellow Jews, Hillesum refused to return her ticket by seeking, to her final moments, meaning amidst the meaningless:
I have told you often enough that no words and images are adequate to describe nights like these. But still I must try to convey something of it to you. 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. We must keep one another in touch with everything that happens in the various outposts of the world, each one contributing his own little piece of stone to the great mosaic that will take shape once the war is over. (1058)

A recurrent theme of Holocaust writers, including Hillesum, is the impotency of language to describe the Shoah; the sheer magnitude of inhumanity it enacts renders its witnesses mute from disbelief. Yet, for many, to submit to silence is to succumb to the diabolical, and thus, the compulsion to speak arises. In this context, language not only bears testimony to the incomprehensible, but its pronunciation becomes an act of faith: the word, written or spoken, rejects diabolical silence by opening up new possibilities for life beyond the void. Thus it is that Hillesum speaks to contribute to the mosaic that will connect her to the world outside the barbed wire fences of Westerbork. In the same way, her diaries and letters speak beyond the extermination camp that claimed her life, to the coming generations. In her capacity to go on believing, Hillesum demonstrates a radical affirmation of life. Hers is an anthropological vision that, whilst acutely aware of humanity's capacity for evil, refuses to allow this to blind her to the presence, or, at very least, its potential for goodness. For Ivan, the concept of intolerable suffering, alone, is sufficient to see him make the decision to close the book on the narrative of his own existence, while, Hillesum, living amidst a cataclysmic event that would claim her life, continued to add to the pages of her narrative, one which today stands in perpetuity as testimony to humanity's capacity for goodness amidst the most desperate of circumstances.

In a letter written to Maria Tuinzing five days before her transportation to Auschwitz, Hillesum remarks: 'we have become marked by suffering for a whole lifetime. And yet life in its unfathomable depths is so wonderfully good, Maria—I have come back to that again and again. And if we just cared enough, God is in safe hands with us despite everything, Maria' (1080). Though confronted by the hellish abyss that was the Holocaust, Hillesum refused to submit to despair and instead sought to open within herself a space for her Deity. Yet, as her words
indicate, it is not enough to encounter God within; one’s orientation must be
directed to the Other, their care, their edification; for Hillesum, such instances
represented her God’s intrusion into the darkness of the Holocaust, a
breakthrough that was impossible without human cooperation. As opposed to
the diabolical narrative, which is facilitated through limited vision, Hillesum’s
‘surplus of vision’\textsuperscript{39} acts as the avenue via which grace enters into the human
story. Thus, against the backdrop of the flames that would soon consume her,
Hillesum embodied the sort of faith that Dostoevsky sought to portray through
his fiction.

As one who lived prior to the Shoah, Dostoevsky set his challenge to faith amidst
the flames of the Spanish Inquisition. Set in 16\textsuperscript{th}-century Seville, at a time ‘when
fires were lighted every day to the glory of God, and “in the splendid \textit{auto da fe}
the wicked heretics were burnt,”’\textsuperscript{40} the ‘Legend of the Grand Inquisitor’ has
Christ make his promised return during an age dominated by the fear of official
seriousness; a time when humanity sacrificed its Other on the altar of ideology.
Arriving the day after the burning of a hundred heretics at the hands of the
Grand Inquisitor, ‘He came softly, unobserved, and yet, strange to say, everyone
recognised Him’ (272):

\begin{quote}
The people are irresistibly drawn to him, they surround Him, they
flock about Him. He moves silently in their midst with a gentle smile
of infinite compassion. The sun of love burns in His heart, light and
power shine from His eyes, and their radiance, shed on the people,
stirs their hearts with responsive love. He holds out His hands to
them, blesses them, and a healing virtue comes from contact with
Him, even with His garments. (272)
\end{quote}

Through Ivan, Dostoevsky here, paints a picture reminiscent of the Gospels,
though, perhaps even more than the evangelists’ accounts, there is an emphasis
on the unspoken, visible power of Christ, which, though transmitted in silence, is


\textsuperscript{40} Fyodor Dostoevsky. \textit{The Karamazov Brothers}, p.271. \textit{Subsequent references shall appear in-text.}
immediately recognisable to all. Christ utters only two words during Ivan’s tale: ‘maiden arise,’ (272) a command with the power to resurrect a child from her coffin, which sees the grim figure of the Grand Inquisitor enter the scene. Like Christ’s, his portrayal is telling:

He is an old man, almost ninety, tall and erect, with a withered face and sunken eyes, in which there is still a gleam of light. He is not dressed in his gorgeous cardinal’s robes, as he was the day before, when he was burning the enemies of the Roman Church—at that moment, he is wearing his coarse, old, monk’s cassock. At a distance behind him come his gloomy assistants and slaves and the ‘holy guard’. He stops at the sight of the crowd and watches it from a distance. He sees everything; he sees them set the coffin down at His feet, sees the child rise up, and his face darkens. He knits his thick grey brows and his eyes gleam with a sinister fire. He holds out his finger and bid the guards take Him. And such is his power, so completely are the people cowed into submission and trembling obedience to him, that the crowd immediately makes way for the guards, and in the midst of a deathlike silence they lay hands on Him and lead Him away. (273)

The contrast between the two figures could hardly be more vivid: Unlike Christ, who commands the crowd’s affection with active love, the Grand Inquisitor sees them cower in fearful obedience. Whilst, at this stage of the tale, neither relies on words to enact their commands, Christ’s actions elicit responsive excitement and life, while the Grand Inquisitor’s every gesture invokes deathlike silence—It is a silence reminiscent of the demonic, incommunicable silence of which Williams speaks; a silence that leads to death. It could be argued that a similar ‘silence’ dominates the remainder of the tale, a silence of a different order, constituted as it is by the old cardinal’s extensive monologue, but a silence nonetheless, as it is characterised by a willful deafness to the divine Other’s narrative and the promise of death for Him who comes to hinder the Grand Inquisitor’s work. Interestingly, it is the attentive, communicable silence of Christ and His silent kiss placed on the Grand Inquisitor’s bloodless lips that defeat the cardinal’s deathly intent, as he orders his prisoner out into the dark alleys of the town with the command to never again return (288).
The obvious juxtaposition of the Grand Inquisitor with Christ, reflects the opposition between the official and unofficial seriousness of the Middle Ages, a conflict revisited in the twentieth century in the contrast between the discourse of Hitler and Hillesum. As previously noted, in all of these instances, the discourse of the former is monologic, authoritarian, given and oppressive, while that of the latter is dialogic, anti-authoritarian, posited and liberating; in the former, truth takes the form of a closed system of inflexible propositions, in the latter, truth is discovered in dialogue and embodiment; the former is deaf to the voice of the Other, while, in the case of the latter, the Other is its indispensable, constitutive centre. In the vernacular of the current chapter, the former represents satanic discourse—which is divorced from love of self or the Other—clashing with the latter, which is reminiscent of the Deity’s narrative. A peculiar aspect of Ivan’s tale is that it begins and ends with the image and portrayal of Christ’s love in action:

…by a stunning artistic picture, which is a masterstroke, Dostoevsky emblazons the divine affirmation across the firmament of the poem’s first moment: Christ’s identity is established with the people by an act of faith. The communion of God (sobornost) of the opening of Ivan’s poem is coupled with the kiss placed by Jesus upon the lips of the Grand Inquisitor, which closes the poem in an act of love, to symbolise the communalism and personalism of Christian faith.41

Thus, in the very structure of the legend, the demonic narrative it promotes is unwittingly undermined by the image of its antithesis, the person of Christ.42 Indeed, Alyosha notes this irony, when, at the conclusion of the poem, he exclaims: “‘But…that’s absurd!’ He cried, flushing. “Your poem is in praise of Jesus, not in blame of Him—as you meant it to be.”43 This structural foreshadowing of the defeat of the Grand Inquisitor’s diabolical narrative

42 Joseph Frank. Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time, p.877: According to Dostoevsky’s biographer, ‘To rebuke Christ for insisting on humanity’s right to choose between good and evil solely according to the dictates of their hearts was to praise him for protecting the very foundation of man’s humanity as Dostoevsky conceived it.’
43 Fyodor Dostoevsky. The Karamazov Brothers, p.285.
notwithstanding, by his own admission, in the old cardinal’s monologue, Dostoevsky created a most compelling argument. In a diary entry revealing of the struggles he experienced in maintaining his faith, he exclaimed:

The dolts have ridiculed my obscurantism and the reactionary character of my faith. These fools could not even conceive so strong a denial of God as the one to which I gave expression [in *The Brothers Karamazov*].... The whole book is an answer to that. You might search Europe in vain for so powerful an expression of atheism. Thus it is not like a child that I believe in Christ and confess Him. My Hosanna has burst forth from a huge furnace of doubt.44

It is said that doubt is the necessary counterpoint to faith, indeed, according to Bussie, these two narratives ‘are dialectically related and as such one cannot be spoken of without the other.’45 In giving full voice to his every doubt regarding Christianity, Dostoevsky created a narrative of such power that even he was uncertain as to how he might write an effective refutation of Ivan’s legend.46

Bound within the ‘gloomy vaulted prison in the ancient palace of the Holy Inquisition,’47 the prisoner is met by the Grand Inquisitor, who, with light in hand, rhetorically enquires as to his ‘guest’s’ identity. Though greeted by silence it is immediately evident the old cardinal, a paragon of official seriousness, has no interest in anything Christ may say, and he demands his continued silence: ‘What canst thou say indeed, indeed? I know too well what Thou wouldst say. And Thou hast no right to add anything to what Thou hadst said of old’ (273). He then proceeds, during the course of an extensive monologue, to take umbrage with the burden of freedom Christ placed on humanity and, referencing Christ’s

46 Ellis Sandoz. *Political Apocalypse: A Study of Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor*, p.79: In a letter to his friend Pobedonostsev, Dostoevsky wrote, ‘In my reply is represented something directly opposite to the word-conception expressed in the earlier book, but again [N.B.] it is represented not point by point, but, so to say, in an artistic picture. And that’s just what worries me, that is, shall I be understood and shall I achieve even a particle of my aim.’
rejection of Satan's offerings in the desert, he praises the greater understanding of men's needs, expressed through the three temptations posed by 'the wise and mighty spirit in the wilderness,' (276) while conducting a defence of the way the Church has corrected Christ's work:

Thou didst choose all that is exceptional, vague and enigmatic; Thou didst choose what was utterly beyond the strength of men, acting as though Thou didst not love them at all—Thou who didst come to give Thy life for them! Instead of taking possession of men's freedom, Thou didst increase it, and burdened the spiritual kingdom of mankind with its sufferings forever. Thou didst desire man's free love, that he should follow Thee freely, enticed and taken captive by Thee. In place of the rigid ancient law, man must hereafter with free heart decide for himself what is good and what is evil, having only Thy image before him as his guide. (279)

As Ivan's creation and mouthpiece, in his condemnation of Christ's work, the Grand Inquisitor aligns himself with the diabolical, underpinned as it is by an impoverished vision of humanity. Like Ivan, the ageing cardinal's vision is limited to observing humanity's weaknesses and, in a Foucauldian will to power, he steps into the breach, to remove the burden of freedom from the shoulders of feeble humanity. Replacing Christ's freedom with happiness, the Inquisitor enslaves humanity by giving them the very things Christ had rejected: miracle, mystery and authority (279). Though cognisant of the appropriateness of Christ's rejection of Satan's offerings, the Inquisitor nevertheless ridicules the decision as one that places too heavy a responsibility on humanity's capacity for goodness:

Thou wouldst not enslave man by a miracle, and didst crave faith given freely, not based on miracle. Thou didst crave for free love and not the base raptures of the slave before the might that has overawed him forever. But thou didst think too highly of men therein, for they are slaves, of course, though rebellious by nature. Look round and judge; fifteen centuries have passed, look upon them. Whom hast Thou raised up to Thyself? I swear, man is weaker and baser by nature than Thou hast believed him! Can he, can he do what Thou didst? By showing him so much respect, Thou didst, as it were, cease to feel for him, for Thou didst ask far too much from him—Thou who hast loved him more than Thyself! Respecting him less, Thou wouldst have asked less of him. That would have been more like love, for his burden would have been lighter. He is weak and vile. (280)
The Inquisitor's lack of faith in humanity's capacity for goodness is matched only by his lack of belief in his Deity's benevolence. Ignoring the divine promise of grace, he replaces freedom with another totalitarian system, within which truth, discovered in embodiment and dialogue, is exchanged for adherence to abstract ideology. As far as the Inquisitor is concerned 'no one really wants liberty, yet people want the semblance of it; they want to fantasize that they are free.' It is thus the illusion of freedom, without real responsibility, that the cardinal provides by demanding assent to his religious power. Thus, by presiding over and reinforcing the precepts of the paternal state the Inquisitor propagates the totalitarian project, which, according to Gorman Beauchamp, 'seeks to keep its subjects in a state of perpetual childishness, insecure, seeking approval from authority, dependent upon the surrogate parent to make decisions for them. It does not, that is, find man slavish, servile, childish by nature, but attempts to make him so.' In language that starkly concurs with Beauchamp's assessment the Grand Inquisitor confesses to Christ: ‘...in their leisure hours we shall make their life like a child’s game, with children’s songs and innocent dance. Oh, we shall allow them even sin, they are weak and helpless, and they will love us like children because we allow them to sin.’

All too aware of the mechanisations of the totalitarian state, Hillesum observed, in the political systems surrounding her, a similar disdain for freedom and truth. Reflecting on the Third Reich’s propaganda chiefs’ determination to ‘incite people with theories they don’t believe in themselves’ (34), Hillesum writes:

It is essentially a boundless contempt for the masses. Keeping the truth to oneself in the supposition that the masses can’t take it. For strategic reasons, of course, the masses cannot be told the truth, because that would weaken their resolve. But that means something

50 Fyodor Dostoevsky. The Karamazov Brothers, p.284.
51 Hillesum’s assessment reflects her generosity as there is much evidence to suggest that the majority of Germans supported the Nazis’ anti-Semitic measures.
is being imposed and foisted upon them. With communism in Russia after 1917, the problem, I think, was different. A new world had to be cobbled together from scratch, and there was no time for deeper thought, for taking an objective view. But yes, basically, it was still the same contempt for the masses, who must not be left to their own devices, who must not be allowed to choose between good and evil for themselves. This puts me in the mind of Dostoevsky’s “Grand Inquisitor.” (34)

Hillesum’s immediate experience confirmed the inherent danger involved in elevating truth to a particular ideology as it inevitably fails to account for the entirety of human experience and, in its efforts to justify itself, oppresses those who fail to conform to its Apollonian vision.\(^52\) Though necessarily speculative, it is likely here that the origins of Hillesum’s reluctance to swear allegiance to a particular creed lie. Freed from adherence to a single ideological frame of reference, Hillesum developed a spiritual outlook which scholars concur defies categorisation; an outlook that borrowed from, but was not limited to, a variety of religious traditions; an outlook nourished by her reading, synthesised in her writing and grounded in a relationship with her Deity.

Prior to commencing our exploration of Dostoevsky’s response to Ivan’s ‘Legend’ and its thematic relevance to Hillesum’s life and writings, it is interesting to observe that the sting in the tale of ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ was directed, not to Christ, but to His Church, most specifically, its Roman Catholic incarnation. The critique inherent in the characterisation of the cardinal as an agent of totalitarianism hardly needs to be spelt out; nevertheless, Ivan interrupts his tale to ensure such connections are not missed. The aforementioned prohibition directed to Christ from the Grand Inquisitor’s lips, against adding to what he spoke of old, is, according to Ivan, ‘the most fundamental feature of Roman Catholicism...”All has been given by Thee to the Pope,” they say, “and all, therefore, is still in the Pope’s hands, and there is no need for Thee to come now

at all. Thou must not meddle for the time, at least." That Ivan’s Inquisitor, having just presided over the burning of a hundred heretics, was prepared to see Christ share the same punishment represents the harshest critique of an obstinate Church apparently more concerned with the preservation of its power than the dissemination of the liberating message of its founder. In seeking to silence the message, the Grand Inquisitor and his Church—having already accepted the Devil’s offer of authority by aligning themselves with Rome—once again ally themselves with the diabolical narrative of Satan.

**ILLUMINATING THE DEITY**

According to Williams, ‘if we are to avoid the politics of the Devil...we have to develop a political imagination that resists abstraction and generality.’ It is interesting then, that in formulating his response to the diabolical narrative of the Grand Inquisitor, Dostoevsky avoids the path of rationalism adopted by Ivan, instead choosing, through his characterisation of Zosima and his protégé, Alyosha, to paint an image of active love. Whilst his intention was to reject Ivan, and his Inquisitor’s, debased perception of humanity by portraying characters of strength, who took seriously and lived out the message of Christ, he feared, with some justification, that his readership may miss the point: ‘In my reply is represented something directly opposite to the world-conception expressed in the earlier book, but again, [N.B.] it is represented not point by point, but, so to say, in an artistic picture. And that’s just what worries me, that is, shall I be understood and shall I achieve even a particle of my aim.’ Among those who seemingly failed to comprehend Dostoevsky’s purposes was D. H. Lawrence who, in his ‘Preface to Dostoevsky’s The Grand Inquisitor,’ argued, “The recognition of the weakness of man has been a common trait in all great, wise rulers of

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55 Ellis Sandoz. *Political Apocalypse: A Study of Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor*, p.80: Sandoz notes that some of Dostoevsky’s critics condemned book 6 as weak literature, while others accused him of ‘spiritual bankruptcy and wholehearted alliance with Ivan’s atheistic rebellion.’
56 Ibid., p.79.
people.” Lawrence concludes that Christianity is impossible because it makes “demands greater than the nature of man can bear,” and therefore, says Lawrence, a great political system is one that recognises this and deprives man of his freedom." Leaving aside how Lawrence reached such a conclusion, his response reveals a disturbingly similar pessimism regarding humanity's capacity to transcend their weakness and act as agents of goodness, as that expressed by Ivan and his Grand Inquisitor. Equally true, however, is the fact that amongst the critical responses there are many that marvel at the ingenuity and effectiveness of book six, and the remainder of the novel, as a retort to Ivan’s legend. Regardless of where on this spectrum readers find themselves, it is Hillesum’s response that is of most interest here.

In the opening of book 6, ‘The Russian Monk,’ the portrayal of Zosima prompts the recollection of Christ's characterisation in Ivan’s tale of ‘The Grand Inquisitor.’ Like Jesus, Zosima is a force of attraction. While anticipating his death, it is as the embodiment of joyful Christian love that people are drawn to him. Though weak, Zosima is ‘engaged in a quiet and joyful conversation,’ with his focus, even in his dying hours, on the welfare of others: Upon noticing Alyosha standing at the doorway of his room, he joyfully implores him to enter; comforting Alyosha in his sorrow, he enquires as to whether his offering of sixty copecks had reached the ‘good woman from Vishegorye, with her little Lizaveta in her arms,’ assured that it had, Zosima then asks Alyosha about his brother, Dmitri, in whose face he had observed a future of trials: ‘I seemed to see something terrible yesterday...as though his whole future was expressed in his eyes. A look came into his eyes—so that I was instantly horror-stricken at what that man is preparing for himself...I sent you to him, Alexey, for I thought your brotherly face would help him. But everything and all our fates are from the Lord.’

60 Ibid., p.311.
61 Ibid., p.312.
Juxtaposed as Ivan’s antithesis, Zosima is one in whom love is visible. While Ivan, the embodiment of Dostoevsky’s belief that ‘those who love men in general, hate men in particular,’ expresses skepticism regarding love for humanity beyond its conceptual possibility, Zosima demonstrates love through encounter with one’s Other in their embodied, individual form. Importantly, in the aforementioned cases, encounter is followed by action. Having observed in Dmitri’s eyes present distress and future suffering and, due to his own proximity to death unable to check on him directly, he sends his brother, Alyosha, to secure his welfare. Similarly, having encountered the woman from Vishegorye and her child, he sends after them an offering, of which he was the intended recipient, with the instruction it be given anonymously, ‘from an unknown benefactress.’

It is in this same spirit of disseminating love into the world that Zosima, having reminded Alyosha of the carnivalesque scriptural injunction that, ‘Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit,’ commands his protégé to go beyond the walls of the monastery in order to ‘live like a monk in the world.’

Zosima’s invocation to an existential orientation that is forgetful of the self and directed to the Other, reflects a Humanism of the Other of the sort advocated by Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, which also finds resonance in the assertion of Indian statesman and philosopher, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan: ‘The resurrection is not the rise of the dead from their tombs but the passage from the death of self-absorption to the life of unselfish love, the transition from the darkness of selfish individualism to the light of universal spirit, from falsehood to truth, from the slavery of the world to the liberty of the eternal.’ Cited by Richard Cohen as the epigraph to his introduction to Humanism of the Other, it serves as an effective segue into the spirit of Levinas’ philosophy, which

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63 Ibid., p.312.
64 Fyodor Dostoevsky. The Karamazov Brothers, p.312.
65 Ibid.
identifies the Other as the origin and centre, *par excellence*, of humanity’s ethical imperative. Expressed otherwise, Levinas’ laconic enquiry, “To be or not to be,” is that the question?68 challenges one to rethink the preoccupation with the self, denoted by the Cartesian formula, *Cogito ergo sum* by suggesting the source of existential meaning is located elsewhere. Echoing the sentiments of Radhakrishnan, and set against the Shoah—the quintessence of the Other’s negation—Levinas encourages an orientation towards the Other so radical that the self acts for a time beyond its own finitude: ‘To renounce contemporaneity with the triumph of one’s work is to glimpse this triumph in a time without me, is setting sights on this world without me, setting sights on a time beyond the horizon of my time; eschatology without hope for self or liberation with regard to my time.’69 The significance of such an existential state, namely ‘Being for a time that would be without me, for a time after my time, beyond the famous “being-for-death, [is that] it is passage to the time of the Other.’70 We see in the Christ of both the Gospels and Ivan’s tale of ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ the perfect paradigm of such an orientation, insofar as each acts totally without self-interest, solely for the purpose of securing the liberation of the Other. Importantly, the liberation secured by Christ for humanity existed, not only beyond the span of His life on earth, but, far more importantly, regardless of whether His existence was acknowledged by men and women or not. Indeed, as has been noted, here, in Christ’s radical respect for the freedom of the Other, lies the source of the Grand Inquisitor’s indictment of his work. Importantly, for Dostoevsky’s purposes, such respect for the Other, wherein the foundation of agape love is discovered, was not restricted to the figure of Christ, but, contrary to the Inquisitor’s charge, could be manifest in humanity also. Once again, Zosima’s example becomes instructive.

In the biographical notes of Zosima’s life found in chapter two of book six, Alyosha records an incident which proved a significant turning point in young Zosima’s life and the catalyst for his entrance into the monastery: in the middle

68 Ibid., p.xxxiv.
69 Ibid., p.27.
70 Ibid.
of an eight-year stint in military cadet school, Zosima forms an attachment to ‘a beautiful and intelligent young girl of noble and lofty character.’

Unbeknown to him, however, the young woman is already betrothed to another man; after a two-month relocation to another district, Zosima returns to the news she has married. Upon discovering that he was alone in his ignorance of the relationship and, in a state of rage (326), Zosima seeks an opportunity to humiliate his rival, the result of which, once taken, is the scheduling of a duel. According to the biographical notes, the day prior to the arranged confrontation, Zosima, having returned home in a crazed state, inflicted two savage blows on his orderly, Afanasy, an act, which, forty years later, he still recollected with pain. After a night of limited sleep and amidst the breaking beauty of the natural world, Zosima experiences a breakdown over the cruelty he had dealt out the previous day. Recalling the dying words of his departed brother, Markel, to his servants: ‘My dear ones, why do you wait on me, why do you love me, am I worth your waiting on me?’ (327) Zosima experiences a conversion:

Yes, am I worth it, flashed through my mind. After all, what am I worth, that another man, a fellow-creature, made in the likeness and image of God, should serve me? For the first time in my life this question forced itself upon me. He had said, ‘Mother, my little heart, in truth we are each responsible to all for all, it’s only that men don’t know this. If they knew it, the world would be a paradise at once.’ ‘God, can that too be false?’ I thought as I wept. ‘In truth, perhaps, I am more than all others responsible for all, a greater sinner than all men in the world.’ (327)

After this revelation Zosima bows down before Afanasy to seek his forgiveness; it is an act of humility that elicits tears from the orderly and sees Zosima depart for his duel in a state of ecstasy. What follows defies the belief of all witnesses. Zosima, convinced of his responsibility to all men, arrives at the duel to face his former adversary. After standing to receive the shot of his opponent, which grazes his cheek and ear, but leaves him otherwise unhurt, Zosima throws his

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72 According to the notes, due to his even temperament, Zosima’s fury was short-lived, requiring him to feign his anger until he ‘became at last revolting and absurd.’
pistol away, seeks the forgiveness of his rival and amidst the confused jeers of those in attendance, commits himself to joining the monastery. In a revealing confession Zosima explains his conversion and newfound commitment to his Other:

...I ought to have owned my fault as soon as I got there, before he had fired a shot, before leading him into a great and deadly sin; but we have made our life so grotesque, that to act in that way would have been almost impossible, for only after I faced his shot at a distance of twelve paces could my words have any significance for him, and if I had spoken before, he would have said, 'He is a coward, the sight of the pistols has frightened him, no use to listen to him.' Gentlemen, I cried suddenly, speaking straight from my heart, 'look around you at the gifts of God, the clear sky, the pure air, the tender grass, the birds; nature is beautiful and sinless, and we, only we, are sinful and foolish, and we don’t understand that life is heaven, for we have only to understand that and it will at once be fulfilled in all its beauty, we shall embrace each other and weep.' (329)

In Zosima's realisation and practical demonstration of his responsibility for all of humanity and his conviction that there, where men and women fulfill their responsibility to their Other, Heaven is revealed, the transforming possibilities of active love are made visible; simultaneously, the Grand Inquisitor’s impoverished anthropology is challenged and Ivan’s rhetorical question as to whether he is his brother’s keeper, borrowed from the mouth of Cain, is emphatically answered in the affirmative (253). Levinas, drawing on Dostoevsky, affirms the importance of Zosima’s realisation:

I am in reality responsible for the other even when he or she commits crimes, even when others commit crimes. This is for me the essence of the Jewish conscience. But I also think that it is the essence of the human conscience: All men are responsible for one another, and ‘I more than anyone else.’ One of the most important things for me is that asymmetry and that formula: All men are responsible for one another and I more than anyone else. It is Dostoevsky’s formula, which as you see I quote again.73

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For both Levinas and Zosima the Other’s dignity is totally without contingency. In other words, it originates prior to, and independently of, corporeality. Its metaphysical origin is recognised by Zosima in the scriptural formulation: ‘So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them’ (Gen 1:27); upon realising the non-phenomenological origins of his Other, Zosima questions the assumptions underlying his relationships with Afanasy and his adversary. In the case of his orderly, though not long in his service, Zosima had previously, and with little apparent compunction, dealt out beatings to him; an act that reflected the class divide which, hitherto had defined their relationship. Once struck by the truth of their common humanity before God, Zosima, in the course of apologising to Afanasy, makes a gesture of humility that signifies a transformation in his consciousness and a reversal of relational power:

‘Afanasy,’ I said, ‘I gave you two blows on the face yesterday, forgive me,’ I said. He started at me as though he were frightened, and looked at me: and I saw that it was not enough, and on the spot, in my full officer’s uniform, I dropped at his feet and bowed my head to the ground. ‘Forgive me,’ I said. Then he was completely aghast. ‘Your honour…sir, what are you doing?’ Am I worth it?’ And he burst out crying as I had done before, hid his face in his hands, turned to the window and shook all over with sobs.74

Dostoevsky here emphasises both the genuineness of Zosima’s conversion and the dramatic impact it had on Afanasy. So overwhelmed is the latter at his master’s gesture of humility, but, more importantly, respect, that he sobs uncontrollably. His question pertaining to his worthiness of such a gesture and tearful response, which points to a past of one unused to respectful displays, is anticipated and answered through Zosima’s prostration, in his full officer’s uniform, before him. As mentioned, this episode proved a catalyst for transformation of Zosima’s life, while for Dostoevsky, it is a narrative demonstration of the victory of active Christian love over selfishness. In pointing to humanity’s capacity to transition from self-interest to a selfless concern for the Other, Dostoevsky refutes the Grand Inquisitor’s assessment of humanity as

74 Fyodor Dostoevsky. The Karamazov Brothers, p.328.
weak and vile and simultaneously signifies the victory of the Deity’s narrative over the diabolical.

A similar victory over the diabolical was at the forefront of Levinas’ efforts to ground God-given human dignity in the non-phenomenological. The shock of witnessing his mentor, Martin Heidegger, align himself with Nazism, which, ‘rendered the self wholly immanent, anchoring it without hope of liberation in its contexts, the body above all,’ prompted Levinas to question the project of phenomenology, to which he had hitherto dedicated his intellectual endeavours. Concluding that ‘Heidegger had turned onto a road that had Hitlerism as an ultimate or at least a possible destination,’ and realising that he had, for at least a while, unwittingly followed the German philosopher down this road, Levinas rejected Heidegger’s phenomenological ontology, which subordinates humanity to the realm of Being, and adopted ethics as his first philosophy. Grounding humanity’s ethical imperative in the metaphysical, he situated Otherness as the indisputable source and centre of human responsibility. According to Glenn Morrison:

Levinas’s philosophy testifies to the ever-present exposure of God to human suffering: God is near to the broken hearted (Ps. 34:18). To accept this reality involves the deepening of pain and bearing forth of compassion. The difficult freedom and adoration of encountering the Other’s broken heart and spirit crushed by the weight of adversity and suffering invites the exposure of bodiliness, of being wounded by the wounds of the Other. This opens an effective state of melancholy and vigilance for the Other. The sense of exposure to the Other’s poverty and destitution unveils the need for vulnerability. The encounter with another’s tragedy is defining for the human condition because it indicates that the self is not all powerful and in control but affected by the weakness of the other’s condition and emotional state. To have the courage to accept the fragility of the human condition allows one to question the ambitions of the self-interested ego. And it is here, in the exposure to the Other’s hemorrhaging and brokenness, that the weight of the crushed spirit awakes consciousness.

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76 Ibid., p.102.
This movement from recognition of the suffering Other to empathy to response is demonstrated in the aforementioned exchange between Zosima and his orderly, Afanasy. As mentioned, it is the appreciation of Afanasy's proximity to God that opens Zosima's eyes to his suffering, a suffering for which he was largely responsible. Accepting his complicity in his orderly's anguish and his responsibility to all of humanity, Zosima, immersed in melancholic regret, questions the ambitions of his ego and confronts the reality of Afanasy's distress. 'And it is here, in the exposure to the Other's hemorrhaging and brokenness, that the weight of the crushed spirit awakes consciousness.'

As far as Levinas is concerned, the yoke of one's responsibility to their Other is discovered in 'the manifestation of the face [which] is the first discourse.' The face of a neighbor signifies for me an unexceptional responsibility, preceding every free consent, every pact, every contract. It escapes representation; it is the very collapse of phenomenality. Not because it is too brutal to appear, but because in a sense too weak, non-phenomenon because less than a phenomenon. To better understand the ethically binding, non-phenomenal nature of the face, we again return to Zosima's exchange with Afanasy. As previously observed, Zosima's initial apology is greeted with uncertainty: "Afanasy," I said, "I gave you two blows on the face yesterday, forgive me," I said. He started at me as though he were frightened, and looked at me: and I saw that it was not enough. Prior to any utterance, Afanasy's face has betrayed a past of abuse that casts into shadow the reliability of his master's words. Its non-phenomenality is displayed not only in revealing a past that is no longer present, but also, in the words of Levinas, a present which is already the past of itself. At the point of Zosima's comprehension of Afanasy's incomprehension, the disclosure has already passed. Despite this, it is the non-phenomenal nature of

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78 Ibid.
79 Emmanuel Levinas. Humanism of the Other, p.31.
81 Fyodor Dostoevsky. The Karamazov Brothers, p.328.
82 Emmanuel Levinas. Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, p.88.
his orderly’s face that reveals to Zosima his responsibility ‘preceding every free consent, every pact, every contract,”83 one might even say preceding every rank and class distinction. In recognition of the ethical imperative displayed through the face, Zosima, relying no longer just on words, but on a gesture of humility before his Other, overcomes Afanasy’s incredulity and secures his forgiveness.

In opposition to the Grand Inquisitor’s dystopian world, which gifts humanity—under totalitarian restraints—the illusion of happiness, Dostoevsky portrays the possibility of genuine happiness attained through an altruistic investment in the Other. Indeed, Zosima’s life, which institutes the movement away from egocentricity to a concern for the Other, enacts into embodied existence the scriptural injunction that ‘unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.’ (John 12:24) Zosima’s encounter with Afanasy represents the genesis of his journey towards eternity: Through self-kenosis, the Other is foregrounded as the ethical imperative to which Zosima must respond; repeating Levinas’ earlier formulation, insofar as he ‘renounces contemporaneity with the triumph of [his] work...setting sights on a time beyond the horizon of [his] own time,’84 Zosima enters into the time of the Other. It remains the task of this chapter to trace this same movement in the life of Hillesum.

‘AM I MY BROTHER’S KEEPER?’: ETTY HILLESUM’S RESPONSE

Across the pages of Etty Hillesum’s diaries and letters a significant personal and spiritual transformation can be traced. Commencing on March 8, 1941, the therapeutic origins of her writing reveal an individual looking to discover herself and her place in the world. By September 7, 1943, when, as one of 987 Jews being transported to Auschwitz, she scrawled her final words on a postcard and threw it from the locomotive of human misery, Hillesum had discovered that her meaning lay securely in her Other.85 For Hillesum, this entailed a journey

83 Ibid.
84 Emmanuel Levinas. Humanism of the Other, p.27.
towards a God who was simultaneously unquantifiable and intimately knowable and towards humanity, synchronously capable of unspeakable deprivations and indescribable beauty. In this, her capacity to embrace both the enigmatic and disclosed aspects of existence, incorporating each into her Weltanschauung, we arguably discover the origins of the ever-increasing popular and scholarly attention she has attracted since her death and the subsequent publication of her writings. According to one of the leading scholars in Hillesum studies, Meins Coetsier, ‘few other diarists in the history of World War Two and the Shoah approximate her in depth and range: conceivably Anne Frank, Victor Frankl and Edith Stein, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Simone Weil are generally agreed to be of the same spiritual rank.’

Hillesum begins her diary in her twenty-seventh year and from the opening entry she discloses a combination of passion and insecurity that one might expect in someone still in the fountain of their youth. Revealing strong feelings for Julius Spier, at whose suggestion she began her chronicles, within a few short paragraphs she writes of her fears, hopes and dreams. Unveiling her trepidation of succumbing to the mental fragilities that had plagued her family, she quickly rejects this notion, stating, ‘I simply need to do a lot of work on myself before I develop into an adult and a complete human being.’ Four days later, in her diary entry of March 12, 1941, Hillesum reveals the kenotic nature of the work to which she would, under the guidance of Spiers, commit herself: ‘Anyone who tackles an important task must forget himself. Under this motto I have entrusted myself to S.’ The word “important” is something I need not

September 7, 1943, were 170 children. Only eight of the 987 that accompanied Hillesum survived Auschwitz-Birkenau.  
86 Ibid., p.16.  
87 Ibid, pp. 40-43: Julius Philipp Spier (1887-1942) was a psycho-chirologist who had trained as a therapist in Zurich with Carl Jung. With Jung’s encouragement he opened a practice in Berlin, which proved successful. Leaving Nazi Germany in 1939 for Amsterdam he resumed his practice and began seeing students. It was in this capacity that Hillesum first encountered Spier. Though twenty-seven years separated them ‘he became not only her personal teacher but the love of her life.’ Spier was a significant influence on Hillesum and it was to him that she addressed the opening entry of her diary.  
88 Hillesum almost always refers to Julius Spiers as ‘S.’
apply to myself for the time being, though I have a strong suspicion that, were I to forget myself, I might yet achieve something of importance’ (18). For Hillesum, the task ahead of her was exemplified by the tale of a woodcarver, taken from Austrian psychotherapist, Alfred Adler, which she transcribed into her diary:

Once upon a time, a woodcarver made a magnificent statue, a true work of art greatly admired by one and all. Even his sovereign, Prince Li, was full of praise and asked him for his secret. The sculptor replied, ‘How can I, a humble man and your servant, possibly have a secret from you? I have no secret, nor is my art anything special. I shall tell you, however, how my work was done. When I had decided to carve a statue, I observed that I was too full of vanity and pride. So I worked for two days to rid myself of these sins, and believe I was then cleansed of them. But presently I discovered that I was impelled by the envy of a colleague. Again I worked for two days and overcame my envy. Thereupon I found I longed greatly for praise. It took me another two days to make this longing vanish. Finally, however, I noticed that I kept thinking of how much money I would get for the statue. This time I needed four days, but at last I felt free and strong. I went to the woods and when I found a pine tree and felt we suited each other, I felled it, took it to my house and set to work.’ (18)

As this story illustrates, self-kenotic activity is laborious and requires a capacity for self-awareness. Paradoxically, it involves an inward glance, however, such introspection aims for the liberation of the self from the self; thus, it is ultimately outwardly focused. Adler’s contemporary, Sigmund Freud, whose assessment of the religious attitude, Hillesum also copied into her diary, alludes to this phenomenon:

Critics persist in describing as ‘deeply religious’ anyone who admits to a sense of man’s insignificance or impotence in the face of the universe, although what constitutes the essence of the religious attitude is not this feeling but only the next step after it, the reaction to it which seeks a remedy for it. The man who goes no further, but humbly acquiesces in the small part which human beings play in the great world—such a man is, on the contrary, irreligious in the truest sense of the world. (22)

While for Hillesum, the lesson of Adler’s story is that ‘anyone who tackles an important task must forget himself’ (22), this required a heavy personal investment. As Freud suggests, far from being a passive collapse into non-
assertion, kenosis required an active surrender of the self in order to create space for the Other—one might call it an active passivity. Finding its scriptural equivalence in the earlier stated Johannine formula (John 12:24), which situates death as the womb of life, Hillesum articulated a similar carnivalesque approach very early in her diaries, writing: ‘One ought to accept one’s suffering, bear it gladly and draw fresh life from it’ (26).

Fortunately for Hillesum, when it came to the work of transformation, time became a redundant category:

‘Development must not bother with time.’ These words are of utmost importance to me. They have become flesh and blood in these last few days. In the past I always had the hunted feeling of having no time for anything, at least not for the little things in life, not for the dentist, not for the hairdresser, not for a walk around the block, not always for friends—or rather, talks and brief encounters with friends and acquaintances always gave me the frantic and upset feeling that I was wasting some of my precious time. And what did I need this time for? For my ‘work’, a highly mystical concept, as nothing much ever comes of this work, what with my inner turmoil and that hunted feeling. (26)

As a Jew living under Nazi jurisdiction, the clock was ticking on Hillesum’s existence; as such, her feeling of being hunted was far from metaphorical. Despite this, and contrary to her self-assessment, Hillesum demonstrated the capacity to incorporate her realisations into the flesh and blood of her existence. Under the influence of Spier, she became quickly convinced of the need to live for a time beyond her own finitude, which was done through the transformation of the self. According to Hillesum, such work reflects and emerges from that which Levinas termed one’s asymmetrical obligation to their Other: ‘A man cannot be comprehensive enough in the demands he makes of himself nor relative enough in the expectations he has of the outside world’ (168). Hillesum reflected further on this obligation when in March 1942, she wrote:

This became clear to me for the umpteenth time, this afternoon: that one can never be conscious enough of the responsibility one has for one’s questioning fellow men in search of help, that one must hearken to oneself ever more attentively and consciously, that one must grow ever more self-disciplined, and that one ought not to waste a single
In the words of Morrison, ‘the oppressiveness of the world is not to be overcome through care for one’s existential possibilities, but via the path of responsibility for the Other.’

Hillesum had by this stage certainly realised that this process was indispensible connected to one’s kenotic activity; in other words, the foregrounding of the Other’s welfare can only be enacted in that space opened up through the retreat of the self. Arguably the most radical demonstration of this retreat in Hillesum’s life was her refusal to go into hiding, this, in spite of the persistent efforts of her friends:

In order to prevent her departure, Klaas Smelik and his daughter Johanna (Jopie) made a plan to kidnap Etty Hillesum from her house in the Gabriel Metsustraat (Amsterdam) and hide her in their house in Hilversum. On one occasion when Hillesum was on the point of leaving for Westerbork, Klaas Smelik grabbed her and tried to convince her of the danger. ‘She wormed herself free and stood at a distance of about five feet from me. She looked at me very strangely and said, ‘You don’t understand me.’ I replied: ‘No, I don’t understand what on earth you’re up to. Why don’t you stay here, you fool!’ Then she said: ‘I want to share the fate of my people.’ When she said that, I knew there was no hope. She would never come to us,’ said Smelik. Others also offered Etty a hiding place, but she steadfastly refused this.

As has been previously observed, Hillesum was fully aware of what sharing in the fate of her people entailed: ‘What is at stake is our impending destruction and annihilation [she wrote], we can have no more illusions about that. They are out to destroy us completely, we must accept that and go on from here’ (736).

Given this consciousness, Hillesum’s choice to stand in solidarity with her fellow Jews signifies her retreat from self-concern and her entrance into the time of the Other. No longer is her life lived for the fulfillment of her own existential possibilities, rather, her existential possibilities are directed towards, and realised through, the service of her Other into perpetuity—this is guaranteed by

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the preservation of her writings. Though she had not forsaken the desire to live a long life, the quality of her existence—measured by the service she could provide those who came after her—took precedence (738). As such, by working for a time beyond the span of her life, by setting her sights beyond the horizon of her own time, Hillesum embodies the Levinasian notion of ethical transcendence, ‘which is irreducible to the immanence of the self’s interest (essence) structured by time and death.’

While the brutality of the Nazis undoubtedly drove Hillesum to a deeper identification with the Jewish community than she, as an integrated Jew, may have otherwise felt, she strove to ensure her empathy broached the confines of the persecuted to include her perpetrators. It is a process that begins as an imaginative exercise played out in her diary entry of March 15, 1941. After reflecting on the danger of the Nazis’ barbarism evoking a similarly barbaric response, one, which Hillesum insisted, should be resisted, lest the world be rendered powerless to pull itself out of the mire, she envisions a reaction that would cut off the fuel to the fires of hatred surrounding her: ‘To put it very crudely, which will probably cause pain to my fountain pen: if an SS man were to kick me to death, I should nevertheless look into his face and wonder to myself, both in terrified amazement and out of human interest, My God, you poor fellow, what terrible things must have happened in your life to bring you to this pass?’ (36). As earlier observed in our analysis of her encounter with the Gestapo, such highly idealised sentiments were not the preservation of the ideological realm but rather entered into existence through Hillesum’s interpersonal relations.

While it is true that in her encounter with the Gestapo she was not subjected to a beating, it is equally true that the sight of Jews receiving floggings at the hands of the Nazis was far from exceptional, subsequently, the possibility that Hillesum’s fearless attitude could have elicited a physically violent response was extremely high. We need only to cast our vision forward to the circumstances of Hillesum's

91 ‘And that is why I must try to live a good and faithful life to my last breath: so that those who come after me do not have to start all over again, need not face the same difficulties. Isn’t that doing something good for future generations?’
transportation to Auschwitz, the order for which came directly from The Hague, to realise the precariousness of Jewish communications with their persecutors. Nonetheless, when confronted by the Gestapo officer’s efforts to intimidate and instill fear into her, Hillesum responds by wondering about the personal circumstances that had brought him to this place. In this instance, Hillesum recognised that she was dealing, not with monsters, but with human beings: ‘All the appalling things that happen are no mysterious threat from afar, but arise from fellow beings, very close to us’ (420). It was this conviction that informed her relationships with friend and foe alike: Her belief in a common humanity, which represented the antithesis of the racial theories advocated by her oppressors, drove Hillesum’s efforts to empathise with all. As Coetsier observes:

Hillesum’s desire to live in harmony with people from different nationalities and backgrounds was not simply theoretical, but something she practiced daily. She was aware of her own shortcomings, as on Friday July 3, 1942 when she acknowledged in her heart irritations and aggressiveness towards the German cook Kathe Fransen. Etty felt annoyed because she sensed that deep down that Kathe was defending her country, or rather; the good that was in her country (Nazi-) Germany. Hillesum realized that this anger inside herself, her own frustration and ‘hatred’ was misplaced and that in spite of everything, those who lived in Germany, ‘the Germans, were “people like ourselves. Surely that is right?” Hillesum argued, “You can spin as many theories as you like but they are people like

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93 Meins Coetsier. *The Existential Philosophy of Etty Hillesum: An Analysis of her Diaries and Letters*, p.68: According to a lawyer by the name of Stokvis, who knew the Hillesum family well, the young pianist and his parents were in Westerbork camp. Mengelberg had certified that this musical genius should not be lost. The small family lived ‘gesperrt’ ['exempted from transport'] in relative safety. But this was all ruined when the mother had the unfortunate idea of writing a letter to Rauter, with the modest request for a little more freedom of movement. A Jewess writing a letter to Rauter! It was ‘unvorstellbar’ ('inconceivable')! A Jewess writing a letter to an SS commander and general lieutenant of the police, to Rauter, the incarnation of the Aryan hero, whose fingers would be besmirched by touching the paper of this letter. ‘Unvorstellbar’ ('inconceivable'). ‘Grauenhaft’ ('horrid'). ‘Ein Verbrechen’ ('a crime'). ‘Sofort verschicken nach Osten’ ('send them immediately to the East'). The telegram arrived a few minutes before the transport train was due to leave Westerbork. Just in time. Within the hour the camp commandant could assure the squad leader that his orders had been obeyed: ‘Verschickt nach Osten.’
ourselves. That is something we must cling to through thick and thin, and shout into the face of all that hatred”

The opportunities to practice this level of solidarity increased exponentially with her entrance into Camp Westerbork. Having refused all efforts to flee, Hillesum, at the recommendation of her brother, Jaap, reluctantly applied for a job on the Jewish council. Evidently, it was a decision that caused her a large degree of anguish:

My letter of application to the Jewish council on Jaap’s urgent advice has upset my cheerful yet deadly serious equilibrium. As if I had done something underhanded. Like crowding onto a small piece of wood adrift on an endless ocean after a shipwreck and saving oneself by pushing others into the water and watching them drown. It is all so ugly. And I don’t think much of this particular crowd either. I would much rather join those who prefer to float on their backs for a while, drifting on the ocean with their eyes turned toward heaven, and who then go down with a prayer. I cannot help myself. My battles are fought out inside, with my own demons; it is not in my nature to tilt against the savage, cold-blooded fanatics who clamor for our destruction. (784)

Appointed to the council on July 15, 1942 to do secretarial work, Hillesum was awake to the problematic nature of its role.95 Whilst ‘the council operated under the illusion that by negotiation it could save the Jews from the worst,’96 a fantasy conceived and fortified by the Nazis, it was a narrative Hillesum refused to buy into. Approximately two weeks later, on the evening of July 28, she wrote: ‘Nothing can ever atone for the fact, of course, that one section of the Jewish population is helping to transport the majority out of the country. History will pass judgment in due course’ (818). Eleven months later, amidst the terrifying machinations of preparing another transport, Hillesum again struggles to come to terms with her role:

The evening before, I had walked through the camp. People were grouped together between the barracks under a gray, cloud sky.

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95 Ibid., p.59.
96 Ibid.
‘Look, that’s just how people behave after a disaster, standing about on street corners discussing what’s happened,’ my companion said to me. ‘But that’s what makes it so impossible to understand,’ I bust out. ‘This time, it’s before the disaster!’ Whenever misfortune strikes, people have a natural instinct to lend a helping hand and to save what can be saved. Tonight I shall be there to dress all babies and to calm mothers—and that is what I call ‘helping.’ I could almost curse myself for that. For we all know that we are yielding up our sick and defenseless brother and sister to hunger, heat, cold, exposure and destruction, and yet we dress them and escort them to the bare cattle cars—and if they can’t walk, we carry them on stretchers. What is going on, what mysteries are these, in what sort of fatal mechanism have we become enmeshed? The answer cannot simply be that we are all cowards. We’re not that bad. We stand before a much deeper question... (1060)

Hillesum’s determination to abide with mystery, whilst surrounded by the demonic, signifies her refusal to subscribe to a diabolical narrative which, before the unfathomable, collapses into nihilism. Counterpoised to Ivan whose Euclidean mind sees him rendered impotent when confronted with the enigmatic, and whose incapacity to tolerate the inexplicable results in his flight towards the diabolical: a state of non-existence instituted through the denial of embodied existence—existence without existents, as Levinas would say, Hillesum ‘falls back on the mystery of human life itself.’ Like Dostoevsky and his character Zosima, Hillesum realised ‘much is concealed in the earthly life of humankind and “many of the strongest feelings and movements of our nature we cannot comprehend.”’ Her acceptance of this state of affairs led her progressively away from the sort of collapse into madness that, in her opening diary entry, she feared might be her fate; conversely, Ivan’s incapacity to accommodate mystery sees him march towards insanity and threatens to throw him into the abyss. In simple terms, Ivan’s inability to embrace life’s ambivalence leads him to reject his Other, whilst Hillesum enters into the enigmatic mystery of Otherness and herein discovers existential meaning and fulfillment. On September 20, 1942, Hillesum reflected on the paradoxical nature of this journey in the following words:

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98 Ibid.
99 Ibid., p.901.
I once wrote in one of my diaries: ‘I would like to run my fingertips along the contours of these times.’ I was sitting at my desk with no idea what to make of life. That was because I had not yet arrived at the life in myself; was still sitting at this desk. And then I was suddenly flung into one of the many flashpoints of human suffering. And there, in the faces of people, in a thousand gestures, small changes of expression, life stories, I was suddenly able to read our age—and much more than our age alone. And then it suddenly happened: I was able to feel the contours of these times with my fingertips. How is it that this stretch of heathland surrounded by barbed wire, through which so much human misery has flooded, nevertheless remains inscribed in my memory as something as almost lovely? How is it that my spirit, far from being oppressed, seemed to grow brighter and lighter there? It is because I read the signs of the times and they do not seem meaningless to me. Surrounded by my writers and poets and the flowers on my desk, I loved life. And there among the barracks, full of hunted and persecuted people, I found confirmation of my love of life. Life in those drafty barracks was no other than life in this protected and peaceful room. Not for one moment was I cut off from the life I was said to have left behind. There was simply one great, meaningful whole. (844, 846)

Turning once again to Bakhtin’s acclaimed exposition of medieval laughter, *Rabelais and His World*, we observe that ‘one of the indispensable accessories of carnival was the set called “hell.” This “hell” was solemnly burnt at the peak of the festivities.’ Behind the delightful irony of this grotesque image lay the people’s determination to reject the diabolical fear so widely used by the executors of official seriousness to terrify and control: ‘The people play with terror and laugh at it; the awesome becomes a comic monster.’ In Hillesum’s writings one encounters a linguistic equivalent of this symbolic act. Rejecting the demonic narrative of the Nazis, Hillesum, ‘surrounded by her writers and poets’ (846), and informed by their vision, enters into and embraces the ambivalent and enigmatic nature of existence; through her descent into Otherness, Hillesum transcends the fearful circumstances of her life, and discovers both meaning and joy. Her diaries and letters testify to a life in which the embrace of the carnivalesque death-life dialectic at the heart of the scriptural injunction that

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100 Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*, p.91.

101 Ibid.
'unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12:24), was played out in full.
CHAPTER V

ETTY HILLESUM AND RAINER M. RILKE: ENCOUNTERING THE FUGITIVE GOD

*To be a poet in destitute times means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods. This is why the poet in the time of the world’s night utters the holy.* (Martin Heidegger)

IN SEARCH OF THE INVISIBLE GOD

In humanity’s unfolding story few events, if any, have produced such a radical disjuncture as that brought about by the Shoah. Rising from the ashes of the Nazi death camps, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Chelmno, Sobibor and Treblinka, were questions of such existential significance that they shook the foundations of humanity’s self-perception in both its ancient and contemporary senses. On the one hand, enlightened man (sic), unfettered by the statutes and formulas of the guardians of previous ages,¹ as Kant understood so well, and armed with reason, stood silent in the face of the Holocaust. On the other hand, who, when confronted with the rotting, charred or incinerated remains of six million Jewish men, women and children, could possibly believe in a benevolent loving God? Where does the Holocaust leave the Jews as God’s chosen people? Does not the Covenant lie in ashes, amidst those of the Holocaust’s victims? This is the conundrum that has confronted scholars since the horrors of the Final Solution were uncovered.

In his attempt to address these questions, Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, points to a God of the scriptures who both reveals and hides his face from his people. Citing the example of Abraham—the father of Judaism—who accepted God both when He promised him a son and then later asked that he be sacrificed, Buber seemingly suggests the need for a similar acceptance on the part of Jews

living in a world that now includes Auschwitz. Referencing Job, Buber goes on to state: ‘And God revealed himself from the storm. He doesn’t say to Job that the world is just, what Job and we will call just. He doesn’t make a confession...and does not reveal his secret of mercy. He is just there, the One who calls himself, “I am who I am.”’

As far as Buber is concerned evil is an inevitable product of human freedom and a phenomenon that provides an opportunity for the manifestation of grace; as such, it is a reality that requires penetration rather than avoidance. In literary parlance, Buber’s position bears some resemblance to the Taoist proclamation of the mutual dependency of opposites, symbolised by the yin and yang, and articulated by the Master Hand in advice given to Ged, the central protagonist of Ursula LeGuinn’s, *The Wizard of Earthsea*: ‘To light a candle is to cast a shadow...’

Philosophically speaking, Buber’s response to the Shoah is best understood within the larger context of the dialogic principle informing so much of his work; that said, this same principle confronts its greatest refutation in the event of the Shoah, a fact Buber himself acknowledged. In the first instance Buber posited dialogue as the indispensable constituent of one’s humanity: “To be a man means to be the being that is over against,” by which he meant that man is ontologically a dialogical entity, that our anthro-phenomenon is our capacity of being a relational partner. Soon after, he added an additional component: “What concerns me fundamentally is that our relation to our fellow man and our relation to God belong together, that their basic character, that of reciprocal I-Thou relation, joins them to each other.” Yet, in the shadow of the Holocaust, an event wrought from a monologic approach, Buber’s faith in dialogue—particularly God’s dialogue with humanity, confronts its greatest trial, a dilemma best encapsulated by the words of Emil Fackenheim: ‘At Treblinka, Jews were singled out for death as inexorably as at Sinai they had once been singled out for

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life.’ Indeed, it is against this backdrop of God’s intervention in Jewish history that His silence in the Holocaust is all the more incomprehensible.

While Buber provides few easy answers to those seeking to reconcile the God of Sinai with the God of Auschwitz, neither does he abandon his faith in dialogue, for, as far as he was concerned, doing so entailed the risk of subscribing to Hitler’s monologic worldview that might is right: ‘...against the dialectic power of force, Buber advocated the dialogic power of the spoken word. Against the monologic reliance on one’s physical might, Buber introduced a reliance on the strength of common human bonds and Humanistic values.’ Notwithstanding the dialogic crisis confronting Buber’s philosophy as a result of the Shoah, its poisonous fruit surely represents the eternal refutation of monologism in all of its manifestations.

While Buber’s theodicean efforts leave many questions unanswered—a state of affairs the likes of Wiesel, who rejected the project of theodicy, would find hardly surprising—he does posit some interesting perspectives, including that relayed in a letter to Ernsh Szilagyi where he calls for an acceptance of God in both his revelatory and eclipsed states: ‘He is not the archetype of ideal, but contains the archetype...God desires that men should follow His revelation, yet at the same time He wishes to be accepted and loved in his deepest concealment.’ As Forman-Barzilai notes, while ‘Buber was well aware of the qualitative uniqueness of God’s role in the Holocaust, that heaven was silent as one and a half million children were cruelly murdered and, more importantly, no angel was sent to Auschwitz to stop the burning chimneys...[he nevertheless] encourages us to keep living in this new existential mode, not as an awaiting mode, but rather as a mode which encompasses a sober reflection with the silence along with a (sic) uncompromising yearning for the voice.’ Interestingly, Buber’s call

6 David Forman-Barzilai. ‘Agonism In Faith: Buber’s Eternal Thou After The Holocaust,’ p.159.
7 Ibid., p.165.
8 Ibid., p.166.
to abide in mystery, resonates with Hillesum’s approach to God, which, as shall be explored later in this chapter, owes much to the poetic vision of Rilke.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, a major figure in the Hasidic tradition who lost most of his immediate family to the Holocaust, rejects the notion that God’s absence during the Shoah is in any sense shrouded in mystery. While acknowledging the hiding God of the scriptures, he insists this is a function, rather than the essence of the Deity: ‘God did not depart of His own volition; He was expelled. God is in exile.’ As far as Heschel is concerned the question, Where was God during Auschwitz? is a signifier of humanity’s persistent tendency to blame the Other, in this instance, the divine Other:

The major folly of this view seems to lie in its shifting the responsibility for man's plight from man to God, in accusing the Invisible though iniquity is ours. Rather than admit our own guilt, we seek, like Adam, to shift the blame upon someone else. For generations we have been investing life with ugliness and now we wonder why we do not succeed. God was thought of as a watchman hired to prevent us from using our loaded guns. Having failed us in this, He is now thought of as the ultimate Scapegoat.

As such, God’s hiding during the Holocaust was his concession to human free will. The real question then is not where was God during the Holocaust, but rather, where was man?

While, in tackling questions of theodicy, Heschel shifts the responsibility back to humanity, Emmanuel Levinas, believes Auschwitz has brought the project of theodicy to a close. ‘Did not,’ asks Levinas, ‘the word of Nietzsche on the death of God take on, in the extermination camps, the signification of a quasi-empirical

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¹⁰ Ibid., p.378.
¹¹ Levinas rejects Theodicy, which attributes suffering to sin, an association which he traces in the Christian doctrine of Original Sin and finds implicit in the Old Testament attribution of the Jewish diaspora to the sins of Israel.
fact?" In answer to his own rhetorical question, Levinas rejects the attribution of meaning to the suffering wrought by the Holocaust as grotesque. To demonstrate this he cites Canadian Jewish philosopher, Emil Fackenheim:

The Nazi genocide of the Jewish people has no precedent within Jewish history. Nor...will one find a precedent outside Jewish history...Even actual cases of genocide, however, still differ from the Nazi Holocaust in at least two respects. Whole peoples have been killed for 'rational' (however horrifying) ends such as power, territory, wealth...The Nazi murder...was annihilation for the sake of annihilation, murder for the sake of murder, evil for the sake of evil. Still more incontestably unique than the crime itself is the situation of the victims. The Albigensians died for their faith, believing unto death that God needed martyrs. Negro Christians have been murdered for their race, able to find comfort in a faith not at issue. The more than one million Jewish children murdered in the Nazi Holocaust died neither because of their faith, nor despite their faith, nor for reasons unrelated to the Jewish faith [but] because of the Jewish faith of their great-grandparents [who brought] up Jewish children.13

Of all the horrendous crimes inflicted at the hands of the Nazis, least comprehensible of all was the murder of children and infants. Confronted with the wide-scale and senseless murder of innocents, one finds oneself joining with Levinas in proclaiming the end of theodicy. To do otherwise, would seemingly see one inadvertently participate in the Nazis' game of Jewish blame. Conversely, Levinas is equally insistent on the need to remain faithful to the God of Israel, though absent from Auschwitz He was, for to renounce this God would be to destroy the very foundations of the Jewish people. This, 'would amount to finishing the criminal enterprise of National Socialism, which aimed at the annihilation of Israel and the forgetting of the ethical message of the Bible, which Judaism bears, and whose multimillennial history is concretely prolonged by Israel's existence as a people.'14 Confronted with these two, equally undesirable paths, Levinas implores humanity to draw upon their resources of compassion to mitigate the suffering of their fellow man. On this point, Levinas stands with Hillesum on common ground.

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., p.454.
In her diary entry of July 7, 1942, Hillesum wrote the following:

Everything has simply fallen away from me, leaving no trace, and I feel more receptive than ever before. Next week no doubt it will be the turn of the Dutch Jews. With each minute that passes, I shed more wishes and desires and attachments. I am ready for everything, for anywhere on this earth, wherever God may send me, and I am ready to bear witness in any situation and unto death that life is beautiful and meaningful and that it is not God’s fault that things are as they are at present, but our own. We have been granted every opportunity to enter every paradise, but we still have to learn to handle these opportunities. (768)

Hillesum’s defence of God is not so much a theological assertion as it is an insistence on humanity’s responsibility for the misery it inflicts on its Other. In this regard, her position aligns with Heschel’s argument that to blame God for the Holocaust is the ultimate act of scapegoating. The tendency to blame the infinite Other conceals the scapegoating of our finite Other, which, for Hillesum, is the real cause of the Holocaust. One need not read too far into Mein Kampf to discover Hitler’s desire to scapegoat the Jews for the perceived problems of Germany; that so many millions cooperated with this venture has been well documented15 and attests to the all too human propensity to look beyond oneself for the origin and solution to one’s problems rather than within. Indeed the very phenomenon of othering attests to a dis-ease within humanity that must be overcome. As far as Hillesum is concerned, it is not the role of God to do this work, rather, responsibility falls upon the individual. As such, to equate God’s absence from the Holocaust with His non-existence is nonsensical. To Hillesum’s way of thinking, God’s absence during the Holocaust only testifies to humanity’s failure to facilitate his presence; as she says, ‘it is not God’s fault that things are as they are at present, but our own’ (768).

In the work of Levinas, Hillesum’s position finds fertile ground. According to the philosopher, God’s hiddenness facilitates openings in which humanity can, through their ethical acts, induct divine presence into the world. As Michael Purcell observes: ‘The God who hides his face is a God who is always anterior to the posterior of the human, but who hides his face in order, starting from the human, to be recovered in the human, and by way of the human. God indeed arises as the counterpart of the justice I render to my neighbor, and who in the very rendering of that justice, makes a discrete return as the true God.’  

It is in this light that Hillesum’s insistence that ‘We have been granted every opportunity to enter every paradise, but we still have to learn to handle these opportunities’ (768), should be read—human agency is the vehicle by which God’s presence is enacted and this presence is most visible at that point in which othering is overcome by solidarity; when such opportunities are grasped, when the human makes himself present to his Other, then, and only then, does he make himself and God visible in the world:

Access to the true God is more to be achieved through engagement with other people rather than through any ‘adventure of cognition.’ The sense of dereliction that the demise of the divine may cause casts back on the human the need to respond to the human: ‘A God invisible means not only a God unimaginable, but a God accessible in justice. Ethics is the spiritual optics…The Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God…’Who can say that he loves God whom he cannot see if he does not love the other person whom he can see?’ (John 1)  

Levinas is dismissive of any theology abstracted from the human story. ‘Metaphysics,’ he says, ‘is enacted in ethical relations. Without the signification they draw from ethics theological concepts remain empty and formal frameworks...Everything that cannot be reduced to an interhuman relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion.’  

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17 Ibid., pp.121-122.
such assertions we hear the reverberations of Bakhtin's insistence that a
philosophy of life must be a moral philosophy, since 'life can be comprehended
only in concrete answerability.'\textsuperscript{19} If the word without a referent grows sickly and
dies as discourse\textsuperscript{20} then it stands to reason that any intellectual pursuit which
lacks a signifying function, will meet the same fate. Within the framework of
Christian theology, that \textit{The Word} became flesh and dwelt amongst us (John
1:14) marks the necessary link between metaphysics and the material world.
Given this, if God's presence is to enter the world, then it must be manifest
through the material—thus we return to Levinas' assertion that humanity is
responsible for God's ongoing incarnation in the human story. Interestingly,
Hillesum reached the same conclusion.

On the morning of July 12, after enduring a night of 'lay[ing] in the dark with
burning eyes as scene after scene of human suffering passed before [her],’ (780)
Hillesum, in an address to God, wrote the following:

\begin{quote}
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 You to 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, although You may later hold
us responsible. I become more aware almost with each heartbeat that
You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend your dwelling
place inside us to the last. There are, it is true, some who, even at this
late stage, are putting their vacuum cleaners and silver forks and
spoons in safekeeping instead of guarding You dear God. And there
are those who want to put their bodies in safekeeping but who are
nothing more now than a shelter for a thousand fears and bitter
feelings. (780)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19} M.M. Bakhtin. \textit{Toward a Philosophy of the Act}. (Trans. Vadim Liapunov). Austin:
University of Texas Press, 1999, p.56.

\textsuperscript{20} Michael Holquist (ed.). \textit{The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin}.
(Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist). Austin: University of Texas Press,
2006, p.353.
Hillesum is clearly speaking to a God very different to the omnipotent God who delivered the Jews from the hands of Pharaoh and enslavement in Egypt.\textsuperscript{21} Hillesum’s God requires her strength and her intervention in order to make His presence evident. Her assertion ‘that we must help You to help ourselves’\textsuperscript{22} emphasises divine reliance on human agency to facilitate the proliferation of His presence in the world. Whilst such a carnivalesque inversion might undermine representations of an all-powerful, omnipresent and omnipotent Deity, luminaries such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Jurgen Moltmann advocate a rich Christian theological tradition supporting the notion that mutuality is constitutive of divine-human relations.

Furthermore, Hillesum’s suggestion that God may hold humanity accountable for their responses to the Other during the Holocaust, which ranged from indifference to outright disdain, resonates with God’s accounting of Cain for the murder of his brother, Abel, an act which represented a fundamental betrayal of his ontological obligation. Channeling Levinas, Jules Simon suggests that in the very presence of the Other the locus of one’s accountability is found. The Other’s existence necessitates one’s obligation to look beyond self-concern: ‘In discontinuity with me, the other calls into question my agenda, my quest for self certainty and security, and spurs into restlessness my complacent comfort of being uncritically at home with myself.’\textsuperscript{23} As noted in the previous chapter, such an ethic demands that one move out of the theoretical realm that facilitates observation of one’s Other from a distance, into the material world of dialogic relations, which demands an encounter with the face. For Levinas, the face ‘is not simply our biological face with eyes, ears, nose and wrinkles, but rather the place of the history of smiles, groans, glances, weathering, wounding—but especially of the vulnerability that leads to wounding.’\textsuperscript{24} As such, the face is an inherently posited phenomenon. It demands, and bears within itself, its Other’s response:

\textsuperscript{21} Interestingly, even the all-powerful God of Exodus acted in conjunction with his creation: Moses acted as the intercessor of God’s salvific act.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p.145.
The other commands my attention to give without any thought of return, without any calculus of cause and effect, without putting my act of generosity into some kind of balance and exchange based on calculating a bottom line of return reducible to the terms of ‘what’s in it for me?’ There is no ‘reserve.’ Rather the call of the other expresses his or her face lined in the event or history of suffering, most poignantly, the suffering of innocence—an expression of useless suffering that is beyond any scheme or framework of understanding and rationalization, or any holding back in expectation that I will be rewarded in my turn. The other calls for the bread from my own mouth.25

The Holocaust then represents humanity’s failure in extremis to recognise and respond to its own Other; a failure which leaves an indelible mark not only upon the neglected, ignored and persecuted Other, but also on all those, for all time, who take up their alibi in being by neglecting to participate in genuine dialogical encounter with their Other. As Simon observes, ‘Auschwitz commands me in a double bind of responsibility: the many lost faces of those with whom we could have shared unknown pleasures—a glass of wine, a loaf of bread—is what commands me. These lost ones command me to act ethically here and now, despite the overwhelming of human responsibility that occurred there and then.’26 The double bind of responsibility of which Simon speaks is found in the necessity that I not only respond to the suffering face of the Other, but that I remains alert to, and militate against any argument, morality or institution that authorises a schism between myself and my Other—thus, I take responsibility for my own response to the Other and for others’ response to their Other. Recalling Hillesum’s warning that ‘systems grow too big for men and hold them in a satanic grip, the builders no less than the victims of the system, much as large edifices and spires, created by men’s hands, tower high above us, dominate us, yet may collapse over our heads and bury us,’ (420) it is incumbent upon each person to fight such systems wherever they are found.

The extent to which individuals and the moral and institutional structures surrounding them facilitate genuine dialogic encounters will determine the

25 Ibid., p.146.
26 Ibid., p.149.
degree of human and divine presence in the world. One such benefit of genuine encounter is the derivation of meaning from the Other’s suffering—a dimension to which Ivan Karamazov was blind. Whilst the suffering of an infant killed in the Holocaust in ways that leave one speechless undoubtedly constitutes that which Levinas calls useless suffering, one’s response to this misery can facilitate the return of humanity and God to the situation; as Purcell states, ‘it is precisely in the response we make to the suffering of others (even from a situation of my own intolerable suffering) that the God who has withdrawn and hidden his face makes his return in the faces of others and the responses I make to them.’\(^{27}\) The enrichment in the life of being brought about through the empathetic response to the Other’s suffering need not be limited to those who witnessed the occasion of suffering, nor to the moment of its occurrence. In so far, and for so long, as the Other’s suffering is represented then its capacity to elicit empathy and thus enrich the life of Being remains. Furthermore, so long as the testimony of witnesses to events such as the Shoah remain available, so too will their insights inspire and benefit those who absorb their testimony—herein lies the transformative power of literature.

By contrast to the positive response to the suffering Other, there where we fail to respond, we simultaneously fail to actualise ourselves as dialogically-realised beings. Given the diminishment of Being that coincides with this dearth of dialogic engagement, we should hardly be surprised to hear questions enquiring as to the whereabouts of God and humanity; this is particularly so within a Judeo-Christian framework whereby God is both dialogically constituted and revealed and humanity is made in His image and likeness (Gen 1:27).

To Hillesum, the Holocaust was further evidence of the poverty that resulted from humanity’s incapacity to accommodate its own otherness. The experience of living through her second world war combined with her historical awareness of man’s cyclical reliance upon violence to resolve his problems convinced

\(^{27}\) Michael Purcell. ‘When God Hides His Face: The Inexperience of God.’ Kevin Hart and Barbara Wall (eds.). *The Experience of God: A Postmodern Response*, p.127.
Hillesum of the need to cast aside the scapegoating reflex and invest her energies elsewhere: ‘So much rebelliousness, so much hatred, the passion, the arguments, the call for social justice, the class struggle, etc. we have been through it all. To go through it a second time just won’t do—it becomes like a cliché. It’s happening all over again: every country praying for its own victory, the same old slogans, but now it’s like a déjà vu...’ (296). Resolved on the futility of this well trodden path, and convinced that ‘God is not accountable to us for the senseless harm we cause one another. We are accountable to Him!’ (728), Hillesum took the road less travelled by seeking to bear and transform her pain and uncover the God within her. Guiding Hillesum along this path was the poet Rainer Maria Rilke.

FACING THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MOON

Born Rene Karl Wilhelm Johann Josef Maria Rilke, in Prague, on December 4, 1875 to Josef and Sophie, Rilke, by his own account, experienced ‘an anxious, heavy childhood.’28 Estrangement characterised his parents’ marriage until, after a twelve-year union, they separated in 1885. Torn by the death of her daughter only a few days after her birth, Sophie Rilke sought to compensate for her loss by dressing her son, Rene, as a girl. A fanatical Catholic, Sophie’s outward piety was rejected by her son, who dismissed such displays as ‘grotesque and meaningless.’29 In all likelihood, his mother’s concern for exteriority may well have driven Rilke’s ambivalence towards institutional religion and his subsequent cultivation of inward piety.

The darkest period of Rilke’s childhood occurred, however, when, at eleven years of age, he was enrolled into the military academy of St Polten situated in lower-Austria. ‘He loathed life there and later admitted that it had traumatised him.’30 Nevertheless, within the regimented atmosphere of the school, which was so at odds with his artistic temperament, Rilke learnt ‘to cope with adverse conditions and to persist; “persistence” was to become one of his most frequently cited

30 Ibid., p.11.
1892 brought happier times for Rilke and a return to his birthplace where he studied literature, art, history and law. Nevertheless, in 1896, without having completed any of his degrees, Rilke left Prague for Munich, but not before producing and publishing his first two volumes of poetry, *Lives and Songs* (1894) and *Offerings to the Lares* (1896). By most accounts Rilke's first ventures into poetry were underwhelming; Daniel Josef Polikoff suggests 'his first, most puerile publications hardly bear the stamp of poetic genius,'\(^{32}\) while Robert Hass 'declares *Tales of God* and *The Book of Hours* Rilke's first readable work.'\(^{33}\) Interestingly, the poet is on record as being similarly disparaging of his early sojourns into poetry. Yet, despite these inauspicious beginnings, Rilke had, by the time of his death in December 1926, attained widespread acknowledgment for his literary output and is now widely recognised as a poet of singular significance.

One of the major influences upon Rilke’s poetic development was Lou Andrea-Salome. A formidable artist in her own right and author of *Female Figures in Ibsen's Plays* (1892) *Friedrich Nietzsche* (1894) and *Jesus the Jew* (1896), she influenced Rilke to change his effeminate first name, 'Rene' to the more masculine, ‘Rainer’ and introduced him to her close friend Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy of art. According to Rudiger Gorner, ‘Rilke attempted to see art from the perspective of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra and engage in reflections on the meaning of art and the existential condition of the artist: “Every artist is born abroad, as it were; and his home is nowhere but within himself.”’\(^{34}\) This emphasis on interiority as the source of artistic inspiration permeates Rilke’s work and no doubt suited his spiritual disposition. Interestingly, these same attitudes can be traced in Hillesum’s approach to both spirituality and art. Given the purpose of this chapter is not to conduct a critical assessment of Rilke’s

\(^{31}\) Ibid.
\(^{33}\) Ibid.
poetic output, but rather to trace his influence upon Hillesum’s *Weltanschauung*, such points of thematic and existential convergence are of particular interest.

So infused with Hillesum’s writings are the thoughts and works of Rilke that in the index of the recently published bilingual edition of her complete works the reader finds the Latin adverb, *passim* under the poet’s name. Yet we need not be satisfied with this editorial demonstration of Rilke’s influence upon Hillesum as, in her entry of April 4, 1942, she writes the following: ‘Right now I am deep in Rilke. He is constantly in my thoughts, I have never experienced anything like it before—to become so completely absorbed in a writer as to lose oneself in him, so to speak’ (518). From her developing image of God to her philosophical and theological anthropology, the influence of Rilke can indeed be traced everywhere in Hillesum’s writing. The aforementioned prayer, for example, in which Hillesum articulates the mutuality that defines her relationship with God, finds its mirror image in the poetry of Rilke:

What will you do, God, when I die?  
I, your pitcher (if I should shatter?);  
drink from your thirst (if it should scatter?);  
I am your garment and your matter;  
you have no meaning once I’m dead

Then you will meet no intimate, warm words, as when I was your retreat,  
The velvet sandals that I am will loosen, fall from your tired feet.

Your heavy cloak will slip undone.  
Your glance, for which my cheek has made warm pillowing, will lose me, seek me—  
and settle, as the sun dips, into some lap of alien stone.

What will you do God? I’m afraid.35

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Taken from The Book of Hours, one can find many points of resonance between this poem and Hillesum’s prayer. As mentioned, we have in each author’s work the portrayal of a God in need of human agency and, equally, in both we find a concern for God’s continued promulgation in the world: Hillesum’s repeated pledge to try to help God and Rilke’s concluding proclamation of fear convey the shared conviction that humanity holds ultimate responsibility for the dissemination of Divine presence in the world. Accusations of hubris are short-circuited in Hillesum’s petition by her assertion, ‘we must help You to help ourselves’ (780), a recognition of the human need of divine grace in order to preserve His presence in an increasingly Godless world. Celestial authority is more ambiguous in Rilke’s poem, although his reference to the pitcher, which serves as a receptacle of divine agency, seemingly suggests a relationship of reciprocity in which humans serve as vessels of the Deity’s power.

Overwhelmingly, however, divine-human reciprocity is ambivalently weighted. This is demonstrated through the symbolism of the garment, cloak, and sandals, which combine to convey an image of a Deity clothed in his human creation. Functionally, these items act to protect the messenger; as such, when the sandals fall from the feet of the divine Other and His ‘heavy cloak slip[s] undone,’36 He is left vulnerable, not unlike Adam and Eve who, upon eating fruit from the forbidden tree, find themselves confronted with their nakedness. Furthermore, the speaker’s assertion, ‘you have no meaning once I’m dead,’37 seemingly emphasises divine vulnerability. Conversely, this statement may be suggestive of a level of intimacy between the speaker and his divine Other that makes it impossible to imagine the continuation of his God beyond his finitude. Such a reading emphasises a God of infinitely personal dimensions. In Hillesum’s writings a deeply personal God of this kind makes frequent appearances. On August 26, 1941, Hillesum wrote,

There is a really deep well inside of me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am there too. But more often, stones and grit block the

36 Rainer Maria Rilke. The Book of Hours: A New Translation with Commentary, p.43.
37 Ibid.
well, and God is buried beneath. Then He must be dug out again. I imagine that there are people who pray with their eyes turned heavenward. They seek God outside themselves. And there are those who bow their head and bury it in their hands. I think that these seek God inside. (150)

Counting herself amongst those who find God within, it is interesting that Hillesum sees the Deity as a constant—although often hidden—presence, whilst, paradoxically, she experiences her own contribution and presence within the relationship intermittently. When Hillesum does discover herself within, she must labour to open the way to the God buried beneath the stones and grit that, presumably, have accumulated during her absence. While psychologists may speculate as to the meaning of Hillesum’s imagery, it certainly conforms to her conviction that, ‘God is not accountable to us for the senseless harm we cause one another. We are accountable to Him!’ (728). Importantly, the site of God’s excavation is within the human person—this, as Hillesum sees it, is her ultimate responsibility: to create the space for divine life within by removing the stone and grit that block access to Him and the enrichment of Being that such access facilitates. Only then will the possibility of outer transformation arise.

Alongside her writing, the primary means by which Hillesum gained access to the divine was through prayer. Referring to herself as the girl who learnt to kneel, Hillesum turned to prayer as a source of strength and access to the God within her. In May of 1942, she wrote: ‘I draw prayer around me like a dark protective wall, withdrawing inside it as one might into a convent cell and then step outside again, calmer and stronger and more collected again’ (584). The darkness, isolation and protectiveness denoted by Hillesum’s imagery are characteristically Rilkean and, significantly, point to the revivifying role of prayer in her life. That Hillesum emerged from the protective space, which prayer provided, strengthened and transformed from a person weighed down by the burdens and worries of external circumstances to one equipped with the courage to confront these same difficulties, suggests that it functioned in a similar manner to her writing, which, as has been previously noted, transformed the foreboding character of the materials of life by engendering an attitude that obviated the sense of hopelessness dominating her times. As such, like Rilke’s
monk in *The Book of Hours*—a man of prayer and creator of icons—Hillesum brings together art and spirituality, embodying this unity in her personhood.

The noticeable symmetry between Hillesum’s images and those employed by Rilke reveal a shared perception of a God, experienced interiorly, whose existence is intimately tied up with His creation. As a Jew living under Nazi occupation, evidence of a Deity outside of herself was increasingly uncommon. As such, Hillesum’s decision to search within for God, may have reflected necessity as much as temperament. Significantly, within the pages of *The Book of Hours*, she discovered an obscure God looking to her for release from a pernicious age:

> My neighbor God, do I disturb your peace  
> by knocking for you in the night? If so,  
> it’s that I scarcely hear you breathe, and know  
> you are alone in all that space.  
> If you should need our help, no one is there  
> to offer water to your unseeing hand.  
> I still listen for you. Give me a sign.  
> For I am near.

> Between us only an insubstantial wall  
> chances—barely, I think—to stand;  
> for perhaps from your lips or from mine one call  
> could break it through without a sigh of sound.

> Your own images have built it around you.  
> They stand in front of you, ranged like names,  
> and if there flames up in me that flare  
> igniting your recognition in my heart  
> it spends itself, brilliant, on their frames.

> So that unstrung my senses lose their rare  
> haven in you, and I am set apart.\(^\text{38}\)

In the sixth poem of *The Book of Monkish Life*, cited here, Rilke’s monk seeks out the presence of a God hidden in dark solitude. Whilst the monk’s initiative suggests a degree of need, on his part, for the Deity, there is an even greater

sense of need on the part of a God whose breath is scarcely heard and whose solitude is stark. As Hutchinson notes, ‘Rilke’s God...is creature as much as creator, the physical embodiment of extreme human weakness and need.’\(^{39}\) Importantly, as far as Rilke is concerned, such dependence is not a sign of ineffectualness; rather, it is a source of enrichment and completion as it facilitates reciprocal relations. Hence, we see the monk offering help to his God, through life-giving water to revive him and companionship to bring Him out of solitude. Yet, more significant again, God’s incompleteness ensures his vitality. ‘The God of The Book of Hours is a God of “becoming,” one who continues to unfold himself across the vastness of the Russian landscape, and the role of poet/monk/icon painter is to assist in His development.’\(^{40}\)

While, in the poem’s first two stanzas, God’s obscurity and the foundation for divine-human relations are established, the remainder of the poem appears to suggest the source of God’s concealment lies in the images attributed to Him. The monk’s observation that such images stand in front of him ‘ranged like names’\(^{41}\) suggests efforts to define and contain God, which, paradoxically, produce the opposite effect. Rilke was disparaging of such efforts, proclaiming with a sense of dismay: ‘I cannot understand models of religion which simply accept and imitate God as given, rather than trying to play a productive part in him.’\(^{42}\) No doubt the contrast he observed between western-European and Russian images of God informed this attitude. Whilst Rilke was no doubt impressed and positively influenced by his time in Florence, the realism characteristic of the Renaissance art saturating the city displayed a vastly different religious imagination than that which he would encounter in Russia.\(^{43}\) It is certainly significant that the monk of The Book of Hours is a creator of icons, an art form associated with eastern

\(^{39}\) Ibid., p.xi.
\(^{40}\) Ibid., p.xxi.
\(^{41}\) Ibid., p.7.
\(^{42}\) Ibid.
\(^{43}\) Daniel Josef Polikoff. In the Image of Orpheus: Rilke A Soul History, p.68: In Rilke’s journey to Florence in the spring of 1898, Polikoff discerns the first of two phases of his poetic development, with the second revolving around his travels to Russia in 1899 and again in 1900.
Christianity, which, as Pauline Kollontai observes, is heavily invested in symbolism:

The eyes of an icon are made large and animated because they have seen great things. The ears are also made large to hear the commands of the Lord. The nose is made long and thin, therefore it doesn’t smell the things of this world, only spiritual fragrances. The mouth is small, since there is less importance on physical food and more importance on spiritual food, the Word of God.⁴⁴

Given Rilke’s poetry was heavily invested in the grounding of spirituality, he would likely have contested the platonic privileging of spiritual matters above earthly concerns implied by the iconic symbolism of the nose and mouth, by insisting the eyes, which have seen great things, would have discerned in all things, the mark of divinity. Furthermore, the theosophic functionality of icons, which, through symbolism, brings the believer mentally and spiritually into contact with the divine archetype, would have appealed to two key elements of the poet’s spiritual vision: the reciprocity at the heart of divine-human relations and interiority as the space in which these relations occur: ‘The purpose of the icon serves not only for our ascent to Heaven, but also for the descent of Heaven to Earth...the icon assists in overcoming...God-less anthropocentrism by helping human beings to discern God within themselves.’⁴⁵ By placing his words in the mouth of an icon-creating monk, Rilke foregrounds human creativity as a vehicle of singular importance for the revelation of God in the world. To this end, it is evident that the ambiguity and carnivalesque undertones he perceived in Russian spirituality and art were better suited to his poetic endeavours than that which he observed in the West.

In poem three of The Book of Monkish Life, Rilke perceives a geographical dichotomy between the West’s image of God, as he observed it in the Renaissance art of Florence and that of the East, specifically Russia, which was

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⁴⁵ Ibid.
informed as much by the literary imagination of Dostoevsky as by his travels to
the novelist’s homeland. Speaking through his monk, Rilke observes:

Many my brothers of the cloth, in the fair
land of the south where cloister laurels bloom.
And I know they draw Madonnas to the life,
and I dream of early Titans on their walls
where God walks in his glory of fire.

Yet as my mind inclines to its own bent:
my God is dark, roots of secret weave
in hundreds that I cannot hear, drinking.
Simply, his warmth grows me. I divine
no more, for my branches rest deep, reticent,
only the message of the winds in their waving.

According to Polikoff, ‘The European drawn to Russia (Lou and Rilke included)
tended to regard the West’s highly sophisticated culture as over-intellectualized
and on the verge of spiritual exhaustion...Russia offered itself as antidote to the
West’s malaise; Russia—a land far enough East to be other than Western, and yet
not so far East as to be positively Oriental and so ineradicably foreign.’
A related and significant aspect of western mythology pertaining to Russia is the
perception that it is a land with a capacity for suffering and sympathy not found
to the same degree in the West. In yet another sign of Rilke’s influence upon her,
Hillesum brings together these two strands of thought in her assessment of
Russia and the West:

One must be able to bear things, bear them to the bitter end and at
their full weight. Suddenly I wondered, isn’t that the difference
between the Russians and us Westerners? The Russian bears his
burden to the end, buckles down under the full weight of his emotions
and suffers to his very depths. We stop halfway and relieve ourselves
with words, reflections, philosophies, theoretical treatises and what
have you. We stop in the middle of experiencing our emotions, can
bear and endure them no further, and our brains come to our aid, rid
us of our burden and build their theories on it. Won’t the end be that
Western Europe will have spawned a host of philosophies, etc., while
Russia has kept her counsel? What we shall then hear from Russia

47 Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Book of Hours: A New Translation with Commentary*,
p.5.
will be cries straight from her soul, and it won’t matter whether or not everything will be all that logical and consistent—it will have been experienced to the full, and that is what matters. For Westerners, theories and systems must fit together much more closely, otherwise they feel that their lives lack a solid basis. They do not endure, experience, bear and suffer; to the full; there is a flaw here in their vitality, a flaw in their capacity to bear things. And hence it is far more vitally important to them that their theories should constitute coherent wholes and not be full of contradictions. To the Russian that does not matter…We deprive ourselves of the ultimate suffering and cast it off with words. The Russian bears it to the end, and unless he perishes as a result he grows ever stronger. (724)

The nature of the shadow of suffering that stretched out across Hillesum’s existence precluded the possibility of escape; nor was refuge possible in rationality. The promises of the Enlightenment collapsed like a house of cards at the foot of the Nazis’ gas chambers and the God of the Renaissance ‘walking in his glory of fire’ was reduced to ashes amidst the flames of the Holocaust. Rilke’s Russia, on the other hand, offered meaning amidst suffering, the acceptance of absurdity as a fact of life, and a God who is dark. The darkness constitutive of Rilke’s God offered Hillesum both promise and possibility: the promise of empathy through shared suffering as well as a place of protection and the possibility of growth. As Hutchinson notes, ‘Night, with all its attendant symbolism of rest and renewal, implies the gradual dawning of a new day; moreover, darkness also implies subterranean images of organic growth,’ images which Rilke drew from his experiences of Russia—her land, people and artists. The inherently carnivalesque nature of this image, which inverts dominant western images of divine omnipotence and illumination, by foregrounding a God at home with darkness, appealed to Hillesum. This, combined with Rilke’s image of a God dependent upon his creation for His

49 Rainer Maria Rilke. The Book of Hours: A New Translation with Commentary, p.5.
51 On February 16, 1942, Hillesum transcribes the following excerpt from Rilke’s Letters to a Young Poet into her diary, which, without naming God, epitomises the interiority she embraced: ‘Everything is bearing and then giving birth. Allowing every impression and every germ of a feeling to reach perfection deep within us, in the dark, in the ineffable, the unconscious, in what is beyond the grasp of reason and to await the hour of birth of a new clarity with deep humility and patience.’
manifestation in the world, appears to have given Hillesum an existential purpose not contingent on outside forces. In other words, her mission to enact God’s return in destitute times was far from diminished by the Nazi persecutions, rather, in the same way that the light from a candle grows more visible as the darkness surrounding it intensifies, so too was Hillesum’s resistance and mission invested with greater significance in the face of growing persecutions:

I am not really frightened of anything, I feel so strong; it matters little whether you have to sleep on a hard floor, or whether you are allowed to walk only through specified streets, and so on—these are all minor vexations, so insignificant compared with the infinite riches and possibilities we carry within us...there is something inside me, tough and indestructible, that tells me I shall be able to bear different circumstances too. (570).

The prominence of death in Hillesum’s existence, an issue already explored in some detail, represents another point of convergence between the writings of Hillesum and her mentor, Rilke. This is not to assert a shared experience of tyranny with Hillesum on the part of Rilke; he had died some years before Hitler’s ascension to power in Germany and was not subject to Nazi persecutions, a fact which Hillesum, in her final diary entry, reflects upon:

I always return to Rilke. It is strange to think that someone so frail, who did most of his writing within protective castle walls, would perhaps have been broken by the circumstances in which we now live. Is that not further testimony that life is finely balanced? Evidence that in peaceful times and under favorable circumstances, sensitive artists may search for the purest and most fitting expressions of their deepest insights so that, during more turbulent and debilitating times, others can turn to them for support and a ready response to their bewildered questions? A response they are unable to formulate for themselves, since all their energies are taken up in looking after the bare necessities? (886)

Notwithstanding the contrasts in their personal circumstances, death was nevertheless a significant theme in Rilke’s work and there is no doubting the

52 On occasion, Rilke stayed at the castles of his friends, e.g., Friedelhausen Castle in Hessen, Duino Castle in Italy, Lautschin Castle in Bohemia and Muzot Castle in Wallis.
influence of his reflections on Hillesum’s growing capacity to confront and embrace her demise as an integral part of life. It is perhaps a reflection of the extent to which the poet had penetrated her consciousness, in this regard, that in both her sleeping and waking hours, when planning what to take with her on her final journey ‘East’—a journey to her premature death—Rilke’s writing figured prominently: ‘Tonight I dreamed that I had to pack my case. I tossed and turned, fretting about what shoes to take—all of them hurt my feet. And how was I to pack all my underwear and food for three days and blankets into one suitcase or rucksack? And I had to find room somewhere for the Bible. And if possible for Rilke’s Book of Hours and Letters to a Young Poet’ (776).

Rilke’s belief in the indispensable relationship between death and life—a motif foregrounded in The Book of Hours—may largely explain the work’s significance to Hillesum. As far as Rilke is concerned, shutting the door of human consciousness in the face of death is akin to denying the existence of the dark side of the moon because it remains invisible from sight: ‘...like the moon, so life surely has a side that is constantly turned away from us, and that is not its opposite but its completion to perfection, to plenitude, to the real, whole, and full sphere and globe of being.’ As such, to deny death is to deny one’s very nature, for ‘what is more in being—in terms of modern thought, what is more certain—than death?’ This denial, according to Martin Heidegger, is constitutive of the destitution of the age: ‘The time remains destitute not only because God is dead, but because mortals are hardly aware and capable even of their own mortality. Mortals have not yet come into ownership of their own nature. Death withdraws into the enigmatic. The mystery of pain remains veiled. Love has not been learned.’ Rilke sought to open the door to death by incorporating it into life and, as far as Hillesum was concerned, death was far from an enigma. Whilst war flung open the door to death’s face and the Holocaust ensured its entry into the lives of the Jews was a fait accompli, Hillesum distinguished herself from the majority of her contemporaries, and, indeed, from the destitute of all ages, by

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54 Ibid., p.122.
55 Ibid., p.94.
anticipating and familiarising herself with death, prior to it exercising the final rites over her life. As noted in the previous chapter, Hillesum’s self-proclaimed capacity to look death in the eye and accept it as a definite part of her life, had an expansive effect on her outlook by liberating her from the fears that would otherwise hold her captive (740). Unsurprisingly, this ‘notion of owning one’s misfortune, of transforming one’s own misery by appropriating it, is the existential undercurrent of The Book of Poverty and Death, and indeed in some senses of the entire Book of Hours.’

Written in 1903, two years after The Book of Pilgrimage, and four years after The Book of Monkish Life, The Book of Poverty and Death—the third and final part of The Book of Hours—sees the poet’s focus shift from God to ‘some of the preoccupations which will accompany him for the rest of his life, such as the idea of dying one’s own death and death as the crowning of a life.’ Reflecting these concerns is the plea ‘O Lord, give each of us our own death; a dying that is born of life, our own desire, our purpose, love, dearth.’ The poet’s appeal resonates with Hillesum’s insistence that ‘by admitting death into our life we enlarge and enrich it’ (740). In a similar vein, Heidegger observes, ‘Death and the realm of the dead belong to the whole of beings as its other side. That realm is “the other draft,” that is, the other side of the whole draft of the Open. Within the widest orbit of the sphere of beings there are regions and places, which, being averted from us, seem to be something negative, but are nothing of the kind if we think of all things as being within the widest orbit of beings.’ In synchronicity with Rilke and Hillesum, Heidegger’s claim falls within the purview of the carnivalesque, insofar as he attributes positiveness to the phenomenon of death, when situated ‘within the widest orbit of beings.’ With such holistic vision, death loses its

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56 Rainer Maria Rilke. The Book of Hours: A New Translation with Commentary, p.xxvii.
58 Rainer Maria Rilke. The Book of Hours: A New Translation with Commentary, p.163.
60 Along with ‘the whole draft’ and ‘the Open’, this is Heidegger’s way of referring to existence in its entirety.
potency. The Grim Reaper, that foreboding, frightful presence whose power is the fruit of its foreignness, is transformed by being brought into familiar proximity with the individual, to whom, in the words of Hillesum, he ‘comes as large as life,’ and is greeted ‘as an old acquaintance’ (742). Conversely, death that is not accommodated has a deleterious effect upon the individual. Rilke articulates this phenomenon in The Book of Poverty and Death when, in poem five, he writes: ‘And death is there. Not death that greeted them in childhood, gone as it came, gentle, wondrous—the little death, as they had understood it—but their own, hanging in them like a fruit, unripening, and green, and lacking sweetness.”61 Whilst Rilke is here commenting upon the death forced upon Paris’ poor by their poverty, it is also suggestive of a poverty induced by one’s incapacity to come to terms with the reality of death as an indispensable part of life. Greater weight may be lent to this reading by the earlier cited plea calling upon God to grant to each a death born of life. Whilst carnival celebrates death as an indispensable and renewing component of life, and Heidegger insists that ‘In the age of the world’s night, the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured,’62 there is, within the individual, a tendency to flee from death’s looming shadow. According to Heidegger, humanity’s need to assert itself in opposition to the Open is a clear manifestation of this tendency:

Man sets up the world toward himself, and delivers Nature over to himself...Where Nature is not satisfactory to man’s representation, he reframes or rediposes it. Man produces new things where they are lacking to him. Man transposes things where they are in his way. Man interposes something between himself and things that distract him from his purpose. Man exposes things when he boosts them for sale and use. Man exposes when he sets forth his own achievement and plays up his own profession. By multifarious producing, the world is brought to stand and into position. The Open becomes an object, and is thus twisted around towards the human being.63

In humanity’s tendency to exercise its will upon existence, to force conformity to its own needs, desires and whims, it not only places itself outside of life in its

61 Rainer Maria Rilke, The Book of Hours: A New Translation with Commentary, p.163.
63 Ibid., p.108.
entirety, but, in so doing, denies its own essence and place within Nature, a place
to which, through death, it is ultimately recalled:

What threatens man in his very nature is the view that this imposition of production can be ventured without any danger, as long as other interests—such as, perhaps, the interests of a faith—retain their currency. As though it were still possible for that essential relation to the whole of beings in which man is placed by the technological exercise of his will to find a separate abode in some side-structure which would offer more than a temporary escape into those self-deceptions among which we must count also the flight of the Greek gods!\textsuperscript{64}

Heidegger clearly sees in humanity’s obsession with self-assertion a flight towards self-sabotage. Just as Doctor Victor Frankenstein, in his desire to assert his will over creation, found himself a victim to his overreaching tendencies, so too, according to Heidegger, will humanity’s efforts to transcend their nature through perpetual acts of self-assertion, ultimately end in futility as, through death, they are forced to confront their essential selves. In more poetic language, Rilke, in poem seven of \textit{The Book of Poverty and Death}, takes up the same issue:

\begin{quote}
For we are only the rind of fruit, and leaf.
The great death, which each of us contains,
is that fruit round which the world turns.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
And for its sake maidens bloom and issue like trees from lutes; boys aspire towards it coming to manhood; and women, confidantes who alone can ease youthful disquietude. And for its sake, what we see remains like the eternal, even if long run down, and everyone who built or painted became world about this fruit, froze, thawed and altered course towards it, shone on it. Into it is given all warmth of hearts and hot white glowing of the brain; and yet your angels stream like flocking birds and coming upon the fruit, found it green.\textsuperscript{65}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., p.114. 
\textsuperscript{65} Rainer Maria Rilke. \textit{The Book of Hours: A New Translation with Commentary}, p.165.
In the opening stanza of this poem, Rilke seeks to remind the reader of their place within the Open. Analogising humanity with ‘the rind of fruit and leaf,’ the poet situates his reader within, rather than outside of, Nature. Significantly, the word he uses for ‘Nature is Urgrund, the pristine ground, because it is the ground of those beings that we ourselves are.’ Rilke’s imagery, which emphasises the indispensable connection between humanity and Nature, is inherently carnivalesque, as it places death in direct relation to life: at the heart of existence. Exemplifying this, the rind brings together both death and life by acting as the protective layer around the fruit, enabling and aiding its growth and development, which is then torn asunder in the process of accessing the life-giving flesh of the fruit—its essential self, if you like. As such, Rilke’s analogy reverses humanity’s practice of self-assertion over Nature by placing it in a position of service—a position that concords with the biblical notion of humanity’s stewardship of creation envisaged by the writers of Genesis—this is emphasised by the final two lines of the stanza, which identifies death as inherent to our nature and subsequently insists that it is around the fruit of death that the world turns.

To Rilke, death does not stand in foreign or oppositional relation to life; quite the opposite is in fact the case: death enhances life’s meaning because, though unseen, it is the side of existence that gives completion to life. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, in order to avoid the avoidance of death, Rilke brings it to the centre of his artistic endeavours—it stands as a prominent motif of the poet’s mature work. According to Keith May, Rilke’s approach to death, which heeds Nietzsche’s injunction against ‘seeing radical opposition where there is only change and development,’ manifests itself through the poet’s abandonment of antithesis within his work, ‘since, for Rilke, meaning resides in the whole.’ Ben Hutchinson suggests the genesis of this attitude lay in the poet’s fear of death and attributes the death-life dialectic at the heart of Rilke’s poetics to his efforts to control this fear: ‘the linking of death to birth removes its sting, since it thus

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66 Ibid.
68 Ben Hutchinson. Rilke’s Poetics of Becoming, p.72.
69 Ibid.
becomes a perpetual present rather than a future past.'\textsuperscript{70} Thus we again find ourselves within the realm of carnival. As we have seen, it is in the nature of carnival to invert reality for the purpose of emphasising the life-death dialectic of existence, which, when viewed from the perspective of the whole orbit of things, is an ever-renewing phenomenon. This is picked up by the images of development and becoming employed by Rilke in the second and final stanza of poem seven, which frames growth and productivity within an economy of mortality. For death's sake, Rilke insists, 'maidens bloom and issue like trees from lutes; boys aspire towards it coming to manhood.'\textsuperscript{71} Thus situated, death becomes the impetus for human endeavour; the finitude of an individual's existence is the guarantor of his propagation into the world; or, to employ the imagery of growth favoured by Rilke, a tree's growth towards the heavens is predicated on its rootedness to the earth. Rilke elaborates upon this in the following lines establishing a link between human mortality and their intellectual and emotional endeavours, observing: 'Into it is given all warmth of hearts and hot white glowing of the brain.'\textsuperscript{72} As such, death is a positive force, a life giving power which drives progress and growth. On this point, Jacques Derrida's work, \textit{The Gift of Death}, proves instructive.\textsuperscript{73}

While acknowledging the human tendency to deny one's historicity, a refutation invested with illusions of immortality, or, at best, willful ignorance, Derrida considers the acceptance of death as the essential precondition of human freedom, insisting that 'a caring for death, an awakening that keeps vigil over death, a conscience that looks death in the face, is another name for freedom...care for the soul is inseparable from care for death, which becomes the true (\textit{prava}) care for life; life (eternal) is born of this direct look at death, of an overcoming (\textit{premozeni}) of death.'\textsuperscript{74} This brings to mind Hillesum's proclamation of the freedom that resulted from her willingness to look into the face of death.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., p.181.
\textsuperscript{71} Rainer Maria Rilke. \textit{The Book of Hours: A New Translation with Commentary}, p.165.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., pp.17-18.
As she said, far from having a diminishing effect, she instead found her life enlarged and enriched (740). Yet, the benefits of death’s gift are not limited to the individual as, in those who embrace it as an integral part of life, it inducts a sense of responsibility that inevitably benefits wider society. This responsibility derives from the realisation of my uniqueness in being: ‘Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. My irrereplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, “given,” one can say, by death...It is from the perspective of death as the place of my irrereplaceability, that is, of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility.’

Thus, like Heidegger, we find Rilke warning against a forgetfulness of mortality that sees the collapse of human consciousness into the fruits of growth. The tree which ignores its connection to the Urgrund produces un-nourishing fruit: ‘and yet your angels stream like flocking birds and coming upon the fruit, found it green.’ The antidote to this dearth of life is the process of ripening which, paradoxically, can only be brought about through the active embrace of one’s mortality. Rilke makes this clear in the following poem:

    Lord we are poorer than the poor beasts
dying their blind death. For we have all
less than entirely died. Send us the One
who guides into our hands the precious skill
to bind life in espaliers, where May
comes early, and the year’s fruit advances.

    Dying is difficult and alien
for this: it is not our death but takes us
because we cannot bring our own to ripen.
So, in a storm, it strips us from the branches.

    We stand, Lord, year on year in your garden,
your trees for nurturing a sweet death;
but by the harvest we have grown sere,
and like the woman you have struck barren
close down, false to our promise, fruitless.

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Or is my arrogance too much? Are trees
In the end better? Are we only womb
and sex of women who yield all too freely?
Surely we have whored with eternity
and when we come to childbed bring forth
only the stillborn foetus of our death:
embryo, bent, full of misery,
trying to cover with its mere hands
(as though in fear of the fearful) eyes uninformed
still; and on its bulged forehead stands
dread of destiny unmet, unsuffered—
so die we all, like just so many whores,
in labour pains, and from caesareans

The first stanza of poem eight of The Book of Poverty and Death, cited here, establishes a contrast between humanity and the remainder of creation that serves to highlight the poverty of human beings, whose very nature facilitates their separation from the remainder of creation. In contrast to men and women, ‘Plant and animal do not will because, muted in their desire, they never bring the Open before themselves as an object.’ Humanity, on the other hand, as we have already established through Heidegger, stands in opposition to the Open, or, quoting Rilke, ‘the animal is in the world; we stand before it by virtue of what peculiar turn and intensification which our consciousness has taken.’ Utilising horticultural imagery, Rilke strives to bridge the consciousness-induced separation from the ground of being, by calling on ‘the One who guides into our hands the precious skill to bind life in espaliers, where May comes early, and the year’s fruit advances.’ This suggests the need to retrain one’s consciousness to resituate the self within, as opposed to against, the Urgrund of Being. Rilke likens this process to the ripening of fruit in the European spring, yet, as he makes clear in the poem’s second stanza, he is under no illusions as to the difficulty of such a procedure. The image of binding life to espaliers connotes an act of violence, a pruning, which, though painful, is ultimately fruitful. Furthermore, Rilke intimates, the failure to partake of this process voluntarily will ultimately bring

77 Ibid., p.167.
79 Ibid., p.105.
80 Rainer Maria Rilke. The Book of Hours: A New Translation with Commentary, p.167.
forth a more violent end; unless we come to terms with death as a necessary part of life, the time will inevitably arise when, lacking familiarity with the hidden side of life, we suddenly find ourselves confronting death approaching, not like an old acquaintance, but like a storm, stripping us from life’s branches.

For Hillesum, the storm confronting her took the shape of the Nazis’ policy of Jewish extermination. Yet, as we have seen, having taken heed of Rilke’s advice by looking death in the eye, Hillesum, confronted with its most extreme manifestation in the Holocaust, was able to not only resist its paralysing and dehumanising designs, but actually enjoy moments of fulfillment, even happiness, beneath its ever-increasing shadow. In the late hours of December 14, 1941, Hillesum, utilising the same metaphorical framework, self-referentially wrote: ‘What do you think of that storm raging around the house, my little girl? You must never praise the storm wholeheartedly from the safety of your room, for that would be wrong. Only if you are out in the midst of the storm and braving it, only then can you say how glorious it is’ (296). Hillesum’s application of the adjective glorious to the horrific events surrounding her should not be interpreted as some sort of masochistic praise of the Nazis’ actions, which she consistently condemned; rather, it conveys the richness of an interiority that enables Hillesum to confront, and find meaning, in the most cyclonic of circumstances.

This attitude is captured in one of the most frequently cited excerpts of The Book of Hours found in Hillesum’s diaries, which is taken from poems thirteen and fourteen of The Book of Monkish Life. In order to better appreciate the significance of Rilke’s words for Hillesum, the interpretation copied into her diaries shall be referenced:

I want always to mirror you full size
and never to be blind or too old,
to hold on to your heavy, swaying image.
I want to unfold.
I do not want to keep living a lie, and I live a lie whenever I am bent.
And I want my mind
to be true before you.
I want to depict myself
like a painting I saw
for so long and close by,
like a word I have grasped You see, I want much.
Perhaps I want all: the darkness of every infinite fall
and the light-trembling play of every ascent.81

While, by her own admission, Hillesum reflected upon these lines in the light of her friendship with Julius Spier,82 the carnivalesque spirit they convey clearly resonated with her as it can be traced across the broader spectrum of her existential stance. It could be argued, for example, that her insistence on looking beyond the denominational boundaries of a single religion for the heavy, swaying image of God reflects her desire to see Him full size. Similarly, in her refusal to scapegoat all Germans for the horrific acts or willing indifference of the majority, we can trace an openness to life in its most complete dimensions. This same determination is reflected powerfully in her willingness, ‘in the age of the world’s night’83 to stare into and experience the abyss that was the Holocaust. That, to her final recorded days, Hillesum was, in destitute times, able to find meaning and beauty in life, suggests that, like Rilke—and undoubtedly due to his influence—she was successful in tracing the fugitive gods. Thus, ‘in the time of the world’s night [she] utters the holy.’84

81 Ibid., p.314.
82 Ibid., p.330.
84 Ibid., p.92.
CONCLUSION

ETTY HILLESUM: LIVING IN THE TIME OF THE OTHER

*Rage, rage against the dying of the light*  
(Dylan Thomas)

One of the more vivid memories of my childhood is of a nightmare which so deeply imprinted itself on my consciousness that its recollection here is as clear as its original manifestation. Aged seven, and in such a deep state of sleep I was seemingly unable to wake myself, I travelled into a fiery cavernous expanse of horrific dimensions. As I purveyed the scene I witnessed demons and witches, all of whom were as red as the furnace they inhabited, gleefully tormenting the broken and tormented bodies of those in their charge. These prisoners of Satan were everywhere: some were shackled to walls by their outstretched arms, their contorted necks directing their pained faces away from their demonic tormentors who were prodding and probing them with all manner of instruments; others hung naked from the ceiling: some were shackled by their hands, while others were suspended from their feet, their bodies swaying as they too were tortured as punishment for a life in the service of evil.

As yet, unacquainted with Dante’s *Inferno*, I can only deduce that the graphic material of my nightmare was the fruit of an old-style homily gifted by a priest all too familiar with the Italian master’s work; the sort given to dissuade good Catholic boys from straying off the narrow path to Heaven. Alternatively, perhaps such images derived from the devotional pamphlets, so often located at the back of the churches whose doors I darkened in my youth, which warned of the pains of Hell, or, for the lucky ones, Purgatory, awaiting those who strayed into mortal or venial sin, respectively. Like a prayer bank, these pamphlets offered salvation through the acquisition of indulgences granted for the recitation of novenas or other incantations: the more prayers deposited, the greater the number of souls saved. This system also doubled as an insurance scheme with the penitent hoping the release of souls from Purgatory through
their petitions might ensure the security of similar favours if they, after death, found themselves in the same unfortunate state of suspension. It is important, of course, to note that the entire edifice upon which these images and rhetorical devices are built is fear—in these instances the fear of eternal damnation.

Whilst time has done little to diminish the trace of those nightmarish images, the fear of being tormented by vindictive demons in an eschatological torture chamber has long fallen away, leaving, not a vacuum, but a recalibrated vision of Hell as a state of existential schism, manifested in one’s separation from their Other. To quote Levinas, ‘To be or not to be is not the question...,’ the question, rather, is that posed by Cain to God (Genesis 4:9) and the answer is a definitive, Yes. Thus understood, Hell is seen not as a place of punishment for evil-doers but a state of separation from the Other whose very existence calls into question my own, commanding my response.

One is aware, of course, that in the twenty-first century any profession of a belief in Hell, or eschatology in general, opens one up to charges of superstition, at best, or, of being a religious nut-case and believing in fairy God-fathers/mothers—such are the nature of the accusations made by the likes of Richard Dawkins and his disciples. And, perhaps, were I proffering the Apollonian vision of Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor or the eschatological nightmare of my youth, such a charge would be eminently applicable; however, in the words of the Jew, Paul: ‘When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways’ (1 Corinthians 13:11). As Hillesum’s life and writings make illuminatingly clear, one need not look to an afterlife to discover demons and angels, nor need one pass through death’s final door to encounter Heaven and Hell: six-million Jews, with Hillesum amongst their number, lost their lives in the Shoah—an event arguably unrivalled in manifesting the hellish demonic; conversely, in Hillesum, we find an exemplar of Christ’s insistence that: ‘...the kingdom of God is among you’ (Luke 17:21). Herein lies this dissertation’s defining motif: that these two paragons of

evil and goodness, respectively, represent the worst and best of humanity and that the essential difference between their correlating narratives is located in their degree of openness—or otherwise—to their Other. As has been shown, the defining characteristic of Hitler’s discourse and that of his devotees, is its extreme neglect of the Other; the hellish fruit it produced represents the natural and inevitable harvest of the linguistically-violent seeds sown by documents such as Mein Kampf and those that followed in its wake. By instituting a schism between language and life such texts materialise the demonic. Conversely, in Hillesum’s writings we see the incarnation of the Deity’s narrative. Informed by the voices of luminaries from the realms of literature, philosophy, theology and psychology—to name a few—Hillesum’s polyphonic narrative, in both its constitution and effect, signify her absolute resistance to the dehumanising discourse arrayed against her. Importantly, it is the absence of the absolute which constitutes the essence of this resistance. As previously mentioned, this is not to attribute a lack of passion or intellectual conviction to Hillesum, for she possessed these in abundance and subjected herself to their demands; it is, rather, an acknowledgement of Hillesum’s unqualified respect for her Other—a respect which forbade the subordination of the Other to the ideological realm. As such, in Hillesum we see demonstrated an asymmetrical relationship of responsibility to her Other expressed through her orientation towards the Other’s elevation in being, which, as Bakhtin notes, is predicated on the recession of her own place in being—a movement which is, paradoxically, self-actualising.2

As many of the critical responses to Hillesum’s writings have noted, the two and a half years covered by her diaries and letters reveal a remarkable rate of personal and spiritual development in what would prove to be the final chapter of this young woman’s life. That her writings acted as both the signifier and

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2 Mikhail Bakhtin. Toward a Philosophy of the Act. (Trans. Vadim Liapunov). Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999, p.16: ‘In self-renunciation I actualize with utmost activeness and in full the uniqueness of my place in Being. The world in which I, from my own unique place, renounce myself does not become a world in which I do not exist, a world which is indifferent, in its meaning to my existence: self renunciation is a performance or accomplishment that encompasses Being-as-event...The world from which Christ has departed will no longer be the world in which he had never existed; it is, in its very principle, a different world.’
principal facilitator of this growth has, similarly, been well documented. Their transformation from a vehicle with therapeutic origins and intent to salvific space, which provided a considerable degree of insulation from the unimaginable persecutions surrounding her—persecutions to which she was increasingly subject—is evidenced most powerfully through her growth from an insecure, emotionally volatile young woman who feared for her sanity to one who lived for a time beyond herself: the time of the Other. Whilst her final known correspondence attests to Hillesum’s arrival in this existential space, its carnivalesque locus simultaneously points to the path of her crossing.

Confronted by the hellish wasteland wrought by the schismatic dogma and decrees of Hitler’s Nazis, Hillesum’s resistance bears remarkable symbiosis with the philosophy and liberating effects of medieval carnival—an event born in an epoch dominated by official seriousness when Church and State sought to exercise their power over medieval populations through the deployment of fear and terror. As has been shown, Hillesum’s spirituality and writings display a laughing outlook on the world: Faced with the linguistic violence of her oppressors, which refused to recognise Otherness and induced incommunicable silence, Hillesum responds with an attitude of perpetual openness to her Other: her diaries, in their form and content, are saturated with the marks of her entrance into dialogic relations with her Other. Challenged by the deployment of fear and terror, designed to dehumanise and ultimately crush the spirit, Hillesum responded with a carnivalesque laughter that liberated her from fear, prevented her from descending into despair, and protected her from the well-worn and soul-destroying response of hatred. Met by the face of official seriousness, which upheld its pretentions to power through the institution of an interminable array of disjunctions between language and life, Hillesum insisted on fidelity to the present moment and the face of the Other in its innumerable guises. Thus, we encounter a woman who, with an insatiable appetite for words, absorbs and enters into a dialogic exchange with—to name a few of her sources—the Jewish and Christian scriptures, the psychology of Adler, Freud and Jung, the philosophical and theological tomes of Augustine, Buber and Descartes, as well as literary paragons of the likes of Dante, Dostoevsky and Rilke. At a time when
the world was turning in on itself, Hillesum was looking beyond, seeking to expand her ideological and existential horizons. It is worth recalling that such openness displays a familiarity with one’s Other akin to that promoted by medieval carnival, which bought into dialogic proximity people from disparate backgrounds who were otherwise separated according to the prescriptions of a highly stratified society.

In Hillesum, we encounter a woman who dares to laugh in the presence of the Gestapo, as one of its number sought to employ the all ‘too transparent’ (420) device of fear in a futile attempt to frighten her into submission. Importantly, Hillesum’s laughter is not derisive, but renewing: she recognised that all were subject to the follies and frailties inherent to sharing membership in the human race. As such, she focused on rooting out such fragilities from within herself as the first necessary step to enriching the existence of all. Furthermore, in Hillesum we encounter a woman who turned down repeated opportunities to flee persecution in order to dedicate her final months acting as a balm to the wounds of Jewish women, men, children and infants awaiting their transportation to Auschwitz. As she was all too aware, it was a choice that would see her share the fate of six million.

Of the several voices writ large in Hillesum’s diaries and letters, informing her Weltanschauung, the literary tomes of Dostoevsky and Rilke have attracted particular attention. In the case of the Russian novelist, his preeminent work, The Brothers Karamazov takes centre stage for its treatment of the primordial question of good and evil and its obvious impact on Hillesum. Sharing uncanny parallels with the concerns raised in Hillesum’s writings, Dostoevsky’s novel explores the ramifications of discourse that is detached from life. As noted, Ivan—the prototype of the rational empiricist—rejects the order of God’s world based on the suffering of innocents; a phenomenon he deems is irreconcilable with the notion of a world created by a loving Deity. While Ivan’s concerns for his suffering Other appears genuine, the rationale he provides for returning his ticket rapidly reveals the superficiality and schismatic nature of his protestations: the variety of anecdotes he cites—as disturbing as they are—are in no way
connected to his immediate experience; thus, one might argue Ivan’s compassion is confected, born from the theoretical realm rather than the materiality of his own life. Hillesum, by contrast, draws on her experiences at the coalface of the Shoah as an inhabitant of Westerbork; it is here, in this horrendous chapter of the book of life that she grapples with voluminous experiences of suffering, death, good and evil.

In one such instance, Hillesum draws parallels between her own times and Dostoevsky’s legend of ‘The Grand Inquisitor.’ Promising to further develop her reflections at a later date, the absence of such deliberations stand as one of the notable signifiers of Hillesum’s unfulfilled potential due to a life cut short by the Shoah. In taking up this task I have drawn parallels between the monologic discourse of Dostoevsky’s cardinal, who is deaf to the voice of his Other and the similarly obstinate voice of Hitler. The self-righteousness of both these figures is displayed through rhetoric that feigns a concern for their Other that barely conceals their totalitarian desires. In the first instance, the Grand Inquisitor professes a greater love for humanity than that displayed by the Christ he holds in chains before him, while Hitler cites his love for the German Volk as the sole motivation driving his efforts to institute the Third Reich. That both men are the mouthpieces of official seriousness is unveiled by the fear they instill and the terror they inflict: freedom is stifled in pursuit of their own dystopian nightmare as those who fail to conform to their vision are purified in their hellish fires. By contrast, the Christ of Dostoevsky’s legend draws the populace to Himself through the sheer magnetism of His being: a Man of few words—two to be exact—His silence is not of the demonic kind; it, rather, opens an expanse for the inhabitation of the Other: a space they rapidly fill. Indeed, it is this that draws the Grand Inquisitor’s ire towards Him. As the paradigm of unofficial seriousness, Christ voices no refutation of the Grand Inquisitor’s accusatory monologue. His communications are of the extra-linguistic order: it is through silence, His penetrating gaze and a kiss on the old man’s ‘bloodless aged lips,’\(^3\) that Christ repudiates the cardinal’s sermon and secures His ticket of liberation. Dostoevsky

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further develops his response to the ‘Legend of the Grand Inquisitor’ through the living portrait of the saintly monk and elder, Zosima. The tale of his conversion from a man of high-esteem and ego to one awakened to the inherent dignity of his Other, who dedicates his life thereafter to the service of God through the active love of all people, represents Dostoevsky’s response to Ivan’s cynical anthropology which is predictably shared by his creation, the Grand Inquisitor. Where Ivan decries humanity’s impoverished state, which, according to his way of thinking, makes it impossible for one to love one’s neighbour, Zosima stands as the embodied revelation of this very love. Hence, his novice, Alyosha can respond to his brother’s disbelief with the affirmation, ‘But yet there’s a great deal of love in mankind, and almost Christ-like love. I know that myself, Ivan.’ Herein lies the defining difference between the two brothers’ worldviews. Ivan, the pure rationalist, cannot conceive of a love based on transcendence of self-interest for the sake of one’s Other; hence, he dismisses the tale of the saint who embraced a diseased beggar with the insistence that any such act reflects ‘the self-laceration of falsity, for the sake of charity imposed by duty, as a penance laid on him. For anyone to love a man, he must be hidden, for as soon as he shows his face, love is gone.’ Alyosha, on the other hand, bears witness to altruistic love, as he has witnessed it in the life of Zosima while striving to dedicate his own life to its incarnation. I suggest that the lesson Dostoevsky here seeks to bestow is that faith in God is predicated on faith in humanity and this can only be attained through entrance into the messy materiality of human existence; in other words: active love of the Other is the gateway to the Divine.

As I have sought to illustrate, Hillesum’s writings point to life in which the lessons of Dostoevsky’s novel have been learnt and lived. While significantly more verbose than the Christ of Ivan’s legend, Hillesum springs from the same soil of unofficial seriousness. Beyond the well-established openness to her Other which she displayed in ever-increasing measure as her life progressed to its premature conclusion, when confronted by horrors that stretched the credulity

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4 Ibid., p.258.
5 Ibid., p.259.
6 Ibid., p.258.
of faith and language, Hillesum, like Christ, utilises the extra-linguistic to hold together her faith in humanity and God, alike. To this end, Rilke stands in singular importance as her most valuable guide.

It may be argued that one of the most striking proclamations of Rilke’s *Book of Hours*, which is comprised of only four words, appears in poem three of *The Book of Monkish Life*: ‘my God is dark.’ Its bold inversion of the dominant association of deities with luminosity struck me as deeply personal: an image born within an individual of a contemplative nature who is familiar with suffering. It was furthermore readily imaginable that the picture it painted would have been particularly salient to Hillesum, immersed as she was in the darkest episode of the history of her people. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, such imagery denotes a God at home in darkness, as is necessary for One who stands by the side of the suffering. In the words of the psalmist, ‘Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me’ (Psalm 23:4). Such is the nature of Hillesum’s God: Far from the gaudy Deity of Renaissance Florence, Hillesum encounters her divine Other in the subterranean space of her interior life, where, in darkness, she encounters an expansive terrain, the site of her remarkable personal and spiritual transformation: ‘My inner landscape consists of great, wide plains, infinitely wide, with hardly a horizon in sight—one plain merging into the next. As I sit huddled up in this chair, my head bowed low, I roam across those bare plains, and when I have been sitting like that for a while, a feeling of well-being, of infinity and peace comes over me’ (100). The geographical and postural signifiers Hillesum has here employed point to her expansive, all embracing *Weltanschauung* developed through a meditative disposition that dominated her existence during the period of her life covered by her diaries and letters. As previously noted, her dual disciplines of writing and prayer combined to form the gateway through which she entered the time of her Other.

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This process necessitated Hillesum’s acceptance of death as an indispensable part of her life and here we again find Rilke’s influence is pivotal. As far as the poet was concerned, death was the indispensable aspect of existence which gave life its completeness. Comparing those who failed to grasp death’s life-giving complexion to un-ripened fruit, Rilke challenges his readers to embrace death as a positive, life-giving force. Beyond dedicating the final book of The Book of Hours to the thematic exploration of this motif, Rilke’s poetic abandonment of antithesis in his work displays his conviction that meaning resides in the whole. As such, only those who open their eyes to the dark side of the moon, so to speak, enjoy access to the fullness of life. As previously noted, Hillesum’s testimony bears witness to this paradoxical phenomenon:

Yes, we carry everything within us, God and Heaven and Hell and Earth and Life and Death and all of history. The externals are simply so many props; everything we need is within us. And we have to take everything that comes: the bad with the good, which does not mean we cannot devote our life to curing the bad. But we must know what motivates our struggle, and we must begin with ourselves, every day anew...I have looked our destruction, our miserable end, which has already begun in so many small ways in our daily life, straight in the eye and accepted it into my life, and my love of life has not been diminished. I am not bitter or rebellious, or in any way discouraged. I continue to grow from day to day, even with the likelihood of destruction staring me in the face...By “coming to terms with life” I mean: the reality of death has become a definite part of my life; my life has, so to speak, been extended by death, by my looking death in the eye and accepting it, by accepting destruction as part of life and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability. Through non-acceptance and through having all those fears, most people are left with just a pitiful and mutilated slice of life, which can hardly be called life at all. It sounds paradoxical: by excluding death from our life we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our life we enlarge and enrich it. (740)

An additional point of convergence between Rilke and Hillesum’s worldviews pertains to their shared image of God. Indeed, so closely does Hillesum’s conception of her God replicate the poet’s that they appear as doppelgängers. As has been repeatedly noted, Hillesum encounters her divine Other within and, importantly, this, she insists, is the site of His recovery. Utilising the image of one clearing away the stones and grit preventing the illuminating effects of divine
presence (150), Hillesum at once conveys a God deeply invested in a relationship of mutuality with creation and the asymmetrical responsibility on humanity to safeguard the manifestation of divine salvific power. Thus it is that Hillesum places responsibility for the Shoah not on God but on humanity, insisting: ‘...it is not God’s fault that things are as they are at present, but our own. We have been granted every opportunity to enter every paradise, but we still have to learn to handle these opportunities’ (768). Hence, we arrive at the place we began, where Heaven and Hell are not the domains of the eschatological realm alone, but states of existence materialised by the degree of responsibility, or otherwise, that we demonstrate for our Other.8

So it is that we return to Bakhtin, particularly his masterful work on medieval carnival, for it is this work that has, more than any other, informed this dissertation. Rabelais and His World is far more than an exposition of carnival during the Middle Ages. It is an examination of humanity's liberating spirit which arises to meet the spectre of official seriousness in its various manifestations across the ages. As Coates astutely observes, fear is the primary focus of Bakhtin’s attack. ‘His deeper concern is to expose the logic of power and authority and its relation to truth, and to present laughter as a means to counteract it.’9 Hence it is that Rabelais and His World has been widely read as double voiced. In the words of Michael Holquist:

At one level Rabelais and His World is a parable and guidebook for its times, inexplicable without reference to the close connection between the circumstances of its own production and Soviet intellectual and

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8 Ruth Coates. Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.8: ‘What Bakhtin often used to call the “philosophy of dialogue” lay at the basis of all his critical work: all of life is a dialogue, a dialogue between person and person, person and nature, person and God...Even simply the very existence of a person, if you like, is also a “dialogue”, the exchange of substances between the person and the surrounding environment. And in this regard Bakhtin several times repeated the phrase that, as it were, objective idealism maintains that the kingdom of God is outside us, and Tolstoy, for example, insists that it is “within us” , but I think that the kingdom of God is between us, between me and you, between me and God, between me and nature: that’s where the kingdom of God is.’

9 Ibid., p.127.
political history. At another level, directed to scholars anywhere at anytime, it is a contribution to historical poetics with theoretical implications not limited by its origin in a particular time and place.\(^\text{10}\)

So it has proven. Concerned as they are with questions of freedom, oppression and truth, Bakhtin’s postulations have served as the perfect scaffold for our analysis of Etty Hillesum’s diaries and letters. To this end, and in line with the aims of this dissertation, the carnivalesque has been traced as a defining presence within Hillesum’s life and writings. Indeed, using Bakhtin’s words, ‘carnival did not convey fear but a feeling of strength...It could never become an instrument to oppress and blind the people. It always remained a free weapon in [Hillesum’s] hand’ (94, 95). In the first instance, it has been shown that Hillesum’s laughter is carnivalesque in nature and intent. While it acts as an extra-linguistic response to the incomprehensible and absurd circumstances she confronted, its renewing nature helped to insulate Hillesum from descending into hatred and despair. Instead she invested her energies into making her inner life more hospitable for the presence of her God, which in turn facilitated an ever-increasing openness to her Other. Furthermore, in Hillesum’s fidelity to truth and her openness to life’s ambivalent multiplicity, we have traced the presence of carnival’s open seriousness which ‘fears neither parody, nor irony, nor any other form of reduced laughter, for it is aware of being part of an uncompleted whole.’\(^\text{11}\) An additional and indispensable aspect of medieval carnival was its proclivity towards dialogic exchange. Through the temporary suspension of the divisions that normally characterised their lives, medieval populations were brought into dialogic proximity during carnival. The importance of the dialogic also explains Dostoevsky and Rilke’s influence on Hillesum’s existential outlook. As has been demonstrated, these two literary giants exercised a formidable influence over Hillesum. In Dostoevsky she encountered incarnated truth and love, while Rilke, whose God was dark, demonstrated the possibility of divine life amidst the bleakest of circumstances. As has been noted, important as they are, Dostoevsky and Rilke are but two of


\(^{11}\) Ibid., p.122.
the voices which Hillesum drew into dialogic exchange. This fact serves well to illuminate the fundamental point: that Hillesum’s dialogic inclinations represent yet another dimension of the carnivalesque.

The question then remains: what can men and women of the twenty-first century and beyond learn from this young Jewish woman, Etty Hillesum? In brief, the answer appears to be, a significant amount!

Whilst one hopes the magnitude of the horror confronted by Jews such as Hillesum is never again repeated, genocidal events that have occurred in the decades since the liberation of Auschwitz, such as the previously referenced Rwandan massacre and the liquidation of Bosnian Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica demonstrate an ongoing dis-ease inflicting the human family. More immediate examples, such as recent terrorist attacks in Beirut and Paris, which have left hundreds of innocent women, men and children dead or injured, awake one to the sobering realisation that the disjuncture between language and life identified as pivotal to the events which led to the Holocaust remains an ever-present problem. To paraphrase Hillesum, whether it be Hitler, Ivan the Terrible, the Inquisition, or, in our own times, the Islamic State, the subordination of one’s Other to ideology is an act of violence which must be fought, not through a likeminded response, but through the preservation of ‘a small corner of one’s soul unsullied’ (772) and the active propagation of the Other’s interests.

Hillesum’s words echo with particular resonance when exhortations of cultural non-equivalence are expressed. Claims of the West’s cultural superiority over Middle Eastern cultures made by Australia’s recently deposed Prime Minister, Mr. Tony Abbott’s is a case in point.12 Whilst such sentiments may help to explain...

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12 Karen Barlow & Josh Butler. ‘Religious Revolution, Tony Abbott Says Islam Must Change.’ Huffington Post Australia, huffingtonpost.com.au, 9/12/2015: ‘Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott has opened up a new controversy over Islam, calling all for a “religious revolution” inside Islam, declaring “all cultures are not equal” and Australians should stop apologising for Western values and culture. Muslim leaders have reacted with dismay and are “cringing” over his claim that Western culture is superior to Middle Eastern culture, but Abbot has been backed in by supporters within the Liberal Party.’
the tangible sense of relief which broke out across the Australian continent when this divisive Prime Minister was replaced by the more centrist and conciliatory figure of Mr. Malcolm Turnbull, their articulation in a post-Holocaust world illuminates the importance of voices like Hillesum’s, which are invested in dialogic relations. Thankfully, contemporary voices dedicated to this cause are also making themselves heard: The 2015 publication, *Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue* by academic and self-proclaimed atheist, Sam Harris and academic and Muslim, Maajid Nawaz is but one such example.\(^\text{13}\) Entering the same terrain as Mr. Abbott, but journeying via a dialogic path as opposed to the hubristic, monologic road taken by the former Prime Minister, Harris and Nawaz converse to ‘demonstrate how two people with very different views can find common ground.’\(^\text{14}\)

By means of providing a literary demonstration of the validity of this approach, I point to the example of William Shakespeare whose genius an esteemed Professor of English Literature once exclaimed to me lay in the impurity of his compositions. Whilst aware of Shakespeare’s fondness for finding in existing tales inspiration for his own work and his predilection for ignoring the prevailing rules of genre in composing his plays and sonnets, on hearing the Professor’s declaration it occurred to me that if the oeuvre of this luminary of the English language is generically flawed then should not existence itself display this same flawed character? Indeed, if there is a lesson to take from Hillesum it is exactly this: by refusing to be bound by the limits of a single language, religious tradition or grand narrative, she destroyed the usual ideological impediments to authentic dialogic relations. As such, the dialogic texture of her writing serves as a literary signifier of her worldview’s inherently relational composition. Conversely, Hitler’s outlook, if indeed one can call his insular view of the world an out-look, lacks any such reference to his Other and, herein, lies its fatal flaw: through his willful and all-encompassing avoidance of responsibility to his Other,


\(^{14}\) Ibid. (Publisher’s description on rear cover)
Hitler’s language and life inflicts on the existential realm violence of apocalyptic dimensions.

As this dissertation has shown, fear stands as one of the greatest impediments to the development of a dialogically constituted and directed \textit{Weltanschauung}. In the case of Hitler, his Anti-Semitic rhetoric betrays his acute ignorance of the object of his hatred, his Jewish Other. Bearing none of the marks of encounter one observes in dialogically constituted discourse, the hatred which saturates a document such as \textit{Mein Kampf} not only materialises the widely acknowledged relationship between ignorance and fear, but, to devastating effect, enacts upon existence the very disjuncture that informs, or—more accurately—\textit{deforms} its composition. Conversely, Hillesum beckons her readers to follow her along a path that leads away from ignorance and fear and the inevitably poisonous effects of such un-ripened fruit. As her diaries show, Hillesum understood the debilitating impressions fear made on the human soul and thus fought its every appearance. From the fear of insanity, which she expressed in her opening diary entry, to the fear of death in a concentration camp far from home, Hillesum’s capacity to conquer these paralysis-inducing anxieties saw her enter an expansive existential space. It was here that she sought to act as a balm for the wounds of her Other—human and divine alike. For those who would seek to tread her path, a perpetually open approach to the multiplicity of existence seems to be the necessary first step. Concretely speaking, this requires the resistance of any ‘isms’ that demand the subordination of one’s Other, for, as Hillesum observed, such adherence inevitably ‘hides a little lie...the “truth” is always violated’ (260). If the lessons of a history containing the Crusades, Inquisitions and Holocaust remain too removed from our experience to convince us, then in the present war on terror we find yet another example of the destruction wrought when the Other is subordinated to the abstract, ideological realm.\footnote{This is not a call to abandon belief systems, except where they act as an impediment to one’s obligations to their Other. I have no intention, for example, of abandoning Catholicism. Indeed, to truly take up Hillesum’s challenge requires that I strive to live out the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith (the most central of which is love for the Other), even more sincerely.}

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It is true, of course, that purely advocating such sentiments does nothing to
breach the schism enacted by worshiping at the altar of ideology. As Bakhtin,
Dostoevsky and Hillesum realised, only in the human act can this fissure be
healed. In this respect, Hillesum again proves to be a most effective teacher. In
the first instance, she refused to scapegoat the Other realising that to do so was
an exercise in self-projection. Expressing the carnivalesque insight that she
shared the imperfections found in all members of the human race, Hillesum
turned within as the site of reconciling the split between the ideological and
material realms. As has been repeatedly noted, such efforts illuminate the
cathartic and transformative impact of art and prayer in her life. Indeed, in
Hillesum’s case, the first seemingly acted as a gateway to the second. Whilst at
one level Hillesum’s refusal to scapegoat her Other could be categorised as
passive resistance of the Nazis’ dehumanising designs, her decision to turn
inwards wherein she discovers her divine Other and the transformative
possibilities derived from this relationship, signifies active resistance. The
quantifiable impact of this transformative interaction is most visibly seen is the
asymmetrical relationship of responsibility Hillesum adopted towards her Other.
As mentioned previously, the woman Hillesum’s readers encounter in her later
diaries and letters has undergone a significant personal and spiritual (if the two
can be differentiated) transformation. While her decision to reject numerous
offers to flee Nazi persecutions in favour of sharing her people’s fate most vividly
illuminates her entrance into the time of the Other, her numerous encounters
with these same people within Westerbork, as relayed through some of her most
moving letters, display an individual at one with her brothers and sisters. In the
same manner do we find some of Hillesum’s most powerful acclamations of life’s
beauty and her divine Other voiced within the barbed-wire fences of the transit
camp. To this end, her diaries and letters stand as an indispensable constituent
of her transformation and resistance—two defining aspects of her final years
that cannot be easily separated. Given the chaotic, apocalyptic nature of events
confronting her, Hillesum’s capacity to enter her interior space seems all the
more remarkable; that said, these same circumstances which, like a Boa-
Constrictor, suffocated Jewish existence, no doubt necessitated Hillesum's entrance into what she describes as an ever-expansive landscape. Paradoxically then, by entering into what many consider the passive activity of prayer, whether facilitated through her writing or by kneeling in contemplative silence, Hillesum exemplified being at its most active: being open to life in its fully ambivalent multiplicity.

In what is widely regarded as his greatest work, Welsh favourite son and poet, Dylan Thomas, concludes his poem, 'Do not go gentle into that good night' with the invocation: ‘Rage, rage against the dying of the light.’\(^{16}\) It is a line that serves as an eminently suitable descriptor of Etty Hillesum’s life and writings, which, during her own times, and ours, rage against the dying of the light. In an apocalyptic age, when the Shoah’s fires were extinguishing the light of humanity across Europe and simultaneously casting faith in the divine light into the fantastical realm, Hillesum raged to keep both alive within her. That she succeeded in this task, there is no doubt! For, as her diaries and letters testify, though the length of her existence was cut short in Auschwitz, Hillesum lived a life of carnivalesque proportions: liberated from the stupefying, spirit-crushing fear deployed by tyrants across the ages, Hillesum lived fully open to life’s ambivalent complexities and here inhabited a landscape of such tremendous riches and beauty that it burst through the confines, not only of the Third Reich, but of any ideological system which seeks to define and control the enigmatic richness of existence. In a statement which illuminates the inspirational reach and power of Etty Hillesum’s Weltanschauung, Pope Benedict XVI, during his General Audience of February 13th 2013, made the following observation:

I am also thinking of Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch girl of Jewish origin who died in Auschwitz. At first far from God, she discovered him looking deep within her and she wrote: ‘There is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am there, too. But more often stones and grit block the well, and God is buried beneath. Then he must be dug out again’ (Diaries, 97). In her disrupted, restless life she found God in the very midst of the great tragedy of the 20th

century: the Shoah. This frail and dissatisfied young woman, transfigured by faith, became a woman full of love and inner peace who was able to declare: ‘I live in constant intimacy with God.’

It is the hope of this author that the numbers of those inspired by the life and writings of this young Jewish woman may continue to expand for, as Hillesum has shown, it is in the expansion of our ideologies, our minds, our hearts and horizons that our common salvation lies.

17 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2013/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20130213.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2013/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20130213.html)
Etty Hillesum
Clockwise from top left: Louis Hillesum; Etty with her books; Etty (Portrait); Julius Spier; Han Wegerif; Etty with her brother, Mischa. Centre: Hillesum family portrait L-R: Etty, Rebecca (Mother), Mischa, Jaap and Louis Hillesum (Father)
Etty’s final known correspondence: postcard thrown from the transport to Auschwitz, which departed from Westerbork on Tuesday, September 7, 1943.

The transport contained 987 people including 170 children. Etty’s parents, Rebecca and Louis and her brother, Mischa, were also on the transport.

Only eight people from this transport survived Auschwitz. None of Etty’s family was counted amongst this number.

According to the Red Cross records, Etty Hillesum died in Auschwitz on November 30, 1943.
A selection of Hillesum's original diaries and letters displayed alongside her image

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