Article

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Natural Metaphors: Expressions of Mystical Experience in John of the Cross, Etty Hillesum, and Björk

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Abstract

In the twenty-first century, academic approaches to mysticism often risk reducing the *Mystery* to an object of erudition and historical distance, as if mystical experience belonged solely to a pre-modern past. Yet, when one encounters the "natural metaphors" that emerge within mystical writings—images of rivers, gardens, fire, and wind—it becomes almost impossible to silence the invitation to perceive the sacred as still unfolding in the present. This article proposes an embodied and associative reflection that brings into conversation the poetry of John of the Cross (1542–1591), the intimate diaries of Etty Hillesum (1914–1943), and the musical and visual work of the contemporary artist Björk Guðmundsdóttir (b. 1965). Through this triadic encounter, I argue that natural metaphors are not mere literary ornaments but symbolic languages that articulate the ineffable through the elemental languages of the earth. They sustain a theology of embodiment, relationality, and transformation that traverses epochs and artistic media. The study also seeks to fracture rigid and hegemonic readings that have confined mystical texts within colonial geographies of interpretation—readings that domesticate spiritual experience through rigid doctrinal frameworks. In contrast, this essay advocates for a decolonial hermeneutics of the mystical imagination, one that recognizes how the natural, the aesthetic, and the spiritual interweave in the polyphony of the world. By reading John of the Cross, Hillesum, and Björk together, I suggest that mystical experience continues to unfold today through poetry, diary, and sound—where theology becomes not only a matter of thought but of vibration, beauty, and embodied openness to the Mystery.

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1. Introduction

To approach the oceanic mystery of what we call mysticism is always to engage in an unfinished task, akin to that of the sailors described by Otto Neurath—those who must rebuild their ship while already at sea, never able to bring it into dry dock to reconstruct it from its best components: "We are like sailors who have to rebuild their ship on the open sea, without ever being able to dismantle it in dry-dock and reconstruct it from its best components" (Karuvelil 2020, p. 138). The maritime metaphor, later taken up by Quine, reminds us that every interpretive effort takes place in motion, amidst the voyage, without final certainties. In his own way, Karl Popper expressed a similar insight with his image of the piles driven into a swamp: we never reach solid ground; we simply stop when the supports seem stable enough to sustain—for a time—the structure we inhabit (Popper 1992, p. 94). Reflection on mysticism shares this same condition: it is composed of gropings, adjustments, and approximations that never arrive at the firm terrain of the definitive. Perhaps this is why Juan Martín Velasco (2004) observed that "mystics behave toward theologians who are not mystics as explorers toward geographers, allowing them to draw maps of unknown lands and to correct what they have already established" (p. 19).

 doi:10.20944/preprints202511.2112.v1

Academic research on mysticism often centers on the historical and philological analysis of texts, treating them as documents that bear witness to a past. While such work is indispensable, it also risks neutralizing the living potency of these writings, reducing them to mere objects of erudition rather than to traces of an experience that continues to resonate. Yet mysticism must be conceived as inseparable from the integral fulfillment of human existence (Santos Meza 2024a). From this perspective, attention to the natural metaphors that traverse mystical texts makes it possible to reactivate their inner resonance, for these images not only give poetic form to the ineffable but also invite contemporary readers into a living, associative encounter with the present.

This article proposes an embodied reading of natural metaphors and their relationship to mystical experience from three perspectives that make it possible to fracture the "colonial geographies" (Althaus-Reid 2003) of mysticism: the poems of John of the Cross (1542–1591), the diaries of Etty Hillesum (1914–1943), and the discography of the Icelandic singer Björk Guðmundsdóttir (b. 1965). We begin from the hypothesis that natural metaphors—that linguistic resource through which the impossible is named in the matter of the world—constitute a bridge between mystical experience and its literary expression, and that contemporary music can serve as a catalyst to reactivate such experience in our own time. The proposal thus situates itself at an interdisciplinary crossroads between literature, theology, and music. By interweaving mystical writings from different epochs with a contemporary sonic repertoire, this work seeks to show that speaking of the mystery is not merely an act of scholarly remembrance, but a living possibility of experience—where past and present converge in a single act of reading and listening (Córdova Quero, Díaz, Mor and Santos Meza 2024).

2. Thinking Theologically through Natural Metaphors

A theological approach to natural metaphor requires, first of all, recognizing the importance that the mystical tradition has attributed to sensible experience as a vehicle of the transcendent. Borrowing a term from Elmar Mitterstieler (2015), one may speak of an *experience of nature*, understood as that which "fills us with grateful admiration [for nature] and makes us ask 'how?' and 'from where?'" (p. 1). This form of experience is constitutive of the human, for the "natural" offers itself as a universal horizon of reference shared by all peoples and cultures (Karuvelil 2020, p. 6).

Mystics, however, have consistently affirmed that authentic mystical experience is, at its root, nonsensory. As one text reminds us: "What mystics say is that a genuine mystical experience is nonsensuous. It is formless, shapeless, colorless, odorless, soundless. But a vision is a piece of visual imagery having color and shape. A voice is an auditory image. Visions and voices are sensuous experiences" (Stace 1960, p. 13; Stace 1961, p.49). The paradox that emerges here lies in the fact that the ineffable cannot be reduced to sensory representation, and yet poetic voice, vision, and metaphor rely on the sensible to express what cannot be said. It is in this interstice that the natural becomes a privileged resource: to speak of wind, water, or the flower is, in mystical writing, to allude to that which exceeds any conceptual category.

In this sense, natural metaphors should not be interpreted as mere aesthetic embellishments but as pathways into the interior. They speak of what unfolds within because mysticism is "not experience of something completely beyond the natural world" (Marshall 2005, p. 2). The mystical, therefore, does not refer to a realm radically alien to the human; rather, it gestures toward a way of inhabiting existence that recognizes nature as both mirror and mediation of the divine.

Contemporary reflection on such metaphors must nevertheless engage with critical perspectives. Timothy Morton (2010) has argued that the use of organic metaphors does not necessarily foster ecological awareness or subvert gender roles. Yet, contrary to his position, it is plausible to affirm that metaphorical language does open possibilities for agency in environmental, gendered, and religious-spiritual domains. Precisely because the natural metaphor destabilizes rigid categories and generates new symbolic connections, it becomes a fertile space for imagining alternative ways of inhabiting the world.

The writer Ellen Meloy offers a decisive insight at this point:

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"Our essence as a species binds us to explore and affiliate with all life. We are lovers who can add up glucose, amino acids, water, fragrant oils, pigments, and other tissue and call it both a flower and a mystical gesture. We can also decimate pollinators with an unloving tonnage of pesticides, precipitating the extinction of entire populations of those mystical gestures, once and forever... Lives without access to sensation are lives that edge out the earth's raw, pervasive sweetness, that deeply biophilic connection to all life" (Chisholm 2010, p. 359).

In her words, the ambivalence of the human condition becomes evident: the capacity to contemplate the flower as a mystical gesture and, simultaneously, to destroy it through extractivist practices. The natural metaphor does not conceal this contradiction but reveals it, thereby making possible a theological reflection that intertwines contemplation with ethical responsibility.

Within this horizon, theology must acknowledge that nature is not merely a stage upon which revelation unfolds but an active interlocutor participating in it. Thus, to think theologically about these metaphors is to recognize that nature is not simply a backdrop for the divine but a living participant in both revelation and contemplation. In the writings of John of the Cross, for instance, the sun, the wind, and the night become signs accompanying the soul's journey toward the Beloved; they are not ornamental devices but mediations of meaning.

This shift toward a relational conception finds resonance in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's thought. She invites us to move our reflection from the "globe," understood as object, to "planetarity," understood as relation—insisting on its inexhaustible nature:

"If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away. And thus, to think of it is already to transgress... We must persistently educate ourselves into this peculiar mindset" (Spivak 2003, p. 73).

As a theological category, "planetarity" suggests that the Other—nature, the neighbor, the divine—does not derive from us but rather precedes and contains us (Neimanis 2017, p. 145). The natural metaphor, read through this lens, becomes the sign of an irreducible alterity that both envelops and transcends us.

Now then, the mystical writing of authors such as John of the Cross illustrates how the natural functions as the symbolic language of the soul and as a "springboard toward God" [*tremplin vers Dieu*] (Boubli 2016). The murmur of the wind, the clarity of dawn, or the fragility of a flower condense, in sensible images, the soul's search for the Beloved. This language does not explain the mystery—it intensifies it: metaphor does not close meaning but opens it to new resonances. For this reason, it is a language rich in "projections, explosions, vibrations, machinery, and flavors" (Tamez 2001, p. 59). To think theologically about this dynamic means understanding that the divine communicates itself precisely through the symbolic, the aesthetic, and the sensible, for "there are no adequate words to describe the object and the nature of this vision, nor to compare it with any earthly image, and only the use of metaphor can give some idea of it" (Boubli 2016, p. 222).

In the same way, Etty Hillesum's diaries demonstrate that these metaphors do not belong exclusively to a monastic or conventual tradition. In the midst of the genocidal violence of the twentieth century, Hillesum turns to images of nature to sustain her hope and inner resistance. Her writing shows that the natural metaphor is capable of articulating experiences of transcendence within contexts of suffering, functioning both as refuge and as an act of faith.

Yet this journey would be incomplete without the inclusion of contemporary musical mediation—a fundamental aspect of the spiritual, intellectual, and existential path of the author of this paper. While artists such as Amancio Prada have sought to give new musical form to the mystical poems of John of the Cross,[i] I have found in the discography of Björk a distinctive, meta-religious, and meta-confessional dimension that proves deeply suggestive. Her experimental music—combining the organic, the technological, the emotional, and the mystical-religious—offers a sonic horizon in which natural metaphors resound within the contemporary spiritual consciousness (Dibben 2006). Some authors have proposed a twofold approach to the study of music and mysticism—through the notions of "musical heaven" and "heavenly music" (Kirakosian 2017). As

 doi:10.20944/preprints202511.2112.v1

Beaudoin observes, "musical experience serves as a kind of spiritual exercise, a force for shaping what matters most, for what we most may be. Music reaches us in deeply holding and motivating ways. We are different for our faith in music" (Beaudoin 2019, p. 47).

In this sense, listening to Björk's harmonic and musical compositions while reading mystical poems by John of the Cross or intimate passages from Etty Hillesum does not only generate sensory, emotional, and affective associations; it also establishes a dialogue between the mystical/religious/spiritual and the postmodern global present. We may never come to know the landscapes described by the Carmelite mystic, yet we can feel inner movements that echo his own; we may not traverse the same bicycle paths once taken by Etty Hillesum, yet we recognize the tides that stir within our own interiority; we may not see ourselves as tectonic beings seeking to realign their geological foundations through seismic motions, yet we know that when we attempt to connect with other people and realities, something within us shifts, demanding new orders.

Much more could be said about the dialogues that emerge when mysticism is understood as a timeless reality; however, that is not the purpose of the present reflection. To grasp the contemporary challenges involved in approaching mysticism, it is illuminating to turn to the work of Cassidy Hall, who departs from the traditional and often rigid frameworks through which mystical experience and mystical figures have been interpreted, and instead proposes what she calls "queering contemplation" (Hall 2024). In this same spirit, the present reflection takes up the challenge of queering contemplation and spirituality by exploring the mystical power that emanates from—and through—music. Melodies expand the human capacity to perceive nature as a symbolic language, transforming contemplation into a polyphonic and universal act, one that is at once intergenerational, intercultural, and interreligious.

Consequently, natural metaphors—at least those of John of the Cross, Etty Hillesum, and Björk—can be understood as bridges linking individual existential experience, collective gatherings, and the oceanic horizon of the transcendent, the spiritual, and the interior. This is not merely an aesthetic description of reality but a spiritual or religious mediation that roots the sacred, the divine, and the mystical in everyday life.

Thus, spiritual theology and contemporary studies on spirituality and mysticism, by reflecting on such images, open themselves to a necessary interdisciplinarity in which literature, music, and the sensory arts intertwine in the pursuit of a more dynamic and embodied knowledge of the sacred. Within this framework, it is also necessary to delve into the theological and religious implications of such languages, showing how nature, transformed into metaphor, becomes a hermeneutical space for understanding the mystery.

When John of the Cross describes his experience of union with God through images such as the "dark night," the "spiritual canticle," or the "living flame of love," nature appears as an indispensable mediation in the construction of his *sacrificium litterae* (Teuber 2003). Following Bernhard Teuber's insight, John's mystical writing emerges from the author's zigzag movement between spelling out the carnal meaning of God's spiritual love—even its erotic distortions—and frustrating it allegorically at the same time (Teuber, 2003). The night, the flame, the water, the gardens, and the mountains are not mere lyrical ornaments; they are realities endowed with a symbolic density capable of containing the ineffable and the unheard within a poetic sonority that, while expressing literary magnificence, always exhausts itself and returns to contemplative silence. The natural metaphor thus fulfills a hermeneutical function: it expands the boundaries of what is sayable, audible, sensible, imaginable, and contemplable, opening an (in)direct path toward the divine. As theology reads and contemplates these metaphors, it must renounce the pretense of conceptual exhaustiveness and accept the poetic detour as a legitimate and unquestionable access to the Mystery.

Etty Hillesum, from a radically different historical context, repeats this logic under other conditions. Her diaries, written amid the horror of Nazi genocidal barbarism, do not dispense with contact with nature; on the contrary, in the passages where she describes the sky, the fields, or the rain, one perceives a spiritual resistance that refuses to be reduced to barbarity. There, the natural metaphor becomes a sign of transcendence within the ordinary: a tree blossoming beside the

 doi:10.20944/preprints202511.2112.v1

concentration camp stands as a reminder of the sacred that insists on remaining. From a theological perspective, this gesture reveals that natural metaphors are not a form of romantic evasion but narratives of resistance that sustain the possibility of meaning in the midst of extreme circumstances.

The inclusion of Björk in this analysis opens a novel methodological horizon, for her discography abounds with references to stones, oceans, volcanoes, and glaciers, interwoven with daring, unsettling, and unprecedented sonic explorations. Her music reveals how the natural metaphor can be embodied through rhythm, texture, and vibration. The metaphor is not merely articulated—it is experienced corporeally. Contemporary theology, long accustomed to the written word, encounters here a profound challenge: how might one think the Mystery when it is conveyed not solely through discourse, but also through poetic verse and sonic landscapes that evoke the natural world? John of the Cross once wrote, "For I know well the spring that flows and runs, / although it is night" (St. John of the Cross 1993, pp. 76–77)[ii]; Etty Hillesum noted in her diary, "There is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God" (26 Aug 1941, Hillesum 1996, p. 91); and Björk (2000), in a distinct cultural register, echoes this same tension when she sings, "I've seen it all, I've seen the dark / I've seen the brightness in one spark." In all three cases, the perceiving and naming bodies are implicated: natural metaphors acquire meaning only insofar as they are lived.

From this follows that theological reflection on natural metaphors—and through them—cannot be confined to describing their use; it must also assume their epistemological consequences. If nature is a medium through which to speak of God, then aesthetics becomes a legitimate theological locus. The beauty, fragility, and force of the natural world traverse human experience, disposing it to feel-think what has been called the Mystery. By recognizing the centrality of natural metaphors, theology moves away from a closed and rigid rationality toward an embodied knowing/tasting—*saber/sabor*—that engages sensitivity, memory, and imagination (Gutiérrez 2003). Such a shift challenges any rationalist reduction of religious discourse.

Natural metaphors are not ornamental resources but traces of the sacred's overflowing of purely conceptual frameworks. As various aesthetic-theological approaches suggest, symbolic language does not replace argumentation but complements—and perhaps surpasses—it, revealing dimensions of the Mystery inaccessible by other means. Paul Tillich, for example, affirms that revelation "is a special and extraordinary manifestation that lifts the veil of something hidden in a special and extraordinary way" (Tillich 1981, p. 146). Hence, he identifies three defining traits of symbols: (1) they point beyond themselves, (2) they participate in the power of that which they symbolize, and (3) they open access to a level of meaning otherwise unattainable (Tillich 1955).

Indeed, reflecting on natural metaphors opens a spiritual horizon for the present. In a world marked by ecological crisis, recovering the sacred dimension of nature entails transforming our relationship with the environment. The mystical tradition reminds us that nature is not a resource to be exploited but a sign to be interpreted. To contemplate a river or a forest as a metaphor of the divine is to assume the ethical responsibility of protecting it. Thus, theological analysis of natural metaphors intertwines with theologies of creation and with contemporary ecological and liberation theologies, offering a symbolic and spiritual foundation for meaningful environmental and ecological action.

In secularized contexts—where institutional religion often arouses suspicion—such metaphors provide an accessible language, one that even situates us within the broader framework of the Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). The image of the spring, the tree, or the flame speaks directly to lived experience and enables believers and non-believers alike to converse on common ground. This symbolic language builds bridges where dogmas erect borders and fosters religious–spiritual connections where rigid confessional identities often generate ruptures and wounds, revealing that the sacred manifests itself in the universal, the shared, and the everyday.

In sum, natural metaphors, when felt and thought theologically, constitute a privileged locus for both the experience and reflection of the sacred and the divine. From the lonely wooded valleys, strange isles, and murmuring rivers of John of the Cross, to Hillesum's sunny, open skies, and Björk's utopian soundscapes, a constellation of images emerges that reveals how what we call "natural" is not foreign to the divine but part of it—and therefore its mediation. Natural metaphors invite

 doi:10.20944/preprints202511.2112.v1

theology to think with openness, acknowledging that language does not enclose truth but gestures toward its horizon. At the same time, they call for praxis: to care for, contemplate, and celebrate nature not merely as a material resource, but as a living symbol of the sacred. In this way, theological reflection becomes more embodied, aesthetic, and ecological—faithful to the invitation that emanates from mystical experience: to let natural life, in its mystery and beauty, become divine and sacred word for our time.

3. Natural Metaphors in John of the Cross, Etty Hillesum, and Björk

Contemplation—understood as a religious, spiritual, and theological experience—overflows the boundaries of a merely intellectual, confessional, or dogmatic exercise (Hall 2024). It entails a vital encounter that engages bodies, senses, affections, and emotions. To approach mysticism from this perspective means allowing the writings of John of the Cross and Etty Hillesum not only to be read but also to be heard, experienced, felt, and embodied in everyday life. Within this framework, natural metaphors emerge as mediators of religious and spiritual experience: the flowing river, the light breaking through darkness, or the whispering wind become symbols that open a theological intuition where abstract reasoning cannot reach.

The integration of contemporary music—particularly the work of Björk—amplifies this experience. Her compositions, which weave together the organic and the electronic, fragility and sonic intensity, create an aesthetic space in which natural metaphors resonate within the present moment. Listening to her melodies while meditating on the verses of John of the Cross or on fragments from Hillesum's diaries generates a sensory dialogue in which the poetic and the theological mutually strengthen one another, giving rise to a form of knowledge that is at once intellectual, affective, and embodied.

In this sense, contemplation may be conceived as a *sentipensar*—a "feel-thinking" practice—that engages the depth of human sensibility across time (Fals-Borda 1987; Santos Meza 2025; Bedford 2025). Far from being confined to scholarly abstraction or limited to any specific academic tradition, it unfolds as an intergenerational, interreligious, and intercultural experience in which emotion, aesthetics, and introspection actively participate in the encounter with the "Mystery." When the living body listens, feels, thinks, interprets, and responds, theology itself becomes embodied, tangible, and present. Attending to these dynamics allows for the dismantling of the rigid structures and ideologies that have appropriated mystical experience, enclosing it within what Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003) aptly describes as "colonial geographies." Within this horizon, it becomes necessary to recognize that "a reading of mystical texts from various historical periods—and a review of the interpretations that have been privileged over these texts—reveals a dominant bias in canonical reflections. In other words, the cis-heteropatriarchal narrative has appropriated the interpretation of mystical texts, distorting the testimonial meaning of the mystics, even to the point of theological misrepresentation of divine experience" (Santos Meza 2024b, p. 5).

Within this temporal and sensorial interlacing, the natural metaphors of John of the Cross find resonance in the ethical, human, and existential sensitivity of Hillesum; both mystical testimonies are reconfigured when brought into dialogue with the mystical-musical expressiveness of Björk. Thus, an experimental space of theological, religious, and spiritual reflexivity in which the past and the contemporary, the anecdotal and the experiential, the literary and the sonic, the individual and the collective, coexist within an ongoing process of discovery. Far from being mere literary devices, natural metaphors unfold as bridges toward the presence of the sacred and the divine within contemporary experience.

The following section will examine each of the three experiences in turn to uncover key insights that deepen and enrich the present reflection.

3.1. Tracing (Selected) Natural Metaphors in John of the Cross

The spiritual writings of John of the Cross are distinguished by an intense and sustained use of natural metaphors that constitute a hermeneutical axis of his mystical language. The Discalced

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Carmelite does not appeal to nature as mere ornament or secondary illustration, but as a symbolic language indispensable for saying the unsayable and communicating the incommunicable—the experience of beauty on the path of divine encounter (Marcos 2020, p. 89). Light, fire, wind, river, garden, night, mountain, deer, dove, fountain, and meadow, among others, become vehicles of spiritual meaning throughout his poems, songs, and couplets. His narrative traces the mystical process of his own spiritual journey, a dynamism reflected in his semantic repertoire: "departure, gate, path, way, mountain, ascent, summit, ladder, flight..." (Mancho Duque 1990, p. 106). This is not a peripheral stylistic device, but a genuine mode of access to the divine, the sacred, and the interior through the sensible. The reader of John of the Cross thus enters a poetic universe in which each metaphor articulates a dynamic tension between the concrete and the transcendent, between the immediate and the ineffable.

One of the most notable features of John's mysticism is his awareness that the experience of God exceeds all human language (Behrens 2004). Ordinary speech proves insufficient to express what is lived in the depths of the soul. Hence the need for another mode of saying—a stammering, an "*no sé qué*" [I know not what] (St. John of the Cross 2003, "Cántico Espiritual," v. 7; St. John of the Cross 1979, "The Spiritual Canticle," v. 7; St. John of the Cross 1864, p. 396)[iii]—where metaphor becomes an indispensable mediation:

"The poet has heard a mysterious call. He is seized by a most subtle, intense sensation that he must communicate. Something made of rhythm and color unsettles him: it is the tone, the accent, the poetic atmosphere; that which exists in the poem before it is written; that which continues to resonate in memory once the words have faded" (Hierro 1952, p. 100).

John of the Cross is thus compelled to perform constant linguistic experimentations that allow him to manifest—or at least to attempt to manifest—that which the everyday use of language cannot contain. His natural metaphors are not rhetorical luxuries but mystagogical and spiritual instruments that open horizons of meaning (Baldini 1986; Polo 1993). Within this framework, his poems and canticles reveal how the poet not only seeks to *speak of* God through symbols but also to allow God to *speak through* them—symbols that are beautiful, primordial, and generative of reality. His mystical language dwells within expressions that appeal to nature yet point beyond themselves, as traces leading toward the Divine. Nature itself is pregnant with revelatory words, as fingers obstinately pointing beyond themselves:

"O woods and thickets,
Planted by the hand of the Beloved!
O meadow of verdure,
Enamelled with flowers,
Say if He has passed by you" (St. John of the Cross 1946, p. 26).[iv]

Indeed, it has been claimed that "in John of the Cross, the understanding of nature as the transcendent and essential word of the Beloved-God reaches its culmination" (Martínez González 2008, p. 463).

Among the most prominent of these natural metaphors is that of the "dark night". Traditionally associated with danger or the absence of light, John of the Cross reinterprets the nocturnal experience as a symbol of spiritual purification and radical openness to the divine (Londoño 2022). According to Lizzie Boubli (2016), "the metaphor of the night achieves the stripping and purification of the soul, leading it toward the absolute of divine union, where no image any longer has reason to be, save that of the invisible God" (p. 233). The dark night is an interior solitude, a passage through the unknown, yet also a threshold of encounter with God (Santos Meza 2024b). It is not a passive absence but a fertile space in which the soul is readied for transformation (Coe 2000; Zuili 2024). This natural metaphor does not explain the mystery—nor does it seek to—but evokes it with suggestive power, pointing toward its oceanic horizon, revealing that within darkness a higher Presence is being born:

"The tranquil night,
At the approaches of the dawn,
The silent music,

 doi:10.20944/preprints202511.2112.v1

The murmuring solitude,
The supper which revives and enkindles love" (St. John of the Cross 1864, p. 398).[v]

Another central natural image is that of *fire*. In biblical and mystical tradition, fire signifies divine presence, and John of the Cross adopts this imagery to express both the soul's ardent passion for God and the purifying process it entails. When the poet writes, "O living flame of love, / That woundest tenderly"[vi] (St. John of the Cross 1864, p. 403), he condenses within a single image the simultaneous experience of pain and joy, of wounding and loving. Fire not only symbolizes affective ardor and intense passion but also inner transformation: just as fire consumes matter and turns it into ash, the soul enflamed by divine love is purified of its limitations and prepared for union with God (Hole 2020). To reinforce this mystagogical horizon, John returns to the image of the "*cauterio suave*" [gentle cauterization] (Frohlich 2016). One of his most striking descriptions of this fiery potency reads:

"The soul feels, as it were, a most minute grain of mustard seed, most pungent and burning in the inmost heart of the spirit; in the spot of the wound, where the substance and the power of the herb reside, diffuse itself most subtilely through all the spiritual veins of the soul in proportion to the strength and power of the heat. It feels its love to grow, strengthen, and refine itself to such a degree, as to seem to itself as if seas of fire were in it filling it with love" (St. John of the Cross 1919, p. 32).

Likewise, water occupies a privileged place in his symbolic repertoire. The fountain, the river, and the crystalline transparency evoke both the soul's thirst and the plenitude that comes from divine encounter. In the *Spiritual Canticle*, he sings:

"O crystal spring so fair,
Might now within thy silvery depths appear,
E'en as I linger there,
Those features ever dear
Which on my soul
I carry graven clear" (St. John of the Cross 1946, p. 444).[vii]

There, the spring reveals itself not merely as a physical fountain, but as the reflection of the Beloved and the mirror of desire. Water, in its ceaseless flowing, evokes the dynamism of spiritual life: it does not stagnate but runs, carries, and fertilizes. The soul that enters this river of mystical experience is drawn into the vastness of the divine, realizing that union with God is not a static possession but an inexhaustible flow.

Landscapes also play a central role in this Sanjuanist poetics nourished by natural metaphors. Mountains, valleys, islands, meadows, riverbanks, pastures, and flowing waters are not presented as idyllic or dreamlike settings but as spaces of revelation, where the beauty of creation guides the soul toward the infinite/eternal/sacred:

"My Beloved is the mountains,
The solitary wooded valleys,
The strange islands,
The roaring torrents,
The whisper of the amorous gales,
The tranquil night
At the approaches of the dawn,
The silent music,
The murmuring solitude,
The supper which revives and enkindles love".[viii]

In these vast images, the soul does not discover God *in* nature, but rather discovers nature *in* God:

"The mountains, the strange islands, the tranquil night, the silent music, the murmuring solitude—vast and austere images that have made room for the immensity of divine amplitude. Remote, total images revealed to the Bride in the Beloved she contemplates. The sovereign joy of form and space recomposes itself in a supersensible impulse. The soul does not find God in the mountains, rivers, or

 doi:10.20944/preprints202511.2112.v1

strange islands; rather, it is those rivers, mountains, and strange islands that the soul finds in God" (Baruzi 1924, pp. 397–398).

Thus, natural metaphors grant access to an essential vision of things, in which the created world finds its fullness in the Creator. Contemplation, therefore, does not culminate in sentimental pantheism, but in the recognition of a transcendence revealed through the manifest beauty of the natural world: "You forest, thicket, dene, / Which my Beloved set in close array; / You meadow-land so green, / Spangled with blossoms gay, / Tell me, oh, tell me, has He pass'd your way?" (St. John of the Cross 1946, p. 443). Another verse from his poem reads: "A thousand graces diffusing / He passed through the groves in haste, / And beholding them only / As He passed, / He clothed them with His beauty"[ix] (St. John of the Cross 1864, p. 396). In explaining these geographic and landscape symbols, John writes:

"The mountains have height; they are abundant, extensive, and beautiful, graceful, flowery, and fragrant. These mountains my Beloved is to me. The solitary valleys are quiet, pleasant, cool, shady, abounding in fresh water; and by the variety of their groves and the sweet song of the birds they greatly recreate and delight the senses, in their solitude and silence giving refreshment and rest. These valleys my Beloved is to me" (St. John of the Cross 1946, p. 261).

Alongside this symbolism woven of visual imagery, the writing of John of the Cross also unfolds within a sonorous space, composed of "a harmonious symphony of sublime music surpassing all concerts and melodies of the world" (St. John of the Cross 1946, p. 261). Expressions such as "*la música callada*" (the silent music) and "*la soledad sonora*" (the sonorous solitude) encapsulate the paradox of a language that points beyond both silence and sound, toward a universal harmony (Herrera 2004; Stopp 1995). It is not merely the description of an environment, but an invitation to inhabit an aesthetic experience that becomes a spiritual one—a *spiritual canticle*, a language built upon "a series of metaphors, associations, and correspondences between natural elements and divine love… a tapestry of metaphors interweaving the natural and the affective" (Boubli 2016, p. 225).

This silent music may be understood as an allusion to the *harmonia mundi*—the cosmic harmony that emerges when the human being becomes attuned to creation. The auditory metaphor thus acquires a cosmic dimension, where the human participates in the consonance of the whole. Ynduráin (2015) observes that "the paradox of the silent music is only apparent, for it clearly refers to the music of the spheres, to the harmony of the universe, when the human being—body and soul—comes into accord with the order of creation" (p. 101). A resonant *Rilkean* parallel also emerges: "song that in every silence we have always sung" [*du Lied, das wir mit jedem Schweigen sangen*] (Rilke 1967, p. 345).

Animal symbolism further enriches this metaphorical constellation. The "wounded deer" that flees becomes the image of the Beloved who wounds with love and at the same time conceals himself, awakening in the soul a more fervent desire (St. John of the Cross 1846, p. 395; St. John of the Cross 1946, p. 442). This dynamic of pursuit and concealment mirrors the tension inherent in mystical experience, where presence both gives itself and withdraws, wounds and attracts. Likewise, a powerful Sanjuanist ornithology unfolds, centered on the "solitary bird" from the *Sayings of Light and Love*, a metaphor for the soul's solitude as it ascends toward God, detaching itself from the multiple to orient itself toward the One (López-Baralt 2002). Both images underscore the radicality of the mystical vocation, which calls for a life stripped of excess and centered on the essential.

In the *Spiritual Canticle*, the soul also appears as a kind of "would-be dove" (Faithful 2025), for in its despair before the apparent absence of God, the soul (as narrator) abandons its search, transforms into a dove, and flies away—until the Beloved (God) finally breaks the silence and sings: "Return, my Dove! / The wounded hart / Looms on the hill / In the air of thy flight and is refreshed" (St. John of the Cross 1946, p. 444).

Tracing the natural metaphors throughout the work of John of the Cross thus reveals that his treatment of nature goes far beyond the conception of the landscape as *locus amoenus*; it is not a mere backdrop or ornamental device but a living language, an interlocutor of mystery. Its elements—night, fire, water, mountains, music, animals—become witnesses and mediations of the dynamic union with

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the divine or the sacred; they condense the tension between the ineffable and the spoken, the unheard and the audible, the sensible and the transcendent.

Undoubtedly, the writing of John of the Cross reminds us that the mystery reveals itself at the intersection of the human and the divine, and that nature, far from being passive, is a pulsating sign that continues to awaken contemplation today. To trace these metaphors, therefore, is not only an academic exercise but also a spiritual practice—an invitation to read with awakened senses, allowing the natural world to lead us into the depths of encounter with the divine.

3.2. Listening to Natural Metaphors in the Diaries of Etty Hillesum

Etty Hillesum's writings—her diaries and letters (1941–1943)—constitute a singular testimony of spirituality amidst the historical catastrophe of the Second World War (Santos Meza 2020; Santos Meza and Unger Parra 2020; Santos Meza 2024a; Santos Meza 2024b). What makes her experience distinctive is the way nature becomes a privileged language through which she articulates her inner life and her relationship with God. Hillesum does not compose a treatise nor construct a systematic theology—*thank God for that!*—but rather lets a profound sensitivity flow freely, translating the spiritual into images drawn from the natural world. In doing so, she succeeds in naming the ineffable (Coetsier 2008; Morrill 2015). Odile Falque aptly notes that for Hillesum, "to write the *Diary* meant 'to enter into oneself,' to 'listen to the springs welling up within'" (Falque 2008, p. 25). In the space between her longing for the Absolute and the reality of daily life, she offers her vision of mysticism: "We try to save many things in life through a kind of vague mysticism. But mysticism must be founded upon crystalline sincerity; first it must bring to light the naked reality of things" (Falque 2008, p. 25).

Within this horizon, nature becomes companion, witness, and spiritual teacher. Time and again, Etty turns to the sun, clouds, and rain; to mountains, trees, and flowers; to mud and pebbles; to birds and sky, water, ocean, and river—to express inner and affective dimensions that transcend her. Indeed, she "expresses the inner experience more than once through metaphors originating from the landscape, *die Seelenlandschaft*" (Schrijvers 2018, p. 318).

In Hillesum's writings, for instance, the sun becomes a metaphor for inner transformation: it is not an object to be interpreted but a presence that permeates and vivifies. The light that she once sought to master through words and intellect is now felt as a gratuitous gift that fills her with strength and vitality. The contrast between the past—when she contemplated the sun from the distance of analysis—and the present—when the sun surrounds and penetrates her without need of explanation—reveals a profound spiritual shift: from control to trusting surrender, from the mind that imprisons to the body that receives. The sun, shining upon the dark branches, thus symbolizes the possibility of allowing oneself to be touched by life in its bare gratuity, without reducing it to concept, and of discovering within this openness a source of plenitude and interior resilience. The diary entry dated March 16, 1941, reads as follows:

"Just now, when I was sitting on the dustbin in the sun out on our stony little terrace, with my head leaning against the washtub and with the sun on the strong, dark, still leafless branches of the chestnut tree, I had a very clear sense of the difference between then and now. And the things for which I needed a lot of words only this morning are now said quickly. The sun on the dark branches, the chirping birds, and me on the dustbin in the sun. In the past I would sit like that quite often too, but except for just once I had never before felt as I did this afternoon. In the past, I took in the tree and the sun with my intellect. I wanted to put down in so many words why I found it so beautiful, I wanted to understand how everything fitted together, I wanted to fathom that deep, that primitive feeling with my mind, or at least I think I did. In other words, I wanted to subject nature, everything, to myself, I felt obliged to interpret it. And the quite simple fact is that now I just let it happen to me. I go about filled with deep emotion, but it is no longer one that wears me out, rather one that gives me strength; health courses through my veins" (Hillesum 1996, pp. 25–26).

The strength of this image lies in its contrast: while Hillesum's historical horizon is marked by the threat of war and the systematic violence against her people, the solar metaphor introduces an

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alternative space of resistance and regeneration. The sun is not a mere scenic backdrop but a daily epiphany that restores energy, reconfigures the spirit, and enables the author to keep alive her awareness of her own dignity. Thus, the light that filters through the dark branches not only illuminates the outer world but also signals an inner movement of openness and hope. In this sense, the sun becomes an experience of transcendence within immanence—a metaphor that sustains and names spiritual resistance, revealing how nature, far from being a simple literary resource, becomes a wellspring of meaning where the inner and the outer intertwine in a fertile dialogue.

Likewise, the floral universe in Hillesum's writing reveals a way of perceiving mysticism in an embodied key. The particularly eloquent passage about the beautiful jasmine appears in the diary entry of July 12, 1942:

"The jasmine behind my house has been completely ruined by the rains and storms of the last few days; its white blossoms are floating about in muddy black pools on the low garage roof. But somewhere inside me the jasmine continues to blossom undisturbed, just as profusely and delicately as ever it did. And it spreads its scent round the House in which You dwell, oh God. You can see, I look after You, I bring You not only my tears and my forebodings on this stormy, gray Sunday morning, I even bring you scented jasmine. And I shall bring You all the flowers I shall meet on my way, and truly there are many of those. I shall try to make You at home always. Even if I should be locked up in a narrow cell and a cloud should drift past my small barred window, then I shall bring you that cloud, oh God, while there is still the strength in me to do so. I cannot promise You anything for tomorrow, but my intentions are good, You can see. And now I shall venture out upon this day. I shall meet a great many people today, and evil rumors and threats will again assault me like so many enemy soldiers besieging an inviolable fortress" (Hillesum 1996, p. 179).

The tension between what is destroyed outside and what blossoms within becomes a sign of endurance. The external jasmine, ravaged by the storm, finds its counterpoint in the inner jasmine that continues to flower and perfume the sacred space of interiority where God dwells. The metaphor expresses a spirituality that does not flee from a wounded world but transforms it into a spring of meaning: what withers in visible reality flourishes anew in the soul as resistance and care for the divine. Nature thus becomes a theological mediation that sustains a mystical experience where fragility and eternity intertwine.

Similarly, in her entry of September 22, 1942, Hillesum evokes the desire to embody the simplicity and trust of nature: "I would love to be like the lilies of the field. Someone who managed to read this age correctly would surely have learned just this: to be like a lily of the field" (Hillesum 1996, p. 209).

The lilies, along with the flowers in a vase, the pinecones on her desk, or the red geranium in Spier's study, become discreet signs of the grace that inhabits the everyday. These are not superficial metaphors but a spiritual pedagogy that, through the contemplation of flowers and wheat fields, reveals a way of inhabiting reality without appropriation or violence. In a context of destruction, the delicacy of the lilies or the memory of the fields becomes a theological lesson: an invitation to live the present with radical trust, as an expression of spiritual resistance that stands against hatred and despair.

Moreover, the interior geography that Hillesum identifies throughout her itinerary of self-knowledge nourishes the symbolic language she weaves into the intimate writing of her diary. In the diary entry dated October 9, 1942, she confesses:

"Through me flow the great rivers and within me rise the tall mountains. Beyond the thickets of my anguish and unrest stretch the vast plains of my inner peace and joyful trust. All landscapes dwell within me. I hold all the space I need. The earth is in me, and so is the sky. And I understand well that human beings have been able to create hell. My own personal hell I shall never live again—once was enough for a lifetime—yet I can feel with great intensity the hell of others. And it is right that this should be so, lest I grow too self-sufficient" (Hillesum 2012, pp. 792–793).[x]

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This identification of the inner world with mountains, rivers, plains, and fields exposes a mystical dimension where nature is not an external object of contemplation but an interiorized space, incorporated into the believing subjectivity. Hillesum's narrative further asserts that the deepest interior holds the landscape of the exterior—and vice versa—since the worldly outside becomes essential for understanding the mystical inside. The metaphor thus articulates a dialectic between anguish and peace, between thicket and open plain: while the historical environment darkens under the Nazi threat, landscapes of trust and spaciousness emerge within the young Dutch woman, allowing her to resist oppression without losing hope. Nature becomes the mirror of the soul and, at the same time, the sacrament of a divine presence dwelling in the depths of the human being.

Therefore, on June 8, 1941, Hillesum writes: "so let this be the aim of the meditation: to turn one's innermost being into a vast empty plain, with none of that treacherous undergrowth to impede the view" (Hillesum 1996, p. 27–28). With this, she describes the beginning of a reflective exercise that emerges from a mystical experience interwoven with natural imagery, through which she expresses a journey of self-knowledge, transformation, and openness. The cleared plain symbolizes the free space where hospitality toward the divine and others becomes possible, while the undergrowth evokes the opacity of inner unrest and the prejudices that obscure the horizon. This kind of dialectic is not binary but spectral, since Hillesum's mysticism is not evasion but the labor of interior cultivation that oscillates between plains and thickets.

Thus, the set of floral and landscape metaphors in Etty Hillesum—jasmine, lilies, geraniums, wheat fields, mountains, and plains, among others—is not an accessory aesthetic device but a theological/spiritual/religious language woven through the fusion of mysticism and nature. Wherever violence seeks to suffocate life, flowers and landscapes become testimonies of endurance, trust, and openness to the divine. Her writings reveal that to carry within oneself all landscapes is to welcome creation as a space of revelation and as a spiritual force capable of resisting even in the most adverse conditions.

Nevertheless, Hillesum does not idealize nature as an isolated refuge but rather as a bridge or threshold between interiority and shared life. The entry dated April 25, 1942, attests to the way she pours her tenderness into the natural world, transforming her emotions into an act of offering:

"Last night when I cycled home (...), I poured out all my tenderness, all the tenderness one cannot express for a man even when one loves him very, very much, I poured it all out into the great, all-embracing spring night. I stood on the little bridge and looked across the water; I melted into the landscape and offered all my tenderness up to the sky and the stars and the water and to the little bridge. And that was the best moment of the day. And I felt this was the only way of transforming all the many and deep and tender feelings one carries for another into deeds: to entrust them to nature, to let them stream out under the open spring sky, and to realize that there is no other way of letting them go" (Hillesum 1996, p. 123).

Here, metaphor becomes a sacred gesture and a silent rite of reconciliation. Nature appears not merely as a mirror of the human but also as the receptacle of a tenderness that finds no space within interpersonal relations—a realm in which feelings are entrusted and transfigured beneath the open sky. In this way, natural metaphors acquire an ethical and spiritual dimension, sustaining an act of interior resistance that opens itself to the world. Along these lines, Evelyne Frank has highlighted the distinctly Dutch rootedness of such imagery: wheat fields, rivers, overcast skies, and shifting seasons intertwine in Hillesum's writing as symbolic mediations that, grounded in both landscape and cultural sensibility, become supports of hope (Frank 2002, pp. 118-119). However, what is decisive is not the cultural reference itself, but rather the ability to transform each element into a sign of eternity. On June 25, 1943, he wrote: "I should like to write a whole book about a pebble and about a purple pansy. I could live with nothing but a pebble for a long time and still feel that I was living in God's great world of nature"[xi] (Hillesum 2012, p. 653). The pebble, minimal in its materiality, becomes a metaphor of the eternal—of that which resists death and opens the experience of the divine within the simplest of things.

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On the other hand, Hillesum's aquatic language also reveals profound intuitions regarding the search for images capable of touching the ineffable. On December 29, 1941, she acknowledges this with striking honesty: "I think I am gradually learning where that sadness comes from. From an inability to express myself properly. When my feelings and mind fail to reflect in clear words and images what goes on inside me"[xii] (Hillesum 2012, p. 306). Faced with the impossibility of grasping the totality of spiritual experience through concepts, the metaphor of water offers itself as a symbolic channel. The sea, the river, the ocean, or the agitated lake neither contain nor explain, but they evoke the dynamism, depth, and vastness of a mystery that exceeds language. Hillesum's spirituality thus unfolds in a liquid register, where the unsayable flows as an unceasing current.

In one of her most intense passages, dated March 22, 1942, she writes:

"All my tenderness, all my emotions, this whole swirling soul-lake, soul-sea, soul-ocean, or whatever you want to call it, wants to pour out then, to be allowed to flow forth into just one short poem, but I also feel, if only I could, like flinging myself headlong into an abyss, losing myself in drink"[xiii] (Hillesum 2012, p. 438).

The torrential force of this image shows how the aqueous functions as a metaphor for the uncontainable. Tenderness and affective intensity are not expressed through fixed categories but through a liquid movement that overflows and spills forth. Water here represents not only emotion but also names a mystical experience of excess: the impossibility of containing what has been lived translates into the need to let it flow like a cascade—an act that is at once liberation and offering. A similar narrative logic is already present in an earlier entry, dated March 10, 1941:

"Your imagination and your emotions are like a vast ocean from which you wrest small pieces of land that may well be flooded again. That ocean is wide and elemental, but what matter are the small pieces of land you reclaim from it." (Hillesum 1996, p. 9).

Here the ocean symbolizes the uncontrollable immensity of inner life, constantly threatening to engulf all stability. Yet the metaphor also points to the necessity of giving form and concreteness: the reclaimed land represents those gestures, words, and acts that become firm amid the oceanic flux. This is a spiritual dialectic between the liquid and the solid, between the uncontainable nature of experience and the task of shaping it within history. Another diary entry, dated July 29, 1942, emphasizes the dimension of transparency:

"What I really wanted to say is: it suddenly felt as if life in its thousand details, twists, and turns had become perfectly clear and transparent. Just as if I were standing before an Ocean and could look straight through the crystal-clear water to the bottom" (Hillesum 2012, p. 746).[xiv]

Here, crystalline water is not merely a metaphor of clarity but of mystical revelation: an experience of radical transparency in which the visible opens onto the invisible and depth becomes glimpsed without being possessed. Watery clarity thus becomes a spiritual category to describe moments of vision in which life's meaning reveals itself as gift. Finally, in her entry of September 25, 1942, the ocean emerges as a site of memory and hidden richness:

"Once in a while a treasure fleet is lost at sea, and mankind forever keeps trying to raise that sunken treasure from the waters. Many treasure fleets have already foundered in my heart, and I shall try all my life to bring some of the sunken treasure to the surface. I still lack the equipment, though, and shall have to assemble it from scratch" (Hillesum 2012, p. 773).[xv]

This inward sea metaphor suggests that the human heart holds unexplored depths, laden with treasures that can only be recovered through arduous inner labor. The image of shipwreck expresses fragility but also latent abundance: the deep and submerged does not vanish; it remains as an intimate reservoir of meaning awaiting discovery.

Taken together, these aquatic metaphors in Hillesum shape a mystical language that unites excess and transparency, overflow and containment, shipwreck and hidden treasure. The liquid element allows her to speak of a divinity dwelling in the depths of being as both unfathomable vastness and revealing clarity. Her writing thus embodies a fluid spirituality in which the interior is

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understood as an overflowing ocean—one that also invites navigation, exploration, and reverent care within its inexhaustible mystery.

Throughout the diaries, music intertwines with these natural images as yet another privileged metaphor: "'Melodiously rolls the world from God's hand.' This line by Verwey was stuck in my head all day. I too wanted to roll melodiously out of God's hand" (Hillesum 1996, p. 8). In the aforementioned diary entry, dated March 9, 1941, the "basic melody" or "inner tune" that Hillesum repeatedly mentions is her search for a guiding thread in life: "I still lack a basic tune; a steady undercurrent; the inner source that feeds me keeps drying up, and worse still, I think much too much" (Hillesum 1996, p. 37). She would repeat this a few months later, on August 4, 1941. The musical metaphor—akin to that of the river or current—reveals a yearning for harmony that is not imposed from without but arises from within as both gift and task. On 20 October 1941, the young Dutch woman writes:

"There is a strange little melody inside me that sometimes cries out for words. But through inhibition, lack of self-confidence, laziness, and goodness knows what else, that tune remains stifled, haunting me from within. Sometimes it wears me out completely. And then again it fills me with gentle, melancholy music. Sometimes I want to flee with everything I possess into a few words, seek refuge in them. But there are still no words to shelter me. That is the real problem. I am in search of a haven, yet I must first build it for myself; stone by stone. Everyone seeks a home, a refuge. And I am always in search of a few words" (Hillesum 1996, p. 54–55).

At this point, the natural and the aesthetic converge to articulate spirituality as shared melody—a rhythm that sustains meaning even amid chaos. Carol Lee Flinders (2013), in her attentive study of this musical language, describes Hillesum's spiritual journey in the following terms:

"When Etty first began writing the diary, she describes her desire for 'a tune': a thread, or medium, a calling that would make sense of her existence. By the end she has found it, and what she has found is so quiet it is almost intangible by ordinary standards" (p. 66).

The theological dimension of these metaphors becomes evident in her conception of God. On June 22, 1942, she notes that sometimes even the word "God" seems inadequate to her:

"I find the word 'God' so primitive at times, it is only a metaphor after all, an approach to our greatest and most continuous inner adventure; I'm sure that I don't even need the word 'God,' which sometimes strikes me as a primitive, primordial sound. A makeshift construction" (Hillesum 2012, p. 645).

With this, she recognizes that the divine cannot be captured in closed concepts, and that natural metaphors offer a more immediate, multisensory mediation. When she speaks of lilies, wheat, or stars, she is not expressing a naïve pantheism but rather the intuition of a presence dwelling within the most concrete and fragile realities. Within this framework, nature also becomes a teacher of balance. In Letter 47, written to Han Wegerif and others, Hillesum observes:

"Yes, really, it's true, there are compassionate laws in nature, if only we can keep a feeling for their rhythm. I notice that afresh each time in myself: when I am at the limits of despair, unable, I am sure, to go on, suddenly the balance shifts over to the other side, and I can laugh and take life as it comes. After feeling really low for ages, you can suddenly rise so high above earthly misery that you feel lighter and more liberated than ever before in your life. I am now very well again, but for a few days I was quite desperate. Equilibrium is restored time and again. Ah, children, we live in a strange world" (Hillesum 1996, p. 305).

The metaphor of natural balance functions here as a hermeneutical key to spiritual life: crisis does not destroy but rather opens a new cycle of strength and trust. The contemplation of nature teaches that suffering can be inhabited in a transformative way. This desire to attune oneself to the order of eternal laws—so radically different from those under which the powerful wage wars and commit genocides—leads her to feel one with the seagulls: "Now and then I join the gulls. In their movements through the great cloudy skies one suspects laws, eternal laws of another order than the laws we humans make" (Hillesum 1996, pp. 305–306).

 doi:10.20944/preprints202511.2112.v1

The richness of natural metaphors in Hillesum's diaries is best understood when viewed as an act of spiritual resistance against the dehumanization orchestrated by the political regimes of her time. On 7 September 1943, already imprisoned in the Westerbork concentration camp, she wrote to her friend Maria Tuinzing (Letter 56):

"Maria, dear friend, this morning there was a rainbow over the camp, and the sun shone in the mud puddles. When I went into the hospital barracks, some of the women called out, 'Have you got good news? You look so cheerful.' I considered saying something about Victor Emmanuel, about a popular government, and about peace being on the way. I couldn't fob them off with the rainbow, could I? — Even though that was the only reason for my cheerfulness" (Hillesum 1996, p. 319).

In this letter, Hillesum transforms the natural phenomenon of the rainbow into a gesture of resistance to horror that is profoundly humanistic, theological, and, above all, spiritual. Where mud and despair define the landscape of the concentration camp, the eruption of color and light is not a mere aesthetic consolation but a way of affirming life and human dignity in the midst of death. To speak of the rainbow with such passion constitutes a failure for the Nazi regime and for any form of fascism that seeks to erase humanity. Her joy—unintelligible to many around her—arises from a spirituality that refuses to be determined or reduced by totalitarian violence. The rainbow, a biblical sign of covenant and promise, acquires in Hillesum a subversive resonance: it is the affirmation that beauty—like the spirit—cannot be confined. Thus, her gaze transforms nature into a space of revelation, where the radiance of the divine manifests precisely at the margins of human suffering.

Tracing these metaphors reveals that Hillesum's spirituality is neither evasive nor disembodied. Her view of nature offers a model of embodied contemplation, where the everyday discloses the transcendent and where the simplest realities—a flower, a stone, a ray of sunlight—become epiphanies. In fact, her writings seem to articulate a kind of theology of care. In a letter dated March 24, 1943, she writes:

"And for the rest, I still have a young heart and old bones; the balance between them could be a bit better. My doctor is unable to come up with anything wiser at the moment. He says that most people in these unbearable times suffer in the soul and the mind, but with me the sufferer is the body. Though I swallow bitter, sweet, sour, solid, and liquid things in turn, I'm sure it's a lot of nonsense and we should look to nature for restoration" (Hillesum 1996, p. 565).

In this passage, the theology of care that emerges in the young Dutch woman manifests itself as a reconciliation between bodily fragility and spiritual lucidity. Her reflection does not seek to evade suffering but to inhabit it with awareness and tenderness. Confronted with the disintegration of the external world, Hillesum discovers in the body a theological site—a territory where the divine is experienced in vulnerability itself. By recognizing that restoration comes from nature—and not from the remedies of power or technique—she reclaims an embodied spirituality that cares for, listens to, and accompanies pain as part of the inner healing process. Thus, her word becomes both prayer and resistance: a way of sustaining life through the humblest gestures of existence. Contemplation here is not mere aesthetic delight but an act of vital and spiritual recovery.

Ultimately, Etty Hillesum's writing unfolds a symbolic universe in which nature reveals itself as interlocutor and mediator of the divine. Her natural metaphors bear witness to a spirituality that does not flee from suffering but transforms it into an occasion for encounter—with life, with others, and with God. Within them pulses a wisdom that invites an incarnate theology, capable of recognizing in the rhythms of nature a universal and timeless language through which to articulate mystery. Her diary, written from the margins of history, illuminates from within the fragility the power of hope, showing that even in the darkest night, the inner jasmine still blooms, releasing its fragrance in the dwelling where God abides. She, who had understood the need to "let some music flow from me, let what is within me be given expression, it longs so desperately for that" (Hillesum 2012, p. 238)[xvi] in order "to help provide some spiritual nourishment" (Hillesum 1996, p. 238), left Auschwitz in a final gesture of fidelity to that conviction: "We left the camp singing", as attested on September 7, 1943, in Letter 71 sent to Christine van Nooten (Hillesum 1996, p. 360). In this way, the melody she had

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composed in the depths of her inner life became an outward proclamation—a song of resistance that, like her natural metaphors, bears witness to the possibility of beauty and meaning even amid devastation.

3.3. Björk: A Contemporary Musicalization of Natural (and Spiritual) Metaphors

Björk Guðmundsdóttir, often hailed as the "Queen of Quirk" (Davis 2004), offers a fertile terrain for rethinking spiritual metaphors beyond the textual and literary realm, translating them instead into the registers of sound and embodiment (Aston 1996; Dibben 2009). In her work, the spiritual is not conveyed as doctrine nor as a closed conceptual system, but as an aesthetic experience that directly engages both the senses and the body (Boak 2019). Listening to her music entails traversing sonic landscapes where the natural and the technological, the organic and the electronic, converge in an experience that, in many ways, borders on the mystical.[xvii] Her compositions weave together organic and electronic elements, natural sounds and technological manipulations, crafting acoustic worlds that convey what eludes conceptual language—the sublime, the mysterious, the transcendent. Björk's productions and sonic compositions achieve what one critic has called "utterly compulsive music—of blood and flesh" (McGeoch 2004).

This capacity of sound to embody the spiritual situates Björk within a long lineage of natural metaphors that, in figures such as John of the Cross or Etty Hillesum, once served as privileged vehicles of mystical expression. Yet, in Björk's music, these metaphors are transformed: they acquire acoustic corporeality and become contemporaneous, intertwined with the ecological, technological, and affective concerns of our age.

In this sense, Björk's oeuvre opens an experimental theological horizon—one that integrates body, hearing, emotion, and aesthetic sensitivity as instruments for the knowledge of the divine. Her work does not propose a conceptual theology but rather an embodied theology of perception, one that attunes to the spiritual through sonic textures, silences, crescendos, vibrations, and resonances. Nature, in this register, is not merely thematic but material: flames and volcanic lava, birdsong, aqueous bodies, tempestuous winds and soft breezes, or ice itself—all become integral to her compositions, interlaced with synthesizers and electronic arrangements (Dibben 2009, p. 58). In this interplay, a new form of spiritual metaphor emerges, wherein nature is no longer a mere image invoked, but an acoustic force shaping the act of listening itself. Indeed, nature can be regarded as a central source of inspiration in Björk's musical creation (Ahonen 2007, p. 53); throughout her artistic production, she enacts a specific political and corporeal relationship with nature, in which her "creative use of sound becomes an embodied expression of nature" (Boak 2019, p. 194).

Critics have described her as a "sonic sorceress," a "genius," and the creator of "serious music that forges its own distinctive sound—constantly transforming and maturing" (Ahonen 2007, p. 38). Such designations underscore the uniqueness of her aesthetic proposal, one that fuses the urban and the natural, modernity and the ancestral, in an encounter that often leaves the listener suspended between the familiar and the strange. It has even been said that her rhythms "sound like footsteps in the snow," and that her music fuses "nature and machine" (Marsh 2001; Allen 2011; Biesenbach 2015). This fusion is not neutral: it constitutes a symbolic language bold enough to reimagine the sacred in an era marked by ecological crisis, technological saturation, and the urgent need for new categories of the human.

The range of natural metaphors in Björk's music is vast and diverse. Specific songs reveal this clearly. In *Victimhood* (2022), the "bird's-eye view" functions as a metaphor of transfiguration—not as an escape from pain, but as a means to contemplate it from a different height. In *Ovule* (2022), the "glass egg" and "digital ovule" intertwine the biological and the technological, suggesting that contemporary spiritual fecundity can no longer be separated from new materialities. In *Fossora* (2022), the metaphor of the mycelium evokes a silent, subterranean growth—a vision of divinity manifest in interconnection and fragility. The body itself becomes a cosmic metaphor in *Body Memory* (2017), appearing as an archive of ancestral rhythms, desire, and dance; far from being an obstacle, the body is the dwelling place of the sacred.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202511.2112.v1

In *Utopia* (2017), the recurring call to "purify, purify" does not evoke an ascetic withdrawal, but rather an ecological regeneration—a purification of the air and of human relationships through a praxis of care (Machado García and Goncalves Magossi 2024; Pääkkölä 2024, pp. 172–174). The music video for *Utopia* offers a rich constellation of natural symbols and metaphorical echoes, unfolding a symbolic horizon in which natural metaphors become mediations of a spirituality that dares to imagine possible futures (Pääkkölä 2024, p. 175). The island, inhabited by young people who play reed flutes and sway like trees in the wind, evokes a communion with the earth and a sonority that seems to arise from the vegetal world itself, as if music were the very breath of nature. The white orchid adorning Björk's torso suggests the heart as a place of fecundity and birth, a sign of an interiority that blossoms and opens itself to the gift of life; indeed, as one critic has observed, "Björk's body is a flower–human hybrid" (Pääkkölä 2024, p. 187).

The blue animal—part bird, part lizard, part dragonfly—symbolizes the unprecedented, that which creation can still bring forth when the logic of repetition is broken and new, unexpected forms of beauty are allowed to emerge. Finally, the gathering of "sisters" around the act of making music points to the communal dimension of utopia: a shared song that, rather than erasing difference, harmonizes it, generating a spiritual experience in which the human, the animal, the vegetal, and the divine intertwine in a single celebratory gesture. In this sense, the natural metaphor becomes a language for imagining not a lost paradise but a possible one—"a process of actualization in a transitory moment of unification" (Webb and Lynch 2010, p. 314)—in which, as one scholar notes, "the plants are foregrounded, becoming subjects, actors, musicians, in radical togetherness with the instruments, the bird sounds, and Björk's singing voice, its 'natural' state now complemented by a completely novel environment" (Pääkkölä 2024, p. 177).

The same logic can be discerned in other works that explore geology, physics, or Nordic landscapes as spiritual languages. In *Mutual Core* (2011), love is expressed through colliding tectonic plates, revealing that union is forged through tension and conflict. *Stonemilker* (2015) introduces the paradox of "like milking a stone" to evoke the patience of extracting life from apparent sterility, recalling the perseverance of the mystic amid God's silence. In *Aurora* (2001), the glacier and the aurora borealis become symbols of epiphanic grace, with the yearning to "melt into you" translating a theology of eros as surrender and transformation (Pääkkölä 2024). *Atom Dance* (2015) situates spirituality within the microphysics of love, where "atoms dance" and bodies are revealed as interdependent reefs. Finally, *Black Lake* (2015) transforms mourning into a dark lake, a metaphor of the abyss and purification in which pain opens the possibility of regeneration.

What emerges from this constellation is a truly post-dualistic mysticism. Björk refuses to separate the corporeal from the spiritual, the human from the cosmic, the technological from the natural. Hers is a material and cosmic spirituality—eroding and luminous, vulnerable and porous—in which salvation lies not in escaping the world but in caring for it and inhabiting it in all its complexity (Gremaud 2018). Song itself becomes a sacrament, a liturgy enacted in the effort to synchronize emotions, in the trembling of a melting glacier, or in the dance of atoms vibrating in communion (Dibben 2006). This proposal entails a decisive eco-theological turn: the divine is revealed in the earth, in the memory of the body, and in the interdependence of ecosystems. Spirituality ceases to be vertical and hierarchical, becoming instead horizontal and communal. From this perspective, one could speak of a "performative process" (Gindt 2011) that even evolves into an eco-theological performativity (Erickson 2018, p. 67).

From a cultural criticism standpoint, Björk has also problematized the traditional association between power, nature, and femininity (Philipp 2024). She has explicitly explored the relationship between ecology and femininity, pointing out that women are often expected "to care for others before themselves, or instead of themselves" (Goldin-Perschbacher 2014, p. 58)—a logic she finds deeply problematic (Merchant 1990; MacGregor 2006; Tomalin 2008; Goldin-Perschbacher 2014; Schneider and Tiidenberg 2024). The artist thus exposes the risk of perpetuating gender stereotypes under the guise of natural metaphors, proposing instead a fluid and open femininity. Indeed, critics have claimed that she "is capable of freeing masculinity from the rigid binary machine… and it is in

 doi:10.20944/preprints202511.2112.v1

this sense that we must understand her interpretation of masculinity as a becoming-woman, a becoming-fluid, a becoming-tender" (Marsh and West 2003; Koziej 2023, p. 436). Her music thus unfolds not only as an eco-theology but also as a queer theology—one that subverts binaries, disrupts traditional norms, and opens pathways toward new forms of the sacred (Santos Meza 2023a; Santos Meza 2023b; Córdova Quero and Santos Meza 2025). Moreover, for Björk, "the female body becomes synonymous with nature itself. The female body becomes the landscape" (Boak 2019, p. 196).

The music videos produced by Björk reinforce her poetics and vision. In *Human Behaviour* (1993), *Isobel* (1995), and *Bachelorette* (1997), for instance, the artist appears in forests, rivers, or merged with mountains, projecting the image of a woman "at one with nature," as critics have described her (Ahonen 2007, pp. 53–54). These scenes are not mere backdrops but visual expressions of the same mysticism that animates her songs—an integration of body, landscape, and cosmos: "Björk's figure overlaps with images of forests and water" (Ahonen 2007, p. 52). The persistent recurrence of natural elements—birds, glaciers, forests, mycelia—does not aim to idealize nature as a realm of purity, but rather to reveal it as a space traversed by tension, erosion, and regeneration (Webb and Lynch 2010, pp. 313–330).

Undoubtedly, Björk's music constitutes a laboratory of spiritual metaphors in which the natural world is reconfigured as a contemporary sacramental language, one that extends beyond the boundaries of hegemonic religious confessionalism (Beaudoin 2019, p. 42). Her songs, like the verses of the mystics, strive to articulate the ineffable—not through words, but through vibrations, textures, and silences. Read through a lens of theological reflexivity, what emerges from her work is a daring proposition: a spirituality that acknowledges the importance of art, crosses disciplines and senses, and allows natural and spiritual metaphors to continue resonating in the present. It is an invitation to contemplative listening—to being affected by a song that is, at once, cosmic prayer, ecological protest, and celebration of eros. In Björk's oeuvre, the divine sings in atoms, in glaciers, in bodies, and in silences; it sings in the very possibility of caring for, transforming, and dancing with the world.

4. Conclusive Horizon: Rewriting the Mystical in the Present Tense

The exploration undertaken in this study around natural metaphors in John of the Cross, Etty Hillesum, and Björk Guðmundsdóttir does not culminate in a rigid or deterministic conclusion; rather, it opens into a *conclusive horizon*: a point of arrival that simultaneously gestures toward new possibilities of continuation. This horizon reveals that what might initially appear as a mere literary or stylistic device is, in fact, a language of profound theological depth—one that traverses epochs, genres, and registers of expression. As Paul Ricoeur (2003) insightfully noted, metaphors sustain dynamic and polyvalent relations with what they signify, and this insight finds concrete verification in the three itineraries examined here.

First, in John of the Cross, light, night, wind, and fire unfold as symbols of a mystical journey in which nature not only provides the setting but also *embodies* the transformation of the soul in its encounter with God. Thus, in his mystical-poetic work, we understand that "metaphors, in general, have the power to draw readers outside of themselves, immersing them in the perspectives of others and calling superficial perceptions into question. Along with many poets and other artists before and since, Juan tapped into those powers" (Faithful 2025). While there is a traditional tendency to regard nature as "the lowest of God's works," his mystical thought moves decisively beyond such hierarchy. The Carmelite mystic makes it clear that the natural world may become the symbolic space where the ineffable comes into view. Indeed, his poetry reminds us that "a poem should not mean / but be", stealing this beautiful poetic verse from Archibald MacLeish (1985). John himself recognized the limits of rational expression:

"Who can describe in writing the understanding [God] gives to loving souls in whom [God] dwells? And who can express with words the experience [God] imparts to them? Who, finally, can explain the desires [God] gives them? Certainly, no one can! Not even they who receive these communications. As a result[,] these persons let something of their experience overflow in figures,

 doi:10.20944/preprints202511.2112.v1

comparisons and similitudes, and from the abundance of their spirit pour out secrets and mysteries rather than rational explanations" (John of the Cross 1991, p. 469).

Second, in Etty Hillesum, images of fields, sky, trees, and earth emerged amid the horror of war as a form of ethical and spiritual resistance. The natural metaphor became a bearer of meaning where extermination sought to extinguish all transcendence. Hillesum embodies the intuition expressed by Hugo Mujica (2014), when he writes:

"Mysticism conjoins the transitive verbality of God or, in its fullness, returns to God His absence.

Its transparency, its plenitude: without edges. All leap. Without ground or soil: all grace. All open. (And not even that.)

Religion is inscription; mysticism, erasure—an itinerant effacement, barely a trace in the sand, barely forgetfulness. (The ebb of the sea that washed the shore, a trace always of a departure: abandonment: the movement by which we erase ourselves.)

Mysticism deconstructs: a dialectic of reason and intuition, of science and experience. Of answer and question. (A dialectic without synthesis: surrendering without recovery: self-giving.)

Religion seeks knowledge, the salvation of the self. Mysticism: joy and union. The disappearance of the self." (pp. 63-64).

Her writings reveal that mysticism does not close off, but rather keeps open the possibility of a spirituality sustained in both the eternal and the everyday, the powerful and the vulnerable, the infinite and the fragmentary, the earthly and the universal, the simple and the complex, the tangible and the elusive. Perhaps for this reason, she has been described as a "wild" (Llop 2021) and "eclectic" (Tommasi 2003), "without borders" (Délaye 2014) yet profoundly "bordered" (Manara 2017).

Thirdly, in Björk Guðmundsdóttir, contemporary sonority amplifies these images and returns them to the bodily and affective experience of those who listen today. Her music—helping us sustain a living "faith in music"[xviii]—translates the symbolic constellation of the mystical tradition into an experimental sonic register that speaks powerfully to contemporary generations. In this sense, the Icelandic artist embodies a form of "nature mysticism" (Hulin 2007, p. 40) that, while detached from religious institutionalism, invokes the body, emotion, perception, and aesthetic sensitivity as pathways to spiritual knowledge.

This study has shown that natural metaphors are far more than mere literary ornaments: they are symbolic languages capable of sustaining the question of mystery, articulating the sensible and the spiritual, and building bridges between past and present. I have focused on only three exemplary cases among the many that have emerged throughout history. In the sixteenth century, John of the Cross developed a poetics rooted in biblical and liturgical traditions that discerns in nature a mirror of spiritual transformation. His imagery of "journeys through borderlands" portrays not an external expedition but an interior passage of the soul. His "dark night," like Rilke's centuries later, reminds us that theology's vocation is not to construct closed systems but to remain open to what exceeds containment. In the twentieth century, Etty Hillesum reconfigures those same metaphors from within a horizon of radical vulnerability. For her, the earth and sky become loci of resistance—sources of inner strength that transcend the confines of any single religious framework. In the twenty-first century, Björk translates this symbolic constellation into a sonic register that resonates with millennial and Gen Z audiences. Her work advances a non-institutional theology that resists erudition preoccupied with academic socialization, bibliographic accumulation, or the sterile imitation of the mystics of old. Instead, her artistic vision integrates body, emotion, perception, and aesthetic sensibility as authentic paths of spiritual knowledge—particularly vital in times of ecclesial crisis and the deep fractures of credibility affecting institutional religious leadership (Moberg and Rantakallio 2023).

Within this horizon, Luce Irigaray's (1985) insight remains illuminating: "So the best plan is to abstain from all discourse, to keep quiet, or else utter only a sound so inarticulate that it barely forms a song. While keeping an attentive ear open for any hint or tremor coming back" (p. 193). Björk's music embodies precisely such articulation—a sonic theology in which mystery resonates through vibration, allowing the ineffable to express itself through tonalities, silences, and textures. It gestures

 doi:10.20944/preprints202511.2112.v1

toward what may be called the choreography of all things or the world's polyphony: a dynamic interplay in which the natural and the spiritual, the human and the divine, the historical and the eternal interweave without rigid boundaries.

Rilke's verse offers a complementary intuition: "A thousand theologians drowned / in the pristine night of Your Name" (1967, p. 377). The metaphor of the night as a space of immersion reveals theology's task not as enclosure but as opening—to let symbolic language and aesthetic experience guide us toward transcendence. Rilke's "pristine night" resonates with John of the Cross's "dark night," with Hillesum's contemplative gaze upon the starry sky amid suffering, and with Björk's cloudy soundscapes that invite us to lose and rediscover ourselves within the vibration of living matter.

This concluding horizon reveals that John of the Cross, Hillesum, and Björk—each in their own time and idiom—may be regarded as "mystics of nature" (Hulin 2007, p. 40). Through poetry, diary, and contemporary music, their natural and sonic metaphors sustain a space of embodied contemplation in which theology is not only thought but also felt and lived. The natural, the aesthetic, and the spiritual thus weave together in a world's polyphony that resists rigid boundaries and enables contemporary theology to emerge anew from beauty, corporeality, and radical openness to the ineffable.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the sound/writing (im)possibilities of mysticism and the mystical (im)possibilities of sound/writing are not mutually exclusive but mutually generative—offering contemporary theology a way forward that continues to think from within beauty, embodiment, and the radical openness of Mystery. As Michael Bernard Kelly (2019) insightfully observes, mysticism unfolds within a kind of "verbal disturbance," a space where divine experience exceeds the boundaries of formal language and finds expression through nonverbal mediations such as liturgy, sacrament, music, architecture, dance, and embodied gesture.

In our time, it is crucial to acknowledge and engage these plural, sensuous, and deeply human pathways through which the mystery of God is encountered. Mystical experience, far from being confined to abstract contemplation, is woven into the very fabric of embodied and relational existence, resonating through the textures of creation itself. What lies before us, then, is the task of cultivating a renewed theological imagination—one capable of re-envisioning the illuminative path in light of the cosmos, the earth and its creatures, the arts and sciences, and, above all, the living body that bears within itself the trace of divine presence in the unfolding of the mystical life.

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[i] Special mention should also be made of Amancio Prada's wonderful album entitled *Cántico Espiritual* (1977): https://amancioprada.com/discografia-amancio-prada-cantautor/cantico-espiritual-1977/.

[ii] In translation of Kavanaugh and Rodríguez, *La Fonte* reads: "For I know well the spring that flows and runs, / although it is night" (St. John of the Cross 1991, pp. 58–60). In edition and translation by John Frederick Nims: "The spring that brims and ripples oh / I know in dark of night" (St. John of the Cross 1979, p. 43).

[iii] In David Lewis's translation, this verse appears as: "While they babble I know not what" (St. John of the Cross 1864, p. 396). In the translation by Silverio de Santa Teresa and E. Allison Peers, it reads: "And something that they are stammering leaves me dying" (St. John of the Cross 1946, p. 27). In his poem *Glosa a lo divino*, John uses the expression *un no sé qué* at the end of each of its nine verses (Díaz 2022, p. 44).

[iv] In David Lewis's translation: "Ye groves and thickets / Planted by the hand of the Beloved; / Ye verdant meads / Enamelled with flowers; / Tell me, has He passed by you?" (St. John of the Cross 1864, p. 395).

[v] In the translation by Silverio de Santa Teresa and E. Allison Peers, it reads: "My love is hush-of-night, / Is dawn's first breathings in the heav'n above, / Still music veil'd from sight, / Calm that can echoes move, / The feast that brings new strength—the feast of love" (St. John of the Cross 1946, p. 444).

[vi] In the translation by Silverio de Santa Teresa and E. Allison Peers, it reads: "O living flame of love / That, burning, dost assail" (St. John of the Cross 1946, p. 448).

[vii] David Lewis's translation reads: "O Fount of crystal! / O that on Thy silvered surface / Thou wouldest mirror forth at once / Those eyes desirable / Which I have in my heart delineated!" (St. John of the Cross 1864, p. 397).

[viii] This translation is the author's own and differs from that of Silverio de Santa Teresa and E. Allison Peers: "My love is as the hills, / The lonely valleys clad with forest-trees, / The rushing, sounding rills, / Strange isles in distant seas, / Lover-like whisperings, murmurs of the breeze. / My love is hush-of-night, / Is dawn's first breathings in the heav'n above, / Still music veil'd from sight, / Calm that can echoes move, / The feast that brings new strength—the feast of love" (St. John of the Cross 1946, p. 444).

[ix] For their part, the translation by Silverio de Santa Teresa and E. Allison Peers presents this verse as follows: "Rare gifts he scattered / As through these woods and groves he pass'd apace, / Turning, as on he sped, / And clothing every place / With loveliest reflection of his face" (St. John of the Cross 1946, p. 443).

[x] This diary entry is not complete in the English edition edited by Eva Hoffman (Hillesum 1996, pp. 227–228). Therefore, we refer to the Italian edition (Hillesum 2012, pp. 792–793). The translation and adaptation presented in the body of the text are the author's own.

[xi] In the English edition edited by Eva Hoffman, the entry is not complete (Hillesum 1996, p. 149). The passage found in the Italian translation by Chiara Passanti and Tina Montone, which has been translated here, reads as follows: "*Vorrei scrivere un intero libro su un sassolino di ghiaia e su un paio di violette. Potrei vivere molto a lungo con una singola pietruzza, e avere la sensazione di vivere nella natura potente di Dio*" (Hillesum 2012, p. 653).

[xii] This passage appears in the Italian translation by Chiara Passanti and Tina Montone: "*dall'incapacità di trovare la mia forma; dai momenti in cui i miei sentimenti e la mente non riescono a cristallizzare in figure e parole ciò che accade in me*" (Hillesum 2012, p. 306).

[xiii] This passage appears in the Italian translation by Chiara Passanti and Tina Montone: "*tutta la mia tenerezza, le mie forti emozioni, quel mare dell'anima molto mosso, lago dell'anima o oceano dell'anima, come dir si voglia, vorrei*

 doi:10.20944/preprints202511.2112.v1

poterli riversare in un'unica piccola poesia, ma senti pure che, nel caso ci riuscissi, vorrei immediatamente buttarmi a rompicollo in un abisso, vorrei ubriacarmi" (Hillesum 2012, p. 438).

[xiv] This passage appears in the Italian translation by Chiara Passanti and Tina Montone: "*Volevo dir questo: era proprio come se la vita mi apparisse altrettanto chiara e transparente nei soui mille dettagli, nelle sue svolte e nei suoi movimenti. Come se avessi davanti un oceano e ne potessi distinguere il fondo, guardando attraverso l'acqua trasparente come cristallo*" (Hillesum 2012, p. 746). In the English edition edited by Eva Hoffman: "What I really wanted to say is: it suddenly felt as if life in its thousand details, twists, and turns had become perfectly clear and transparent. Just like a crystal-clear sea" (Hillesum 1996, p. 196).

[xv] In the English edition by Eva Hoffman, this paragraph has been omitted (Hillesum 1996, p. 215). The version followed here is the Italian one: "*È già successo che galeoni carichi di tesori naufragassero nell'oceano. L'umanità ha sempre provato a ripescare questi tesori sommersi. Nel mio cuore sono già naufragati tanti galeoni e per tutta la vita cercherò di riportare alla superficie una parte dei tesori che ora giacciono sul fondo. Non possiedo ancora gli strumenti adatti. Dovrò fabbricarli dal nulla*" (Hillesum 2012, p. 773).

[xvi] In the Italian version followed here, the text reads as follows: "*E lascia che un po' di musica fluisca da me, che quanto è in me prenda forma: ne ha bisogno così disperatamente*" (Hillesum 2012, p. 238).

[xvii] For reasons of editorial focus, individual references to Björk's songs have not been included. Those wishing to explore her music can visit her official website: https://www.bjork.com/.

[xviii] Tom Beaudoin formulates the following circuit of questions: "What are good reasons and justly persuasive rhetorics for having this engagement between theology and music happen? Why do we think our theological traditions might have something significant to say here, and how do we convey that with care, style, and beauty? No less important is the moment in theological work where we ask why this theological engagement with music matters for us and for those affected by this conversation. Do we see that we or others might become different, gain knowledge, insight, wisdom, or virtue, might simply grow or change, as a result? And will this engagement, which is both ever new and ever rooted in our past, make us reconsider both this music and theological traditions?" (2019, pp. 44–45).