

The Lasting Significance of Etty Hillesum's Writings

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The Lasting Significance of Etty Hillesum's Writings

*Proceedings of the Third International Etty Hillesum
Conference at Middelburg, September 2018*

*Edited by
Klaas A.D. Smelik*

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We are grateful to the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam for the permission to publish the illustrations 1, 4-6 in this volume, and to Uitgeverij Balans for the permission to publish illustration 7.

Preface

The diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum have a special place among the Jewish-Dutch testimonies of the Shoah (Holocaust). They contain not only a description of Camp Westerbork during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, but also a reflection of Hillesum's important, though unfortunately interrupted, existential search for spiritual, philosophical and literary fulfilment. Since her death in the extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1943, the diaries have received worldwide attention and inspired hundreds of thousands of readers.

We have the honour to present in this volume the proceedings of the Third International Etty Hillesum Conference held in September 2018 meeting in Middelburg, Zeeland, the city where Etty Hillesum was born in 1914. The Etty Hillesum Research Centre in cooperation with University College Roosevelt invited scholars from around the world to exchange insights and to discuss problems that arise when studying Etty Hillesum's writings. Forty speakers presented papers and there was a wonderful performance of the theatre play *Blazing Harmonies* written by Stephen Cherry, Dean of King's College, Cambridge, and performed by him and the gifted English actress Rosie Hillal. In this volume, most of the papers presented at the conference have been included in revised and annotated versions.

Looking back at the conference with gratitude, we would like to thank the various people and organisations who made the meeting possible. First of all, we thank those who presented their papers and all others who accepted our invitation to attend the conference and through their enthusiasm and interest in Etty Hillesum's literary heritage made it an unforgettable experience. We especially thank Rosie Hillal for her most impressive performance, Bert van den Brink, Dean of University College Roosevelt Middelburg, for his cordial welcome, Han Polman, King's Commissioner in the province of Zeeland, for opening, and Harald Bergmann, Mayor of Middelburg, for closing the conference. Special thanks also to Ms. Michael Strange and Caroline Diepeveen, whose assistance in editing the texts has proven most helpful and whose dedication we appreciate very much.

A number of organisations and institutions provided us with indispensable aid, enabling us to carry out the conference in the beautiful surroundings of the ancient Town Hall of Middelburg. In alphabetic order, they are: the Etty Hillesum Foundation, Amsterdam, the Municipality of Middelburg, the Province of Zeeland and the University College Roosevelt. We express our sincerest thanks for their support.

We are grateful to Amsterdam University Press for recognizing the importance of the manuscript from the proceedings and for accepting it for publication. And we would like to thank Julie Benschop-Plokker for her continuous assistance in the process of producing this volume.

We end with a note to the reader: The quotations from Etty Hillesum's writings are taken from *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943*, translated by Arnold J. Pomerans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). This complete English edition of Etty Hillesum's literary heritage is indicated with the abbreviation E.T. In the footnotes, the reader will find the original Dutch (or German) text of the passages quoted from the diaries and letters. These quotations are cited from Etty Hillesum, *Het Werk* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2012). In this way, we hope to encourage our readers to become acquainted with Hillesum's original text.

15 April 2019

Klaas A.D. Smelik

Introduction

In autumn 1979, Klaas A.D. Smelik shared with the Dutch publisher, Jan Geurt Gaarlandt, a piece of Eddy Hillesum's diaries transcribed by his half-sister Johanna Smelik, whom Hillesum called "Jopie" in her diaries. Unlike publishers in the 1950s, when his father Klaas Smelik Sr. had tried in vain to get Hillesum's diaries published, Gaarlandt immediately understood the value of the texts and moved to publish selections from them. An anthology appeared in 1981 under the Dutch title *Het verstoorde leven* [An Interrupted Life].¹ From the very beginning, the book was an overwhelming success. Many translations followed and Eddy Hillesum became renowned internationally.² The remarkable global reception included some extreme reactions: hagiographic admiration, identification, lack of understanding and outright rejection. Every author claimed to know the truth about Eddy Hillesum without any consideration of the research done by others.

The worldwide response to Hillesum's writings was, moreover, based on the selection of texts made by the publisher himself and taken from an unreliable transcription of the original manuscript.³ An unabridged and scholarly edition of Hillesum's texts, both her diaries and letters, was required. The Eddy Hillesum Foundation in Amsterdam asked Klaas A.D.

1 Later on, Gaarlandt published two other selection from Hillesum's writings: Eddy Hillesum, *Het denkende hart van de barak: Brieven van Eddy Hillesum*, with an introduction by J.G. Gaarlandt (Haarlem: De Haan, 1982), and Eddy Hillesum, *In duizend zoete armen: Nieuwe dagboekanteekeningen van Eddy Hillesum*, with an introduction by J.G. Gaarlandt (Haarlem: De Haan, 1984).

2 Meanwhile, the diaries have been translated in 18 languages: Czech, Danish, English, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Modern Hebrew, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish, and Swedish.

3 Jan Geurt Gaarlandt elucidates the criteria for his selection from the diaries in his contribution "Context, dilemmas, and misunderstandings during the composition and publication of *An Interrupted Life: Eddy Hillesum's Diary, 1941-1943*," in: Klaas A.D. Smelik, Ria van den Brandt & Meins G.S. Coetsier (eds.), *Spirituality in the Writings of Eddy Hillesum: Proceedings of the Eddy Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, November 2008* (Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, 11; Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2010), 365-375.

Smelik to address this need and, assisted by a group of young scholars, in 1986 he published a complete annotated edition of all then available texts of Etty Hillesum: *Etty: De nagelaten geschriften van Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943*.⁴ The unabridged edition has been reprinted several times; the sixth edition appeared in 2012 with a different title: *Etty Hillesum, Het Werk*. In each new edition, annotations have been updated and revised where necessary, and newly discovered texts by Etty Hillesum added. In 2002, the complete edition appeared in English translation,⁵ followed by a French version in 2008⁶ and in 2012-2013 by an Italian translation in two volumes.⁷ A German translation of the complete edition is in preparation.

In 1989, Jan Geurt Gaarlandt expressed his astonishment at the many reviews and essays on Etty Hillesum:

It's shocking to read how many different aspects one can discover in her life and work. Literary, mystical, philosophical, historical, theological, psychological and therapeutic perspectives have generated material for many essays. She is compared and connected to people like Kafka, Meister Eckhart, Ruusbroec, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Rilke, Jung, Seneca, Carry van Bruggen, Bonhoeffer, important representatives of literature, theology and philosophy. It has been said that her diary belongs to the most important documents of this century.⁸

The colourful but sometimes controversial reception of Hillesum's writings has continued long after 1989. Numerous books and essays have been written, conferences and seminars organized, classes given and artistic productions created. Each language, each cultural or religious domain seems to produce

4 *Etty: De nagelaten geschriften van Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik; text edition: Gideon Lodders & Rob Tempelaars (Amsterdam: Balans, 1986).

5 *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik; translated by Arnold J. Pomerans (Ottawa, ON / Grand Rapids, MI: Novalis Saint Paul University / William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002).

6 *Hillesum: Les écrits d'Etty Hillesum: Journaux et lettres 1941-1943*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik; translated by Philippe Noble & Isabelle Rosselin (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008).

7 *Diario: Edizione integrale 1941-1942*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik; translated by Chiara Passanti & Tina Montone (Milano: Adelphi Edizioni, 2012). *Lettere: Edizione integrale 1941-1943*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik; translated by Chiara Passanti, Tina Montone & Ada Vigliani (Milano: Adelphi Edizioni, 2013).

8 Jan Geurt Gaarlandt, "Men zou een pleister op vele wonden willen zijn," in Jan Geurt Gaarlandt (ed.), *Men zou een pleister op vele wonden willen zijn: Reacties op de dagboeken en brieven van Etty Hillesum* (Amsterdam: Balans, 1989), ix-xi, especially p. x [translated from the Dutch].

a different image of her.⁹ At the same time, the diverse readings from various countries show remarkable similarities and unexpected connections.¹⁰ In this situation, an international exchange of ideas and perspectives became an imperative and in 2006 Klaas A.D. Smelik answered the call. The Etty Hillesum Research Centre was founded at Ghent University in that year with the express purpose of coordinating international Hillesum research.¹¹

By 2008, the Etty Hillesum Research Centre had organized its first international conference in Ghent, focusing on two central themes in Hillesum's work: spirituality and writing. The papers were published in 2010 by Brill Boston in a volume in English, entitled *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum*.¹²

In January 2014, one hundred years after Etty Hillesum's birth, a second international conference was organized by the Etty Hillesum Research Centre in Ghent.¹³ Again, Hillesum scholars from all over the world presented papers and gathered in the beautiful university building 't Pand. The papers, revised and annotated, were (partly) published in 2017 by Brill Boston in English in a volume entitled *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum*.¹⁴

And in September 2018, a third international conference on Etty Hillesum was organized by the Etty Hillesum Research Centre. Held in the ancient Town Hall of Middelburg, the centre of the University College Roosevelt, this conference was not only in the city of Etty Hillesum's birth, it began 75 years to the day when Etty Hillesum and her family arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau, never to return again. The papers of the Hillesum scholars from this conference have been collected in this volume in revised and annotated

9 Cf. Ria van den Brandt & Klaas A.D. Smelik, "Etty Hillesum in facetten: Inleiding," in: Ria van den Brandt & Klaas A.D. Smelik (eds.), *Etty Hillesum in facetten* (Etty Hillesum Studies 1; Budel: Damon, 2003), 9-18.

10 See for instance Yukiko Yokohata, "Perceptions of Etty Hillesum in Japan," in: Klaas A.D. Smelik, Gerrit Van Oord & Jurjen Wiersma (eds.), *Reading Etty Hillesum in Context: Writings, Life, and Influences of a Visionary Author* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 395-417.

11 In 2015, the Etty Hillesum Research Centre moved to Middelburg, the capital of the Dutch province of Zeeland, where Etty Hillesum was born on 15 January 1914.

12 Klaas A.D. Smelik, Ria van den Brandt & Meins G.S. Coetsier (eds.), *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, November 2008* (Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, 11; Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2010).

13 Organized by the Etty Hillesum Research Centre, Ghent University, in cooperation with the Instituut Iudaicum, Interuniversity Centre for the Academic Study of Judaism in Belgium.

14 . Klaas A.D. Smelik, Meins G.S. Coetsier & Jurjen Wiersma (eds.), *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, January 2014* (Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, 28; Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2017).

versions reflecting the different premises, approaches, and disciplinary tools of the conference participants. Each one is a unique contribution. Let us have a look at these papers.

In her contribution "Music as Metaphor in Etty Hillesum's Spirituality," the American researcher Nancy JP Anderson investigates the role of music in Hillesum's diaries and letters. She points to the fact that Hillesum's spirituality was not an awakening as much as a slow dawning composed over time. Hillesum used the metaphor of music to refer to the way she got in touch with her own spiritual melody. She learned to nurture the undertones that would sustain her through the difficulties she faced in occupied Holland.

In his essay "A 'staretz' in Camp Westerbork," the Spanish theologian Fernando Arriero Peranton investigates the connections between Slavic Orthodoxy and Etty Hillesum's spirituality. He maintains that it is possible to draw a parallel between her kind of spirituality and Russian Orthodox mysticism. He notes striking connections between the two: the need of muting the mind to reach the heart, the desire for a permanent state of prayer, non-violence, and the importance of being more than doing. Looked at in this way, Etty Hillesum could be seen as a "Russian spiritual father" – a *staretz* – in Camp Westerbork.

The Roman scholar Emilio Baccarini is very impressed with Etty Hillesum's writings. In his contribution "Etty Hillesum: Humanity as a Task," he says metaphorically that meeting Etty Hillesum through her diary and letters is like seeing a spark of light at the bottom of an abyss of evil. Hillesum's task on the road to humanity was to establish a balance between "inside" and "outside"; to find the centre of herself and fill every moment of life with meaning. The source from which this meaning originates, the author calls *ordo amoris* – a term dear to mystical theology and taken up by Max Scheler in his ontology.

In her contribution "Etty Hillesum & Albert Konrad Gemmeker: A Twofold Analysis of the Perpetration of the Westerbork Commander," EHOc scholar Lotte Bergen analyzes how Gemmeker, the commander of *Durchgangslager* Westerbork, became known as the "gentleman-commander". As well, the author deals with how Etty Hillesum did not follow along with this positive assessment of the key player in the *Entjudung* of the Netherlands – notwithstanding his polite and seemingly friendly behaviour towards the Jewish prisoners. During his trial after the war, Gemmeker, trying to minimize his role, declared – like many other Nazi perpetrators – that he did not know of the extermination of millions of innocent Jews in Eastern Europe. But Etty Hillesum – unlike Gemmeker's judges – was not blindsided by the commander's correct behaviour. In her letters, she described, criticized, and

exposed the commander of Camp Westerbork as one of the most important executioners in the German system. Hillesum insisted that he had far more agency to act on his own responsibility than he would later admit during trial.

The Dutch scholar Ria van den Brandt has done extensive research into the friendship booklet *Levenskunst: Gedachten van week tot week* [Art of Living: Thoughts from Week to Week] that Etty Hillesum received from her friend Henny Tideman and in which she copied passages from authors she admired. In Van den Brandt's contribution, "Now is the Time to Put into Practice: Love Your Enemies": Several Notes on Hillesum's 'Love for Enemies' in *Levenskunst*," she focuses on Hillesum's quotes related to love for one's enemy. She finds conspicuous the number of references to the Gospel of Matthew, particularly the Sermon on the Mount. Hillesum also often quoted Russian authors writing about the awareness of guilt and sin. Van den Brandt describes the literary-historical context of Hillesum's growing interest in the Gospel of Matthew and suggests a possible radicalization in Hillesum's later writings on the love for one's enemy.

Although Etty Hillesum briefly mentions the name of Kierkegaard in her diaries, we do not know if she read any of his work, or if she did, what exactly and how intensively. But when writing of her worries about the future, she regularly quoted chapter 6 of the Gospel of Matthew – a passage that Kierkegaard had commented upon extensively in his *Discourses*. Is it possible that Etty Hillesum knew these discourses? In his contribution "The Cares of the Pagans: The Reading of Matthew 6:25-34 by Søren Kierkegaard and Etty Hillesum," the Swiss scholar Pierre Bühler compares from several perspectives Kierkegaard's and Hillesum's reading of Matthew 6. He discovers in both authors what John D. Caputo has called *quotidianism*; for Søren Kierkegaard as well as Etty Hillesum, it was essential to devote all attention to living in the present.

In his essay, "Dialogizing Life amidst a Culture of Death: Etty Hillesum, Dostoevsky's *Grand Inquisitor* and Nazi Reductionism," the Australian scholar John Cartner stresses the difference between the discourse of the Nazis and that of Etty Hillesum. Her diaries and letters, in both their form and content, can be seen as a repudiation of the Nazis' monologically constituted, reductive discourse. Unlike her oppressors, Hillesum embraced the *Other* and allowed their voices to saturate her writings and inform her *Weltanschauung*. One such voice was that of the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky. Through an examination of "The Grand Inquisitor" and Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* of which it is a part, Cartner examines their influence on Hillesum's all-embracing worldview. In contrast to the diabolical markers of Nazi discourse, it is Cartner's seminal idea that Etty

Hillesum's dialogically constituted writings, which foreground a concern for the *Other*, actually reflected the discourse of the Deity.

The Cambridge scholar Stephen Cherry admits that it may seem an unlikely exercise to compare the fourteenth-century Christian visionary and anchorite, known as Julian of Norwich, with the twentieth-century Jewish author Etty Hillesum. Although Etty Hillesum longed for a convent cell at times, she committed herself to solidarity with her fellow Jews at a perilous time, while Julian opted for complete seclusion. Nevertheless, Cherry proves in his contribution, "Patience and Hope in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Etty Hillesum" that such a comparison is fruitful. He shows that these two women can be seen as kindred spirits. He points out their openness to suffering, the way in which they related to others, and their determination to find beauty in the most unpromising of circumstances. For both of them, patience was hard but important work, and hope was a quality intrinsically connected to practical, intimate, mutual and vulnerable loving-kindness.

Most readers of Etty Hillesum's diaries are convinced that Julius Spier taught her to pray while kneeling, but the Dutch scholar Marja Clement does not share this opinion. In her essay "The Girl Who Could Not Kneel: Etty Hillesum and the Turn Inward," she examines the way Etty Hillesum described in her diaries her process of turning inward and finding the deepest and best in herself, which she called God. While admitting that Julius Spier played an important role in this process, Clement questions the general opinion that Hillesum discovered and developed the gesture of kneeling under his influence. She maintains that this gesture was encountered by Etty Hillesum herself and the process of discovery was well underway before Julius Spier suggested she pray in this rather Roman Catholic manner.

Both Etty Hillesum and Charlotte Salomon were creative and productive young women. They were of child-bearing age during the Second World War, but bore only cultural offspring. In her essay "Etty Hillesum and Charlotte Salomon: Pregnancy as a Theme in Their Lives and Works," the Dutch researcher Denise de Costa reflects on the lives and legacies of Charlotte Salomon and Etty Hillesum, emphasizing the connection between fertility in a biological and a cultural sense. The author of this chapter is influenced and inspired by the work of three women: Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, both feminist theorists, and the late Dutch philosopher Rina Van der Haegen.

Etty Hillesum and Clarice Lispector were two brilliant authors who belonged to the same generation and were both victims of Nazi persecution. Most references to the two women consider them mystical writers who revealed an unconventional notion of God. For both, the use of language to represent reality meant being removed from full participation in the

reality being described. For both, the search for the divine was connected to the failure of language. In her contribution “Wandering Beyond Words: Etty Hillesum and Clarice Lispector,” the Dutch-Portuguese researcher Patricia Couto points to the fact that Hillesum’s and Lispector’s task was itself contradictory and impossible. After all, their medium was language and if it removed them from their own experience, how did they get beyond words? Hillesum and Lispector faced this paradox and did indeed meet finding ways to describe the world’s turn towards darkness and to reveal their own journey through these events.

The suggestive testimonies of Etty Hillesum and Primo Levi urge the reader to reflect upon one of the most important questions of our time: What constitutes a human being? There are no answers given. But thanks to the poetical function in their narratives, and considering the vulnerable communication between author and reader, what emerges from Hillesum and Levi is a serious call to take responsibility, cooperate with the text, and let it affect you. In her essay “Verbalize, Vocalize, Visualize’: Creative Death and Performative Writing in the Testimonies of Hillesum and Levi,” the Swedish scholar Maria Essunger argues that Hillesum’s and Levi’s writings affect us and change our perception of life as well as of our inner selves *if* we are willing to cooperate – critically and constructively – with their texts.

Although from different backgrounds and perspectives, Etty Hillesum and Simone Weil shared an attentive look at reality that made them able to understand contemporary events and to reject any kind of totalitarianism out of hand. As well, the two women believed in the need to re-found Europe upon a new humanism, and to create a new civilization based on a real sense of justice. In her contribution “A ‘No’ that Is an Affirmation: Etty Hillesum and Simone Weil Against the Laws of Force,” the Italian researcher Laura Fasani focuses on the specifics of each woman’s opposition to evil and shows that their choices led them both to say “no” to the outrages of history in the name of every human being.

Self-narration has often been perceived as a narcissistic display, a rupture with the outside world. Etty Hillesum’s diary has not been spared this accusation. Italian researcher Sara Gomel, in her contribution, “From Enclosure to Disclosure: Images of the Self in Etty Hillesum’s Diary,” shows that the opposite process takes place in Hillesum’s diaries, where narrative and ethics mingle and “dis-closure” of the Self is what enables the encounter with the other. Gomel analyzes this process of transformation from enclosure to disclosure by looking at the images Hillesum employed to portray the Self, images which were at first restricted, personal, and limited, but with time, evolved into wider, more open representations.

The diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum illuminate her path of individuation. In her contribution "A Story of Individuation in the Writings of Etty Hillesum: A Jungian Perspective," the American Jungian psychotherapist Maribeth Kallemeyn explores how Hillesum wrestled with individuation and shows the growing depth she attained, absorbing three key elements of individuation: a link with primal sources, genuine interpersonal encounter, and acknowledgment of pauses. In addition, the author discusses the risk of psychological projection when reading Etty Hillesum's writings.

The purpose of Marc P. Lalonde's essay "Mad Midrash in the Diaries of Etty Hillesum" is to examine Hillesum's wartime reflections on the divine-human interaction as a species of "mad midrash". According to the modern Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim, *mad midrash* is an inventive, theological narrative that responds to the inconceivable bond between the world, the divine and "the anti-world", i.e. Auschwitz. It is "mad" because the relationship strikes one as impossible, and yet it exists. In answer to such an aberration, mad midrash dares to voice, to protest against, and to partially mend an unthinkable history that is the Shoah. Hillesum's mad midrash, the author claims, involves a depiction of God without recourse and a human(e) existence that says "God lived, even in these times". To flesh out this idea, the author explores the act of diary writing as something that proliferates in times of historical turmoil, and finally, as a type of mad midrash.

In his contribution "The Mystery of Encounter: Poetry and Faith After Auschwitz in the Work of Paul Celan and Etty Hillesum," the German scholar Ulrich Lincoln constructs a dialogue between Etty Hillesum and the poet Paul Celan. Both writers try to come to terms, poetically and conceptually, with the Shoah. Both find their own language to search for the power of the human encounter in the face of existential nothingness and semantic levelling. Hillesum's work, just as Celan's poems, can be understood as a search for subtlety in language capable of expressing meaning in the face of meaninglessness.

The American scholar William C. McDonough's essay, "Can Religion Help Heal a World Broken by Trauma? Etty Hillesum as Our Ancestor in the *Qahal Goyim*," draws the reader's attention to the research on trauma. The author then goes on to state that Etty Hillesum is a religious model for responding to trauma. Tempted to withdraw from the horrors, Hillesum instead saw herself as part of a spiritual heritage and committed to acts of love for the other. The author concludes that Etty Hillesum can be seen as our contemporary Jacob, our ancestor in the assembly of peoples – a Hebrew idea going back to Genesis 35:11.

Etty Hillesum found an inner path to liberation, and in the face of the horror of her times, she discovered “union with the ground of her being”. In her contribution “The Contours of These Times: Etty Hillesum as Chronicler of Love Transcending Hate in Her Times, for Our Time, for All Time,” the American scholar Barbara Morrill explores aspects of Etty Hillesum’s process of transcending the evil and hatred in her time, and posits that it can be seen as a model for opposing the seemingly ubiquitous rise of nationalism, neo-fascism and/or illiberalism throughout much of Europe and the United States in our time. In an even broader sense, the author cautions that the tension that exists between democratic and fascist principles, or open and closed systems is something that should concern us in all times.

Ever since the public read parts of Hillesum’s diaries in *An Interrupted Life*, it has been obvious that Etty Hillesum’s first encounter with Julius Spier was a major step in her personal development. In her essay “Etty Hillesum’s Hand Analysis: The Prologue to Her Diaries,” the Dutch researcher Alexandra H.M. Nagel finds powerful evidence to back up this assumption. The author argues that the report made during their first meeting on 3 February 1941, when Spier analyzed Etty Hillesum’s hands, captured a pivotal moment. Several elements that Spier noted down about Hillesum when “reading” her hands, became themes in her diaries. Spier’s report is thus a prologue to the diaries. This chapter contains the report in an amended, more easily readable version so that all Hillesum scholars may examine the content of this most unusual document.

The experience of pain and suffering accompanies the life of all human beings, in different ways, in the most diverse contexts throughout the history of humanity. The reality of the world we live in, is no exception; we are permanently “exposed”. In her essay “Suffering, Silence, and Wisdom in the Life of Etty Hillesum,” the Colombian scholar Rosana Elena Navarro Sánchez considers the evolution of the meaning of suffering in Etty Hillesum’s writings. She wants to establish the relationship between the experience of suffering and the experience of silence. As well, she writes of the progressive emergence of wisdom in Hillesum’s personal experience.

In her essay “Feeding the Soul: Etty Hillesum’s Pedagogical and Spiritual Path,” the Italian scholar Maria Gabriella Nocita reconstructs the path that Etty Hillesum followed during the years of the Shoah. On her way to the realization of the “self that one is”, Hillesum understood that “body and soul are one”, and that “the inner world is as real as the outer world” and that both need care. Taking care of one’s soul is not as obvious as taking care of one’s body; the soul’s needs are commonly ignored or misunderstood. To decode the soul’s needs, Hillesum developed a form of *philosophizing*

for life that saw the human being as both subject and object of the enquiry and that humanized the individual who pursued this knowledge. The author concludes that through Etty Hillesum, we can learn to cultivate this knowledge of the soul.

In his contribution “Am I Really a Woman? A Question About Female Identity in Etty Hillesum,” the Colombian researcher William Augusto Peña Esquivel sheds new light on the mystical itinerary of Etty Hillesum. He shows how her female identity is constituted in parallel to her inner search and her development as a mystic. Femininity and the realization of self as a woman, when taken from the particular perspective of Etty Hillesum’s writings, emerges as a path to freedom.

Etty Hillesum and Dietrich Bonhoeffer lived in what Hannah Arendt called “Dark Times”. Their lives and work show us that even in the worst places and situations, light is possible and hope can be maintained. Besides emphasizing how they both practised an ethics of care, the Portuguese scholar Maria Luísa Ribeiro Ferreira pays special attention in her essay “A Powerless God: Etty Hillesum and Dietrich Bonhoeffer” to their mutual concept of God – a powerless God who needs the help of human beings.

In her contribution “New Light on Etty Hillesum’s Actions in Camp Westerbork,” the Dutch scholar Bettine Siertsema draws our attention to a hitherto unknown testimony about Hillesum’s activities in Camp Westerbork: a text written by Ies [later: Matthew] Spetter in the fall of 1945. Spetter was one of Etty Hillesum’s colleagues on the Jewish Council in Camp Westerbork. Like Hillesum, he was opposed to the ways in which the Amsterdam Jewish Council responded to the Nazis’ demands. In his post-war testimony, Spetter referred very briefly to cooperating with Etty Hillesum to smuggle children out of Camp Westerbork. Spetter managed to survive the Shoah, and his post-war activities show that to a great extent, he and Etty Hillesum shared the same views on life and humanity. This until now unknown testimony may well mandate a shift in how we interpret what has generally been viewed as Hillesum’s total acceptance of her fate.

Etty Hillesum showed a special attachment to the desk in her room in Han Wegerif’s house in Amsterdam. It was her favourite place to be even if other parts of her room were also very dear and had a special meaning for her. Nevertheless, she did not grieve when she had to leave because – as she explained – “In every place on earth, we *are* ‘at home’, when we carry everything within us.” In his contribution “‘My Beloved Desk, the Best Place on this Earth’: Etty Hillesum Says Goodbye to Her Familiar Surroundings,” Klaas A.D. Smelik analyzes Hillesum’s remarks on the various parts of Wegerif’s house and discusses the special meaning they had for her.

In his essay, “Etty Hillesum’s Humanism,” the Dutch scholar Jurjen Wiersma offers ethical, philosophical, and theological comments on Hillesum’s diaries and letters. He stresses that excellent moral status provides leverage for the *humanum*, and elevates human persons to increased humanity. In Etty Hillesum’s case, it inspired her to oppose hatred, anger, and barbarism. Hillesum wanted to be faithful to God, but also to all living co-creatures, to her own best moments, and to her creative talent. The author maintains that Hillesum displayed a specific Jewish identity when she, in spite of everything, committed herself to biblical humanism, to God and his creation.

In his essay “Etty Hillesum’s Struggle to See Clearly: A Story of Two Worlds,” the English scholar Patrick Woodhouse explores the question: How was it possible to continue to see the Nazis as human beings created in the image of God as Etty Hillesum did? The contribution begins with Etty Hillesum gazing at the brutal faces of the guards loading the train destined for the death camps, and explores her reaction to what she sees, noting that her reaction is a statement of what she has become. The essay traces how – in the midst of a world collapsing around her – Etty Hillesum learned to inhabit an inner world that shared characteristics common to the contemplative traditions of all the great faiths. This contribution is a reminder that her story is a story not of one, but of two worlds.

In “Present Traces of a Past Existence: Through the Lens of Photography” – the last contribution in this volume – the Italian artist and researcher Lucrezia Zanardi starts with the question: What happens to a space when it is inhabited by different people? Does the presence of its previous inhabitants persist? Is the space merely architectural or is it pervaded by the acts of the subjects and therefore bound in some way to the former occupants? The author, having photographed every space once inhabited by Etty Hillesum, presents a playful exploration of these questions. Photography is the perfect medium to work through these problems as it is able to suggest and maintain a trace of a presence alongside a look from the past. In addition, photography is a highly psychological medium that allows one, just like a diary, to review and rework a vision.

The 29 contributions in this volume reflect various new developments in the study of the literary heritage of Etty Hillesum. Since the first publication and translations of her diaries and letters in the 1980s, much creative work has been done and new approaches have been found. International research has shown how multifaceted her thought was and has stressed the viability of her views for our present situation. This Jewish woman, murdered 75 years ago by the Nazis, was convinced that humanity and human dignity could

survive in a barbaric world. Etty Hillesum hoped for a better world after the war, but any daily newspaper today shows that we still have a long way to go. For our lives, her writings can serve as a guideline and they deserve our continued attention – which is the purpose of the Etty Hillesum Research Centre in Middelburg.

Music as Metaphor in Etty Hillesum's Spirituality

Nancy JP Anderson

Abstract

Etty Hillesum's spirituality was not a spiritual awakening as much as it was a slow dawning composed over time. One metaphor she used – music – is about getting in touch with her own spiritual melody. This undertone was one she learned to nurture, and which would sustain her through the many difficulties she faced. The use of metaphors can offer lasting significance to Hillesum's readers by providing various approaches to discovering one's inner life.

Keywords: music, spirituality, metaphors, “inner scale”, Westerbork Camp, art, beauty

In this summary article,¹ I discuss the connection between music and spirituality in the span of Etty Hillesum's writings from 1941 to 1943. In her diaries and letters, Etty Hillesum frequently refers to music – both the external music she hears and the internal “music” she is experiencing as her own spirituality deepens. She refers to soul or spirit 266 times in her writings. Her references to music, melody, scale, tune, etc., and their derivatives are made 216 times. Her words “inner scale” first appear in Exercise Book Nine on Saturday, 6 June 1942, “I have my own inner scale”.² This internal music is a metaphor for her spiritual self and the one on which I focus here. The framework for this article is music in Hillesum's life, music

1 This article is a summary of my graduate thesis, *The Undercurrent of Music in the Burgeoning Spirituality of Etty Hillesum*, fulfilling the requirements of a Master of Arts in Theology degree at St. Catherine University.

2 E.T., 397. *Het Werk*, 416; Saturday morning 6 June 1942: een eigen toon in me zit.

and spirituality, and, finally, the metaphor of music used by Hillesum to describe her spirituality.

Music in the Life of Etty Hillesum

The references to music in the diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum commence with her first Exercise Book and end with her final postcard from the train. Hillesum takes us on a journey from “I too wanted to roll melodiously out of God’s hand”³ to “We left the camp singing”.⁴ References to music begin as a recognition of the music she hears around her in public spaces, as references found in her private reading, and in the musical soirees she attends with friends. As she continues journaling, there is a gradual awakening of her spiritual facet and the metaphor of music appears.

Hillesum’s journals begin on Sunday, 9 March 1941. The first reference to music makes its appearance in the late evening of that same day when she recalls a line of poetry, “‘Melodiously rolls the world from God’s hand.’ [...] I too wanted to roll melodiously out of God’s hand.”⁵ A few days later, she journals about her experience as she registers her Jewish origin. On Wednesday, 19 March 1941, while standing in the “silent and depressed” line, Hillesum hears children singing in the next room and finds the singing “almost touching”.⁶ Later that same day, Hillesum recognizes a need for music in herself. She writes introspectively, noticing the way she has become more conscious of music in her life. “I surprised myself with a need for music. [...] And now, quite suddenly, music is beginning to press its claims.”⁷

Hillesum moves from an external awareness of music to her personal inner tune. She attributes this to her deepening relationship with her God. The final specific reference we have to her inner music is in a diary entry on Saturday, 6 June 1942:

3 E.T., 7. *Het Werk*, 7; Sunday night 9 March 1941: Ik wilde dat ik zelf melodisch uit Gods hand rolde.

4 E.T., 577. *Het Werk*, 702; Letter 71, To Christine van Nooten, near Glimmen, Tuesday, 7 September 1943: We hebben zingende dit kamp verlaten [...].

5 E.T., 7. *Het Werk*, 7; Sunday night 9 March 1941: “Melodisch rolt de wereld uit Gods hand” [...]. Ik wilde dat ik zelf melodisch uit Gods hand rolde.

6 E.T., 31. *Het Werk*, 33; Wednesday morning 19 March 1941: bijna aandoenlijk.

7 E.T., 32-33. *Het Werk*, 35; Wednesday morning 19 March 1941: Ik betrap mezelf op een behoefte aan muziek. [...] en nu begint, in deze phase van m’n leven, de muziek z’n rechten op te eisen.

I [...] have discovered that I have my own inner scale and that a melody is emerging, one to which I must give every chance and lots of space, and to which I must be true.⁸

In summary, Etty Hillesum appreciates listening to music and writes about music early on in her diaries. Her awareness of music around her is acute. The undercurrent of music as a metaphor for her spirituality is used only a few times, but with a growing awareness that this facet of herself is something she wants to share with others.

Music and Spirituality

Developing a strong, healthy spirituality initially requires as much attention as a strong, healthy emotional, physical, or social life. Tending to this part of being human starts with an *awakening* to this inner space; an awareness that there *is* a spiritual depth in each of us that desires nurturance. Some people find this through organized systems like religion or support groups. Others find their path through experiences like reading, listening to music, being in nature, or meditating. "Attending to the spiritual entails going within to the soul space, opening both the eye that looks into the Spirit and the eye that looks into the world."⁹ In due course, one's spirituality will care for them if one is attentive to it, nurtures it, and allows it to sustain them.

Music has a way of gathering people together, creating community among us, and keeping communities unified. Richard Viladesau writes,

Music seems to have a spiritual dimension which goes beyond mere sensible pleasure, and which somehow reflects a deeper reality. Anthropology makes it clear that primitive religion is inseparable from music and dance; and even for the most modern of cultures, music retains a mystical fascination.¹⁰

8 E.T., 397. *Het Werk*, 416; Zaterdagochtend [6 Juni 1942]: ... gehoord ondertussen hoe er toch een eigen toon in me zit en er zich een melodie ontwikkelt, die ik kans en de ruimte moet geven en aan welke ik trouw moet zijn.

9 John Shea, *Spirituality and Health Care: Reaching Toward a Holistic Future* (Chicago: Park Ridge Center, 2000), 106.

10 Richard Viladesau, "Music as an Approach to God: A Theology of Aesthetic Experience," *The Catholic World* (January/February 1989), 4-9, especially p. 5.

Kathleen Harmon states the power of music is more able to connect with the non-verbal portion of human thinking than words. She writes eloquently on music and spirituality when she states:

Through music we can become present to that speechless realm within one another where the struggle with semantic overload is at rest and the peacefulness of our simple presence can communicate.¹¹

Infants, long before they have the power of speech, respond to music and rhythm – even *in utero*. A baby is not born with a sense of individuation from the world surrounding it. Crying (singing) is one of the first vocalizations an infant uses to communicate with others. Music is as lifelong in our memory as the memory of aromas. Long after the initial experience with something musical has passed, music can conjure up long-distant memories in people, just as an aroma can bring memories of an event or person.

In the following quote, note the connection made between the arts and the survival of humanity when Karl Paulnack, Director of the Music Division at Boston Conservatory, addresses the 2014 freshman class:

Given what we have since learned about life in the Nazi camps, why would anyone in his right mind waste time and energy writing or playing music? [...] And yet – even from the concentration camps, we have poetry, we have music, we have visual art; [...] many, many people created art. Why? Well, in a place where people are only focused on survival, on the bare necessities, the obvious conclusion is that art must be, somehow, essential for life. [...] Art is one of the ways in which we say, ‘I am alive, and my life has meaning.’ [...] You are here to become a sort of therapist for the human soul, a spiritual version of [...] someone who works with our insides to see if they get things to line up, to see if we can come into harmony with ourselves and be healthy and happy and well.¹²

Paulnack’s references to music in the Nazi concentration and death camps are apparent in the texts of Hillesum, too. Etty Hillesum’s eyewitness accounts of music at Camp Westerbork are incorporated into her letters to friends in Amsterdam, Deventer, and The Hague. One such letter, quoted

11 Kathleen Harmon, *The Mystery We Celebrate, the Song We Sing: A Theology of Liturgical Music* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), 37 & 46.

12 Karl Paulnack, “Boston Conservatory Music Division,” September 2014. www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/boisi/pdf/sog1/Welcom_e_address_to_freshman_at_Boston_Conservatory.pdf [Accessed February 2016].

here, was surreptitiously published with a pseudonym in 1943. While in Amsterdam in late December 1942, Hillesum writes to two sisters in The Hague about the experience of Camp Westerbork:

The people from Rotterdam were in a class by themselves, hardened by the bombing raids. "We don't frighten easily anymore," you often heard them say. "If we survived all that, we'll survive this, too." And a few days later they marched singing to the train.¹³

When standing side-by-side with others and singing with them, we have joined a "collectivity of shared orientation and identity".¹⁴

In summary, music and spiritual practices, whether solitary or socially constructed, can work together to enliven the inner Presence. Music is innate in the human person. We respond to rhythm and tune at very early ages, before we can speak with each other. Music has an influence on an ailing humanity when facing times of darkness or uncertainty. Spiritual strength can exercise the same positive influence through the hope received through a private or public practice.

The Metaphor of Music

How did the undercurrent of Ety Hillesum's spirituality steady her through the remaining course of her life? Her journals and letters are stunningly written passages about dreadful events and actions. Her interior life is as much a topic in her journals as her exterior life at Camp Westerbork is in her letters. Hillesum is determined to nurture her inner melody (spiritual voice) and maintain it as a constant part of her life.

The phrase "basic tune" is used to describe the inner voice for which Ety Hillesum listens within herself. Hillesum first uses the metaphor "inner scale" or "melody" as a descriptor for her inner self on Monday, 4 August 1941. She is seeking a steady current inside her. "I still lack a basic tune; a steady undercurrent; the inner source that feeds me keeps drying up."¹⁵

13 E.T., 584-585. *Het Werk*, 622; Letter 23, To two sisters in The Hague, Amsterdam, end of December 1942: De Rotterdammers waren een klasse op zichzelf, gestaald door het bombardement in de oorlogsdagen. 'Wij zijn voor geen kleintje meer vervaard', hoorde men van velen, 'als we daar doorgekomen zijn, komen we hier ook wel door' en ze trokken enige dagen later zingende naar de trein.

14 Harmon, *The Mystery We Celebrate, the Song We Sing*, 39.

15 E.T., 72. *Het Werk*, 77; Monday, 4 August 1941: Ik heb nog geen grondmelodie. Er is nog niet één vaste onderstroom, de innerlijke bron waaruit ik gevoed word, slibt altijd weer dicht.

This metaphorical theme occurs three times over the next several months, between August 1941 and June 1942. Her desire to one day be a published writer assists her in developing various metaphors: a deep well, inner melody, thinking heart, etc. She continues the development of the inner melody metaphor on Monday, 20 October 1941:

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. [...] And then again it fills me with gentle, melancholy music.¹⁶

One month later, on Monday, 24 November 1941, Hillesum writes, “[...] let some music flow from me, let what is within me be given expression, it longs so desperately for that.”¹⁷ Her writing is her art form; her art gives voice to that inner tune. Through journaling, Hillesum can return to herself, her God and her inner tune whenever she finds it necessary to reconnect with that aspect of her life.

Etty Hillesum's conversations with her God illustrate to us, her readers, her confidence in the powerful, abiding Presence in her life and the lives of others. Her spirituality is her connection with/to others and is her strength to “lead them back to their own sources”.¹⁸ Her ministration to others prior to train departures from Westerbork is her way of being a calm presence in the dark chaos surrounding the deportees. She nods in the direction of her heritage when she writes:

Your lessons are hard, oh God, let me be your good and patient pupil. [...] I feel that I am one of many heirs to a great spiritual heritage. I shall be its faithful guardian. I shall share it as best I can.¹⁹

Hillesum's desire to help people through difficult times is her way of expressing her spiritual life with and to others. She intends to give them

16 E.T., 131. *Het Werk*, 138; Monday, 20 October 1941: Er zit een eigen melodietje in me, dat er soms zo naar verlangt in eigen woorden te worden omgezet. Maar door geremdheid, gebrek aan zelfvertrouwen, luiheid en ik weet niet wat nog meer, blijft het nog steeds verstikt in me zitten en spookt in me rond. Soms holt het me helemaal uit en dan weer vervult het me met een hele zachte, weemoedige muziek.

17 E.T., 153. *Het Werk*, 161; Monday, 24 November 1941: laat U wat muziek uit me komen, laat dat wat er in me zit vorm vinden, het verlangt er zo naar.

18 E.T., 399. *Het Werk*, 418; Friday morning, 18 September 1942: terug te voeren naar de eigen bronnen.

19 E.T., 521. *Het Werk*, 551; Thursday night 17 September 1942: Uw lessen zijn moeilijk, God, laat mij Uw goede en geduldige leerling zijn. [...] Ik voel me een van de vele erfgenamen van een grote geestelijke erfenis.

Ik zal daarvan de trouwe behoedster zijn. Ik zal er van uitdelen, zoveel als ik bij machte zal zijn.

the strength they need by sharing her sense of purpose. Continuing in her determination to be an author, she is grateful for the opportunity to have lived her life and hopes that it will bear fruit someday in being published. Carol Lee Flinders describes Hillesum's journey in this way:

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.²⁰

What Hillesum has discovered within herself is the steady undercurrent of spirituality in her life which flows to others without prejudice. In Letter 21, from Camp Westerbork written on Sunday, 29 November 1942, she confesses, "I should so much like to help provide some spiritual nourishment".²¹ The desperate conditions of the camp do not destroy her. She knows she has the internal resources to bring a sense of "being human" to the lives of those continually being dehumanized within the barbed-wire confines of the camp.

In her article, *Etty Hillesum and Sophie Scholl: Sisters in Fate*, Marta Perrini writes cogently about the spiritual strength of these two non-violent resisters to Nazism.

Several passages by Hillesum [...] focus on music. [...] The primary importance of music, like literature, was not [...] its dimensions of formal beauty and aesthetic pleasure, but its valuable support of spiritual activity.²²

Hillesum's diaries abound with comments on her own written creations and the creations of other writers. Perrini continues,

[...] especially Hillesum's, who saw diary writing as an exercise in style. Her need to 'find a new tone to go with this new attitude to life' was

20 Carol Lee Flinders, *Enduring Lives: Living Portraits of Women and Faith in Action* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 66.

21 E.T., 577. *Het Werk*, 614; Letter 21, To Han Wegerif and others, Westerbork, Sunday, 29 November 1942: ik zou graag op dit gebied van geestelijk voedsel aan het werk willen gaan.

22 Marta Perrini, "Etty Hillesum and Sophie Scholl: Sisters in Fate", in: Klaas A.D. Smelik, Meins G.S. Coetsier & Jurjen Wiersma (eds.), *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, January 2014* [Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, 28] (Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2017), 192-204; especially p. 192.

deeply connected to her artistic and personal experiences, both internal and external.²³

Richard Viladesau, whose expertise is theological aesthetics, resonates with Paulnack's speech with what is essential for surviving times of fear, horror, or personal darkness.

[...] the fact that God is the 'horizon' of every experience of beauty explains why even the tragic emotions can be experienced in art as 'beautiful,' and why there is at the heart of every deep aesthetic experience – and perhaps particularly in music – an intense feeling of striving toward something beyond the moment itself.²⁴

Beauty is essential for living towards something and not surrendering one's humanity to the current dark moment. The most transcendental aesthetic is music since human beings have an innate connection to this form.

In summary, music can be a solace in a wounded world. For Etty Hillesum, music is a metaphor for the undercurrent of her spirituality. Her inner tune is expressed in her desire to help others who were facing life-or-death possibilities on a day-in and day-out basis. She wants to bring a sense of humanness back to those for whom the dehumanization has taken hold. She uses metaphors to express what she hopes to do with her life: "let some music flow from me"²⁵ to "provide some spiritual nourishment".²⁶

Conclusion

"We left the camp singing."²⁷ From a twenty-first century perspective, Etty Hillesum and her family boarding a transport train with a song on their lips is an amazing action. Surrounded by the cacophony of noises – screaming, howling, yelling, bargaining, crying, murmured praying – is the singing

23 Perrini, "Etty Hillesum and Sophie Scholl", 196.

24 Viladesau, "Music as an Approach to God", 8.

25 E.T. 153. *Het Werk*, 161; Monday late afternoon, 24 November 1941: En laat U wat muziek uit me komen.

26 E.T., 577. *Het Werk*, 614; Letter 21, To Han Wegerif and others, Westerbork, Sunday, 29 November 1942: op dit gebied van geestelijk voedsel aan het werk willen gaan.

27 E.T., 659. *Het Werk*, 702; Letter 71, To Christine van Nooten, near Glimmen, Tuesday, 7 September 1943: We hebben zingende dit kamp verlaten [...].

at the train an act of resistance? An act of acceptance? An act of spiritual confidence? A natural product of shared identity?

The metaphor of music in Hillesum's burgeoning spirituality is not about external music. It is about getting in touch with her own spiritual melody – a melody she could sustain, and which would sustain her. She found great hope, comfort, and safety in her God. Hillesum's conversations with her God were frequently written in her journals, sometimes spontaneously, other times trying to recall what had spilled out of her earlier. The inner tune or inner melody is one of the metaphors she uses to describe her spirituality.

Ultimately, she found in herself an unbreakable melody. Because of the strong melody within, she chooses to provide spiritual nourishment to those with whom she comes in contact. The unbreakable melody of Hillesum's spirituality transcends the sensory and "semantic overload" described by Harmon earlier in this work. Hillesum is then able to be the "peacefulness of [...] simple presence" in the lives of other prisoners at Camp Westerbork.²⁸ This undercurrent of Hillesum's spirituality is as strong and moving as any piece of music that touches something deep within each of us and, likewise, connects us to the greater Presence in all of us. This connection may be why, for decades now after her death, Etty Hillesum's life story continues to move us.

About the Author

Nancy JP Anderson (1957) earned a master's degree in theology with a focus on spirituality from St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota, USA. She is the sole owner of a wholesale distribution business for the graphics printing industry. She offers educational presentations about Etty Hillesum, incorporates Hillesum's writings into presentations about labyrinths as spiritual paths, and uses Hillesum's writings to keep her philanthropy, life, and business "human focused".

28 Harmon, *The Mystery We Celebrate, the Song We Sing*, 46.

A “staretz” in Camp Westerbork

The Connections Between Slavic Orthodoxy and the Spirituality of Etty Hillesum

Fernando Arriero Peranton

Abstract

It is possible to draw a parallel between the spirituality of Etty Hillesum and Russian Orthodox mysticism, since there are some striking connections: the need of muting the mind to reach the heart; the desire for a permanent state of prayer; non-violence; or the importance of being more than doing. In fact, Etty Hillesum could be seen as a “staretz” (Russian spiritual father) in Camp Westerbork. Moreover, this article shows that these connections are not casual.

Keywords: Russian orthodoxy, mysticism, *staretz*, Camp Westerbork, prayer, non-violence, kneeling, *hineinhorchen*

The aim of this article is to show that there are some interesting connections between the itinerary of Etty Hillesum and the spiritual path of Russian Orthodoxy. These links are not casual. Recall that Etty Hillesum inherited a love of Russia from her mother Rebecca, who was born in Pochep (Почеп), about 450 km from Moscow. Moreover, Etty Hillesum became deeply interested in Russian literature of the nineteenth century,¹ a literature steeped in the orthodox mysticism radiating out of Russian monasteries.

¹ Etty Hillesum refers once to the geographer and philosopher P.A. Kropotkin and the short story master Anton Chekhov, and twice to the first modern Russian novelist, Nikolai Gogol. As for Alexander Pushkin, Etty Hillesum mentions two of his works: *Yevgeny Onegin* and *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*. On the other hand, she dedicated many hours to the translation of the works of Leo Tolstoy. Regarding Michail Lermontov, no textual citations are found, but the majority of the references appear in the first volume of the diary to express the inner battle between

In fact, there are some aspects in common held by both her spiritual development and Russian mysticism, which in her case could have been channeled through the literature. It is for this reason that Etty Hillesum could metaphorically be considered a *staretz*, a man of God dwelling in these monasteries. But Etty Hillesum's monastery was a Nazi transit camp called Westerbork.

The more relevant aspects are addressed below.

1.1 The Ascetic Battle

Orthodox religious practitioners take care of the corporal dimension of their spiritual advancement through physical and breathing exercises. They pay attention to the heart area, concrete bodily postures, and fasting, among other things.² Etty Hillesum, advised by Julius Spier, assumes similar practices, thus marking the beginning of her spiritual itinerary.³ Moving forward on her spiritual path, however, soon demanded an attitude of deep listening or, as she called it, "hineinhorchen."⁴

Orthodox wisdom would say that Etty Hillesum was in the stage of the "common man," in which many thoughts or *pomysly* fill the mind when one is silent, and thus one avoids reaching the core of the self: the heart.⁵ Thus, a necessary ascetic battle begins:

reading this author and getting carried away by the fantasies with respect to Julius Spier. Fyodor Dostoevsky is the second most cited author (35 times), even ahead of the Bible (33 times). Etty Hillesum approaches him in a direct way through his works, especially *The Idiot*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *Memories of the Dead House*. In addition, she immersed herself with great interest in the commentary prepared by the French author André Suarès. Hillesum fell in love with the main character of *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin, whom she called my "new friend" (E.T., 214; *Het Werk*, 223; Friday, 2 January 1942: Er is een nieuwe vriend bijgekomen: Vorst Myschkin). In fact, she wanted to take these two volumes to Camp Westerbork, even if that meant sacrificing space for food. But the Austro-Hungarian poet Rainer Maria Rilke stands out among all her readings. The trips to Russia (1899 and 1900) left an indelible mark on the poet.

2 Saint Basil, bishop of Caesarea Mazaca in Cappadocia in the fourth century and a great defender of corporal prayer, invites us to consider "how the soul forces affect the body and how the feelings of the soul depends on the body" (Hom. In illud, Attende tibi ipsi 7 PG 31, 216b). Etty Hillesum mentions the practice of fasting on several days: 20 March 1941, 8 June 1941, 22 March 1942 and 11 June 1942. Indeed, to say monk in Slavic, the term *postnik* can be used, meaning "that who fasts."

3 Cf. E.T., 6. *Het Werk*, 6; Sunday, 9 March 1941.

4 Cf. E.T., 90. *Het Werk*, 96; Saturday, 23 August 1941.

5 This is, according to the Eastern Fathers, the main organ of psychic and spiritual life, the deepest sphere of being in which God manifests Himself to man (Cf. *Hom. Spirit.* XV), 20.

It costs me a lot of pain and takes a great deal of strength, but if I can fight this fight to the end, I shall be stronger than ever before.⁶

To describe this descent into her inner core, Etty Hillesum uses various images: a well, a workshop, a laboratory, a granite block, a plain. Later, with a more mature practice, she adds two others. Etty Hillesum imagines an ocean crossed by a fleet of ships that transport treasures of incalculable value. Suddenly, a storm shakes the ships in such a way that one of them is shipwrecked. This ocean figures as the human being and the bottom of the ocean is where the valuable booty waits to be found. There lays the heart. To get to it, it becomes necessary to enter oneself.⁷ Indeed, Etty Hillesum points out in her fourth notebook how this internal process is developing for her:

The cosmos has moved from my head to my heart, or in my particular case, to my midriff – anyway from my head to another area. And once God had moved inside me to the space in which he still resides, well, I suddenly stopped having headaches and stomach aches!⁸

Only after the battle was it possible to reach the most sacred source of her person and a state of stillness, the state which the Slavic mystics calls *hesykhia*. And only after the battle did Etty Hillesum make listening a permanent way of life. In fact, her deepest words about this attitude were written in September 1942 when she explained how a deep listening to herself, to others and to God could explain her life. That listening, from the depth of herself to the depth of the other, carried out a communion so intimate that it seemed to Etty Hillesum that God Himself listened to Himself in the wisdom of the other,

Truly, my life is one long hearkening unto myself and unto others, unto God. And if I say that I hearken, it is really God who hearkens inside me.

6 E.T., 58. *Het Werk*, 62; Monday, 9 June 1941: Het doet een hoop pijn en kost veel kracht, maar wanneer ik deze strijd ten einde toe zal kunnen voeren, zal ik sterker staan in m'n leven dan ooit. The orthodox spiritual tradition compares ascetic practices with a combat against the enemies of the soul. Indeed, the monks were called "combatants" or *agonizomenoi*. Cf. T. Spidlik, M. Tenace & R. Cemus, *El monacato en el Oriente* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo, 2004), 149-150.

7 Cf. E.T., 532. *Het Werk*, 563-564; Friday, 25 September 1942.

8 E.T., 555. *Het Werk*, 591; Letter 5, To Aimé van Santen; Amsterdam, Sunday 25 January 1942: De Kosmos is uit m'n hoofd verhuisd naar het hart, of voor mijnentwege naar het middenrif, in ieder geval uit m'n hoofd naar een ander regioon. En toen God eenmaal in me verhuisd was en de ruimte betrokken had, waar hij nu nog steeds woont, ja, toen had ik opeens geen hoofdpijn en geen maagpijn meer!

The most essential and the deepest in me hearkening unto the most essential and deepest in the other. God to God.⁹

1.2 The Uninterrupted Dialogue with God

The radical transformation of Etty Hillesum is explained, among other things, by the discovery of God within. The God who initially bothered her became gradually her permanent interlocutor. In this way, Hillesum appears to have reached the aim of Orthodox spirituality: a permanent state of prayer.¹⁰

On 26 August 1941, Etty Hillesum discovers within herself, as if it were from a wellspring, God Himself.¹¹ The rock of her atheism and rationalism did not allow her quick or simple access,¹² but the mere awareness of being inhabited by the Presence supposed an irreversible dynamism.

Progressively, as she kneels physically and existentially, as she dares to pronounce the name of God, as she experiences the superabundance of peace, joy, strength, and love of God, she prepares to welcome Him inside her and to unearth Him in the hearts of others.

Additionally, Hillesum experiences for herself another of the spiritual keys of orthodoxy: the Holy Scriptures. These are the daily nourishment for any monk who wishes to reach *deification*.¹³ Although Julius Spier is the person who encourages her to read the Bible, she takes a very personal approach. Thus on 28 November 1941, Etty Hillesum explains how she has

9 E.T., 519. *Het Werk*, 549; Thursday, 17 September 1942: Eigenlijk is mijn leven één voortdurend "hineinhorchen", in mijzelf, in anderen, in God. En als ik zeg: ik "horch hinein", dan is het eigenlijk God in mij, die "hineinhorcht". Het wezenlijkste en diepste in mij dat luistert naar het wezenlijkste en diepste in de ander. God tot God.

10 The search for this continuous prayer marked the beginning of the itinerary of the Russian pilgrim; cf. Strannik (trad.), *El peregrino ruso* (Madrid: Espiritualidad, 2005), 14.

11 Perhaps Etty Hillesum took the image of a buried God from the imaginary of Rainer Maria Rilke. According to Rilke, God has retreated into the dark abyss of the incomprehensible, of nature and of inner faith, because He fears that poets will come to Him. In this way, God has been "self-buried"; cf. Fabián Soberón, "Dios y Rilke", in: pendientedemigracion.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero28/d_rilke.html [last query: 13-II-2017]. But the Austro-Hungarian poet warns that God will return to us from the bosom of the earth.

12 Cf. E.T., 102. *Het Werk*, 108; Wednesday, 24 September 1941.

13 The knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, having been inspired by the Spirit, "sows virtue, makes thought light, prevents us from being submerged by the unexpected vicissitudes of events, raises us above the darts of the devil, makes us stay very near the sky" (John Chrysostom, Hom. 5, *De studio praesentium*, PG 63, 485) [translated into English by the author]. In this way, God, who is transcendent and inaccessible in his impartible essence, communicates Himself to finite man, making possible the real divinization of the believer (*theosis*).

chosen some passages and has given them a new, significant and experiential meaning. She chooses the commandment "love thy neighbor," the Pauline *Hymn of Charity*, and the creation of man in the image and likeness of God.¹⁴

Another suggestive connection between Etty Hillesum and orthodox spirituality is the relationship she finds between the physical body and the practice of prayer. The psychophysical dimension is acknowledged in how *Hesychasm* pays attention to bodily postures, breathing, or heartbeat. The most characteristic posture for Etty Hillesum is kneeling. She makes a point of describing herself as "*The girl who could not kneel*"¹⁵ at the beginning of her diary, and as "*the girl who learned to pray*" at the end.¹⁶ Far from a platonic vision, Etty Hillesum experiences the body as a home for God that must be preserved in good condition. By practicing corporal prayer in an ordinary context like her room, she sanctifies her own daily life.

In the Eastern tradition of the first centuries AD, kneeling prayer was, according to Origen,

a symbol of that prostration and submission that Paul talks about when he writes: "I bow my knees before the Father" (Eph. 3,14). It is this spiritual kneeling, so called, that all creatures worship God in the name of Jesus and submit humbly to Him[...].¹⁷

Furthermore, it is interesting to point out that one of the times that Etty Hillesum wrote about kneeling is when quoting a letter from Rainer Maria Rilke. For the poet, this bodily gesture was connected to prayer and was the condition God needed to fill those who await him. From these verses, Etty Hillesum concludes that if God permeates and fills her, she herself will be the mediator of the Mystery, making sacred all that she experiences.¹⁸

1.3 Non-violence

Etty Hillesum shares with orthodox mystics an optimistic vision of the world related to the view of a kind and provident God Creator who protects His

14 A. Pleshoyano advocates that this truth was Etty Hillesum's *Leitmotiv*; cf. Alexandra Pleshoyano, "Etty Hillesum: For God and with God," in: *The Way* 44 (2005), 7-20, especially p. 11.

15 E.T., 145. *Het Werk*, 153; Friday, 21 November 1941, and E.T., 148. *Het Werk*, 156; Saturday, 22 November 1941: *Het meisje, dat niet knielen kon*.

16 E.T., 547. *Het Werk*, 580; Saturday, 10 October 1942: *het meisje, dat leerde te bidden*.

17 J. Daniélou, *Origène* (Paris: Éditions de la Table Ronde, 1948), 44.

18 Cf. E.T., 351. *Het Werk*, 262.

creatures. That is why Hillesum is also close to the Eastern understanding of evil; it has no substance, but is simply a corruption of good, an absence of good in the sense of realm or spiritual reality that was originally created in goodness. This approach led Hillesum to assume a posture of passive activity in the face of suffering.¹⁹

In the Eastern tradition, this attitude is known as *amerimnia*. It is a concept that may be misunderstood – as Etty Hillesum's attitude was by some of her friends – because it is close to apathy or lack of interest. But in monastic life, this term intends to describe a diametrically opposed attitude: “disregard for earthly things”²⁰ after struggling to “not having any desire for the things of this world any longer and to attend to God alone, assiduously and without distractions.”²¹

The pacifist position of Etty Hillesum is also close to the view of Leo Tolstoy, who has drawn his inspiration from the Gospel according to Matthew. For the Russian author, revenge is not the way to build the Kingdom of God on earth. Love is the only force that will prevent humankind from distancing itself from its egocentric instincts in its actions. Hillesum, however, stands apart from a purely earthly Kingdom and finalizes her view on the foundation of evil by adopting the theological idea that human beings were created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen. 1:26-27).

The concept of being created in the image and likeness of God has been one of the theological truths studied by the greatest Fathers of the Church in the first centuries AD. In fact, Irenaeus, Origen, Basil, and Gregory of Nyssa distinguished between “image” and “likeness” to explain man's pull towards God; while “image” is a free gift from God, “likeness” refers to the free response of the human being, the effort made with the grace of God to assimilate and personalize the God within each person. Hillesum journeys along this orthodox path. As she recognizes God in her life, she knows herself better and recognizes others as images of God. Hence, in June 1942, when events accelerate and fear among the Jews intensifies, Hillesum tries not to express in her diary the separation between them (Nazis, executioners, evil) and us (Jews, victims, good). In fact, she refers to German soldiers as “our so-called enemies.”²²

19 Cf. E.T., 556. *Het Werk*, 591.

20 Pseudo-Efrem, *Ad renunciantes*, t. 3, 323F.

21 Dorotheus of Gaza, PG 88, 1109b. Cf. I. Hausherr, *Hésychasme et prière, Orientalia Christiana (Analecta, 176)* (Rome: Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies, 1966), 216ff.

22 Etty Hillesum uses this expression on 23 September 1942 (cf. E.T., 529. *Het Werk*, 560); on 24 September 1942 (cf. E.T., 530. *Het Werk*, 561); and on 2 October 1942 (cf. E.T., 541. *Het Werk*, 573). See also B. Siertsema, “Etty Hillesum's Views on the Nazis and their Henchmen,” in: K.A.D.

1.4 "Being more than doing"

Etty Hillesum, who welcomes with simplicity and confidence the superabundance given to her, decides to hand over everything she has learned and that has generated life in her.²³ This is how she breaks and shares herself like bread in the service of the inmates in Camp Westerbork, by sending the correspondence of the prisoners, helping to carry the suitcases of the deportees and visiting the sick. Moreover, Etty Hillesum discovers that "being [is] more than doing" and that her most worthy service consists in being herself – hopeful, full of vision, and present alongside others.

Thus, Etty Hillesum devotes more and more time to listening deeply (*hineinhorchen*) to those who approach her, reading their lives and understanding them as if they were houses with open doors that could be visited and where the God who inhabits them, could be found. Etty Hillesum, taking the witness of Julius Spier, her "midwife of the soul," becomes a mediator between divinity and humanity. Or, expressed with the analogy I am crafting here, she becomes a *staretz*, since the role assigned to *staretz* in the orthodox tradition is the same as what she has taken on.

He is always directed to a human person with a unique destiny, a vocation and particular difficulties. Thanks to a special gift he sees each being as God sees them and looks for the right way to help them, opening the inner sense in a direct way without doing violence to their will, in such a way that they, liberated from his own hidden chains, can get to grace. To make this charismatic operation it is not enough to have a deep knowledge of human nature that is born from a long experience. It is necessary to have, each time, a vision of the person. A person cannot be known except through a revelation.²⁴

The words offered by Etty Hillesum to the Westerbork prisoners are luminous and full of hope and compassion. The testimonies that have come from those who knew Etty Hillesum in these circumstances evoke the words of Macarius of Egypt,

Smelik, M.G.S. Coetsier & J. Wiersma (eds.), *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, January 2014* [Supplements to the Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, 28] (Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2017), 270-281, especially p. 271.

23 Cf. E.T., 682. *Het Werk*, 640; Letter 60, To Henny Tideman; Westerbork, Wednesday, 18 August 1943.

24 John B. Dunlop, *Amvrosij di Optina* (Magnano: Qiqajon, 2002), 12-39.

Those who carry within themselves the divine richness of the Spirit, when they talk with others about spiritual matters, transmit this wealth as if they extracted it from their own treasure [...]. Because, if we can say it that way, each of their words has returned to the place from where it had been taken.²⁵

Ultimately, the most essential mission was not so much what was done, but what inner sense of being Etty Hillesum and others maintained. Indeed, a *staretz* could help a person not only with words and prayers, but simply with their presence, their being. Etty Hillesum expresses it in this way,

And to be where one happens to be, to be there one hundred percent. My 'doing' will consist of 'being' there.²⁶

1.5 Beauty and Patience

Contemplation of the beauty of creation aroused in Etty Hillesum inner peace and sharpened her sense of harmony and desire for a beautiful life. Amazement and admiration were transformed into interior attitudes such as adoration, praise and thanksgiving towards the Author of this beauty. In addition, Etty Hillesum enters into communion with the cosmos and understands that she is part of a whole in which each being has an incalculable value, in which everything is a comradeship and a gift. Everything is given to her and every gift is filled with the love of the Giver. Orthodox wisdom also speaks of this spiritual knowledge that allows one to understand the laws that govern the cosmos. In turn, this permits the spirit to sense a Presence that unifies all reality. This is what Saint Gregory of Sinai expresses when he says,

Through the spirit and meditation of the heart, man sees clearly appear to the Word (Logos) of God from the 'logoi' of beings; see the personified wisdom of God Father appear from time leading into the 'logoi' of the models that print their strokes in beings.²⁷

A similar approach, which goes beyond pure appearance, made it possible for Etty Hillesum to understand reality as a paradox; in spite of the horror, life

25 *Philocalia V*, 88, 55.

26 E.T., 536. *Het Werk*, 568; Wednesday 30 September 1942: En waar men is helemaal zijn, honderdprocentig zijn. Mijn 'doen' zal bestaan in er te 'zijn'.

27 *Philocalia X*, *Various sentences*, 134, p. 105.

is beautiful. Only one who has experienced Love as the last word standing stronger than death, can affirm that life is beautiful. Even the most inhuman terror can never wipe out the truth, the goodness, and the beauty of life. This was Etty Hillesum's *leitmotiv* and the core of her testimony to future generations.

1.6 Etty Hillesum: a "Staretz" in Camp Westerbork

A *staretz* possesses an "apostolic soul" of a very high order and is enabled to speak of God, to read hearts (*kardiognosis*), to prophesy the Kingdom, and to limit the power of demons.²⁸ In addition, a *staretz* has the gift of healing wounds of the soul by giving advice, sharing his presence, introducing silence, or offering prayers of intercession. These activities lead him to identify closely with his disciples in a way that makes their joys and sorrows his own, and he assumes the weight of their guilt or anxiety.²⁹

A *staretz* is more than a priest because he is not appointed by a human authority in a hierarchy, but is chosen by the Spirit who offers him the gift of guiding others and healing them. Coming to his position in this way, he is a prophetic figure not tied to blind obedience.³⁰ Indeed, he knows well that each relationship of spiritual fatherhood is unique and does not follow a predetermined pattern. Rather, he knows that it grows under the influence of the Holy Spirit with each individual receiving the most appropriate word for their specific needs.

This figure from the oriental monastic evokes Julius Spier who had a role as mediator between Etty Hillesum and God, but the young Dutch woman also became a *staretz* while in Camp Westerbork. She guided dozens of people to whom she testified that life was beautiful in spite of everything. This commitment as a mediator was something Etty Hillesum assumed in front of the body of Julius Spier that 15 September 1942:

You taught me to speak the name of God without embarrassment. You were the mediator between God and me, and now you, the mediator, have gone, and my path leads straight to God. It is right that it should be so. And I shall be the mediator for any other soul I can reach.³¹

28 Cf. O. Clement, *La Iglesia de los ortodoxos* (Madrid: Nerea, 2008), 20.

29 Cf. Kallistos Ware, *El Dios del misterio y la oración* (Madrid: Narcea, 1997), 146.

30 Cf. Spidlik, Tenace & Cemus, *El monacato en el Oriente*, 102.

31 E.T., 516. *Het Werk*, 545; Tuesday 13 October 1942: Jij hebt me onbevangen de naam van God leren uitspreken. Jij bent de bemiddelaar geweest tussen God en mij en nu ben jij, bemiddelaar

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weggegaan en nu gaat mijn weg regelrecht tot God, het is goed zo, dat voel ik. En ik zal zelf weer de bemiddelaarster zijn voor al die anderen, die ik bereiken kan.

Etty Hillesum: Humanity as a Task

Emilio Baccarini

Abstract

Meeting Etty Hillesum through her diary and letters is like seeing a spark of light at the bottom of an abyss. Her achievement was to conquer and maintain a balance between “inside” and “outside.” She was able to find the “centre” of the self, that point that allows one to fill every moment of life with meaning. To use a term dear to mystical theology and taken up by Max Scheler in his ontological value, *ordo amoris*; she found the centre where one encounters God.

Keywords: humanity, meaning of life, beauty of life, suffering, *ordo amoris*, Other, Max Scheler, inner self

Preliminary Remarks

Etty Hillesum died at Auschwitz-Birkenau 75 years ago. Some 40 years later when her work was published, it was immediately perceived as a vivid and direct testimony to the tragedy that took place in Europe during World War II. She considered her own writing as preparatory notes for a later narrative. But we are left without the follow-up. Her notebooks represent one of the most illuminating testimonies and concrete complaints coming out of the tragedy. Fortunately, with new scholarship focusing on the literature of memory, the analysis of the Shoah and its radical evil shows us that human beings are able to perform unconscionable acts. This lesson stands as a warning: We are again in a dangerous moment of narcissistic retreat leading many countries including Europe and the US, and even India and Brazil, to the exclusion of the other, to the rejection of the different and the needy. Dangerous forms of the exaltation of violence, of the ideology of death, and of the denial of humanity have returned to the scene. It is no longer so

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clear what we can assume by the word “humanity” or what the expressions “human” life or “human” existence imply. What does “human being” mean?

These are the questions that inspired my initial approach to the work of Etty Hillesum. My investigation developed along two complementary lines; the first sees Hillesum as a witness to the Shoah, and the second views her life and work from a philosophical-anthropological perspective examining how she manifested the sense of the human. Her answers to my questions – revealed to us in her writings – are a promising legacy applicable to the present and to our future. She embodied a real philosophical anthropology in practice.

A Spark of Light in the Abyss of Evil

Etty Hillesum’s diaries are fully meaningful in the context of the time in which they were written, even if their origin was simply the desire of a young woman to solve the existential difficulties of life.¹ In this sense, they were first of all the “story of a soul” and we could say that they were a clear manifestation of what, after Plato and Augustine, we term *epimeleia tēs psychēs* [care of the soul]. The diaries, however, immediately display an awareness of the times. It was these times that Etty Hillesum wanted to chronicle² and she did it through her own osmosis between the exterior and its interior.

Sometimes I long for a convent cell, with the sublime wisdom of centuries set out on bookshelves all along the wall and a view across the cornfields

1 Cf. E.T., 69-73. *Het Werk*, 72-77; Monday, 4 August 1941.

2 Cf. E.T., 86: I want to live to see the future, to become the chronicler of the things that are happening now (downstairs they are screaming blue murder, with Father yelling, “Go, then!” and slamming the door; that, too, must be absorbed, and now I am suddenly crying since I am not all that objective really and no one can breathe properly in this house; all right, make the best of it then); oh yes, a chronicler. I notice that, over and above all my subjective suffering, I have an irrepressible objective curiosity, a passionate interest in everything that touches this world and its people and my own motives. Sometimes I believe that I have a task. Everything that happens around me is to be clarified in my mind and later in my writing”. *Het Werk*, 91; Wednesday afternoon, 13 August 1941: Ik wil de Kroniekschrijfster worden van veel dingen uit deze tijd (beneden moord en brand, vader brult: ga dan, en smijt met deuren; ook dat moet verwerkt worden en nou huil ik – brul opeens, zó objectief ben ik dus nog niet; eigenlijk kan je hier in huis niet leven, enfin, vooruit maar weer); o ja, Kroniekschrijfster, daar was ik gebleven. Ik neem bij mezelf waar dat naast al dat subjectieve lijden dat ik doe altijd weer een a.h.w. objectieve nieuwsgierigheid komt, een hartstochtelijke belangstelling voor alles wat deze wereld en z’n mensen en m’n eigen zieleroerselen betreft. Ik geloof soms dat ik een taak heb. Alles, wat er om me heen gebeurt moet in mijn hoofd tot klaarheid gedacht worden en later door mij beschreven worden.

– there must be cornfields and they must wave in the breeze – and there I would immerse myself in the wisdom of the ages and in myself. Then I might perhaps find peace and clarity. But that would be no great feat. It is right here, in this very place, in the here and now, that I must find them. I must fling myself into reality, time and again, must come to terms with everything I meet on my path, feed the outer world with my inner world and vice versa. But it is all so terribly difficult, and I feel so heavyhearted.³

A passage from the diary clearly shows the “method” that Etty Hillesum intended to follow:

I am sometimes so distracted by all the appalling happenings round me that it's far from easy to find the way back to myself. And yet that's what I must do. I mustn't let myself be ground down by the misery outside things around me out of some sense of guilt. Things must mature to clarity within you, you yourself must never succumb to things.⁴

One year later, on 20 and 21 July 1942, the path of existential maturation was advancing, as was her contact with suffering.

They are merciless, totally without pity. And we must be all the more merciful ourselves. That's why I prayed early this morning: “Oh God, times are too hard for frail people like myself. I know that a new and kinder day will come. I would so much like to live on, if only to express all the love I carry within me; carry into that new age all the humanity that survives in me, despite everything I go through every day. And there is only one way of preparing for the new age, by living it even now in our

3 Cf. E.T., 71. *Het Werk*, 75-76; Monday, 4 August 1941: Soms verlang ik naar een kloostercel, met de gesublimeerde wijsheid van eeuwen op boekenplanken langs de muur en met het uitzicht op korenvelden – dat moeten nu eenmaal korenvelden zijn en ze moeten golven ook – en daar zou ik me dan willen verdiepen in de eeuwen en in mezelf en op den duur zou er dan wel rust en klaarheid komen. Maar dat is geen kunst. Hier, op deze plek, in deze wereld en nú, moet ik tot klaarheid en rust en evenwicht komen. Ik moet mezelf iedere keer weer gooien in de realiteit, moet me auseinandersetzen met alles, wat ik op m'n weg tegenkom, de buitenwereld moet voedsel ontvangen van mijn innerlijke wereld en omgekeerd, maar het is zo verschrikkelijk moeilijk en waarom heb ik toch zo een beklemd gevoel van binnen.

4 E.T., 86. *Het Werk*, 92; Wednesday afternoon, 13 August 1941: Je wordt soms zo afgeleid door de schokkende gebeurtenissen om je heen, dat je je later maar moeizaam de weg tot jezelf terug kunt banen. En toch moet dat. Je mag niet ten onder gaan in de dingen om je heen, uit een soort schuldgevoel. De dingen moeten in jôu tot klaarheid komen, je mag niet zelf in de dingen ondergaan.

hearts. Somewhere in me I feel so light, without the least bitterness and so full of strength and love. I would so much like to help prepare for the new age and to carry that which is indestructible within me intact into the new age, which is bound to come, for I can feel it growing inside me, every day.”⁵

[...] I feel as if I were the guardian of a precious slice of life, with all the responsibility that entails. I feel responsible for that great and beautiful feeling for life I carry within me, and I must try to shepherd it safe and sound through these times, towards better ones. That is all that really matters, and I am always conscious of it. There are moments when I feel like giving up or giving in, but I soon rally again and do my duty as I see it: to keep the spark of life inside me ablaze.⁶

There was a continuity with what had been her reaction to the news of the suicide of her professor in March 1941.⁷ This is the task that Etty Hillesum

5 E.T., 497. *Het Werk*, 526; Monday evening, 20 July 1942: Onbarmhartig, onbarmhartig! Maar des te barmhartiger moeten wij innerlijk zijn, dat is toch het enige. Waar mijn gebed vanochtend in de vroegte op neer kwam: Mijn God, dit tijdperk is te hard voor broze mensen als ik ben. Ik weet ook, dat er hierna weer een ander tijdperk komen zal, dat humanistisch zijn zal. Ik wil zo graag blijven leven om al de menselijkheid, die ik in me bewaar, ondanks alles, wat ik dagelijks meemaak, over te dragen in dat nieuwe tijdperk. Dat is ook het enige, waardoor wij de nieuwe tijd kunnen voorbereiden, door haar nu al in ons voor te bereiden. En ergens ben ik zó licht vanbinnen, zo zonder enige verbittering en heb zoveel kracht en liefde in me. Ik wil zo graag blijven leven om de nieuwe tijd te helpen voorbereiden en om dat onverwoestbare in mij behouden over te dragen naar de nieuwe tijd, die zeker zal komen, ze groeit immers al in mij, iedere dag, ik voel het toch?

6 E.T., 498. *Het Werk*, 527; Tuesday evening, 21 July 1942: Ik voel me als de bewaarplaats van een stuk kostbaar leven, met alle verantwoordelijkheid daarvoor. Ik voel me verantwoordelijk voor het mooie en grote gevoel voor dit leven dat ik in me heb en dat moet ik onbeschadigd door deze tijd heen trachten te loodsen, naar een betere tijd toe. Dat is het enige waar het om gaat. Daar ben ik me voortdurend bewust van. En er zijn momenten, waarop ik denk te zullen moeten resigneren of te bezwijken, maar steeds komt er weer dat verantwoordelijkheidsgevoel om dat leven, dat in mij is, ook werkelijk levend te houden.

7 E.T., 53: Nevertheless, we who are left behind are just a little bit destitute, though inwardly I still feel so rich that the destitution is not fully brought home to me. However, one must keep in touch with the real world and know one's place in it; it is wrong to live only with the eternal truths, for then one is apt to end up behaving like an ostrich. To live fully, outwardly and inwardly, not to ignore external reality for the sake of the inner life, or the reverse – that's quite a task. *Het Werk*, 56; Tuesday, 25 March 1941: Maar de wereld zal verder gaan en ik ga voorlopig nog mee, vol goede moed en goede wil. Maar we blijven toch een beetje berooid achter, maar ik voel me vanbinnen nog zo rijk, dat de berooidheid nog niet volledig tot me doordringt. Toch moet men goed contact houden met de tegenwoordige werkelijke wereld en daarin zijn plaats trachten te bepalen, men mag niet alleen leven met de eeuwigheidswaarden, dat zou ook kunnen ontaarden

set for herself and to which she tried to remain faithful. To find and preserve the harmony between “inside” and “outside” meant finding the “centre” of her being, that point that would allow her to fill every moment of life with meaning. Max Scheler in his ontological valence, takes up this term dear to mystical theology: *ordo amoris*. On 17 September 1942, Hillesum wrote,

My love of life is so great and so strong and calm and makes me so grateful that I shall refrain from putting it into words again. There is such perfect and complete happiness in me, oh God. What he called “reposing in oneself.” And that probably best expresses my own love of life: I repose in myself. And that part of myself; that deepest and richest part in which I repose, is what I call “God.”⁸

At this time, Etty Hillesum was dealing with health problems, but this was not her obstacle. Rather it was her need to acquire the capacity to have a deeper look, and to listen “inside” (here she uses the German *hineinhorchen*). She writes,

It is all to the good that my body has called a ‘halt’, oh God. For I must rest a while if I am to do what I have to do. Or perhaps that is just another conventional idea. Even if one’s body aches, the spirit can continue to do its work, can it not? It can love and *hineinhorchen* – “hearken unto” – itself and unto others and unto what binds us to life. *Hineinhorchen* – I so wish I could find a Dutch equivalent for that German word. Truly, my life is one long hearkening unto myself and unto others, unto God. And if I say that I hearken, it is really God who hearkens inside me. The most essential and the deepest in me hearkening unto the most essential and deepest in the other. God to God.⁹

in struisvogelpolitiek. Volledig leven, naar buiten en naar binnen, niets van de uiterlijke realiteit opofferen terwille v.h. innerlijk en ook niet andersom, zie hier een schone taak.

8 E.T., 519. *Het Werk*, 549; Thursday morning, 17 September 1942: Het levensgevoel is zo groot en sterk en rustig en dankbaar in me, dat ik maar helemaal niet meer proberen zal het in één woord uit te drukken. Er is zo een volmaakt en volkomen geluk in me, mijn God. Het is toch weer het beste uitgedrukt met zijn woorden: “ruhen in sich”. En hiermee is misschien het meest volkomen uitgedrukt mijn levensgevoel: ik rust in mijzelf. En dat mijzelf, dat allerdiepste en allerrijkste in mij, waarin ik rust, dat noem ik “God”.

9 E.T., 519. *Het Werk*, 549, Thursday morning, 17 September 1942: Het is zeker goed, dat je mijn lichaam “halt” hebt laten roepen, mijn God. Ik moet helemaal gezond worden om te kunnen doen, wat ik allemaal zal moeten doen. Of misschien is dat ook een conventionele voorstelling. Zelfs als men een kwaal in z’n lichaam heeft kan de geest toch doorwerken en vruchtbaar zijn? En liefhebben en “hineinhorchen” in zichzelf en in anderen en in de samenhangen van dit leven en

This inner listening allowed her to become the “thinking heart” of Camp Westerbork. The question of God appeared many times in her diaries. An annotation of 26 August 1941 is particularly significant for the Chassidic – as well as Augustinian – resonances that one finds there:

There is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am there, too. But more often stones and grit block the well, and God is buried beneath. Then He must be dug out again. I imagine that there are people who pray with their eyes turned heavenward. They seek God outside themselves. And there are those who bow their head and bury it in their hands. I think that these seek God inside.¹⁰

On 14 December of the same year, the young woman who did not know how to kneel, wrote,

Last night, shortly before going to bed, I suddenly went down on my knees in the middle of this large room, between the steel chairs and the matting. Almost automatically. Forced to the ground by something stronger than myself. Some time ago I said to myself, “I am a kneeler in training.” I was still embarrassed by this act, as intimate as gestures of love that cannot be put into words either, except by a poet.¹¹

The slow work she did on herself transformed her life into one that manifests the elusive “meaning of life.” The human being does not simply *be*. Rather one “builds himself on what he is,” to use an expression of Edith Stein whom Etty Hillesum met in Camp Westerbork (“the two nuns with the yellow star”). Existence is not only a datum, statically defined and immutable,

in jou. “Hineinhorchen”, ik wilde dat ik daar een goede hollandse uitdrukking voor kon vinden. Eigenlijk is mijn leven één voortdurend “hineinhorchen”, in mijzelf, in anderen, in God. En als ik zeg: ik “horch hinein”, dan is het eigenlijk God in mij, die “hineinhorcht”. Het wezenlijkste en diepste in mij dat luistert naar het wezenlijkste en diepste in de ander. God tot God.

10 E.T., 91-92. *Het Werk*, 97; Tuesday evening, 26 August 1941: Binnen in me zit een heel diepe put. En daarin zit God. Soms kan ik erbij. Maar vaker liggen er stenen en gruis voor die put, dan is God begraven. Dan moet hij weer opgegraven worden. Ik stel me voor, dat er mensen zijn, die bidden met hun ogen naar de hemel geheven. Die zoeken God buiten zich. Er zijn ook mensen, die het hoofd diep buigen en in de handen verbergen, ik denk, dat die God binnen in zich zoeken.

11 E.T., 181. *Het Werk*, 190; Sunday, 14 December 1941: Gisterenavond, vlak voor het naar bed gaan, lag ik opeens geknield midden in deze grote kamer, tussen de stalen stoelen en op het lichte matting. Zó maar vanzelf. Naar de grond gedwongen door iets, dat sterker was dan ik zelf. Een tijd geleden zei ik tegen mezelf: ik oefen me in het knielen. Ik geneerde me nog te veel voor dat gebaar, dat even intiem is als de gebaren der liefde, waarover men ook niet spreken kan, als men geen dichter is.

but an event in continuous transformation. With its plastic nature, it takes on the form that we are called to give it. The process of formation and transformation constitutes the very exercise of existence. Etty Hillesum found the internal light by digging mercilessly within herself and thus giving us all a valid paradigm path. Evil is born from the heart of man and only when we have the courage to dig into our own interiority (“listen to ourselves inside”) can we find both the source of evil and the spark of love capable of transforming the world.

Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it toward others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also be in our troubled world.¹²

Today, just as 75 years ago, hatred and violence are never only political or social, though that may be a convenient thought. Their origin is elsewhere. On 24 July 1942, Hillesum wrote a message from which we can learn today:

I am terribly tired. I can bear these times. I can even understand them a little. If I should survive and keep saying, “Life is beautiful and meaningful,” then they will have to believe me. If all this suffering does not help us to broaden our horizon, to attain a greater humanity by shedding all trifling and irrelevant issues, then it will all have been for nothing.¹³

If suffering is cancelled out, the very meaning of life is cancelled out.

Humanity as a Task

The adjective “human” with which we determine the specific existence of a type of being compared to other creatures, is not a simple qualification. It

12 E.T., 535-536. *Het Werk*, 567; Tuesday, 29 September 1942: Dit is eigenlijk onze enige morele taak: in zichzelf grote vlaktes van rust ontginnen, steeds meer rust, zodat men deze rust weer uitstralen kan naar anderen. En hoe meer rust er in de mensen is, des te rustiger zal het ook in deze opgewonden wereld zijn.

13 E.T., 502. *Het Werk*, 531; Friday morning, 24 July 1942: Ik ben erg moe. Ik kan deze tijd dragen, ik begrijp haar zelfs een beetje. Als ik deze tijd overleef en als ik dan zal zeggen: het leven is mooi en zinrijk, dan zal men mij toch moeten geloven. Als al dit lijden niet tot een horizonverruiming leidt, tot een grotere menselijkheid, daartoe dat alle kleinheden en bijzaken van dit leven van je afvallen, dan is het voor niets geweest.

is not only an adjective. It has an ontological value: humanity is a mode of being. I think that Etty Hillesum perceived and experienced this in depth. Her diaries were the deposit of this reality in its continuous variations. In the course of her writing, her life happened, and she realized its meaning. Her biography became a phenomenology of the event of being human. She was able to manifest an awareness of her day-to-day existence, and to give meaning to the course of her life.

From this perspective, Hillesum's writings were her description of a metamorphosis in which she reached the ontological source of existence, which gave rise to her sense of humanity. For her, existence did not simply happen; it flowed in a current of meaning, and as a result, her life became meaningful. A note of 15 June 1941 is particularly enlightening. We find it at the conclusion of the first notebook:

We are but hollow vessels, washed through by history. Everything is chance, or nothing is chance. If I believed the first, I would be unable to live on, but I am not yet fully convinced of the second.¹⁴

And further on she adds,

For a moment yesterday, I thought I couldn't go on living, that I needed help. Life and suffering had lost their meaning for me; I felt I was about to collapse under a tremendous weight. But once again I put up a fight and now I can face it all, stronger than before. I have tried to look that "suffering" of mankind fairly and squarely in the face. I have fought it out, or rather something inside me has fought it out, and suddenly there were answers to many desperate questions, and the sense of emptiness made way for the feeling that there was order and meaning after all, and I could get on with my life. All was smooth going again after a short but violent battle from which I emerged just a fraction more mature. I said that I confronted the "Suffering of Mankind" (I still shudder when it comes to big words), but that was not really what it was. Rather I feel like a small battlefield, in which the problems, or some of the problems, of our time are being fought out. All one can hope to do is to keep oneself humbly available, to allow oneself to be a battlefield. After all, the problems must be accommodated, have somewhere to struggle and come to rest, and

14 E.T., 62. *Het Werk*, 66; Sunday, 15 June 1941: We zijn maar holle vaten, waar de wereld-geschiedenis doorheen spoelt. Alles is toeval of niets is toeval. Wanneer ik het eerste geloofde, zou ik niet kunnen leven, maar van het laatste ben ik nog niet overtuigd.